



norwegian

Meals on wheels

Why now's the time for a food adventure on Ireland's west coast

Cork goes pop

Portuguese designers are turning to the beige bark for inspiration

Talking books

Borrow a person from Denmark's Human Library

Deep impact

How the rising demand for meteorites is creating a new gold rush in Morocco

The Human Library

In Copenhagen you can now borrow people instead of books. *Rose Dykins* went to see how it works

Photography Ulf Svane



Ronni Abergel,
human librarian



Michele,
formerly homeless



Eske, identifies
as transgender



Dan, living with
ADHD/autism

the experience

I'm sitting in a library in Vallengsbæk – a short Metro ride from Copenhagen's centre – trying to choose a book to read. The titles on loan today are Refugee, Bisexual and Jew, among others. Instead of pages, though, these books have pulses. In a moment, I'm going to be "reading" them – and I'm starting to feel like I need a manual for this.

The Human Library's premise is simple but powerful: borrow a human "Book" for 30 minutes, and ask them questions about their lives. Books are volunteers who tend to embody societal groups or identities that are often misunderstood. The idea is that by examining them, Readers can learn about their own prejudices.

"It's about the nuances that disappear in a polarised world," says Ronni Abergel, who founded the library with a group of friends as a free resource back in 2000. "Stereotypes are not necessarily negative, but they need to be investigated," he says.

I fidget anxiously as I wait for my first Book to arrive, and browse the library catalogue, which has lists of prejudices that each person has experienced. My first instinct is to avoid mentioning these, but surely this would defeat the point? What if I ask something offensive? Or stupid? What prejudices do I harbour that I'm not aware of?

It's only when a woman wearing a stripy dress sits next to me, and I realise she's not what I expected from the title "Formerly Homeless", that I can see I'd conjured up a one-note narrative of what homeless might be. While I'd expected a man who would tell me about a gritty life on the streets, Michele is a 44-year-old mother of two whose homelessness happened when she and her partner divorced (amicably). She was unable to afford her own apartment, so moved into emergency housing. "I want people to see that homeless people aren't always what they expect," she says.



**"Instead of
pages, these
human books
have pulses"**

Borrow these, too...



Tools

Oakland Public Library in the San Francisco Bay Area has 5,000 tools on loan, saving DIY novices from forking out for gear. It also runs workshops on repairs.

oaklandlibrary.org



Museum passes

Chicago Public Library loans out Kids Museum Passports for families, providing discounts on tickets, food or parking at 17 of the city's museums.

chipublib.org



Slow fashion

For €25 per week, Amsterdam's Lena Library lets you borrow unlimited items of clothing from its collection of up-and-coming designers as well as vintage pieces, as an alternative to fast fashion.

lena-library.com

After chatting with a stranger who seems so at ease, I find myself asking bolder questions with my second Book. Eske, 23, has two titles, "Transgender" and "Body-Modified", so I ask whether he encounters prejudice from people who are intimidated by his tattoos and piercings.

He says The Human Library helps him to feel more understood: "People I spoke to today told me that next time they see someone like me on the S-Train, they'll feel comfortable sitting next to them," he says, adding, "I feel that I'm changing something, one person at a time."

I learn a lot in an afternoon. My time with Eske highlights the challenges of navigating the world as a transgender person – such as using public changing rooms. Then chatting with 46-year-old Dan (title: "ADHD/Autism") opens a window to his world, as he explains how much energy he exhausts trying to understand people's body language.



From far left ✓
Michele, Eske and Dan let
Rose and other readers
"borrow" them for 30
minutes; time flies as Rose
asks Eske bolder questions

"It's one thing to read about [a topic], and another to have a human sit with you and tell you about it," says Annette, a 45 year-old university lecturer and another Reader. "It's a privilege."

I feel as though I could do this all day; like I've expanded my mind. It's no wonder this concept has spread around the world. The Human Library now operates in 80 countries, in cities including Buenos Aires, New York and Riga – and it's also spawned a TV series (*Menneskebiblioteket*) in Denmark.

I can't help but feel I've gained the same enhanced understanding of myself and the world that I've only previously felt with the best fiction.

"Sometimes when you put a good book down, you feel like you've lost a friend," Abergel says. I couldn't have put it better myself. humanlibrary.org

Norwegian flies to Copenhagen from nearly 60 destinations. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at Norwegian.com

