



Queer, Kinky, Homeless... In the Human Library the 'books' are people – and if you ask them, they'll share their stories. Simon Ward checks it out

Tunji is a homeless man sitting on a bookshelf, waiting to be borrowed. For now, he's happy to chat with Squatter and Muslim about their mutual experiences, although their conversation is soon interrupted as Transgender rushes past them towards the balcony. "I'm gagging for a cigarette," she says. It has been a long day in the Human Library.

But this Human Library isn't from a Margaret Atwood novel. Instead, it's just around the corner from a small Sainsbury's in a London suburb, and it offers punters (or "readers") the chance to chat with people (the "books") who are not like them. Readers sit with these books, listen to their unique stories and ask questions.

"The idea came to me to see if we could get people to sit down with someone they think they don't like, unpopular types from the community," says Ronni Abergel, who founded the Human Library with his brother at a

music festival in 2000. Since then, the organisation has grown, and there are now libraries taking place in 80 countries worldwide.

At this Ladbroke Grove event, there are more than 40 titles on the shelf, with each book summed up by a single provocative word: Immigrant, Queer, Satanist, Kinky, Child Of Gay Parents, EU Migrant, Traffic Warden and, in Tunji's case, Homeless. Over the next five or so hours, and in spite of heavy snow outside, a stream of readers line up to borrow him.

So what do people want to ask a homeless person about homelessness? "The main issue that comes out is they want to know how do they help a homeless person," says Tunji, towards the end of the event. "They talk about giving people money, they talk about maybe buying people food, but they're not quite sure how to go about helping them."

"The readers I met were very open-minded and supportive, and were open to any insights I had. None of us are perfect, we're all prone to make mistakes. One of

the mistakes a human being could make may propagate into them being homeless, it could have that ripple effect. My readers were all looking for a way forward, and whether there was a solution."

When you step into the Human Library, you're presented with a catalogue featuring every title on offer, and under each one there's a list of stereotypes and prejudices that have arisen around the subject. Even for Traffic Warden, these aren't an easy read. Was this something Tunji had to tackle himself?

"Some maybe didn't understand



homeless people and the mentality they can adopt to protect themselves," he revealed. "But it's not because homeless people want to be unfriendly or aggressive or even manipulative. It's simply what they have to do in order to survive. So I suppose it's just a case of explaining some of these behaviours or the divide."

While the atmosphere at this library is welcoming, it does take courage for these books to share their stories. But for first-timer Tunji, he found his involvement empowering. "I have been trying to get out of my comfort zone," he remarks. "I don't have a lot of family, so

I need to get out and talk a bit more, and what better way than this. And I thought I'd be helping by giving people an insight into some of my experiences."

But was there anything that surprised him about the day? "A guy asked me about logistics," he mentions. "Like, if you're homeless, why would you travel from outside of London into central? But then I got it. It's not something I particularly did, but I understand that certain people who are homeless travel to where they can best survive during the day. This was something I had never really thought about."

Doubters would argue the Human Library is only reaching people who are already open-minded. But Ronni says that's not the point: "The agenda here is not to change anyone's perception. In reality, we're neutral. We're a library, we just put the information forward."

"Some readers seek advice, some seek redemption or understanding, some seek insight to better know about others. I'm not the one to have an agenda about what readers must take away. They should come with their agenda, with their questions, and then let us know whether they were fulfilled when they go."

Tunji agrees. In the age of social media bubbles and echo chambers, he believes the Human Library offers a counterpoint, a safe space to challenge what you think you know about other people: "There's a saying, 'If we do what we've always done, you'll get what you've always got.' We should all try something new, we should all be trying to broaden our horizons a little bit."

"Instead of us walking about with our heads down, something like this gives you a better insight, maybe allows you to get closer to somebody and maybe allows us to have a decent conversation. Perhaps it can start here, and then you can take it outside another day. People need to be better informed, and not just about homelessness."

Tunji has been supported as part of the Nova New Opportunities family. novanew.org.uk
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