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Check Out the Human Library, Where the Books Are People

By: [Kristen Hall-Geisler](#) | Apr 17, 2023



Students at Columbia College participated in the Human Library where they talked to “human books” about their life experiences. COLUMBIA COLLEGE

At the turn of the millennium, Ronni Abergel, his brother Dany Abergel and a few other colleagues, developed a project called the [Human Library](#) for a festival in Denmark. (Being Denmark, the [library](#) actually was called Menneskebiblioteket, which is very fun to say.)

Their idea was that human beings would be the "books" that other people could check out for a set amount of time. During that time, the borrower could ask the book anything they wanted.

The books were people from all different demographics and lifestyles who were willing to share their experiences to challenge stereotypes.

That small festival project ran for eight hours a day over four days with 50 books — that is, humans — available for checkout. Now it's an international phenomenon with libraries in Asia, Africa, Australia, North and South America, and Europe.

The Human Library still has its headquarters in Copenhagen, but Human Libraries have been held on **every continent** on the planet. The library also has "book depots," which are like mobile libraries that visit towns or events.



The original Human Library in Copenhagen, Denmark, opened in 2000 to address people's prejudices and help them talk to those they wouldn't normally meet.

THE HUMAN LIBRARY

Who Are the Books?

The books are all volunteers who inhabit a particular slice of life, usually one that is stigmatized or misunderstood by the wider culture. You might be able to check out an unhoused person, or a [trans person](#), or someone who's experienced sexual abuse. The meetings are for a set duration and in public places, usually at libraries, schools or other public facilities where the Human Library is hosting an event.

The volunteers go through a vetting and instruction process called "[getting published](#)" before they can become a book. Once they're published, they can be "[checked out](#)" by patrons of the Human Library at local events.

How Do You Check Out Books?

Borrowers can attend the [Human Library events](#) and check out as many books as they have interests, one book at a time.

The 'Rules for readers' are simple, respect the book, be curious, bring the book back on time and in the same condition it was given to you. Both parties have the right to end the loan at any time.

The Human Library

The Human Library hosts events in person and online, and offers books for groups to check out too. A company could, for instance, check out a few books for a seminar on diversity and inclusion, or they could give their employees the opportunity to understand the people they may be designing for or catering to. Having [a Human Library event at company offices](#) can actually help integrate diverse workforces too. Global brands like Heineken, Microsoft and Eli Lilly all have collaborated.

You might even remember a Heineken video that went viral dubbed "Worlds Apart: An Experiment." The beer brand gathered a group of strangers with wildly different beliefs together to discuss common ground over, what else, a Heineken. The campaign was created in partnership with the Human Library.

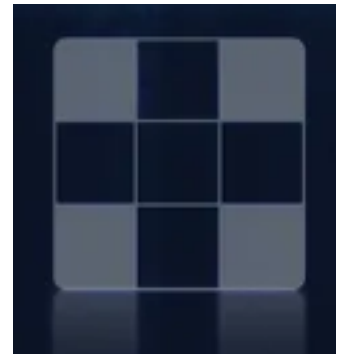
Heineken - Worlds Apart, #OpenYourWorld (2017)



Now That's Effective

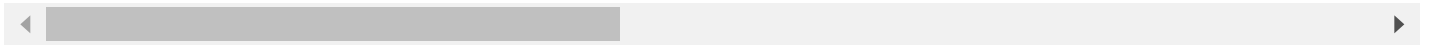
In the 1950s, a psychologist named Gordon Allport developed the [contact hypothesis](#). He thought that tolerance and acceptance could be fostered between groups when certain conditions were met, like having equal status and common goals. Fifty years later, researchers discovered that it takes much less than that for the contact hypothesis to work. Any contact at all between two people, unless the situation is plainly hostile, is enough to create greater understanding between people. So the Human Library just might be onto something.

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