Off THE SHELF

READING CAN GIVE YOU AN INSIGHT INTO THE LIVES OF OTHERS. ESPECIALLY WHEN THE LIBRARY IS MADE UP OF PEOPLE, NOT PAGES.

At a community festival in Perth, an Indian-Australian man sits down opposite a white woman, who identifies as queer. It’s tense at first, even hostile. The man refers to homosexuals as “you people”. But the woman doesn’t leave or get angry. She just patiently talks, answers questions and asks questions of her own. Eventually, it comes out that the man’s son is gay. He’s incredibly uncomfortable with his son’s sexuality, and can’t bring himself to refer to his son’s partner, but he continues to talk. His migrant community had recently experienced the suicides of several young gay people, and the man desperately wants to help avoid further tragedies. After 30 minutes of increasingly frank conversation, they both go on their way.

In feedback after the session the man says that his first interaction with the Human Library had given him really useful food for thought.

In a Human Library you don’t flick through books. There are no shelves, only chairs. Readers rely on their ears; real people and their personal stories are on loan.

Each of the human “books” is represented by a short title that conveys their unique perspective on less commonly discussed topics. Titles like Polyamorous, Molested, Refugee, Single Mother, HIV and Soldier (PTSD) are chosen by the books themselves. Librarians introduce readers to the books who are presenting their stories. And – like an intensified version of getting to know a character in a novel – a conversation begins. The aim of this face-to-face library? To teach people not to judge a book by its cover. Instead, visitors sit. Listen. Ask questions. And absorb a perspective they might not otherwise encounter.

The first Human Library, or Menneskebiblioteket, was established in Copenhagen in 2000. It then came to Lismore in 2006. Greg Watson, a team member at Curtin University’s Centre for Human Rights Education, was so inspired by the project that he started a Human Library in Perth.

Watson sees Human Libraries as a chance to acknowledge and celebrate differences within our shared humanity. “If we overemphasise commonness, the risk we come into is that someone is only human if they’re like us,” Watson says.

Regularly operating Human Libraries can be found in six cities around Australia. And Perth’s human books appear at festivals, but others might hold sessions at physical libraries, or go into schools or government organisations. Police officers are a particularly important group of readers, given their need to understand and empathise with the diverse communities they serve.

For the free 30-minute readings in Perth there are three rules: 1) A reader can ask anything; 2) The conversation goes both ways; 3) At any point, either the book or the reader can choose not to answer a particular question, or to end the reading.

These ground rules allow the books to grow in confidence, as they share their narratives and raise awareness about difficult topics. And for the readers, the openness of Human Library interactions allows them to hear personal accounts they might not otherwise be exposed to.

One person who has seen the transformative power of Human Libraries is Rachel Oliver. A 56-year-old transgender woman, Rachel used to be known as Robert. While Robert was shy and uncommunicative, Rachel is effusive and always happy to take part in a chat. She sees part of her role as being an information resource. The readers who seek sessions might be in the early stages of transitioning themselves, or might simply be curious. Often the first questions she hears are about physical aspects: hormones, surgery etc. Eventually, though, the conversations typically move to emotions and attitudes.

They might also cover Rachel’s unconventional life story, which includes periods living in the UK, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and now Australia. Rachel was previously a military nurse, and now sells military paraphernalia to customers who are often surprised that a woman knows so much about World War II.

Rachel’s 34-year-marriage dissolved along with her male identity. Despite this, and the loss of several long-term friendships, she says that she’s had a “relatively pain-free transition”. She doesn’t want to minimise the obstacles faced by many transgender people, but she also considers herself lucky. She’s grateful she lives in a country that, though it has a long way to go in trans acceptance, is more progressive than many.

Of course, a half-hour is a short time to combat a lifetime of myths and stereotypes, but even within that short period, Rachel has regularly seen defensiveness loosen, body language relax and conversation deepen. What she loves to do is educate and inform readers, to “show that transgender women and men are just ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances”. Turning herself into a human book has been one way for her to do that.

by Christine Ro

» Check out humanlibrary.org to find an event or library near you.