

Fags, Blacks and Hutterites: Challenging Prejudice and Stereotypes with the augustana human library

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What is a Human Library?

The Human Library (formerly Living Library) is an initiative whereby people who have experienced prejudice or stereotyping in life become “Human Books” and are taken out for coffee and conversation by “Readers”. The conversations create learning opportunities rarely otherwise found. The Human Books tell their story and then receive questions from participating Readers. Putting a human face to prejudice and stereotypes challenges people to think differently and to support and advocate more accepting and supportive environments for all. Offerings of Human Libraries are becoming more frequent in academic libraries. Human Libraries were first established at folk festivals in Denmark by youth seeking to raise awareness of violence. An overview and history of the Human Library movement and associated documents can be found at the Human Library Organization’s webpage at humanlibrary.org.

The augustana human library

The **augustana human library** brings to the Augustana Campus (Camrose, AB, Canada) of the University of Alberta an opportunity to discuss prejudice and stereotypes with the persons who have been recipients of prejudice and stereotypes. The University of Guelph (Guelph, ON), Douglas College (Coquitlam, BC) and the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta were the first three academic libraries in Canada to have a human library all starting within

months of each other in the 2008–2009 academic year. While the **augustana human library** is based on the principles noted at the founding human library webpage (humanlibrary.org), it has been expanded to also include as Human Books individuals who have experienced a significant and unique life experience not necessarily affected by prejudice and stereotypes. In particular, the “readings” on offer at the **augustana human library** detail lived experiences of prejudice, stereotypes and/or unique life stories — all of which offer the Readers insight into the lives of Human Books. The Human Library concept was quickly embraced during the planning process. The Augustana Campus has a curriculum which endeavors to challenge students on social issues and responsibility and encourages understanding and tolerance in their back yards and across the world.

Sample themes discussed by Human Books in the **augustana human library** include transgendered persons, living with AIDS, lesbian marriage, atheism, farm economic stress and its effects on marriage/family, substance abuse, domestic violence, depression, environmental debate over conventional/organic land practices, adult perspective of being sexually abused as a child, adoption, male feminism, the raising of an autistic child, and many more! Additional information about each of the **augustana human library** events including titles and abstracts of Human Books, is available at www.library.ualberta.ca/augustana/infolit/humanlibrary/.

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The following is a photo of a human library conversation in March of 2009. The title of the Human Book on loan was “Experience of racism in Canada, Germany and Uganda”:



Photo by Michael Holly. Used with permission.

The Human Library as an Extension of Information Literacy at Augustana

The **augustana human library** has a librarian-led research project associated with it. Other academic libraries or librarians who have published research-related results on a Human Library include Preston College¹ and Garbutt² and many other libraries have reflective reports on their websites. During each **augustana human library**, each Human Book completes a pre-event and post-event questionnaire and each Reader completes a pre-read and post-read questionnaire so as to assess the value of the program as perceived by all participants. While there have been four **augustana human library** events to date, ethics coverage was not in place for research and reporting purposes for the initial two events. As a result, the organizers have a much richer data pool for organizational decision making than for publication. For all questionnaires, basic demographic questions are asked regarding gender, age, year of study, discipline of study and institutional affiliation. The following data has been collected only from the winter and fall 2010 events.

Regarding Human Books, there were 22 participants between the two events (though data only reflects responses provided in the questionnaires and not all Human Books completed questionnaires as they are optional). Responses to the question “What is your gender?” were 65% (13 of 20) male, 30% (6 of 20) female and 5% (1 of 20) selected the response “I prefer

not to answer.” Given that the Human Library is about prejudice and stereotypes, organizers thought that consideration of the experience by gender could present interesting data. However, in retrospect, the question has two problems: the use of the word gender instead of sex and the limited response options (“male”, “female” and “I prefer not to answer”) provided to participants. For future events, the question will be revised to ask individuals “What is your sex?” as sex refers to a person’s biological and physical characteristics and gender refers to the social construction of what society deems to be masculine or feminine. Ironically, answering this kind of question where one must label oneself into a category is the kind of thing which haunts some individuals each day. So that Human Books and Readers are not put into this position in the future, additional response options will be considered for any upcoming events. Other questions asked to determine the demographic makeup related to age (age ranges between 18 and 50+ were all represented) and institution affiliation (Human Books originated from the general public, as well as from the faculty, staff, alumni and students of Augustana, providing numerous connections between the campus and local communities).

The following questions and results are samples from the pre-read questionnaire for Human Books at the two **augustana human library** events of 2010 (each with likert-style scaled responses from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

1. *In my opinion, I will experience a low degree of tension/disagreement in my Human Book conversations.*
 - a. 70% (14 of 20) responded agree/strongly agree that they anticipated a low degree of tension/disagreement.
2. *In my opinion, I have broad experience with my chosen Human Book topic.*
 - a. 95% (19 of 20) responded agree/strongly agree

The post-read questionnaire for the Human Books also included the following questions (each with likert-style scaled responses from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

1. *In my opinion my experience as a Human Book was a positive experience.*
 - a. 100% (17 of 17) responded agree/strongly agree
2. *In my opinion, Readers benefited very much from my Human Book topic.*

- a. 100% (17 of 17) responded agree/strongly agree
- 3. *Did you benefit from being “read” as a Human Book?*
 - a. 100% (17 of 17) responded agree/strongly agree

In addition, the following responses soliciting written responses were asked (very select responses provided):

- 1. *The most frequently asked questions were?*
 - a. NOTE: Responses were highly relevant to the topic of the Human Book and not appropriate to be summarized
- 2. *The most challenging part of being a Human Book was?*
 - a. Being confident that my message was getting across
 - b. Scheduling
 - c. Staying on topic
 - d. Whether anyone one would be interested
 - e. Not being self-conscious
 - f. Speaking in front of a group of people
 - g. When there was only one person in the group, it was more difficult

Responses from Readers were very positive and certainly validate the Human Library’s contribution to the institution’s extra-curricular context. Organizers who facilitated the gathering of pre-read and post-read questionnaires observed frustration with Readers regarding the completion of the forms when the Reader took out more than one Human Book over the course of the event. Readers often asked if they could fill out one form after the event but at the time of inquiring they rarely know when the last book they will take will be scheduled so this presents an inadequate solution. Additional work is required to strengthen the questions and refine the data gathering process so that the data gathered is of the most significant value. A variety of demographics questions were asked on both the pre-read and post-read questionnaires including gender, age range, institutional affiliation (student, faculty, alumni, public, etc.), year of student and discipline of study (students only) and if the Reader has taken out a Human Book at previous events. The following questions were also asked in the pre-read questionnaire for Readers at the two **augustana human library** events of 2010 (each with likert-style scaled responses from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

- 1. *In my opinion I know very much about the Human Book topic I am checking out.*
 - a. 41% (92 of 222) responded agree/strongly agree
- 2. *In my opinion, I experience prejudice toward the Human Book topic I am checking out.*
 - a. 17% (36 of 222) responded agree/strongly agree
- 3. *I anticipate this conversation to be very challenging.*
 - a. 42% (92 of 222) responded agree/strongly agree

In the post-read questionnaire for Readers, the same demographics questions were asked as well as the following (each with likert-style scaled responses from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

- 1. *In my opinion this Human Book read was a positive experience (only asked at one event).*
 - a. 96% (134 of 139) responded agree/strongly agree
- 2. *In my opinion my knowledge about this Human Book has increased significantly (only asked at one event).*
 - a. 92% (128 of 139) responded agree/strongly agree
- 3. *In my opinion, my experience of prejudice regarding this Human Book topic has decreased significantly.*
 - a. 58% (80 of 139) responded agree/strongly agree
- 4. *I experienced this Human Book read as very challenging.*
 - a. 31% (43 of 139) responded agree/strongly agree

Additionally, the Readers were asked in the post-read questionnaire for ideas for future Human Books and comments or questions regarding their experience of reading this Human Book?

All responses from the pre-read and post-read questionnaires were entered into Augustana’s open source information literacy assessment software WASSAIL (additional information on WASSAIL can be found at <http://www.library.ualberta.ca/augustana/infolit/wassail/>). WASSAIL allows analysis of data comparing responses across different **augustana human library** events. For example, responses associated with a particular Human Book, responses from a particular demographic (e.g. students, biology majors, women), etc.

One of the more unique components of the **augustana human library** is that student attendees are encouraged to cite the Human Books that they have “read” in their undergraduate research papers. This gives librarians an opportunity to discuss citation requirements with students when citing such an information source, as well as the notion of “what is information?” Students are thus challenged to think beyond the book, periodical, web paradigm when considering sources of information and the contexts in which different kinds of information sources are, or may not be, appropriate. Teaching faculty are emailed to inform them of this practice of students citing Human Books and students are encouraged to check with faculty that this practice is acceptable in their courses’ context.

The final manner in which the **augustana human library** contributes to the university curriculum is by explicitly inviting Readers to follow-up with a librarian if additional information on the topic of the Human Book is desired. Readers indicate their desire on the post-read questionnaire that they would like to be contacted by a librarian for assistance in gathering additional information relevant to their **augustana human library** experience/topic (for research or personal purposes). This creates opportunities for the librarian to assist the student in further developing research and information literacy skills.

Human Book Selection and Orientation

Human Books are selected by event organizers in a very controlled manner requiring personal verbal or written references from persons known to the **augustana human library** organizers. This is done to assure validity and appropriateness of each Human Book’s personal narrative. It is important that Human Books understand that they are not to proselytize or recruit or counsel or spread propaganda to Readers. Their role is to tell their story as a personal narrative and not feel pressured or inclined to represent their story as consistent with all persons who have suffered similar prejudice or life experience. Human Books are provided with preparatory materials based on resources provided at by the Human Library Organization at humanlibrary.org³ and a one-hour orientation session provided by the **augustana human library** organizers. One benefit of the orientation session is that it provides an opportunity for the Human Books to meet other Human Books prior to the event. Additionally, Human Books are provided with guidelines

regarding behavioral expectations of all participants and suggestions of how to plan the telling of their story. For many Human Books, this will be the first time they have verbalized their story beginning to end, to persons known or unknown to them. They are encouraged in their preparations to do things like making a list of key points they want to cover, considering their biggest fears of the experience, imagining the difficult questions Readers might ask and assessing their readiness, or not, to respond. Human Books are also involved in the creation of a title and abstract for themselves. Titles are often intentionally provocative (similar to the title of this article) to catch the interest of the Reader but are always done with the agreement of the Human Book. Human Books are volunteers although some Human Libraries will provide coverage for expenses and/or a token gift of appreciation.

Publicity and Visual Identity

A variety of promotional efforts have been made regarding the advertisement of the **augustana human library**. The largest challenge is educating people on what a human library is succinctly. This can be a challenge in the limited format of a campus newsletter, a library LCD screen, or a poster. The best recruitment of Readers comes from word of mouth as others experience the event as Human Books or Readers. The **augustana human library** is open to Augustana Campus students, staff and faculty as well as members of the public. So, while campus tools have a degree of success in terms of advertising, consideration must be given to viable, effective and affordable external options.

In creating for the **augustana human library** a visual identity, consideration was given to the desired message behind the graphical representation. The notion of conversation was decided to be the key element of the desired message; and, ironically, a Creative Commons graphic called “Conversation” was found at flickr.com and used, with permission, as the primary visual identity of the **augustana human library**.

An additional component of the branding effort can be seen in the “Conversation” flowers after the phrase “**augustana human library**.” The words reflect what the organizers aim to achieve in the provision of the event: **growing with people, growing in community, growing our world**. This component promotes a number of different ideas: the “people” as individuals with stories to share, the “community” that grows from the sharing of intimate stories and living with

personal differences, and the growth in our “world”, big and small, that comes from challenging and facing prejudice and stereotypes. The name **augustana human library** always appears in lowercase letters and in bold as part of the visual identity.

The following is the resulting branding:



Word of mouth from the good work of other Human Libraries serves to promote any Human Library. An article in *The Globe and Mail*, Canada’s national newspaper, made a reference to an upcoming human library in Alberta (the first **augustana human library**) which resulted in inquires to the organizers prior to the first event.⁴ This occurred only because the University of Guelph’s **human library** was featured in the article.

Behind the Scenes

The planning of a Human Library can be as complex and involved or as simple as the organizers desire. To a great degree, the model of the human library employed affects the nature and complexity of planning required. Most human libraries are less structured than the **augustana human library** and would advertise a window of time that Human Books are available and readings are first-come-first-served or, alternatively, scheduled at mutually agreeable times.⁵ All models have strengths and weaknesses but the **augustana human library** organizers desired the context where Human Books were available at a pre-advertised time as we did not have the technological infrastructure to facilitate online advance booking and we desired a single event rather than an ongoing event. As well,

Human Books in the **augustana human library** are selected through a more informal process of personal recommendations because the infrastructure is not in place to interview potential Human Books.

On the financial side of things a human library can be run at low to minimal cost. However, there are situations which arise which do benefit from financial backing. A number of examples would include:

1. Advertisements in the local media are effective as this method targets the largest number of potential participants.
2. During the Human Library it is important to serve refreshments for the Human Books and the Readers so that the reads have the desired “going out for coffee” feel
3. There are a number of potential costs associated with the orientation, hosting and thanking of Human Books
 - a. If there are orientation sessions, there are potential costs such as printing of handouts and refreshments.
 - b. Not all books can provide their own transportation to/from the event so funding to support bus passes, taxi rides, etc would be appropriate.
 - c. Some books may come from outside the region and require overnight stay. In this case, appropriate per diem and accommodation costs may come into play.
 - d. A token thank-you gift for the Human Book’s participation is common.

Highlights

Without exception, the reported experiences by Human Books and Readers of the **augustana human library** have been positive. Anecdotally, participants verbally reported a sense of humility and humanity that touched them deeply. The level of trust and respect, even where people might have fundamentally disagreed on issues, was palpable. Descriptive responses provided as part of the research study’s pre-read and post-read questionnaire affirmed for organizers that the event was a success in the many ways success could be measured.

The following are select quotes from **augustana human library Readers**:

“I think it is important to learn about other people’s lives and experience. In our commu-

nities it's the sharing of experiences that creates compassion, and a trust within communities."

Lindsay Sims (Reader of "Surviving the City and the Village," Gay Man)

"...[the experience] connects you to a human soul and human eyes, enabling you to learn through a lived experience of someone else."

Chelsea Halvorson (Reader of "Dancing Chick-to-Chick," Married Lesbian)

"It was a reminder that we can choose how to perceive our world and those who are in it. It is good to question society's values and messages."

Anonymous (Reader of "Guy Hard," Transgendered Person)

The following are select quotes from **augustana human library** *Human Books*:

"I felt that talking about racism made me think more about all other forms of prejudices that may be encountered by other people."

James Kariuki (Human Book: "More Than A Color," Experienced Racism)

"I found it empowering to look back on my life and realize that I have met or adapted to many challenging situations."

Donna Schroeder (Human Book: "I See," Visually Impaired)

Although the **augustana human library** is located on the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta in Camrose (one hour from Alberta's capital city of Edmonton), the **augustana human library** was featured on the front page of the Edmonton Journal. The story featured a Human Book titled "A Father's Heart" which was the story of a father whose infant baby died, who adopted an infant from Haiti, and who parents a Down's syndrome 12-year old son.⁶

Conclusion

While the model of the **augustana human library** is still evolving because every event offers new insights to planners, it is safe to say that the event is fully embraced by the Augustana Campus community as well as the general public. Ongoing challenges include securing stable budget support for the event. As well, the research project is evolving and the data gathering process and the questions asked requires assessment. Working with faculty on a variety of curricular-related options is being considered. The notion of a human library with the Augustana Library will develop more and more with time and will meet with continued success on the strength of formal advertising and word of mouth. It most certainly will continue to be an event that brings a diverse group of people to the Augustana Library both from within and from beyond the boundaries of Augustana campus.

Notes

1. Carney, "A Living Library as an Educational Tool."
2. Garbutt, "The Living Library: Some Theoretical Approaches to a Strategy for Activating Human Rights and Peace."
3. Abergel and others, "Don't Judge a Book by its Cover!: The Living Library Organizer's Guide."
4. Matheson, "Talking Books That Actually Talk Back."
5. Douglas College Foundation, "Living Library: Sharing the Expertise, Talents and Passions that Exist within Douglas College."
6. Stolte, "Library's Walking, Talking Books Offer Lives Worth Borrowing."

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