

HOW



Libraries



Survive

Thrive



A Guide for Librarians... and Everyone Else in Europe!

How Libraries ~~Survive~~ Thrive

**A Guide for Librarians...
and Everyone Else
in Europe!**

This book presents examples and best practices brought forward by dozens of librarians and communities involved in The Europe Challenge, an annual programme uniting teams from across Europe. Libraries and communities collaborate to tackle issues such as social isolation, inequality, disinformation, and climate crisis by developing creative solutions with support from the European Cultural Foundation and its partners. The initiative fosters a growing network of European libraries working together to enhance democratic participation and social and environmental well-being through citizen-led local change.

theuropechallenge.eu

Content

Introduction

8

1 Libraries as Democracy Hubs

12

2 Libraries as Living Rooms of Europe

48

3 Libraries as Climate Oases

90

4 Libraries as Houses for All

122

5 Libraries as Hospitals for the Mind

158

Introduction: The European Social Network

As I write the introduction to this wonderful collection of stories and conversations, I feel overwhelmed by the possibilities of our libraries and their discrete charm in making our societies more connected, caring, joyful, interesting, resilient, and hopeful.

Libraries are essential public infrastructure. They are safe and trusted public spaces in turbulent times full of challenges, uncertainties, and questions. Libraries help us find answers. They are human spaces in an age of artificial intelligence. I admit I am a fan.

Libraries create a sense of belonging. They are both super local and everywhere in Europe. Libraries are unique, yet share a recognisable and trusted format. They are part of their communities, which typically finance them. Connected, they form a European social network in the real sense. They are a cultural network, a knowledge network, and a community network. I would love to see a European community powered by libraries.

Libraries are the original sharing economy – or better yet, the original sharing society. They had been around long before sharing cars, scooters, apartments, cat pictures, and dance videos became

trendy and profitable for digital businesses. Sharing is the social and creative function of libraries, and it is mostly free. Libraries have been ahead of the curve for thousands of years. Libraries have always been the future.

I hear that there is a whole fashion and influencer scene that loves libraries. Are libraries cool? I think so. Still, many have the image of librarians as grey people with thick glasses moving some dusty books around. While this is hardly the case, it may be a good thing that libraries are slightly underrated and not so trendy that you must queue to get in, like at some hip coffee bars.

There are 65,000 libraries in Europe. Just imagine if they were connected. Libraries can uniquely connect the local with the European. I want people and policymakers in Europe to realise what a great treasure the libraries of Europe are. They need recognition and investment. I believe Europe's libraries will create the next Erasmus effect, connecting millions of people across European borders as universities have done for decades thanks to the Erasmus programme.

What does it take? An infrastructure all around Europe. A simple idea: locally-based but European-connected. Ambition and some money. A public-philanthropic partnership to kick it off. We have all the ingredients. Let's do it.

André Wilkens
Director of the European Cultural Foundation

Libraries as Democracy Hubs



Introduction

'You think that libraries are just books? You must be new here,' reads the viral internet meme of Willy Wonka from the 1971 Chocolate Factory movie. Pictured in his signature purple blazer, his sarcastic smile invites a moment of reflection. As any devoted library enthusiast will tell you, libraries offer far more than mere dusty bookshelves; they promote literacy, provide access to knowledge and lifelong learning opportunities, offer safe spaces for debate, encourage the exploration of diverse ideas, and nurture generations of engaged, critical citizens. You get the idea – the list is practically endless.

While democracy is often narrowly-defined by the outcomes of elections, it is what happens between elections that makes democracy possible. Libraries play a crucial role in this. But how is the role of libraries evolving in an era marked by censorship, polarisation, fake news, and misinformation? These troubling trends challenge what it means to maintain a space that upholds democratic values.

You think that libraries are just books? Let this chapter show you how much more they truly are.

A public library is the most democratic thing in the world. What can be found there has undone dictators and tyrants: demagogues can persecute writers and tell them what to write as much as they like, but they cannot vanish what has been written in the past, though they try often enough... If you read, you can learn to think for yourself.

– Doris Lessing

Interview

Democracy is a Thing for White People, Right?

Esra Karakaya on the state of democracy in Europe and the ripple effect on libraries

Photo: Meklit Fekadu Tsige



Name	Esra Karakaya
Country	Germany
Year of Birth	1991
Role	Media entrepreneur and journalist

Esra Karakaya is the founder of KARAKAYA TALKS, a talk show and news content startup that centres traditionally marginalised communities. Among many other prizes, she was named as one of 30 under 30 Changing Germany. In 2021, she was awarded the Hildegard Hamm-Brücher Prize for democracy. Esra is passionate about media justice, and committed to producing critical and accessible news content for marginalised communities.

Is there a particular library that's played an important role in your life – or that you remember fondly for shaping who you are today?

I grew up in Wedding, a part of Berlin that's historically very working class, with a lot of marginalised communities. During high school, me and my peers often went to study at the Schiller Bibliothek. Many of us didn't have any space at home – a lot of us were from big families, living in tiny spaces. For me, this library became a space for learning, but also for community. Even though we were never specifically invited, we knew that this space was there for us – it was right around the corner, it was free to access, they had computers.

Around 10 years ago, this library moved to a newly-built building on the same street. Although this street in Berlin is now heavily gentrified, the new library building is so beautiful and edgy. I love that it hasn't been built for the sake of making money, but for the sake of building a beautiful space for local people. For no other purpose than to have a space where people can go for free, where they can learn. Seeing it gives me hope.

The writer Doris Lessing once said that 'a public library is the most democratic thing in the world.' Disturbingly, research shows that in some European countries, one in three librarians are now facing pressures to censor or remove books, signalling an alarming trend. Drawing parallels with your media work, why do you think libraries are considered "dangerous" amongst the populist forces that are now threatening the state of our democracies?

I wasn't aware of this happening, and I find it shocking that this is the case. For me, libraries are hubs of truth, whereas populist forces obviously thrive on distorting facts. They thrive on building a narrative that they are the oppressed – a narrative that encourages you to feel empathy for them. In reality, populists are people in positions of power, people who use power to oppress.

If I was a populist politician, I can see why I would find libraries threatening. They're spaces that poke holes in the narrative. They're spaces where knowledge and history are archived. They're spaces that store data – spaces where people can go and find pieces of history and puzzle them together.

If you could use only three words to describe the current state of democracy in Europe, what words would you use?

My first thought was: “low self-esteem”. ☹️ Can I just leave it at that?

The Canadian filmmaker and writer Astra Taylor says: ‘Democracy may not exist, but we’ll miss it when it’s gone.’ Do you agree with this statement – is democracy in Europe as good as it gets, despite it being “broken”? What do you think are the greatest challenges for democracy at the moment?

I both agree and disagree with this statement. I agree, because we would definitely miss it if it were to go. But I also disagree, because I just can’t accept that this is the best we have. Right now, we’re theoretically living in a democratic system. But practically, we still have people in positions of power who are able to misuse and abuse it. We also have no common understanding of democratic values. Instead of actually having a democratic institution ruling Europe, it all feels like a performance; like an illusion.

If I was a populist politician, I can see why I would find libraries threatening. They’re spaces that poke holes in the narrative.

While I don’t want to belittle the work of people who put so much effort and energy into building a better democratic system, I do think that we could still go much, much, much further. Europe today would look very different if it was ruled by 16- to 22-year-olds. So right now, I perceive the biggest challenge to be for those in positions of power to let go of the reins and self-reflect; to truly understand what their role should be in these systems.

In your media work, you try to centre the voices of traditionally marginalised communities. What are some of the lessons you’ve

learnt that you could pass on to libraries across Europe – libraries that are trying to offer truly inclusive, safe spaces for marginalised communities, but aren’t always successful in their efforts?

Our media start-up, KARAKAYA TALKS, was born out of a need to deliver information and content to Gen-Zs and millennials of colour in the German-speaking part of Europe. We were needed because public broadcasting stations weren’t able to provide this service for marginalised communities. So there was a clear gap.

However, what I’ve been observing is that different organisations and players are now approaching us, seeking access to our community. For now, I can understand it – these organisations have needs, and they probably see us as the solution. The problem is when these organisations see us as the shortcut. On paper, they’re looking for inclusivity – but inclusivity is not microwaveable.

So if someone asks me how to go about fostering inclusivity, I tell them that you can’t take a shortcut into marginalised communities. True community work is all about relationships, and relationships need time. So, for example, if you have access to money, invest that money into the communities you want to work with. Put your money where your mouth is – ask them what they need, trust that they know best what’s happening on the ground, then work with them on a level playing field. The most important thing to remember is that you cannot perform inclusivity. The moment you tokenise people, people will smell it.

Imagine a future in which 65,000 public libraries across Europe are all connected, playing a key role as hubs of European democracy and civic engagement. What could libraries do today to make such a future a reality?

This question alone is the first step. Just imagining such a future is the foundation of everything. The next step is understanding that, if we want real change, it needs to start small – with the smallest steps that each of us, as individuals, can take. I don’t want to individualise systemic oppression or systemic problems, but the position of power that each of us has – however small, with however little influence – is where we need to start. If we want the system to transform, then we as individuals also need to transform. So my advice to libraries would be: start small!

Some people turn off when they hear the word “democracy” – perceiving it as something they have little influence over, or a topic that’s too big for them to address. Beyond encouraging people to vote, what are some of the ways in which librarians could promote active democratic participation, especially amongst young people?

If people aren’t interested in the word “democracy”, then don’t use the word. Democracy shouldn’t be about the word. So many atrocities have been committed in the name of democracy. Democracy has been instrumentalised to justify violence. Right now, there are states in Germany where I’m not allowed by law to become a teacher, a judge, nor a policewoman, because of my hijab – and all of this is happening in the name of democracy.

You can’t take a shortcut into marginalised communities. True community work is all about relationships, and relationships need time.

When thinking about how to connect with young people, you should think about language – what language do young people understand and feel connected to? If you’re doing truly democratic work, you shouldn’t really have to use the word “democracy”. Democracy should be about democratic values and actions rather than words.

Which one book has influenced your understanding of inclusive democracies the most?

Growing up, I often thought: “What democracy? What are you talking about?” Democracy wasn’t really a concept that worked for me. I’m of Korean-Turkish heritage, whereas democracy is a thing for white people, right? This is how I felt.

As my work became more and more political, I found my own understanding of democracy. Although I don’t necessarily have one book that shaped me in that process, a book that I read recently which has influenced me a lot is a collection of essays called *Unlearn Patriarchy*. It’s in German, and I would recommend it to anyone interested in deconstructing the different oppressive systems that are present in our lives.

If you’re doing truly democratic work, you shouldn’t really have to use the word “democracy”. Democracy should be about democratic values and actions rather than words.

When thinking about the future of democracy in Europe, what gives you hope?

The people. Both the visionaries, and the people who work in the tiny, tiny, tiny margins. Their work, regardless of how small, is what will make the future of Europe more just and more human. I see investing in the people as watering the soil of democracy.

And finally: If you could send a message to librarians across Europe – who are working towards a more democratic, inclusive continent – what would it be?

You are the guardians of the truth. You are the people who protect the knowledge that is fundamental for justice, for democracy. In 2020, there was a right-wing terrorist attack in Hanau, a small German city. Nine people were brutally murdered, all of them from marginalised communities. One of them, Ferhat Unvar, said: ‘I will only die when I’m forgotten.’ So let’s not forget. Libraries are the means for us not to forget; the means to remember. And remembering is justice.

10 Tips for a Democratic Library

Access to information, literacy, and life-long learning are all vital cornerstones of inclusive, democratic societies. From rethinking accessibility to inclusive programming, here are 10 tips for a democratic library – straight from The Europe Challenge librarians!

1

Read *What is democracy?* by Hal Koch. According to him, democracy is not something that can be secured – it's not just a system that we implement, but a way of life that we need to continuously pursue.

2

Prioritise a culture of empathy, compassion, and understanding. By creating an inclusive and welcoming environment where individuals feel heard, understood, and supported, you help build democracy from the ground up.

3

Remove as many barriers to access as you can: financial, linguistic, cultural, physical, geographical, mental... Consider implementing concepts like the living library, a language café, or a travelling library to challenge prejudice and discrimination.

4

Don't work in a bubble! If you want your work to be truly inclusive and democratic, make that first step. Cast a wide net for partners to help you build an engaged and diverse community of life-long learners. Energy, patience, and persistence are key!

5

Participate in the Summer Reading Challenge. It started in the UK, but it should become a Europe-wide thing. It's a yearly initiative to keep children reading during summer holidays, and it helps build generations of engaged, critical adult readers (and citizens).

6

Consider how your library can foster *all* types of literacies that are vital for a functioning democracy in the 21st century. Not just traditional literacy like reading, but also information literacy, digital literacy, media literacy, cultural literacy, financial literacy, and perhaps most importantly, civic literacy – the knowledge of how to actively participate and initiate change in society.

7

Remember that democratic action goes hand-in-hand with reflection. Create space and time for both.

8

Exercise your democratic muscles by embracing disagreement instead of avoiding it. Train the ability to handle the discomfort of conflict in a non-escalatory manner. Foster an empathetic atmosphere.

9

If you are facing pressure from external parties, or even your own visitors, to remove or add certain books based on political viewpoints, make sure you have a solid policy in place to handle such demands. This way, you can keep your space neutral and democratic, no matter what.

10

Check out *How To Make Libraries Forums of Democracy* – it's a handbook that you can download online for free. It was developed by Sitra researchers from Finland, who do exciting work on community building and democratic dialogue.

Essay

The Bumpy Road of European Democracy through the Lens of The Europe Challenge

Photo: Juris Ross



Name	Irina Kuznecova
Country	Latvia
Year of Birth	1985
Role	Artist, researcher, and strategic project manager

Irina Kuznecova works at the DOTS Foundation for an Open Society, a non-profit dedicated to promoting a culture of democracy in Latvia. She is also a co-founder of the LAMPA Conversation Festival, an annual open-air democracy festival, and a board member of the Democracy Festivals Association, which unites democracy festivals across Europe.

Democratic values implemented by libraries and communities through The Europe Challenge

Libraries as Democratic Spaces

- Trust-building
- Cooperation and solidarity
- Participatory culture
- Inclusive society
- Dialogue

Community Building

- Social capital
- Common ground
- Sense of belonging
- Social inclusion
- Networking
- Co-creation

Shared democratic challenges faced by libraries and communities across Europe

Diverse Democracies

- Reintegration of prisoners
- Integration of Ukrainian refugees
- Fighting discrimination
- Social inclusion of migrants and marginalised communities
- Equal rights and visibility of minorities
- Inclusion of people with disabilities
- Intercultural societies and hyper-diversity

Social Fragmentation

- Loneliness and social isolation
- Health and mental wellbeing
- Social deprivation, poverty, rising cost of living
- Ageing population and depopulation
- Political and societal disengagement
- Polarisation

Climate Change

- Biodiversity and climate change
- Waste problems and circular economy
- Sustainable lifestyles and practices
- Divisive climate policies

- Ecological awareness
- Disadvantaged youth
- Social exclusion
- Mental health problems

Youth (Dis)engagement

- Misinformation and fake news
- Social cohesion in multi-ethnic communities
- Political and societal disengagement

We are used to perceiving democracy largely through the lens of regular elections. However, I'd like to invite you to look at it a bit differently, putting society – a foundational block of democracy – front and centre.

Democracy thrives when people are politically engaged, able to find compromises and common ground, can create strong social bonds and networks, and cooperate and build solidarity across differences. It wanes when people withdraw from politics and signal their indifference, distrust others, cease interacting with those outside their groups, or when they shut themselves off within only their closest circles.

These were the “democracy glasses” that I put on while diving into 96 library and community initiatives that participated in The Europe Challenge between 2021 and 2024. From tiny villages to big cities, I was trying to grasp the state of democracy in Europe and explore how these challenges reveal a broader picture. As a result, I have identified the following shared issues confronting us Europeans: diverse democracies, societal fragmentation, climate change, and the urgent need to engage young people in particular.

Diverse Democracies

It's never been easy to live in diverse democracies, and coming from Latvia, I can fully attest to that. Social psychologists and neurobiologists have long proven that the categorisation of people into in- and out-groups comes easily to humans; it is natural for the brain to divide the world into “us” and “them”, giving preference to those who are most like ourselves. As our European societies – to a greater or lesser extent – become diverse, this presents a weak point for democracy.

Today, many European libraries across the continent face the challenge to serve and engage a fragmented intercultural population. Nearly a quarter of The Europe Challenge library initiatives have been dealing directly or indirectly with intercultural dialogue, hyper-diversity, the inclusion of migrants and refugees, and tackling a rising anti-immigrant sentiment. They have created welcoming spaces for Ukrainian refugees, encouraging their cultural inclusion and fostering their sense of belonging within the local community; brought people of different backgrounds together to re-establish shared values or to take care of common causes; created mentorship and cultural exchange programmes; and

organised cultural events, educational workshops, and community-building activities to foster understanding and solidarity.

The history of diverse societies is not, to put it mildly, very bright; the danger of scapegoating and populists stoking ethnic, racial, or religious hatred during hard times has always been present – a threat we should be keenly aware of, and do everything to avert. The world may have changed, but human nature has not. However, we should remain hopeful. It is a common fact that people from different backgrounds are more likely to get along and discover shared values if they spend time with one another, and here comes a crucial role of libraries – more than just knowledge hubs, they are meeting places where community is built.

Social psychologists and neurobiologists have long proven that the categorisation of people into in- and out-groups comes easily to humans; it is natural for the brain to divide the world into “us” and “them”.

Societal Fragmentation

Each of us has a set of close contacts (friendships) and weaker connections (acquaintances). In a society made up of stronger networks of friends and acquaintances, people start to trust each other more, allowing democracy to thrive. However, when we stop meeting friends, reduce our social interactions to a minimum, and when our only birthday wishes come from social media apps, democracy is in deep trouble.

In a way, democracy rests on the breadth and diversity of our social connections, and although the Covid-19 pandemic was a major disruption, it merely accelerated atomisation: a trend towards people spending less time together in person and more time with technologies. It has been accompanied by withdrawal from societal

life, social isolation, loneliness, and mental health issues exacerbated by anxieties over events like the war in Ukraine and the subsequent rise in living costs.

The history of diverse societies is not, to put it mildly, very bright; the danger of scapegoating and populists stoking ethnic, racial, or religious hatred during hard times has always been present - a threat we should be keenly aware of, and do everything to avert.

These issues have constituted the second major set of challenges that The Europe Challenge libraries have chosen to work on, affecting large and small communities alike. To tackle them, libraries have brought people together to jointly design 'escape rooms' (Milan, Italy), established 'citizen labs' (Lisbon, Portugal), turned their spaces into community agoras (Novi Sad, Serbia), developed wellbeing therapy programmes (Vaidava, Latvia), employed the therapeutic power of stories (Athens, Greece), and even provided free access to services that assist with mental health (Genova, Italy). These are just a few examples.

Ageing populations and depopulation, along with the subsequent social problems, stand out as particular challenges for small rural and urban communities across Europe – both in the East and the West. 'With no shops, limited public transport and closed public spaces in the villages, Busto's ageing population is more isolated than ever, and youngsters are leaving the area at a rapid rate in search of better opportunities,' – this description of a situation in a village in Spain's Asturias region could easily apply to many European communities. In areas such as these, the role of libraries

becomes essential in nurturing community spirit and creating a safe space for social interaction.

Via The Europe Challenge, libraries have also addressed low voter turnout and the public disengagement from political life, stirred frank and open dialogues between different groups of people, and created welcoming spaces for people to exchange and discuss their ideas.

Climate Change

In many ways, climate- and environment-related issues have become a bone of contention, a divisive political agenda, as well as a reality that is harder to ignore or deny. Over the last couple of years, people across Europe have experienced polarising debates, political tensions, demonstrations, disruptions to public life, and even violent actions. In all likelihood, climate change and the accompanying environmental problems will be as disruptive a force in our lives as artificial intelligence. They can also provoke serious conflicts.

In one example, the European Commission has warned that water scarcity risks are sparking conflict among European Union countries unprepared for a warming world. We can already see how water scarcity is setting up conflicts between drought-stricken Spanish regions; pitting residents against tourists over water consumption in Barcelona; and even sparking tensions between France and Switzerland.

Democracy rests on the breadth and diversity of our social connections, and although the Covid-19 pandemic was a major disruption, it merely accelerated atomisation: a trend towards people spending less time together in person and more time with technologies.

Environmental issues and sustainable living practices have constituted the third largest set of The Europe Challenge initiatives, indicating the urgency of the problem. Libraries have focused on urban beekeeping, waste problems, overconsumption, and water preservation. They have also organised awareness campaigns and activities, ecological educational programmes, libraries of things, community gardens, and more. In Seville – a Spanish city affected by high temperatures and regular heat waves – one library transformed parts of its premises into a climate garden. However, in several small communities, the promotion of sustainable living practices is overshadowed by other urgent issues, with rising levels of poverty and social deprivation taking precedence among local populations.

Libraries are already becoming a place for dialogue, playing host to various conversations on divisive green issues and policies. A vivid example here is a library from Laois county in the rural Irish Midlands, which has facilitated dialogue and understanding around the transition from peat extraction: an historical practice which is regarded as a form of cultural heritage.

Democracy has never been rock-solid but rather fluid - with its ups and downs. It is more like a garden that needs constant tending.

Youth (Dis)engagement

Youth as a specific demographic group has been the primary focus of nearly a fifth of all the libraries' initiatives. Many libraries have faced a decline in their young audiences, and the pandemic has only accelerated this process, urging libraries to reimagine themselves to remain relevant to young people.

Youth ecological awareness, social cohesion in multi-ethnic communities, digital skills to counter fake news, social exclusion, and mental health problems have been among the particular subjects in focus. The biggest concern of all, however, has been

youth political and societal disengagement – a serious challenge for the future of democracies, which rely on political participation.

'In East-Central Europe, most young citizens who are critical of how democracy is practised in their countries are choosing political disengagement over mobilisation,' a worrying trend revealed in more detail in the April 2024 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*. If there aren't enough young and capable citizens becoming politically interested and engaged, who will hold the line against possible democratic backsliding? This is an open question, and here again, libraries could contribute.

Ending on a Positive Note

Today, we often hear or read about a crisis of democracy, and the list of actual problems can easily drive you down the rabbit hole. Falling into a democracy "doom loop" is a dangerous exercise: in the end, it might become a self-fulfilling prophecy with an outcome none of us would want. Therefore, it is good to remind ourselves occasionally that democracy has never been rock-solid but rather fluid – with its ups and downs. It is more like a garden that needs constant tending. So far we have been rather complacent, but for a democracy to thrive, we need to start caring – and our libraries have the potential to become an important part of this circle of care. The road ahead of us may well be quite bumpy for some time (fasten your seatbelts!), making initiatives like The Europe Challenge more timely than ever.

For a democracy to thrive, we need to start caring - and our libraries have the potential to become an important part of this circle of care.

Libraries as Democracy Hubs

The Europe Challenge Case Studies

How are libraries across Europe challenging fake news and misinformation? How are they promoting active citizenship and addressing critical democratic issues like low voter turnout? What steps can libraries take to nurture essential literacies – social, digital, information, civic, and more – for a healthy democracy? Discover 20 inspiring library initiatives across Europe that are fostering life-long learning and transforming library spaces into vibrant hubs of democracy: from unlocking opportunities for prisoners to challenging discrimination, and promoting a more informed and engaged society.

Key words

Democracy, fake news, misinformation, life-long learning, education, discrimination, upskilling, literacy, prisons, active citizenship.

Types of libraries included

Public, prison, feminist.

Learn more about the cases in this chapter!



The Democratic Library

- 📍 Woolwich, UK
- 🏠 Woolwich Centre Library
- 👥 Woolwich Service Users Project

The Democratic Library addresses low voter turnout and growing divisions in British society by encouraging inclusion, imagination, and storytelling from marginalised voices in south-east London. The goal is to promote positive civil engagement that reflects local diversity.



Working Together to Challenge Fake News

- 📍 Vilafranca del Penedès, Spain
- 🏠 Torras i Bages Public Library
- 👥 High school students and library users of the Penedès and Garraf area

Bringing together libraries, schools, and the University of Barcelona, this initiative is boosting digital skills in a region where many economic migrants have settled – teaching skills to navigate the internet safely, think critically, and challenge fake news.



The Elections Experience Trail

- 📍 Brussels, Belgium
- 🏠 Muntpunt (Brussels Public Library)
- 👥 Tisaanu (Ambassade, council desk for youth)

With the goal of inspiring young Belgians to become more involved in the democratic process, this Brussels-based initiative is developing an interactive library experience to help educate secondary school children about elections, democracy, and active citizenship.



Cultural Opportunities to Challenge Disinformation

- 📍 Paterna del Campo, Spain
- 🏠 Biblioteca Pública Municipal Miguel Arguisjuela
- 👥 Asociación Cultural Scatiana

Hosting storytelling events and book clubs, this initiative is redefining libraries in rural southern Spain, turning them into hubs for debate and reflection. The ambition is to inspire other libraries across Europe to tackle disinformation too.



Fighting Discrimination with Books

- 📍 Lecce, Italy
- 📖 Biblioteca Bernardini
- 👥 Tdf Mediterranea APS

In southern Italy, this initiative is challenging discrimination by building a more inclusive library. Working with young people, they run workshops around LGBT+ and multicultural issues - leading to a new diverse library section and inspiring author talks.



Democracy & Inclusion in the Library

- 📍 Kuldīga, Latvia
- 📖 Kuldīga Main Library
- 👥 Kurzeme NGO Centre

This initiative is encouraging social inclusion and active citizenship in Latvian society. Through engaging conversations on current topics, developing interactive games, and organising a Democracy Festival, they are creating a more inclusive space and amplifying diverse voices.



Breaking Down Language Barriers

- 📍 Ternopil, Ukraine
- 📖 Ternopil Regional Universal Scientific Library
- 👥 Ternopil Regional Branch of the Ukrainian Library Association

This collaboration offers free Polish classes to Ukrainians displaced by war. Learning languages is not just about developing new skills, it is about building connections, developing social skills, and laying the groundwork for future opportunities.



The Creation of Feminist Library Tirana

- 📍 Tirana, Albania
- 📖 Berk Centre
- 👥 Kolektivi Feminist i Shqiperise

In Tirana, the Albanian Feminist Collective collaborates with the local library to challenge patriarchal views and violence against women - creating a vibrant safe space for discussions on feminist issues, and establishing a dedicated women's library.



Learning for Life

- 📍 Kyiv, Ukraine
- 📖 Lesia Ukrainka Public Library of Kyiv
- 👥 Young people on probation

Learning for Life connects Kyiv's main public library with young offenders across Ukraine, providing support to prisoners and those on probation. Through events, training, and masterclasses, they are helping to prepare offenders for life after prison.



LA Together: Participate in Your Local Community

- 📍 Landskrona, Sweden
- 📖 Landskrona Public Libraries
- 👥 Hej Öster

LA Together is energising the local community with lively talks and workshops, inspiring young people and locals with Swedish as a second language to dive into community activities and democratic processes - boosting local engagement and voter turnout.



Unlocking New Opportunities for Prisoners

- 📍 Florence, Italy
- 📖 BiblioteCaNova Isolotto
- 👥 700 prisoners at Sollicciano Prison

In a small prison library in Florence, staff have big ambitions to make sure inmates have the skills they need to unlock a brighter future upon release - offering lessons in Italian, creative writing, and reading.



Community Activators and Programmers

- 📍 Ipswich, UK
- 📖 Ipswich County Library
- 👥 Ipswich Romanian community

In Ipswich, this initiative is overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers to library access for the growing Romanian community. Through dynamic outreach activities, expanding book collections, and inclusive events that celebrate Romanian culture, it seeks to strengthen community bonds.

(Photo: Joe Field Horner)



Digital Skills for People with Vision Disabilities

- 📍 Lviv, Ukraine
- 🏠 Lviv Municipal Library
- 👥 Institute of Ukrainian Studies

To help reintegrate injured Ukrainian veterans into civilian life, this Lviv-based initiative shares digital skills with the friends and relatives of former combatants with impaired vision, giving them access to much-needed practical and psychological support.



Building Digital Skills to Challenge Fake News

- 📍 Cavriago, Reggio Emilia, Italy
- 🏠 Multiplio Centro Cultura
- 👥 Accento Cooperativa

In northern Italy, the School of Lies initiative teaches school children safer internet skills, including how to spot fake news. The team is also setting up a library-based digital laboratory to empower young people with tech skills.



Romnja Feminist Library

- 📍 Bucharest, Romania
- 🏠 Romnja Feminist Library
- 👥 Romnja Magazine

The Romnja Feminist Library champions Romani feminism, showcasing Romani women writers and activists. Providing a curated book collection and an online magazine, this initiative is empowering Romani women to share their stories and challenge discrimination across Europe. *(Image: Sandra Carmona)*



LetteraMente - Information Literacy and Books to Counter Fake News

- 📍 Turin, Italy
- 🏠 Biblioteca Centro Studi Piero Gobetti
- 👥 Liceo M. Mazzarello di Torino

Tackling misinformation head-on, this Turin library has joined forces with a secondary school library to offer community workshops and activities. From exploring book heritage to recommending new titles, they aim to inspire students' critical thinking and active citizenship.



Accept the Challenge - Express Citizens Labs

- 📍 Novi Sad, Serbia
- 🏠 Novi Sad City Library
- 👥 Kulturis Association

This Serbian initiative dreams of transforming libraries into community hubs, challenging citizens to play a more active role in addressing local issues. Through 'Express Citizen Labs', they are bridging gaps between community initiatives and cultural institutions.



Libraries Without Borders

- 📍 Warsaw, Poland
- 🏠 Biblioteki bez granic (Libraries Without Borders)
- 👥 The Readers' Community

Libraries Without Borders is on a mission to bring books to people in detention centres across Poland, as well as to deliver books to migrant communities. They also organise skill and language exchanges to help strengthen community connections.



Elastic Money / Money Matters

- 📍 Bootle, UK
- 🏠 Sefton Libraries
- 👥 Venus Charity

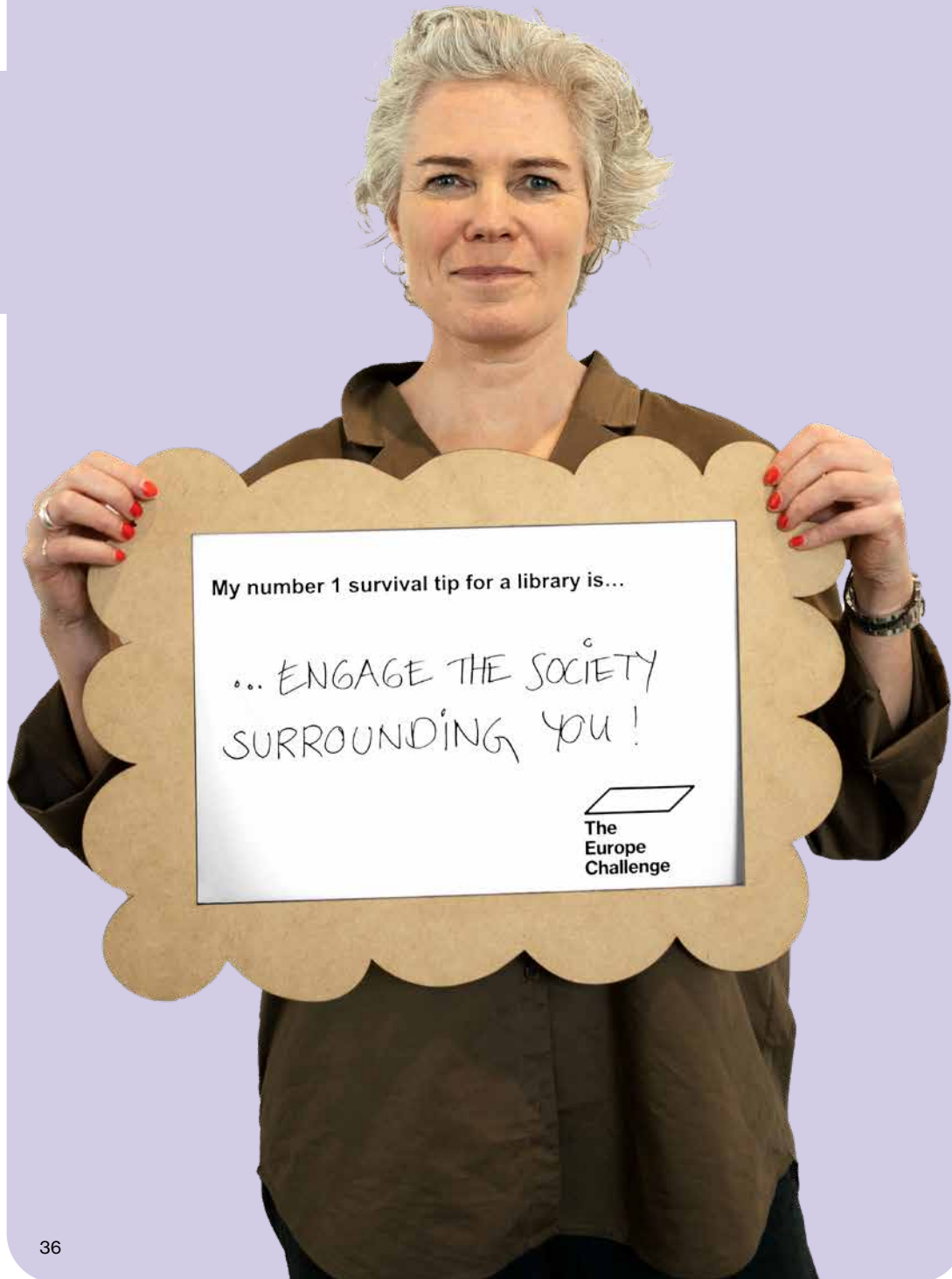
Empowering local women in a deprived community to tackle their financial problems, this library collaboration is pioneering creative approaches to debt management, sharing financial guidance and money-saving tips in a safe space to help turn lives around.



Technophobia Is Not for Women

- 📍 Kranj, Slovenia
- 🏠 Kranj City Library
- 👥 Local community

Tackling gender gaps in scientific disciplines, this Slovenian public library is attracting nationwide attention for its 'Living Library' events - where inspirational women scientists make guest appearances as 'living books' - as well as for its all-female robotics and programming workshops.



Home is Where We Keep Our Books



Name
Abdallah Alghoul

Country
Palestine/Greece

Year of Birth
1988

Role
How a Library Changed My Life writing competition winner

Abdallah Alghoul was born to a family of 11 in Rafah, Palestine. He later studied filmmaking in Cairo, Egypt. Abdallah's first short documentary focused on workers in Gaza's tunnel network; after graduating, he returned to Gaza to make a feature film, but the war of 2014 forced him to emigrate. He now lives in Athens, Greece, where he works on home renovations.

How a Library Changed My Life was a writing competition held by the European Cultural Foundation in Spring 2024. Six winners were selected from nearly 300 submissions across 47 countries, each showcasing the life-changing impact of libraries.

My backpack is heavy today. I had to carry all six of the Arabic books that I've finished reading, to exchange them for new ones at the Echo Mobile Library without having to return home after work. The library van stops for an hour at different squares across Athens, and I have to run to catch it downtown at Victoria Square. Beka, the founder of the library, promised a collection of new books, and she will again allow me to borrow six books at a time, not just two.

I reached the square just in time. Beka was there with her warm smile. I sat inside the van, checking out the new books, and suddenly my eyes landed on a familiar title. I held the book in my hand and closed my eyes, praying I would find the missing pages, 190-198, still there: pages I had been looking for since I was a child. Then I began to remember.

Everything started with a rock. It was 2001, in Gaza city. I was 12 years old, the Twin Towers in New York had just been attacked, and the second intifada (uprising) had already broken out around Palestine. I was in an UNRWA-run school when a rock broke through the glass window at 11.00, resting at our teacher Omar's feet. I liked teacher Omar. It is amazing how much teachers can impact our lives; each one of us has a favourite teacher who we will always remember. I can still recall the smell of his cologne mixed with tobacco, and the way he always smoked in class while walking between the rows of students, hiding the tip of the cigarette in the palm of his hand like a soldier in the battlefield. His hair was always shiny and neat, and he somehow managed to wear ironed shirts even when the electricity was out for days.

Everything started with a rock that rested at Mr Omar's feet. By the time the whole class had turned to see what was going on outside, there were another 20 rocks flying in the air towards us. These rocks came from the older students' demonstration against the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The older students were demanding that we should be let out to join them, but Mr Omar tried hard to stop us from leaving the classroom. We could hear the Israeli army's Apache helicopter fighters dropping bombs in the distance. Mr Omar took the scared students who did not want to join the demonstration, leading us to a safe room in the basement. He said: 'You stay here until I go and talk to the other teachers and bring the keys to the room.'

This basement room was the school library that no one visited. Everything was dusty and old; we opened the windows to let the light in so that we could see. The bookshelves looked like the walls of a cave, and there was a nice smell of leather and oak. 'How did I not know about this room until now?' I thought. 'How come no one took us to the school library before, or even told us that there was one?'

Everything started with a rock. It was 2001, in Gaza city. I was 12 years old, the Twin Towers in New York had just been attacked, and the second intifada (uprising) had already broken out around Palestine.

I was fascinated by the books; something about the atmosphere that day made me fall in love with libraries and books forever. I stood there reading the names of the books and their authors, and everything around me started to fade: the shouting of the student demonstration and the sound of the helicopter bombings. And in that moment, on a high shelf, I found some books that changed my life, making me who I am today.

I stood on a chair and reached for a big volume of poetry by Mahmoud Darwish, one of Palestine's most famous poets. I opened it at random and started reading:

**'Between Rita and my eyes
There is a rifle
And whoever knows Rita
Kneels and prays
To the divinity in those honey-coloured eyes
Ah, Rita
Between us there are a million sparrows and images
And many rendezvous
Fired at by a rifle'**

Mr Omar and the other teachers kept returning with more students, going back and forth until the whole library was full. But at this point I didn't care; I had already sunk body and soul into Darwish's poetry. All I wanted was for the chaos and the bombing to last a bit longer so that I could stay. I asked if I could take the book; the teacher said no, but I was told I could come back and read it in my free time.

After that day, all UNRWA schools stayed closed for 10 days due to the high number of Palestinians killed in the Israeli attacks.

When we went back to school, the first thing I did was go to the headmaster to suggest that I could clean the library. The headmaster smiled, showing a line of yellow and missing teeth, and gave me a copy of the keys. It was the first set of keys I had ever carried for something I really loved. I started gathering students who loved books and reading; together we cleaned all the shelves, tables, and chairs and reorganised all the books. I discovered the Palestinian novelist Ghassan Kanafani, the Syrian writer Ghada Al-Samman, and the Lebanese poet Adonis. I would spend hours there, missing out on lots of classes just to sit and read books in this place: my new home. On Fridays, when everyone went to pray at the mosque, I would jump over the school wall and hide in the library, losing myself in stories.

I soon became responsible for overseeing the school library. One of my duties was to choose the themes for the school's morning assemblies. After singing the Palestinian national anthem and raising the flag, I would read aloud short stories, poetry, and political articles that I did not understand fully at the time. I started to become well-known among the students and the teachers; more students wanted to be my friend, which left me feeling happy and contented.

One day I overheard my elder sister, Asmaa, and her best friend, Iman, talking about a sex scene in a novel by Hanna Mina called *Hikait Bahar (A Sailor's Tale)*. The next day I went to look for the book in the school library. I was very excited when I found it. I took it and went to the sea. When I approached page 190, I discovered that several pages had been torn out of the book, which I realised must have been the sex scene pages. I was so disappointed that I could not sleep. I went to another school library looking for the book. I searched every bookshelf I saw, everywhere I went. I started reading all the novels I found by Hanna Mina; I really liked the simplicity of his stories, as well as his beautiful metaphors. But I could not forget about pages 190-198.

Another day I went with a small group from our school to visit the national library in Gaza City. It was the biggest library I had ever entered. It had two big floors with thousands of books in Arabic, English, and French, with lots of tables with nice lamps and a beautiful garden. There was free hot tea with sage or mint, and my school made memberships for the whole group so that we could come back and borrow books. Of course, I started looking for *A Sailor's Tale*. I found it, but this time the lines on pages 190-198 had been crossed out with black ink. I tried to read through the ink but I couldn't; I was able to read only one sentence which drove me even crazier. It read: 'And then he closed her mouth with his hand to lower her loud moaning and carried her, and pushed her back against the wall, her legs were crossed behind his back'. I went many times to re-read the sentence and to try to read more, but with no success.

I became a regular visitor to the national library, and one day – while I was looking through the English section – I stumbled upon a medical book. While going through the pictures and reading the comments under them, I found a whole chapter with pictures of women's bodies. It was the first time I had seen a woman's full naked body, the first time I saw breasts and private parts. I felt like a thief – that everyone in the library knew this book and what I was looking at. My face blushed, my ears were hot, and I felt something come alive down there that stopped me from leaving the table. When I finally pulled myself together and put the book back in a hidden place that only I could find, I realised that my jeans were wet. I felt very embarrassed, leaving the library in a hurry.

In the following weeks, I returned many times to the library to look at the book and its pictures, and I began to have more confidence that I was not doing anything wrong. I started to discover my own body, my own desires, feelings, and sensitivities. I was slowly growing up with the library books. Books and war had made me grow older, wiser, as well as making me want to listen instead of talk. It is strange how beauty and ugliness can influence you in the same time and place.

The national library of Gaza was taken over by the Hamas government in 2007. Sadly, most of the interesting books, including my secret hidden ones, were removed or censored. Sadly, too, our school was bombed by the Israeli army in 2008. Later, a big part of the library was destroyed by another Israeli operation in 2014. It

was rebuilt, then destroyed again in 2023. I sometimes wonder what teacher Omar is doing right now, if he is alive or dead, if he left Gaza, or if he is still there. I wonder what happened to all the books in my lovely school library, which was my second home throughout my primary school years.

The chanting of a passing demonstration at Victoria Square brought me back from my memories. I'm still sitting in the library van holding *A Sailor's Tale*; I opened it at pages 190-198, and I was happy to finally find them intact! I used to struggle to find Arabic books in my first couple of years in Athens, but now a few multilanguage libraries have been created, allowing me the pleasure of enjoying a book in my native language. It has now been seven years since I moved here. Athens has been so generous, giving me a home, friends, a new language, and most importantly, the freedom of movement that I had never experienced before.

I was born in the Gaza strip as a refugee from a refugee family. I miss the books I left behind in our family house in Gaza City, which has been bombed and destroyed in the devastating war that rages as I write in 2024. I have always been a refugee wherever I go, moving from place to place. Libraries are home because home is where we keep our books.

**'Even the wind wants to become a cart
Pulled by butterflies.
My wishes are flowers
staining my days.
I was wounded early, and early I learned
that wound made me.
I still follow the child
who still walks inside me.
Now he stands at a staircase made
of light
Searching for a corner to rest in
and to read the face of night again
I was born in a village,
small and secretive like a womb.
I never left it.
I love the ocean not the shores'**

Celebrating Childhood by Adonis, translated by Khalid Mattawa



Libraries as Living Rooms of Europe



Introduction

Europe is becoming increasingly polarised. Just think about all the news we consume while doomscrolling the internet until the early hours of the morning, the blue light of our screens deepening the anxiety-induced creases on our foreheads. Each in our own bubble, we increasingly surround ourselves with people who live the same, look the same, and think the same as us.

Here's a challenge for you: apart from the library, can you name another open, public space in Europe found in every country on our continent that allows you to interact with fellow human beings – possibly ones of different ages, backgrounds, genders, or political viewpoints – under the same roof? A space that doesn't require you to spend money (like a shopping centre), purchase an expensive oat milk latte (like a café), or rage at whoever did such a dismal parking job (like a parking garage)? A space that feels as safe and cosy as a living room? A space that broadens perspectives – not just on your local context, but on Europe as a whole? A space that continues to persevere in the face of shrinking public areas?

Welcome to the library, your home away from home!
No need to take your shoes off.

**You want weapons?
We're in a library!
Books are the best
weapon in the world.
This room's the greatest
arsenal we could have.
Arm yourself!**

– Doctor Who

Interview

Libraries As Cathedrals of Our Time

Francine Houben on designing library spaces
for a happier future

Photo: Mark Uy!



Name	Francine Houben
Country	The Netherlands
Year of Birth	1955
Role	Library architect

Francine Houben is the founding partner and creative director of the Delft-based architecture firm, Mecanoo, and has held several professorships in the Netherlands and abroad. Her practice is particularly known for the design of libraries. These include the Delft University of Technology Library, the refurbishment of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library in Washington D.C., and the New York Public Library Midtown renovation.



Library in Birmingham. Photo by Christian Richters.

Can you trace your architectural career back to a specific library? Is there perhaps a library you remember fondly for shaping who you are today?

I come from a family where there was quite a lot of reading. My parents had books, but I rarely went to the library. What I remember is that the branch library in Groningen was in a basement and that it smelled nasty. So that wasn't my inspiration. The library that was a space of inspiration for me was the Faculty of Architecture library at TU Delft. I became an architect because of three things that fascinate me, all of which come together harmoniously in architecture: creativity, social involvement and the technical translation thereof. This is reflected in all of Mecanoo's projects.

You've designed libraries in Birmingham, New York, Washington, Tilburg, Tainan, and many other places. An American journalist once called you 'The Library Whisperer'. What is the secret to your success when designing libraries?

As an architect, I think it's essential to immerse yourself in the place where a library will be located before you start designing. What characterises this location? What drives the people who live there? I want to feel and taste how a library can serve and enrich that particular local community. That is reflected in my design. One example is that the way we treat children in the Netherlands is very different than in England, America or Taiwan. You have to understand things like that in order to be able to design something that appeals to the users.

It's also important to stress that an architect is not an autonomous artist. What you do, you do in collaboration with the client and with the people who work in the library. That's why their input is so important. Of course you have to make concessions from time to time, but that's part of the job. Likewise, when it comes to renovating existing buildings, such as libraries in New York and Washington, you work as a kind of surgeon. You treat the building respectfully, but at the same time you perform surgical procedures to make it contemporary. This process is just as interesting as designing a new building.

Looking back, I'm proud of all the libraries I've designed and wear the honorary title of 'The Library Whisperer' with pride.

What does the library of the future look like in your opinion?

The library of the future must be for the people. It must offer everyone, whatever their age or background, the knowledge, skills, and paths they need to find their own future. At the same time, I don't think there is one particular library of the future. The library of the future is different for every country and every city. Just as the world is changing, libraries need to change with it.

The library of the future is different for every country and every city. Just as the world is changing, libraries need to change with it.

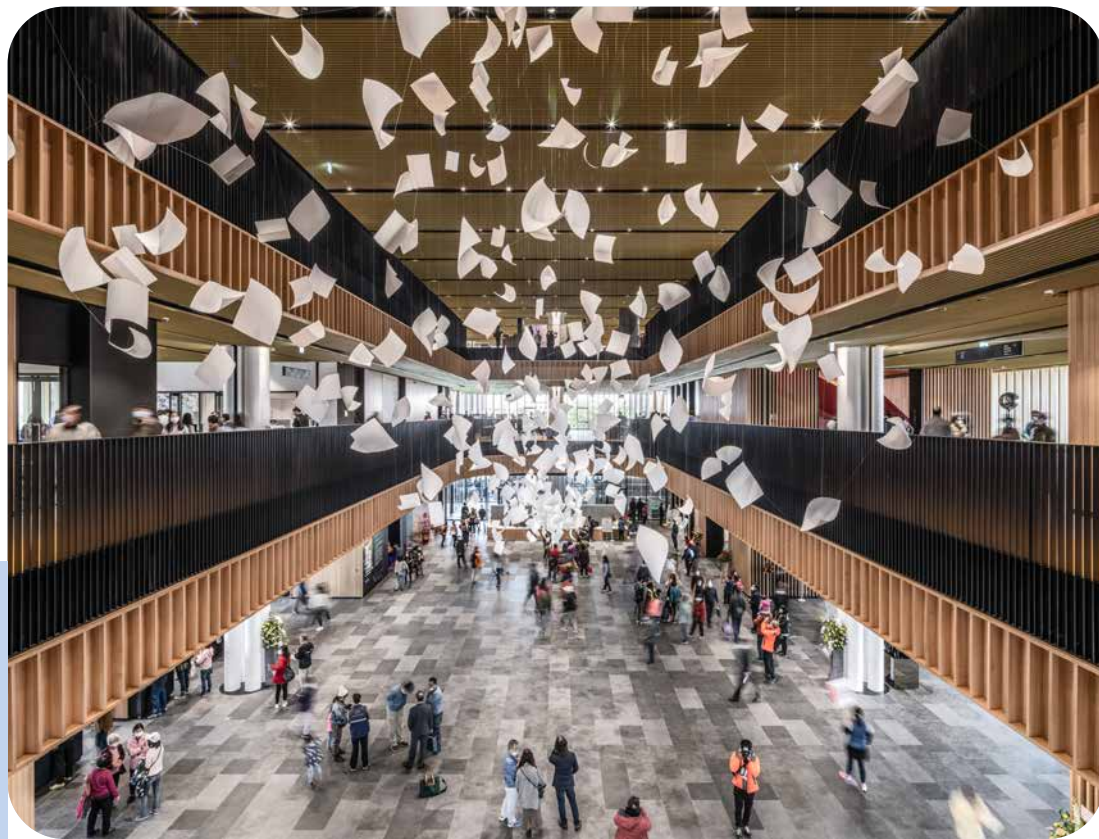


Library of the Technical University in Delft. Photo by Greg Holmes.

We designed the library at Delft University of Technology over 25 years ago. When we designed that building, we knew the library would change in the years that followed, but we didn't know how. Still, you have to be prepared for that – we're still updating that library by responding to developments in the world. There is a reading room with 300 computers in Delft, which was unique at the time. Now, many students bring their own laptops. The catalogue bins and magazine cabinets have disappeared due to digitisation. The quiet library of that time has been transformed into a building with different atmospheric zones. Each library has its own challenges, and our task is to prepare them for unpredictable changes in the future.

What, in your opinion, is the value of libraries?

In the Netherlands, people attach great importance to the cultural and educational value of the library, but they often neglect its



Library in Tainan. Photo by Ethan Lee.

economic value. When I was designing the Birmingham library, I came into contact with a board of directors that included many people from the business community. One of them pointed out to me the great economic significance of the library, which is something I had never heard anyone say in the Netherlands. After that experience, I started working to convey that broader understanding of the value of libraries in the Netherlands.

Most modern libraries nowadays want to be “a third place”, “a people’s palace”, or “a living room of the city”. But so does a train station and a café. The library distinguishes itself from these other examples because it builds community. This is done, among other things, through life-long learning. In New York, for example, we placed a study centre on the sixth floor of the Mid-Manhattan Library. It works closely with the Business Library, which is located one floor below. There you can learn how to write a curriculum vitae, how to apply for a job. Volunteers from the business

community assist small entrepreneurs with advice and assistance, helping them draw up a business plan for example. The Washington library offers visitors help with filling out their tax forms. I always say: the library is the most important building in the city, and these kind of initiatives only confirm that.

As a library architect, you’re not only designing a space but also the way people will interact within that space. What do you find important when designing libraries to ensure they’re accessible and inclusive?

It’s important to design libraries that are welcoming and not intimidating. As far as I’m concerned, architecture must be service-oriented and inspiring, and at the same time, it must be able to consist of different spheres. When we designed the Library of Birmingham in England, I spent a lot of time observing library users, and saw that the library must be for the whole community. Inclusivity had to be built in.

I always try to capture the culture of a city in a library. Therefore, our design for the New York Library is different from Washington’s. Birmingham Library could not be in Tainan, and vice versa. In the latter city, for example, food and cooking are very important. That’s why there’s a whole cooking studio in that library, something we also tried in the Tilburg LocHal Library which unfortunately hasn’t succeeded there yet.

Most modern libraries nowadays want to be “a third place”, “a people’s palace”, or “a living room of the city”. But so does a train station and a café. The library distinguishes itself from these other examples because it builds community.

In the Netherlands, you have to pay for library membership as an adult. That's really an issue for me. In all the countries I visit, the library is free, and that's how it should be. I'm a huge fan of the Rotterdam Library – my own hometown – and I'm pleased to see many teenagers there day in and day out. Isn't it a pity that some of them will drop out later because they suddenly have to buy a membership card?

You often say that libraries are the cathedrals of our time. What do you mean by that?

In the past, cathedrals were spaces where people of all ages and walks of life could come together. They were at the heart of city life, where people gathered, gossiped, and traded. Nowadays, we barely have any physical public spaces left where people can meet fellow human beings under a single roof – only banks, train stations, or

Library in New York. Photo by John Bartelstone.



post offices perhaps. At the same time, loneliness is increasingly becoming one of the biggest challenges of our time. All generations suffer from it: from the isolated elderly to the Zoomer generation, who primarily exist in virtual spaces only.

That's why I think libraries are the most important public buildings at the moment, like cathedrals were many years ago. Libraries are not just spaces for books, they're not just for the rich or for intellectuals. Libraries are for everyone. That's why we always try to design library spaces that are inviting and welcoming, spaces that are animated by civic life. We design spaces that are meant to be social: lobbies, landings, roof gardens, even stairs.

In the past, cathedrals were spaces where people of all ages and walks of life could come together. They were at the heart of city life, where people gathered, gossiped, and traded. Nowadays, we barely have any physical public spaces left where people can meet fellow human beings under a single roof.

Mecanoo's architecture does not have a hallmark style, but it is always driven by our philosophy of focusing on People, Place, Purpose, and Poetry. Our architecture has a humanist approach. Poetry in architecture is intangible, but a building needs an emotional dimension beyond the programme it delivers. It must have a magic in the combined effect of all its design elements. Then, the library becomes a pleasure – a pleasure that carries everyone's future.



Library of Tilburg. Photo by Ossip Architectuurfotografie.

What role do architects have in ensuring a brighter future for our societies?

I believe the human condition should be central to the future of design. We need to recognise the value of every individual, people's engagement with each other, culture, nature, or in many cases, combinations of both. Our attitude to planet Earth needs to change; nature has an irreplaceable value and beauty, and it's vital that we reconnect to it.

With increased polarisation and our borders turning inward, it's more important than ever to uphold the value of compassion and knowledge-sharing to connect people to one another. The future is likely to bring more focus on the human scale, where the experience of each individual will drive design.

Architecture is all about multidisciplinary teamwork. Now it's time for the design community to come together – we need cooperation to face our current challenges. And maybe, just maybe, we need to realise that instead of the capitalist model of economic growth, happiness should be the goal for societies to strive for. Design alone cannot change the global economic system, but it can help craft, step by step, a world that's happier.

Are you optimistic about the future of libraries in Europe?

The future is unpredictable, but I'm optimistic about it. I think the future, especially in the post-pandemic world, is all about going "forward to basics". Over the past decades, encountering people from all across the world has shown me that everyone, regardless of where they live, want very simple things: to take care of their families and children, to be able to provide them with a better future. It's all about friends, family, and communities.

I think libraries are great spaces to facilitate that. Libraries are dynamic and continually changing. They have proven to be resilient in the past – they shifted from mere silent repositories for books to forward-thinking platforms that can influence their surroundings and communities. They used to be passive spaces to sit and read in, but reborn libraries are designed to be active, places for doing and meeting. This is very important for the future because libraries are civic buildings – it's not only about the design, it's the programme that needs to be tailored to the context and to the communities it serves. Design should facilitate that.

Over 25 years ago, when we were designing the library in Delft, we heard things like: "why do you need a library, is a library as a building even necessary anymore?" Such comments, fortunately, are rare nowadays. No sensible person doubts the future of libraries anymore. Look around you: all the libraries are used more than ever.

Instead of the capitalist model of economic growth, happiness should be the goal for societies to strive for. Design alone cannot change the global economic system, but it can help craft, step by step, a world that's happier.

10 Tips for a Safe and Open Public Space

Libraries are public spaces, but what makes them truly safe and open? Consider these words of advice from the libraries participating in The Europe Challenge.

1

Figure out what being a safe public space means for you, and then work on your messaging. How are you making sure that your community knows that the library is not just a place for books, but a place for people? Remember that you have to choose the right language when talking to different groups of people.

2

Try to work on relations between grassroots and those in power – by focusing, for example, on citizen-to-citizen and citizen-to-authority interactions. It is important that people are able to get in contact with those in power – and the other way around. As a public space, your library can be that bridge!

3

Promote a culture of curiosity and discovery to counter fear and polarisation – and ensure you also stay curious and open!

4

Remember to explore themes or challenges that are relevant locally, nationally, at the European level, and globally. Look into the world as it is, and find interesting themes to unfold in the library you have.

5

Listen to your public. What do they need? The general public is very diverse (students, readers, homeless people, families with children...), but we all use the same public space.

6

If you can, advocate to stay open longer and on weekends, so that people can come more freely according to their working schedules. Without access to your collections and services, all other efforts are futile.

7

Think of your library as a living room. What do you do at home when having guests over to make them feel at ease? Small touches make all the difference when trying to ensure that visitors feel welcome. Foster an empathetic atmosphere.

8

Be self-confident about the role you play in society! Librarians always tend to be modest, but your work is essential for a democratic and open society. You are doing fantastic work!

9

Become an official Safe Zone for underrepresented groups. It's important to consider how your library can create a support network for members of the public who are marginalised in an intersectional way.

10

Consider co-locating with a partner that has a similar commitment to helping people – e.g. an arts organisation, a citizens advice point, a local business, or even a pharmacy or surgery. This will help you share some of the maintenance costs, while also attracting visitors who wouldn't usually consider going to your library.

Conversation

The Evolving, Essential Role of Libraries in the 21st Century

In Conversation: Luke Burton and James Urquhart



Name
Luke Burton

Country
United Kingdom

Year of Birth
1979

Role
Director of Libraries
at Arts Council England

Luke Burton is an advocate for the role of libraries in information services, reading for pleasure, open data, digital literacy, digital skills, AI, and informal learning. An archaeologist-turned-librarian, Luke is Chair of the English Public Libraries Stakeholder Working Group, and a member of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP).



Name
James Urquhart

Country
United Kingdom

Year of Birth
1967

Role
Senior Manager of
Libraries and Interim
Director of Literature at
Arts Council of England

James Urquhart is known for his work in both literature and library development, specialising in policy and strategic relationships. He spent over a decade reviewing books for most national broadsheets; has edited and published work; and spent most of the 1990s working in bookshops.

James Urquhart: Luke, how long have you been working in the public library sector? What was your path before coming to Arts Council England?

Luke Burton: Both my parents were librarians, so I spent a lot of time in libraries as a kid. I initially studied archaeology and worked as a commercial archaeologist. I then graduated from library school in 2007 and started working in local studies and prison libraries, which included working across prisons in County Durham, ranging from young offenders institutions up to high security facilities. I started working for Newcastle City Libraries in 2010, where I moved through different library roles until becoming the head of service. I oversaw 14 libraries and approximately 114 staff for three years, largely through the Covid-19 pandemic. I joined Arts Council England in 2022. Roles like the one I currently hold don't come along very often – it's a privilege to be involved in shaping and supporting libraries on a national level.

Across Europe, the fate of libraries swings dramatically between decline and resurgence - in some regions, libraries have been transformed into landmarks, but in others they've been closed owing to funding cuts.

James Urquhart: Your arrival has been really welcome – from the Arts Council's point of view, we were pleased to appoint a director who brings experience and expertise from the ground. What are some of the biggest changes you've witnessed around libraries since you've been in the sector? Have there been any significant shifts you've noticed post-pandemic, for example?

Luke Burton: There have always been shifts in libraries, yet libraries have always adapted to the needs of their communities and the zeitgeist of each new period. We have seen the progression from libraries providing access to physical information to libraries becoming a gateway for finding reliable information. So, a library perhaps no longer has the answer or the physical item, but will signpost you.

However, at their heart, I don't think libraries have changed much. The idea of offering access to good quality, reliable information is still at the core. What has become more important is access to safe spaces and supporting communities. Post-pandemic, there's been a return to libraries as social infrastructures. There's also been a shift towards using libraries in a much more flexible way – for example, people co-working from libraries post-pandemic. So, while libraries haven't fundamentally changed, there's a renewed emphasis on their role as flexible, essential community spaces.

James Urquhart: You mention libraries as spaces that signpost to trusted knowledge and reliable information. A conversation that has escalated recently has been around AI – what are the ways in which libraries can adapt or respond to artificial intelligence? Either in

terms of tools that could be useful to library users, or in terms of the challenges posed by deepfakes, which make the provenance and accuracy of information increasingly difficult to verify. Clearly libraries have a remit in this area – what are your thoughts?

Luke Burton: Some people see AI how they saw emails when they were introduced – it's just the next progression. Others speak of doomsday scenarios. Regardless of what the future holds, it's clear that AI and large language models are here to stay. For public libraries, AI can be seen as an extension of digital and information literacies. If, in the past, libraries have taught people how to set up emails, how to use Facebook, how to apply for a council tax reduction, libraries have a role to play around AI too. This may not be in the form of "here are the mechanics of how a large language model works", but rather around the development of critical thinking skills amongst people. What am I asking? What am I being told? Where's the information coming from? Libraries can be the safe spaces in which to experiment with that.

James Urquhart: You've just touched on so many different aspects of what public libraries offer their communities. For me, one of the biggest challenges in this sector has always been making visible the great offer of libraries. Because they do so much, it can be hard to verbalise the unique selling point of public libraries. I think this challenge has fed into both public and governmental perceptions of libraries. Across Europe, the fate of libraries swings dramatically between decline and resurgence – in some regions, libraries have been transformed into landmarks, but in others they've been closed owing to funding cuts. Where on the spectrum do you think libraries in England and the wider UK are at the moment? Are they surviving or thriving? Or is it a mix of the two?

Luke Burton: I think library services in the UK are on a wide spectrum across survive and thrive – we have 152 local authorities in England alone, never mind Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. What is clear is that the funding situation of libraries is symptomatic of the bigger local government funding challenges in England and the UK. In Nottingham, for example, the city is facing significant financial challenges, with the council declaring itself bankrupt. But they've also just opened this fantastic new central library, which the community and the city have really bought into. So even within a single city, you can have a very mixed picture.

But in spite of the challenges libraries face, I think we should work on emphasising the brilliant work that they do. I'm always struck by all the work libraries do for communities, for people fleeing conflict, for older people, for people with additional support needs – they continue to do all that in spite of Covid-19, in spite of financial challenges. If this is what libraries do when facing challenges, imagine what they could do if they weren't facing those financial burdens?

James Urquhart: We think of libraries as houses for all, as palaces for people. But so much has changed in Europe in the last few years alone. From increased polarisation to surging inequalities, or even the political crisis around refugees. Do you think the library sector needs to reconsider what skills and knowledge are required of librarians who witness these changes firsthand on a day-to-day basis?

Luke Burton: Diversification and upskilling are essential. Generally speaking, the librarian workforce in England and the UK is predominantly older (55 and over), female, and white. Many librarians joined the profession at 16, adapting as library services evolved. As they retire, we face challenges and opportunities to bring in new talent. We work with organisations like the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and Libraries Connected to identify workforce needs and gaps. Library schools are aware of new challenges, but there's nothing like hands-on training that you do on the ground as a library assistant. We're also seeing more people entering the profession from adjacent sectors – customer service, retail, the wider cultural sector, even health. This influx of diverse skills and backgrounds has been beneficial, strengthening the sector. I think it's all about balancing qualified librarians with newcomers from outside.

James Urquhart: Librarians have always been considered among the most trusted professionals. And whilst I think that's still true, we've also witnessed that they've been working in a more adverse environment over the last few years. I'm thinking about things like the international backlash around Drag Queen Story Hour or some of the current challenges around censorship, including assertions that books need to be taken off shelves for political reasons. Do you have any thoughts on how the role of a librarian is changing in terms of values or ethics?

We're seeing more people entering the profession from adjacent sectors - customer service, retail, the wider cultural sector, even health. This influx of diverse skills and backgrounds has been beneficial.

Luke Burton: The examples you mention emphasise the need for librarians with at least some professional training in the ethics and values of libraries. Many say libraries should be neutral spaces, but they're also part of a political context. I keep on coming back to this quote by Jo Godwin: 'A truly great library contains something in it to offend everyone.' If libraries are truly committed to representing different viewpoints, then there are going to be books on the shelf that you don't agree with, that challenge your views. We're not pushing an agenda. We're offering reliable, quality information to foster conversations, even difficult ones.

Unfortunately, a lot of really difficult conversations these days are happening on social media. I don't think social media is an appropriate space for such nuanced discussions. Libraries can and should be the places where these important conversations happen, or where people can at least be informed in order to start these conversations.

James Urquhart: You've set up an interesting tension there. Another elephant in the European room is that, despite the many efforts to make libraries more inclusive and diverse over the years, particular population groups continue to dominate libraries. Statistically, public libraries in the UK are much closer to the actual demographic makeup of Britain compared to other cultural institutions. That said, whilst public libraries are more accessible for disadvantaged communities compared to other cultural spaces, the dominant library users are still fairly mainstream. Is there something we're missing in terms of making libraries even more accessible?

Luke Burton: It's really important for library users to see staff who look and sound like them. If you're like me – a white, 40-something Scotsman – then perhaps you're not the best person to understand some of the cultural challenges that people from different backgrounds navigate when entering a library. So having diversity of leadership and staffing is crucial. In addition, it's also really important that libraries find a way to promote their offering to those who need it most.

James Urquhart: If you could imagine an ideal future for libraries in England, what do you think libraries would look like? How are they funded? How are they governed? What's different? What's the same?

I keep on coming back to this quote by Jo Godwin: 'A truly great library contains something in it to offend everyone.'

Luke Burton: Libraries as hyper-local, community-focused institutions supported by local authorities will continue to be essential. In England, we currently have a tension because libraries are supported by local authorities, which are funded by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Whereas the superintendent of libraries is the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. So there's a disconnect there – money comes from one side, and oversight comes from another side. Looking across Europe, we see various models of how libraries are funded. But regardless of the model, I think the idea of a hyper-local library service that has public funding – proper public funding – will continue to be key.

Thinking about the future, we recently funded some research called *Come Rain or Shine: Preparing Public Libraries for the Future in an Age of Uncertainty*. Libraries often plan on one, two, or three-year funding cycles, whereas the focus of this report was futures literacy. So not so much about "how will I fund this project for the next two years", but rather: what are the potential directions that society might move into over the next 10, 15, 20 years? Where are the challenges and opportunities for libraries within these directions? So it's about helping libraries anticipate big societal changes around climate change, skills gap, AI, digital inclusion.

The library of the future will be well-funded, responding to local needs, supporting social and digital inclusion, and aiding education. But even if you have great library buildings and excellent stock, you still have a gap if you don't have knowledgeable and trained staff within – so that will be critical.

James Urquhart: Looking at Europe, why is it important that the library sector stays connected across national borders at a time when populism is on the rise, and when countries across Europe continue to close borders or look inwards? Why is international exchange vital?

Luke Burton: Certainly things like Brexit and the way that the UK's relationship with Europe has changed over the last years has presented some challenges. Hence why I think it's more important than ever for librarians to continue looking outwards. The library sector in the UK is very collaborative, we constantly share knowledge. But in order to keep that growth and understanding of best practice, we should also look at what's happening in other countries.

Libraries across Europe have done a brilliant job of becoming true living rooms and third spaces for their communities. At its core, librarianship is about information sharing. So observing and exchanging ideas with international counterparts is vital – regardless of political changes.

James Urquhart: To close our conversation, Luke, you've seen and worked with hundreds of library initiatives all over the country. Do you have a favourite memory that stayed with you through the years?

Luke Burton: There are so many! A recent story that stayed with me is about Ian, a man from the North East of England who spoke so powerfully about how libraries have changed his life. His life had been consumed with looking after his mum. She passed during the pandemic, and nobody could hug him on the day of her funeral. He found himself in a very dark place. Getting his shopping delivered and not leaving the house, he gradually lost touch with people. Luckily, he was referred to his library, and he speaks of how joining the Reading for Wellbeing group changed his life. It's just a really powerful story – one of hundreds that are a testament to unsung heroes in libraries doing everything they can to help people, every single day. You can watch it on [LibraryOn.org](https://www.libraryon.org).

Libraries as Living Rooms of Europe

The Europe Challenge Case Studies

From the smallest villages in the most isolated corners of the continent to the largest and most bustling cities, the stories of Europe are as diverse as its people – and its libraries. As Europe grapples with the alarming trend of shrinking public spaces, 18 innovative initiatives are boldly redefining the role of libraries, making them more open, accessible, and enjoyable for everyone. By empowering young people, introducing travelling and street libraries, gamifying the library experience, and celebrating local heritage, these initiatives ensure there is something for everyone to enjoy and benefit from.

Key words

Europe, public space, creativity, arts and craft, storytelling, spatial interventions, urban vs. rural, history vs. future, cultural cooperation, heritage, gamification, co-design, open space.

Types of libraries included

Public, college, university, special, school, academic.

Learn more about the cases in this chapter!



Engaging Young People

- 📍 Dogliani, Italy
- 🏠 Biblioteca Luigi Einaudi di Dogliani
- 👥 Cooperativa Caracol and the teenagers of Dogliani

In a small Northwest Italian town, local teens are being encouraged to take over their library! At a sleepover surrounded by 20,000 books, young people are inspired to get involved and help shape the library's future.



#HACK to Attract Young Library Users

- 📍 Roeselare, Belgium
- 🏠 ARhus Knowledge Centre
- 👥 Young people aged 14 to 35

The #HACK challenge team is empowering young Belgians to design a library fit for their future. Through inspiring activities, young "local heroes" are helping their peers develop new skills, share knowledge, and engage with their community.



Illustrated Villages

- 📍 Busto, Valdés, Asturias region, Spain
- 🏠 Biblioteca Eduardo Pérez de la Fanosa
- 👥 Busto Neighbourhood Association and other surrounding village associations

On Spain's isolated rural north coast, this volunteer-led initiative is building a memory archive to connect the local community - attracting long-term funding and securing a new building to help counter rural depopulation.



Travelling Library

- 📍 Zalău City, Sălaj County, Romania
- 🏠 Sălaj County Library
- 👥 Friends of the Library Association

Romania's low reading rate has inspired this initiative, which promotes literacy and creativity in 40 rural locations. Through public readings, arts and craft workshops, and a travelling library, local communities are experiencing the transformative power of books.



A Thread Between Past and Future

- 📍 Barberino di Mugello, Italy
- 📖 Biblioteca Comunale Ernesto Balducci
- 👥 Associazione Culturale Penelope

The library and cultural centre in this rural Italian town are spreading traditional needle-work techniques to people of all ages and genders. Its programme of inclusive knit cafes and embroidery workshops celebrates the area's thread-work history.



Building Bridges, Finding New Connections

- 📍 Valmiera, Latvia
- 📖 Valmiera Library
- 👥 Local community

In Valmiera, blending urban and rural communities within a new municipality poses a difficult puzzle. The Challenge team is building bridges between two communities through storytelling and volunteering, helping to catalyse new collaborations.



Once There Will Be

- 📍 Moliterno, Basilicata Region, Italy
- 📖 Bibliomediateca Comunale Giacomo Racioppi
- 👥 Patto Locale per la Lettura del Lagonegrese

In an Italian region where bookworms are rare and libraries are disappearing, this initiative is rewriting the script. Through a storytelling card game, players become village mayors, navigating tough choices to ensure libraries thrive.



S.O.S. Heritage: Save Our School Heritage

- 📍 Bakar, Croatia
- 📖 The Bakar Maritime School Library
- 👥 The students of the Bakar Maritime School

In coastal Croatia, Bakar Maritime School is reviving the region's rich maritime heritage. As well as preserving their library's nautical history, students recover forgotten knowledge of engineering and navigation, host book demonstrations, and create engaging digital resources.



Unleashing Student Creativity through Zines

- 📍 Glasgow, Scotland, UK
- 📖 City of Glasgow College Library Services
- 👥 Diversity & Inclusion Student team, Glasgow Zine Library, Ross Wilcock Media

The City of Glasgow College Library team works with students to create a post-pandemic safe haven. Their City Zine initiative is igniting student creativity through workshops and storytelling events, inspiring more than 200 publications.



Collective Roots

- 📍 Sutton, UK
- 📖 Sutton Libraries
- 👥 Arts Network Sutton

In the London Borough of Sutton, Collective Roots taps into community creativity to nurture a sense of cohesion amid rapid demographic change, uniting diverse and underrepresented groups in library spaces through creative conversations, workshops, and exhibitions.



Book(shelf) Yourself

- 📍 Athens, Greece
- 📖 Myrsini Zorba Library
- 👥 Network for Children's Rights and 54 Elementary School

In a diverse area of Athens, this children's library partners with a local school to inspire passion for reading and books - showcasing how a library works, and exploring opportunities for vulnerable children and teachers.



Cozyplace: Co-management of a Co-designed Place

- 📍 Pallanza, Italy
- 📖 Biblioteca Pietro Ceretti
- 👥 Associazione Culturale Sherazade

This rural library is reimagining its premises to appeal to young people. Teaming up with local groups, library staff are co-designing a new cultural hub with young teenagers, empowering them to play an active role in its governance.



Heritage Talks

- 📍 Rome, Italy
- 📖 ILa biblioteca dell'ICCROM
- 👥 Istituto Comprensivo Statale Regina Margherita

A leading conservation library in Rome is working with a local school to ignite an interest in cultural heritage among children from diverse backgrounds – as well as exploring how institutional libraries can become more welcoming.



LIBRO LIBRE: Red Urbana de Intercambio de Libros

- 📍 Córdoba, Spain
- 📖 Libro Libre: red urbana de intercambio de libros
- 👥 El Alambre cooperative

LIBRO LIBRE is a fun network of street libraries in Córdoba that organises book swaps and promotes community reading. Partnering with a local cooperative, they make reading more accessible through exciting events that bring communities together.



Library as a Starting Point for Democratic and Conscious Film Production

- 📍 Aubagne, France
- 📖 SATIS (Sciences, Arts et Techniques de l'Image et du Son – Sciences, Arts and Image and Sound Techniques) Department, Faculty of Sciences, University of Aix-Marseille
- 👥 SATIS students and alumni

This audiovisual library is promoting responsible film-making, challenging inequalities by hosting debates on race, age, disability, and stereotypes in film. The goal is to educate both filmmakers and the wider community about ethical representation in film.



Creating a Dynamic Cultural Knowledge Hub

- 📍 Chios, Greece
- 📖 School Library of the 3rd Primary School of Chios
- 👥 Parent Association of the 3rd Primary School of Chios

On a Greek island which has become a haven for migrants seeking sanctuary in Europe, volunteers are turning a school library into a dynamic cultural hub that helps to bring parents, teachers, and students together.



Like Home

- 📍 Kraków, Poland
- 📖 Knizny Vyrāj
- 👥 Belarusians of Kraków (Belarusian Association in Krakow)

Like Home is building collections of Belarusian literature in Kraków's libraries and organising reading clubs for children and adults living in exile, to help preserve Belarusian language, culture and identity.

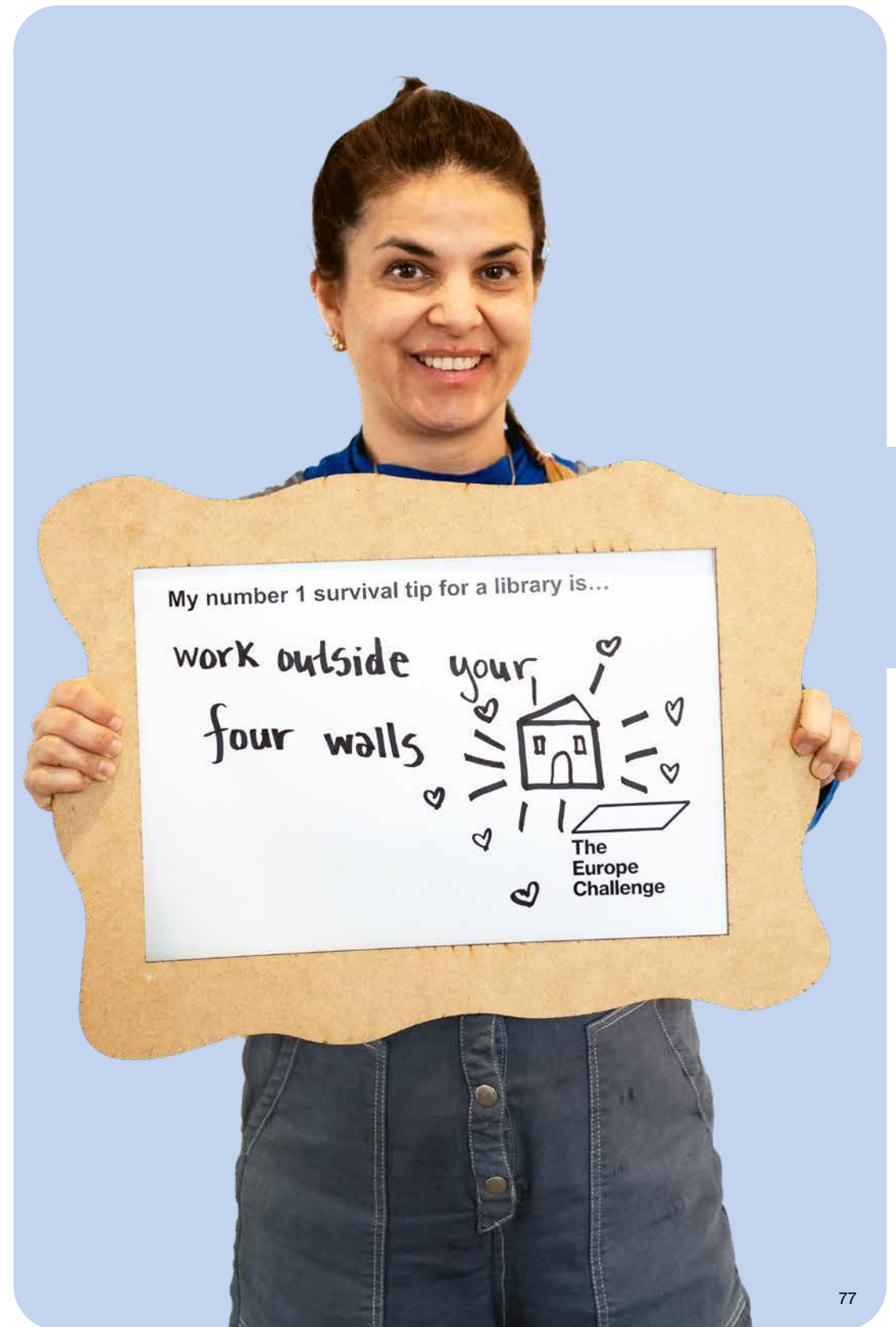


The Library Escape

- 📍 Milan, Italy
- 📖 Quarto Oggiaro Public Library and Gallarate Public Library
- 👥 Espinasse condominium library and Monte Amiata condominium library

Libraries are known as places of escapism. In Milan, public libraries are teaming up with a network of condominium libraries to create an “escape room” concept – helping to connect different generations and communities with their libraries post-pandemic.

Meet The Europe Challenge librarians
and community representatives!



A Kindness Repository



Name
Sheryl Man Wai Sze

Country
Hong Kong/United Kingdom

Year of Birth
1979

Role
How a Library Changed My Life writing competition winner

Sheryl Man Wai Sze was born and raised in Hong Kong. She currently lives and works in London. As an arts professional and an aspiring writer of stories that bridge disparate worlds, Sheryl believes that inspiration lies within the unusual as well as the mundane. Her story is inspired by her real life experiences working at a London public library. This was her first entry to a writing competition.

How a Library Changed My Life was a writing competition held by the European Cultural Foundation in Spring 2024. Six winners were selected from nearly 300 submissions across 47 countries, each showcasing the life-changing impact of libraries.

The library has shown me desperation, anger, helplessness; through it, however, I have also seen empathy, compassion, and humanity.

When I joined this small public library in Central London as an assistant last year, I was not remotely ready for what was in store. My original idea of working at a library was quite romantic: neatly placing books onto shelves, enthusiastically recommending titles, answering enquiries about membership, and maybe dealing with a few odd disputes over fines...all in all, a quiet, purposeful existence punctuated by craft activities, community meet-ups, storytelling, and nursery rhyme time. Instead, I had an emotionally intense experience, woven by a tapestry of moments as mundane as they were poignant.

Born and raised in Hong Kong, I have loved libraries since I was a child – I still have fond memories of trips to our local branch, carefully deciding which books to borrow; I knew my mum was too busy to take us there all the time, so I had to make every trip count. Back in those days, when Hong Kong was just pulling itself out of poverty, and social mobility seemed genuinely within reach, reading was believed to be a key to a better future. My family also had such hopes. My grandfather was an orphan. My mum left school at 13 to work in a factory, where she met my dad. During the 1967 Hong Kong riots, when road-side bombs made regular news headlines (that year, the police defused as many as 8000 home-made bombs, of which 1100 were found to be real), many people would opt for public transport as a safer way to travel. Meanwhile, my mum, a 13-year-old child, walked to save a few precious cents. She had seen her parents worrying about feeding the family, and wanted better for us.

Our local library was well used; even the children's section was quiet, filled with purposeful-looking little bookworms browsing the shelves (children needing to let off steam were expected to go to a playground). It was a haven of stories, fun facts, and imagination, joyful but orderly.

Fast forward four decades, having worked most of my career in arts marketing and communications, I found myself with an opportunity to forge an unusual new path. I decided that working at the library part-time would fit into this journey. In the summer of 2023, I walked into this small public library, thinking it would only be a minor excursion from my existing career – perhaps with a livelier

atmosphere than my university's interlibrary loan department, where I worked many years ago. Instead, all of my naive notions about libraries were shattered instantly.

Within the first hour of starting the job, my manager had to ask a visitor to put his shoes on (there were no socks).

Within the first hour of starting the job, my manager had to ask a visitor to put his shoes on (there were no socks). The man was lying down across an entire sofa. When asked to sit back up, he grumbled. He had two large fully-filled, worn-out nylon bags with him. Maybe there wasn't a safe space to keep his possessions, maybe he was worried about things being stolen.

In the following days, I quickly realised I was well out of my depth. In other jobs over the years, I was used to classical musicians, art experts, educators, and lovers of culture. Here, many customers came to us with real-life frustrations – some needed an online service but did not understand the concept of emails or web browsers. Some struggled to read. Some had what seemed like motor tics, shouting out sharp, loud grunts, or threatening words, even when no harm was intended. Some were convinced they were being followed, or that every time they logged onto a computer, the device would be hacked and their passwords stolen. They were lost, frustrated and, at times, angry.

Until then, I did not realise how out of touch I had been. How would I have guessed? Only a 10-minute walk away was a bustling business district with designer stores inside buildings by celebrity architects. Britain's major cultural institutions and an urban nature reserve completed the picture of a thriving city centre location. In the 15 years that I had lived in this country, I had never truly crossed paths with anyone like some of the visitors that I ended up seeing every week at the library.

I have now worked at this library for almost a year. It can demand a lot of composure at times; I need to hold my nerve, and

de-escalation techniques are crucial. I have, however, come to the conclusion that kindness is my best friend in difficult situations. Even when I cannot help (which is often, given that the library is not a social work office, a benefits hub, a citizens advice bureau, a homeless shelter, a medical centre, or the home of magic conjurers that I sometimes wished we were), kindness and respect will almost always be noticed and felt. When strangers are briefly connected through moments of humanity, it makes our work a worthwhile pursuit.

* * *

'Hello! Can I help?' I looked up and smiled at a man approaching the enquiry desk.

'Yes. I need the bank account number and sort code to pay for my CSCS card,' he said, anxious and agitated, clutching a crumpled sheet of paper in his hand.

After carefully inquiring, I understood that he had been to a bank to try and pay for his CSCS, a construction work qualification card, but was told to provide the bank details. I quickly looked up CSCS and saw that the application process had gone fully digital. I tried to explain that he would first need to file an application, but he did not seem to understand.

'I need to phone them up to get their bank details, so I can pay for the card,' he explained again. 'Look, here's the money for the registration.'

He did not have access to an email address, which made an online application virtually impossible. I attempted to talk to CSCS on their live chat asking for an alternative way to apply, but was told to go online. The usual. Either a "bot" was sending me generic messages, or a human had switched off their communication feature, copying and pasting messages robotically.

'I came from the prison, you see,' he said, explaining why he did not have a mobile phone or email address.

For a minute, I thought he meant he had recently finished a prison term, but soon realised he was on day release and would need to return to prison by the day's end.

How out of touch I had been. Only a 10-minute walk away was a bustling business district with designer stores inside buildings by celebrity architects.

There was a CSCS contact number that may or may not have helped. But there wasn't a phone for public use in the building, and I had no idea where the nearest pay phone was. Google was of no help in this instance either. I tried to ask the security officers at the reception desk of the building and was told there was a phone booth across the road, but it was not clear whether it was still functional or not.

'He wasn't causing you any stress, was he?' the security officer asked kindly.

'No, no, he is okay, but thanks for checking!' It was true that when he first arrived at the enquiry desk, he had a bothered look that made me anxious about how the conversation would go. Somehow both of us managed to struggle through the frustrating situation calmly and amicably. I returned to the enquiry desk, defeated by an impossible process that would normally have been simple.

'Look, I did the construction work training in prison. I have already passed the test!' He showed me his crumpled piece of paper – it stated that he had indeed passed, with a golden star sticker and the words 'Well Done!' written on the page.

How is it possible that someone was given the opportunity to take the construction qualification exam whilst in prison, but was not actually assisted in the process of registering as a qualified construction worker?

In the end, I was able to tell him the location of the public phone booth. He also asked for the address of a Citizens Advice Bureau, so I looked up the travel details for him. I was not convinced that he would get the help he needed, but I was also unsure how to further assist. Under a haze of confusion, I said goodbye to him and wished

him good luck. 'Who would be there for his next logistical hurdle?' I wondered, wishing I could have done more.

'Thank you so much,' he said to me before he left. 'This is the only positive interaction I have had today.'

For me, one seemingly trivial but genuinely challenging aspect of working in this library is the odour. It is quite intense, way above the level experienced on public transport in the summer for example. I can only speculate that some of our visitors do not have access to showers, and judging from their clothes (identical outfit daily, needing a clean) they may not have access to laundry facilities either. Among those who turned up in the same outfit was Yvonne, a very softly-spoken woman with a seemingly blank expression on her face whenever she walked into the library. And you could not miss the smell. People who innocently sat down next to her were known to have moved to different seats.

At first, I did not know what to expect and all I could perceive was the smell and the vacant expression. But I quickly realised that when I smiled at her, she would smile back.

'I got a place at a university!' she told me one day.

I congratulated her, wholeheartedly wanting it to be true.

For a while, she came to the library most days, but I noticed that she spent more time reading than sitting in front of the computer. Later, she came less and less often.

One day, during the week before Christmas, she showed up at the enquiry desk, where we exchanged friendly hellos. Showing me a gift bag, she said:

'I was given this box of chocolates and I want to give it to you.'

I hope I did the right thing. I politely thanked her, but declined. It sounded silly, but I really wanted her to have a treat. She asked a couple more times, even pointing at her belly saying that she felt she ought to watch her weight (she was fine, average build in my opinion). Eventually, I convinced her that she should keep it, and we wished each other Merry Christmas.

Working at an inner city public library is not idyllic, nor is it endlessly depressing. It is real life; more on the edgy side for my fragile heart, which is easily broken by seeing people stuck in difficult situations.

It has been a few months since I last saw her; she must have a different routine now, in a better situation perhaps. I hope she is still reading her books, maybe treating herself to a few more pieces of chocolate every now and then.

Working at an inner city public library is not idyllic, nor is it endlessly depressing. It is real life; more on the edgy side for my fragile heart, which is easily broken by seeing people stuck in difficult situations. Some days I feel angry, sometimes helpless, sometimes a bit fed-up; seeing vulnerable groups being left behind by society when I could offer no fundamental improvement to their predicaments. Some days I feel my compassion running low, struggling to be endlessly warm and patient when treated poorly, even though I know the other person has probably been through tough times.

On any given day, I could be running a children's craft session attended by a sparky, beautifully-dressed, confident child, effortlessly impressing me with her creativity and can-do approach. Sitting alongside her might be another child of the same age, unable to hold her scissors correctly or draw a smiley face, yelling at her guardian to fetch a library tablet so that she could watch videos on YouTube.

A few metres away from the children's section, I once observed someone sitting on a sofa, motionless, their presence vacant and despairing. In the computer area, meanwhile, a woman with apparent memory issues became convinced that the computers

had been hacked after typing either her passwords or the antibot CAPTCHAs incorrectly, causing another day of great frustration. In previous visits, this woman had told me snippets of her life story, which was both extraordinary and heartbreaking. I had huge respect for her ability to remain polite and calm most days, despite having lived through such hardship. Later, another man asked me to book an online appointment for him. He did not remember his email address, but insisted on typing his name and the word 'google' in the mandatory email field, becoming frustrated when his attempts failed.

Once, someone lost their temper and shouted at me, only to apologise sheepishly a few hours later. 'I am not a bad person,' he explained earnestly, 'but I'm being followed! I had to call the police...' Many visitors were very pleased when I simply showed them how to save files on OneDrive, or copy and paste information from a webpage. It always feels great to help – recommending a community class, successfully finding books, or sharing the sense of empowerment a visitor feels when they overcome their initial discomfort with the self-checkout machine after a few guided attempts. There is also a regular customer who loves telling me all about what he has learned from the books he reads from our display.

Each of these moments is relatively brief, but leaves indelible marks in my memory – a few words, a facial expression, a gesture, an image. A man once came in and asked for help as he could not read. He showed me his hands, which carried signs of industrial accidents: 'There's nothing wrong with being a builder, but I would not want this for my child,' he said, alluding to his lack of formal education. Even so, this is far from a true snapshot of everything that happens in the library; I will save the story of two musicians from a renowned orchestra playing Haydn, Mozart, and York Bowen in the library for another time.

What I have learned as my universal truth is that the library has huge potential: the potential to be a safe, accepting place; to assert the power of kindness; to show a glimpse of humanity in all its light and shadow; to encourage growth and to share stories – stories that are written, told and lived.

Meet The Europe Challenge librarians and community representatives!



Libraries as Climate Oases



Introduction

Prompt:

Please write a poem about libraries and climate change.

ChatGPT:

Sure! Here's a poem about libraries and climate change:

In our towns, where knowledge grows,
Lies a refuge from climate's woes.
A warm bank in freezing cold weather,
An air-conditioned summer oasis altogether.

Roses are red, violets are blue,
This is not a poem, it's what a library must do.
Because climate change is real,
And we need the Earth to heal.

Amid the books, we find our way,
To fight climate change, to save the day.
Libraries offer hope and light,
Guiding us through the darkest night.

Roses are red, violets are blue,
This is not a poem, it's what a library must do.

If you have a garden
and a library,
you have everything
you need.

— Marcus Tullius Cicero

Interview

Heroes Won't Save Us - But Community Will

Mikaela Loach on the role of libraries in the climate justice fight



Name
Mikaela Loach

Country
United Kingdom/Jamaica

Year of Birth
1998

Role
Climate justice activist
and author

Mikaela Loach is a British-Jamaican best-selling author of *It's Not That Radical: Climate Action To Transform Our World*. She is a co-host of The YIKES Podcast, a writer, and a former medical student. In 2020, Forbes, Global Citizen, and BBC Woman's Hour named Mikaela as one of the most influential women in the UK climate movement. In 2021, she was one of three claimants on the "Paid To Pollute" case who took the UK government to court over the huge public payments they give to fossil fuel companies every year.

Libraries are more than just houses for books – they inform, influence, and shape our thoughts and perspectives. Can you trace your climate justice activism back to a library? Is there a library in your life that you remember fondly for shaping who you are today?

When I was younger, I was quite badly bullied. The local library near where I grew up used to hold a reading challenge every summer. That reading challenge is where my love for books started – it gave me something to do as a kid that was going through a difficult time. Because of the competitive element to it, I became obsessed with reading. I would sit on this one beanbag and read as many books as I could.

Being exposed to so many different books in that space – and being forced to read different genres – introduced me to so many of the ideas that have shaped the work that I do and the life that I live now. I'm really grateful for that space for encouraging and challenging me to do that, and for the librarians who created a safe space for me and would always give great recommendations.

In your book, *It's Not That Radical*, you explore how the climate crisis is inextricably linked with other challenges: racial inequality, class, legacies of colonialism, and so much more. You believe that solidarity, empathy and community are key ingredients for climate change solutions. Where do you think the world is right now in the history of climate change transformation?

Right now as humanity, we have a choice to make about what future we get. People think that the choice is between taking climate action or not taking climate action – but I don't think that's the choice. The reality is we're going to take climate action of some sort. The choice is what that climate action looks like, and whose lives we prioritise in that climate action.

One of the choices we have is eco-socialism. It's choosing climate action that focuses on the lives and the abilities of those most marginalised in our society and creating a world in which everyone gets to live in dignity, with enough food, a safe home, water, a life that is joyful and healthy. We're deliberately made to believe that such a world is a utopian impossibility – it's too radical, too ridiculous. That's just not true. That world is genuinely very possible, and we have a choice to take that path right now.

People think that the choice is between taking climate action or not taking climate action - but I don't think that's the choice. The reality is we're going to take climate action of some sort. The choice is what that climate action looks like, and whose lives we prioritise in that climate action.

We could also take a path of eco-fascism, which is where our world becomes even more unequal than it is right now. Currently, the top 10% of richest people in the world produce 50% of global emissions. The top 1% produce more than double the emissions than the poorest half of the world do, hoarding resources at obscene levels. Eco-fascism is where that happens even more – the divide between the richest 10% and the majority of the world becomes even greater, and there's even more harm done.

People find it confusing when they hear that climate action could make the world even worse. But we have to recognise that the climate crisis was itself born from colonialism and extraction, from the dehumanisation of the majority of people in this world. To tackle the climate crisis adequately, these root systems should also be tackled. Obviously, a lot of big corporations don't want us to do that. So I think that we need to be mindful and cautious of these root systems, while also recognising that we have an opportunity to create transformation. That should be very exciting for all of us.

You often speak about society's obsession with leaders. You say: 'Heroes won't save us – but community will'. What is the power that you think communities have in addressing the climate crisis?

Photo: Marie Jacquemin



Having strong communities is an essential part of climate solutions. We've all been manipulated to believe that we're all just individuals whose lives aren't connected to one another. Who cares if your neighbour is experiencing misfortune, right? They're an individual, and if they're experiencing misfortune, that's their fault individually – it has nothing to do with you.

I believe such a worldview is a lie – and hugely disempowering. My life is only possible because of the person who made the clothes that I'm wearing today; because of my neighbour who works in healthcare; because of my other neighbour who collects the bins; because of the people who run my local library, and so on. The idea that we're all individuals – that our successes and misfortunes are separate from each other – is there to deliberately stop us from talking, from working together.

Grace Blakeley uses the following analogy in her book *Vulture Capitalism*. Imagine you've been working somewhere for a long time and suddenly notice that you no longer have enough money to feed your family, despite the fact that you used to be able to survive on the wage that you were given. The individualistic society would say: 'It's your fault; you should have been working harder; it's your issue.' Instead, true collectivism would say: 'Talk to your other colleagues at work! Ask them if they are having the same issue. If they are, then work together, unionise. Ask your boss for a pay increase together.' That's how we achieve things collectively. That's how we keep each other safe, that's how we build strong communities.

Change has always been a collective process. In movements, the people that we see as heroes are often just mouthpieces. Any social change takes sustained, long, and - often - quiet work from millions of ordinary people over generations.

We're also made to believe that it's individually exceptional heroes that create change. This disempowers us from knowing that change has always been a collective process - it's not just the Martin Luther Kings! We need to recognise that in movements, the people that we see as heroes are often just mouthpieces. Any social change takes sustained, long, and - often - quiet work from millions of ordinary people over generations. When we recognise that, we recognise that we too can make that change, and that we are essential - and that connecting with each other and working together collectively as a strong community is essential.

Imagine a future in which 65,000 public libraries in Europe all play a key role in the climate movement. What could libraries do today to make such a future a reality?

Sharing resources is a key part of climate solutions - libraries encourage us to share not just books but also information, tools, and other practical resources.

People often think that climate solutions are these futuristic, intangible things. But libraries are a key example of existing spaces already enacting climate solutions! Sharing resources is a key part of climate solutions - libraries encourage us to share not just books but also information, tools, and other practical resources. There's also not that many spaces left where people can come together to just hang out - libraries are a really brilliant place for people to form strong communities.

One practical thing I would encourage libraries to do is to come together and communicate with each other. Maybe your library in one part of Europe is experiencing the same issue as a library in another part of the continent - share ideas on how you've managed to tackle this issue. The other suggestion I have is for libraries to consider that they're institutions that people trust - people have used libraries for a long time. How can you, as a trusted space that people care about, advocate for climate solutions? Maybe all libraries could sign The Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty. Perhaps they could include resources for local climate action groups within their spaces so that more people can find out about them, or offer library spaces for meetings of climate groups. Lots of things are already happening, but the most exciting part is that having more library users means sharing resources more - and therefore becoming part of the climate solution.

Libraries in different parts of Europe are successful to a greater or lesser extent in ensuring that they're truly inclusive, safe spaces for people of all backgrounds and walks of life. Taking into consideration some of the lessons that you've learnt in your effort to make the climate movement more inclusive, is there any advice you could give to libraries on how to become better at actively engaging with diverse communities?

The climate crisis has been unfolding every day for decades already. There won't be a single day in which everything collapses. There's also not going to be a single day by which we've won the climate fight.

My number one tip is to think about – and ask – what these communities already care about and work from there. I think the climate movement could do this a lot better. Audre Lorde once said: 'There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.' If we truly recognise that everything is connected in our world, then we'll realise that whatever people already care about is connected to the climate crisis – or another important issue – in some way. So, working from what communities already care about and connecting it to your cause, rather than forcing them to care about what you care about, will be much more efficient. Really think about how you can address whatever communities care about on a material level. How do we meet these people's needs? How do we not just ignore them? In that way, people also feel much more empowered and not as if they're just being lectured.

Climate anxiety is on the rise, especially for younger people. A lot of narratives surrounding climate change are all doom and gloom. You, on the other hand, often wear pink – a colour that usually represents lightness and fun. Why is that?

The climate movement has been marketed as 'we're all going to die, so panic!' This is an issue as it's not very motivating in the long term. It gets people involved, but only for a short time – it then quickly leads to burnout because people have the perception that climate disaster is all going to happen in a day, just like you see in these apocalypse films.

But that's just not how it works. The climate crisis has been unfolding every day for decades already. There won't be a single day in which everything collapses. There's also not going to be a single day by which we've won the climate fight. People think that

one day the crisis will stop, but actually we'll always have forces pushing against us. Our fight to ensure all of us are safe will need to be constant.

Therefore, our actions need to be consistent and sustainable in the long-term. And sustainable action requires joy – it requires something to fight for, not just something to fight against. Panic is not the best way to address anything. When we panic, we often leave out justice. We often leave out the most marginalised people because we're scared. And that's not the way in which we should be acting. We should be fighting for a better world where all of us get to live in dignity, where solutions for the climate crisis are grounded in social justice. And that's something that's exciting – that's something to fight for, something to build active hope for!

If we prioritise joy, if we perform actions we enjoy, we're going to want to do more of them. If those of us who are doing the work look like we're happy and joyful people, others will want to join us. If we all look like we're having a terrible time, who's going to want to join us? We're living in an era in which there seems to be a sense of competition as to who's suffering more. I find that strange – I think having lightness is important. For me, that comes from silly pink outfits. When I walk down the street, people – especially older people and kids – often smile at me. And I enjoy that – it creates a spark people want to move towards. To fight is important, but it's also important to have joy.

What would you say to a librarian, a community organiser, or just an ordinary person who would like to contribute to the climate justice fight but feels that the task is simply too monumental?

I really sympathise with feeling like you don't know where to start. A lot of people feel like that. I would maybe say: start by joining a group of people who've been doing this for some time already. Perhaps there's a climate group near you that's been around for a year, 10 years, 20 years, six months. The people in that group will have some skills that they can teach you – they will already have an understanding of how change happens and how to organise. They might not be doing it perfectly, but have a level of humility and consider what you can still learn from them. This will make you feel held and like you're not alone in this. I learned everything I know about organising from older organisers in the first groups I joined. They were generous enough to teach people like me, and I'm so grateful for that.



For those of us in the global North, we should acknowledge that to choose to “check out” of this crisis is a huge privilege that a lot of people don’t have. My friend Kato comes from Tuvalu in the South Pacific; Tuvalu is one of the nations that’s set to be completely submerged by rising sea levels in the next 15 years if we don’t adequately tackle the climate crisis. When I talk to him, I see that giving up is something he can’t even think about – it’s not an option for him. He holds onto a strong belief that his home will still be here 15 years from now, and that we will take the action that’s required for that to happen.

When thinking about the future of the planet, what gives you hope?

I feel the most hope when I’m organising with other people. We often talk about hope as if it’s something that we receive passively, something that floats around in the world. But actually, I think it’s something that we create and build. Rebecca Solnit in *Hope in the Dark* describes hope as ‘an axe we break down doors with in an emergency.’ And that’s how I see hope. It’s the axe that we build or that we become to break down the doors.

Another quote that I love is by Arundhati Roy from *The God of Small Things*. She says: ‘Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.’ I think I take this quote a little bit too literally, but this is what I ask myself: ‘Where can I hear this breath?’ For me, I hear this breath when I feel like we’re doing or changing something. When we’re choosing not to be passive in the face of things, we become that new world that breathes – we become that hope.

I often think back to my ancestors, who were kidnapped from the African continent, then enslaved in Jamaica. They didn’t decide to give up. They believed that a new world was possible. They also didn’t wait for anyone else to give them hope. They realised that if they wanted freedom, if they wanted a new life, then they had to build it themselves. It wasn’t just handed down. It was fought for from the ground up. People have never waited for hope to be given to them. They’ve always created it.

And finally, if you could send a message to libraries across Europe joining the climate movement, what would it be?

Firstly, I would say thank you for everything that you’re already doing for all of us. Thank you for creating a space where people can come and feel safe. Thank you for encouraging people to read books. I think that education is a huge, huge, huge part of transforming our world. And books play a really important role in that. So thank you for that.

For those of you who already feel like you’re trying your best on climate action, please know that the work you’re doing is worthwhile. It is creating change, even if you can’t see it. And for those of you who want to take more action, please know that we have something exciting to fight for. We have a whole transformed world to win, and it’s an honour that we get to be part of that!

I’m a writer, so storytelling is my profession. You, as librarians, also have such a unique and important role in creating space for stories within your communities. If we can get people to imagine worlds where there are dragons and magic, what would happen if we could encourage people to imagine a world that’s different from the one we’re living in now? So let’s not just encourage people to imagine that world, but also to build it. Together!

10 Tips for a Green Library

Are you looking to make your library greener and climate-friendlier, but don't know where to start? The Europe Challenge librarians are here to help you with their top tips!

1

Lead by example: offer plant-based products in your library café, recycle, use green and renewable energy for your building, encourage staff to use public transport, avoid single-use plastics, install a beehive. These actions can sometimes feel like drops in the ocean, but if all of Earth's 8 billion people did them, our planet would be very different.

3

Interview a plant! This probably sounds a bit wacky, but take the time to really acknowledge the nature around you by asking a plant near your library a few questions. How does it feel? What makes it happy? What makes it sad or anxious? This can help you step away from our human-centred ways of thinking.

2

Set up a library of things: the idea is to provide people with useful objects and DIY tools that we use infrequently in life, thus avoiding the need to buy new things, and promoting a sharing economy.

4

Think about your books! Are you still laminating your books or covering them in plastic? Is your outreach vehicle a car, and could you instead bring books to communities by bicycle? What stock are you displaying? There are so many excellent fiction and non-fiction books that promote an understanding of nature and climate – set up attractive book displays around these topics, especially for children.

5

Start a repair café – it's an excellent way to utilise the diverse skillsets within your local community while lengthening the lives of objects, from clothes to electronics and other household items.

7

Don't forget that libraries and book loaning are part of the circular economy by their very nature. This makes your library a perfect place to promote dialogue around climate change, and to help communities acquire the necessary media literacy to fact-check divisive opinions about climate change.

9

Remember that your library is a place for people, and people make the difference. Revolutions start from people. So prioritise education and awareness – small changes in daily habits make all the difference.

6

Set up a seed library for community use – you can lend and share seeds to preserve native plant species while promoting ecological education in the process.

8

Offer local climate groups a space to meet and organise in your library. Host dedicated talks and discussions on climate change topics, targeted at different age groups.

10

Climate change can feel like an overwhelming topic – it can lead to despair, cynicism, or denial. So, promote spaces where people can have fun and connect with others! Climate action can be joyful and relaxed – for example, you could start a self-sufficient gardening club at your library garden, and help your community grow their own food, collect rainwater, create compost, etc.

Libraries as Climate Oases

The Europe Challenge Case Studies

Can libraries inspire communities to live more sustainably? How are libraries addressing climate change? Whether turning themselves into climate refuges in the hottest parts of Europe, or introducing beekeeping, tree planting, communal gardens, repair cafés, and much more, here are 18 unique Europe Challenge initiatives that are transforming libraries into green oases. These initiatives are making a significant impact by promoting environmental awareness and sustainable lifestyle choices within their communities.

Key words

Climate change, sustainable lifestyles, circular economy, environment, green spaces, biodiversity, ecology, food waste.

Types of libraries included

Public, community, school.

Learn more about the cases in this chapter!



Library of Things

- 📍 Altamura, Italy
- 🏠 Agorateca Community Library
- 👥 Local community and library users

What if you could borrow anything you need from your local library? In rural Italy, volunteers are creating a "library of things" - inspiring locals to save money and reduce waste by sharing tools and materials.



Books 'n' Bogs

- 📍 County Laois, Ireland
- 🏠 Abbeyleix Library
- 👥 RE-PEAT

In rural Ireland, local libraries are partnering with international charity RE-PEAT to explore the rich cultural heritage of peatlands. Together they unearth new insights on sustainability and enhance community cohesion through storytelling, helping to ease the transition away from peat harvesting.



Tastier Together - Tackling Food Waste

- 📍 Klaipėda, Lithuania
- 🏠 Klaipėda City Municipality Immanuel Kant Public Library
- 👥 Klaipėda city community

Tackling food waste and loneliness, this rural Lithuanian library hosts community lunches, cooking classes, and workshops covering sustainable recipes and food storage. By empowering locals to reduce waste, they aim to inspire other communities to do the same.



Repairing our Planet Together, One Object at a Time

- 📍 Concesio (Brescia), Italy
- 🏠 Biblioteca Comunale di Concesio
- 👥 Library users

In rural Italy, this library and its users are helping to repair our planet. Volunteers host monthly repair cafés where community members fix broken items, make connections, and help to fight waste, together.



Be Sustainable. Start at the Library.

- 📍 Broumov, Czech Republic
- 📖 Broumov City Library
- 👥 Broumov Educational and Cultural Centre

Can libraries help communities live more sustainably? Broumov City Library runs workshops on waste reuse, composting, and biodiversity - encouraging sustainable living, and bringing a community on the Czech-Polish border closer together.



Cooking up Green Solutions

- 📍 Stornoway, Outer Hebrides (Western Isles), Scotland, UK
- 📖 Stornoway Library (Western Isles Libraries)
- 👥 Western Isles-wide

To tackle Scotland's fuel poverty crisis, this initiative has introduced an energy-free cooking method to the Western Isles. By sharing cooking demonstrations and offering the energy-free method across the area, they are reducing the islanders' carbon footprint while simultaneously cutting their bills.



Children's Plants Library

- 📍 Neringa, Lithuania
- 📖 The Nida Art Colony Library
- 👥 Ukrainians in Neringa

This Lithuanian initiative is helping Ukrainian refugees adapt to their new environment by creating a children's plant library with conservation-related books in Ukrainian, English and Lithuanian. Additionally, creative workshops and outdoor activities are designed to nurture community bonds.



Community Growing for Recovery

- 📍 Falkirk, Scotland, UK
- 📖 Falkirk Library
- 👥 Falkirk's Mental Health Association

By creating a learning community garden from disused land - and by sharing growing tips, tools, books, and seeds - this Scottish initiative tackles health inequalities, environmental concerns, and cost-of-living challenges, empowering vulnerable residents to grow their own food.



Biblioteca dei Semi - Seed Library

- 📍 Nave, Italy
- 📖 Biblioteca Comunale di Nave
- 👥 Associazione Amici Antica Pieve della Mitria

This public library is sowing seeds of change by partnering with local community groups to organise a free, circular seed library; school seed workshops; garden visits, and idea-sharing for communal gardens - inspiring more sustainable lifestyles.



Autumn Songs - Bird Life in Urban and Literary Environments

- 📍 Frankfurt am Main, Germany
- 📖 Stadtbücherei Frankfurt am Main
- 👥 Umweltlernen e.V.

Engaging Frankfurt's citizens through workshops, bird walks and artistic events, Autumn Songs is raising awareness about bird conservation. Blending science and art, it nurtures a deep emotional connection with nature, and a shared sense of responsibility for our feathered friends.



Water Care in a Creative Way

- 📍 Čačak, Serbia
- 📖 Čačak Public Library
- 👥 Eko-kultur distrikt

Serbia's largest library has created a green rooftop garden using rainwater. Working with environmental organisations, its workshops and activities tackle water pollution and overconsumption, raising awareness about sustainable water use and environmental challenges.



Bookworms Community Garden

- 📍 Stockport, UK
- 📖 Stockport Libraries
- 👥 Sustainable Living Romiley

The Bookworm Gardeners are designing, planting, and nurturing a disused library space in Stockport, turning it into a buzzing community oasis - complete with a beehive - and encouraging both community cohesion and sustainable living.



Literacy for Climate Transition

- 📍 Póvoa de Varzim, Portugal
- 📖 Biblioteca Municipal Rocha Peixoto
- 👥 Póvoa em Transição

In a Portuguese coastal town steeped in maritime tradition, this library-based literacy club invites locals on a journey towards sustainability. Through education, activities, and campaigns, it inspires people to live in more sustainable, connected, and inclusive ways.



School Library Activities for Sustainable Development

- 📍 Płońsk, Poland
- 📖 Primary School No. 2 - Jan Walery Jędrzejewicz School Library in Płońsk
- 👥 Senior+ Club

This school library-based initiative brings seniors and young people together for eco-friendly workshops, outdoor adventures, and creative collaborations. Its programme encourages sustainable practices, healthy eating, and intergenerational connections - all while celebrating and protecting our planet.



Awareness of the Importance of the Ecological Pillar in the Sustainable Development of Future Communities

- 📍 Bumbesti Pitic, Romania
- 📖 Vladimir Communal Library
- 👥 Association for Community Development Vladimir

To tackle low environmental awareness in Romania, this collaboration engages children in ecological activities, including tree planting, rubbish collection, eco-innovation competitions, and educational excursions - inspiring ecological responsibility and awareness among future generations.



BIBLIOKEPOS

- 📍 Seville, Spain
- 📖 Red Municipal de Bibliotecas de Sevilla (Spain)
- 👥 Lucas de barrio

In response to Seville's scorching summers, this public library has been reimagined as a climate refuge - offering cool indoor gardens and sustainable spaces, as well as resources to encourage eco-awareness and community resilience in vulnerable neighbourhoods.



The Gatherers

- 📍 North Devon, UK
- 📖 Braunton Library
- 👥 Honeyscribe

Bridging the gap between several rural communities, The Gatherers connects isolated people across five rural libraries by rekindling the art of flower pressing and organising wildflower-related activities - helping social connections flourish in the midst of nature.

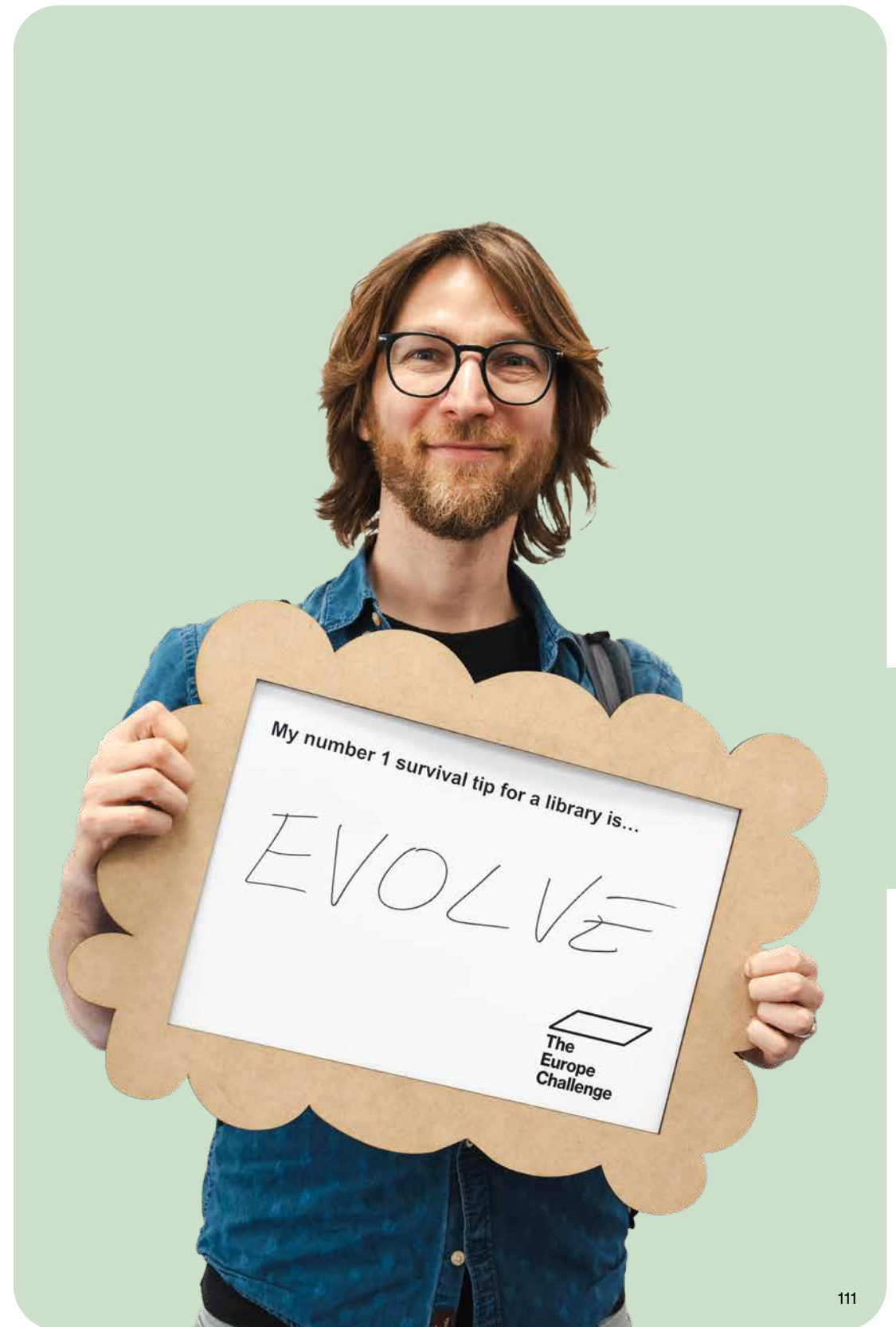


Creating a Buzz: Bringing Bees to Libraries

- 📍 Sant Boi, Spain
- 📖 Jordi Rubió i Balaguer Library
- 👥 Sant Boi Community

From books to bees: near Barcelona, this library is working with the local community to bring beehives to the library's courtyard - helping to create a buzz around biodiversity and sustainability, and influencing the city's eco-urban planning.

Meet The Europe Challenge librarians
and community representatives!



Well-lighted Places



Name
Luis Eduardo Torres Sánchez

Country
Mexico/Greece

Year of Birth
1977

Role
How a Library Changed My Life writing competition winner

Luis Eduardo Torres Sánchez is originally from Northern Mexico. He is a playwright, an educator, and a reading promoter. Now based in Athens, Luis has led writing and creativity workshops – and coordinated book clubs – across Europe. His plays have been published in several anthologies, and translated into English and German.

How a Library Changed My Life was a writing competition held by the European Cultural Foundation in Spring 2024. Six winners were selected from nearly 300 submissions across 47 countries, each showcasing the life-changing impact of libraries.

I want to tell you a story. At first, it was supposed to be about libraries, but somehow it ended up being about tables and bookcases in clean and well-lighted places.

There are three things that have always brought comfort to most people: safe places, community, and stories. That's why, in these trying times – when finding a safe place can be challenging, minority communities are oppressed, and books are banned for daring to speak freely – we need libraries more than ever.

As with any story, this one contains many others – digressions and bits that could have been footnotes – and I don't want you to get lost. For that reason, and given that it's a story about libraries, I decided to guide you through it using the Dewey decimal classification system.

We'll begin in section 599.5. This number specifically covers the category of marine mammals.

599.5 Marine Mammals

I was born in the desert. I went to the sea for the first time when I was eight years old. However, thanks to our encyclopaedia, I knew the names of the most common whales in Mexico's Pacific waters: the grey whale, the humpback whale, and the blue whale. Not being able to read yet, I memorised every detail of the illustrations: the anatomy, the proportions, and the subtle curvature of their immense bodies. My first experience with books wasn't reading the words, but the images. However, that wasn't enough. If I wanted to be an expert, a Mexican Jacques Cousteau, I also needed to read the words: all the long articles or at least the footnotes – you can always pretend to know everything by reading those. Alas, it wasn't an easy task.

372.4 Reading

During the first year of primary school, my mum was told I would be at risk of repeating the year if I wasn't able to read fluently by the end of the Easter holidays. She decided that, no matter what, I would have to improve in the next two weeks. We spent those days sitting next to each other at the kitchen table. On its bright-red formica surface, she placed everything we needed: notebooks, pencils, and a pile of books. The plan was to make me fall in love with books and consequently with reading. On the first day, we read together the biblical story of Jonah and the Whale, and given the

success of the aquatic theme, we continued on the second day with Jason and the Argonauts. On the third day, it was my turn to read one of the two on my own; I started reading, one syllable at a time, 'Juno and the Nargotuas'. My mum looked at me in disbelief. She knew I wouldn't dare play such a silly trick on her, because after all the effort she had made, it was obvious her patience was running thin. Therefore, there was only one explanation: I was slightly dyslexic. With no other pedagogical knowledge than her common sense, my mum decided that the best thing for me was to read as many books as I could aloud.

'It's like dancing', she said. 'The more you practise, the better you'll get. You are going to read aloud and listen to yourself, and if it doesn't make sense, you'll go back and read again. Just follow the sounds and you'll find your way.'

As a reward for my daily efforts, she emptied the only bookcase we had at home, usually filled with cooking and new-age books, replacing them with ones she knew I would like. That's how our bookcase, and the table in our clean and well-lighted kitchen, became my first and most beloved library.

In Greek, the word for bookcase and library is the same: βιβλιοθήκη. I'll stop there, as I'm no expert in etymology, but my point is that the Greeks understand that, in essence, a small bookcase at home is the same as the biggest library in the world: a place to keep all the books we need close.

821 English Poetry

During my school days, in that forgotten era with no internet, one of the main reasons to go to the public library was to do group assignments – obviously something I dreaded. I'm not saying all libraries are the same, but the experience of visiting ours was like reviving the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, where the monster

The Greeks understand that a small bookcase at home is the same as the biggest library in the world: a place to keep all the books we need close.

– half-human, half-bull – that lived inside the labyrinth was the ill-tempered librarian. And of course, we were the heroes, trying to get in and out without disturbing the beast, who I have to say was probably just a misunderstood monster, one of the least likeable kinds, but a creature of nature nonetheless.

As the librarian didn't want to deal with any additional trouble, we were always told to avoid certain sections of the library: she would say things like, 'These sections are the only ones you need to do your homework, so stay away from anywhere else.' The poetry section, of course, was one of those forbidden places. I'll never know if it was just disobedience, or if I was answering the call of the hero's journey, but one day I decided to cross the threshold into the unknown and defy the monster. Walking into the forbidden paths of the poetry section was like entering a haunted house. I felt chills down my spine when I stepped in, and the moment I took a book from the shelf I knew there was no way back.

The cover read 'Blake'. When I opened it, I found a Tyger burning bright. I couldn't understand all the words, but I saw the flames. I flipped the pages. I was shaking. I got lost in the forest of the night. And of course, I wanted more. But I had defied the monster and I would have to pay the price. I was told how perverse my act was. While tearing my library card in two, the librarian said, 'Imagine if you had found Sappho, Whitman, Brecht or Angelou.'

The only reason I regret not being allowed back is that I never received an explanation as to why these poets were so dangerous. Luckily, this incident didn't keep me away from libraries. It was quite the opposite: I had looked the tiger in the eyes, and I wanted more. That's the library that unintentionally changed my life forever.

325.1 Immigration

As an immigrant living in Athens, I'm faced again with the inability to read. Given that Greek has its own alphabet, you don't just learn to speak it but you need to learn to read all over again.

So, I'm a 40-something-year-old immigrant who is unable to read fluently, and my mum isn't here to help. However, I have to confess that, despite the practical inconveniences, being in this position as an adult has been a blessing in disguise. I've come to appreciate the process of putting together letters and sounds, and then long sentences that carry meaning, and it's incredible. However, I had to

So, I'm a 40-something-year-old immigrant who is unable to read fluently, and my mum isn't here to help.

stay away from Greek libraries for a while, as I am not able to read a book (yet). That obviously makes me sad, but also makes me appreciative of the benefits and privileges of being a literate person. I've been brought back to those childhood days when I could only read the images, and again, I also want to be able to read the words. I want to know what the signs in the streets say, and mostly, I want to go back to the library because it is my safe place.

305.8 Multiculturalism

Kypseli (Κυψέλη), which in Greek means beehive, is the name of one of the most lively and harmonious areas in Athens, which is also home to a multilingual community library called We Need Books. In one of the many commercial buildings that were abandoned during the crisis, a whole community – like the most organised, buzzing, and thriving beehive – works towards the same goal: building a safe space to keep all the books it needs close.

Unlike the library of my school days, the first time I was there, I felt welcome. There were books everywhere; some were organised on shelves, but there were also piles on tables, and others remained waiting inside cardboard boxes. These books were donated by the community; books that were loved and read many times before; books that were forgotten, with broken spines and scratched covers; books cherished like treasures, with shiny golden letters; books in French, German, English, Spanish, Greek, and Farsi. There were books everywhere, and I was happy.

Was this a library? Yes. There were bookcases and tables. And it was also a clean and well-lighted place. Worn carpets and sofas, living their best second life, created cosy corners where the visitors read quietly, away from the noise and vertigo of the outside world.

At We Need Books, everyone has their own special corner and their own special interests. Ali, for example, always sits in the red armchair under the window overlooking the garden. On that Louis XV-style armchair, embraced by the light and quietness of his favourite corner, he has read all of the available translations of Nikos Kazantzakis' work in Farsi.

813.52 American Fiction (20th Century)

One day, while I was volunteering to organise some of the shelves, Ali approached me. The conversation led us to a common topic among immigrants: our nationalities. When I told him I was Mexican his face lit up with joy, and he said:

'I can't believe it. My favourite writer is Mexican. His name is...'

I didn't quite understand the name, but the closest thing I got was Hemingway. I was confused – there was no direct connection with Mexico, but in my head, I deduced that since Hemingway wrote about Spain, Ali had made a connection with Mexico somehow. However, his enthusiasm stopped me from asking him to repeat the name, and I tried to confirm which author he was talking about by saying:

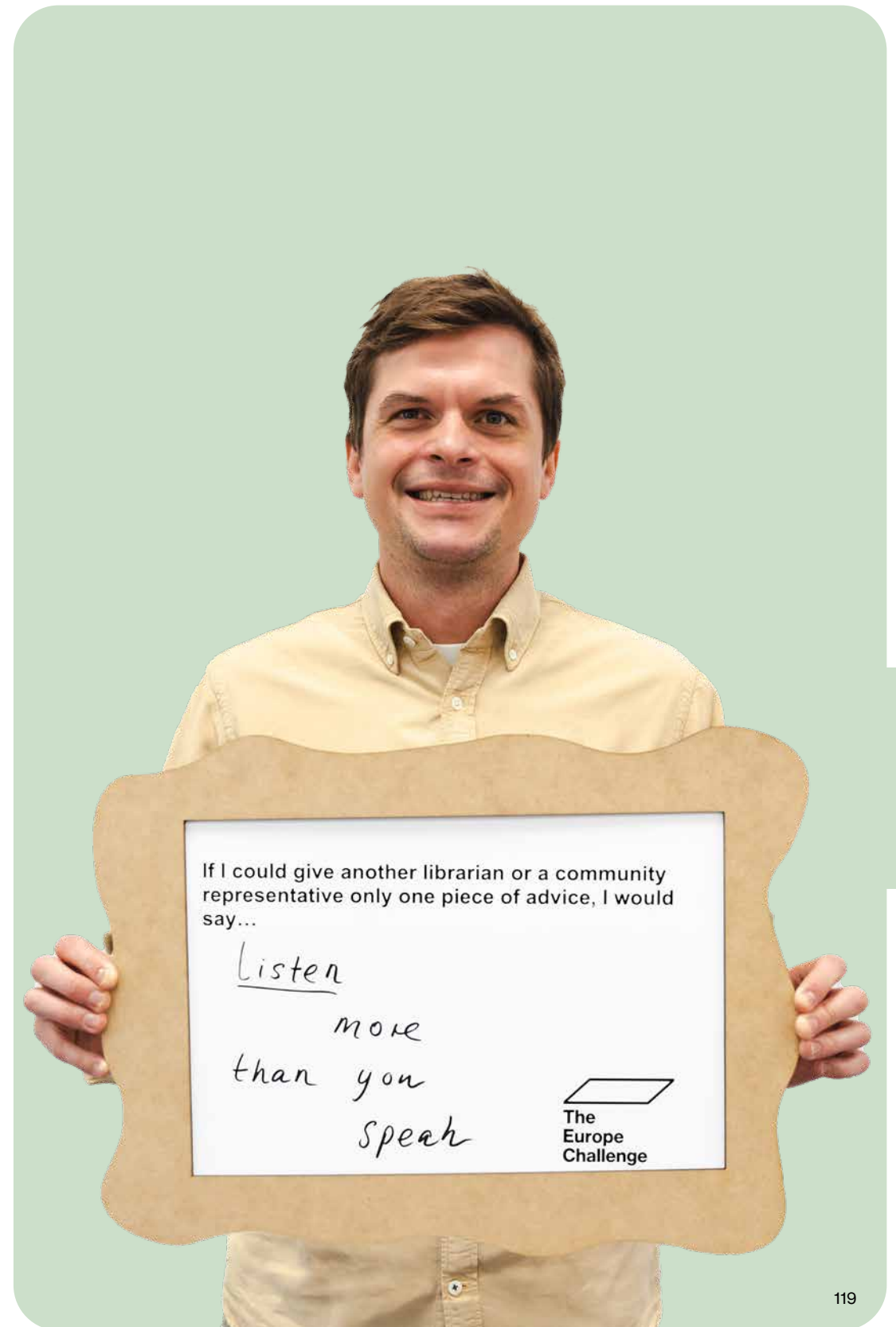
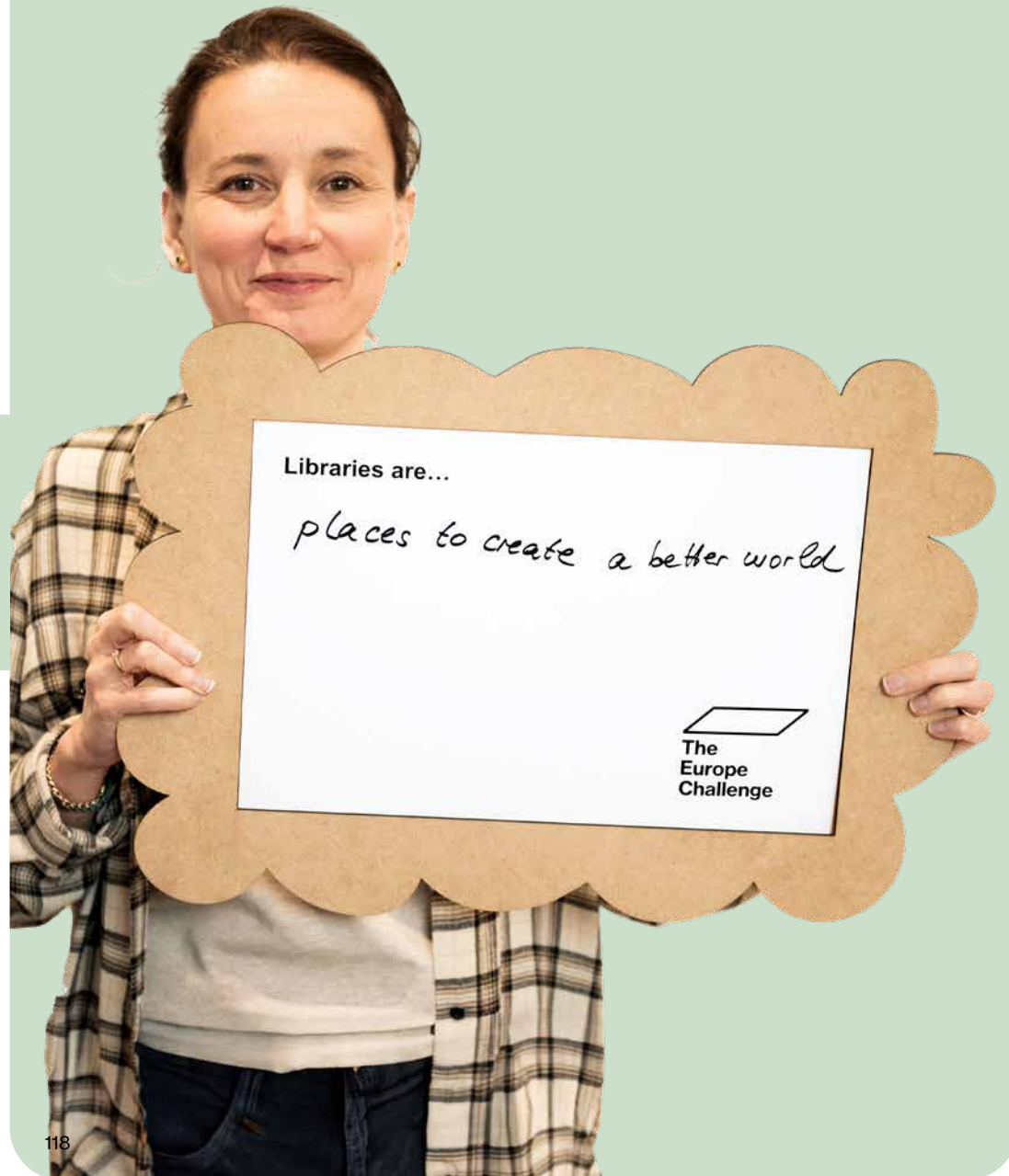
'Which of his books is your favourite?'

'I like all his books, but there's one story in particular. Wait, I have to translate the title because I only know it in Farsi.' After using the translator on his phone he said: 'A bright and clean place.'

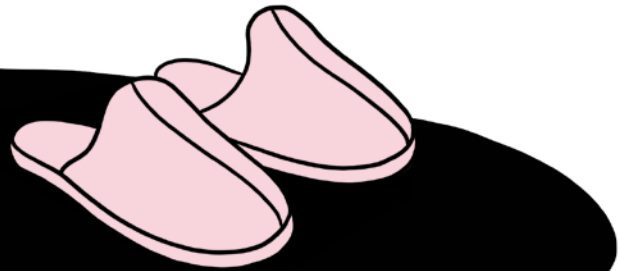
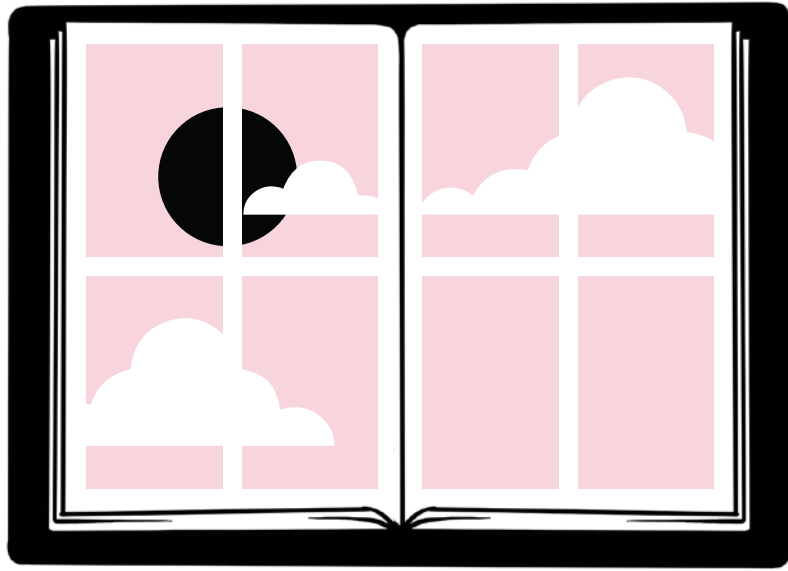
I didn't recognise it, but I promised him I would look up the story and read it. When I got home I searched for it, and it turned out that the title was *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* by Ernest Hemingway. A short, sad and powerful story. A story that speaks of what becomes essential when you have nothing: 'light... and a certain cleanness and order'. For the character in the story, it was a café. For us, it was a library, our library.

I know I said the library that changed my life was the one of my school days, but I think I've changed my mind. We Need Books is that library now. The one I share with Ali and my community, and all the other immigrants like me who need a clean, well-lighted place with tables and bookcases to keep the stories we need close.

Meet The Europe Challenge librarians
and community representatives!



Libraries as Houses for All



Introduction

Inclusion! Diversity! Intersectionality! Equity!
Accessibility! Safe spaces for all!

Do these glossy words sound familiar? But let's pause for a moment and think about what they actually mean. Who are we really talking about?

When we talk about libraries, we're actually talking about the people inside them. The librarians who dedicate their lives to local communities, the visitors who come to explore and learn, or the cleaners who ensure the space remains welcoming. But being a "house for all" can come with a darker side – from dealing with anti-social behaviour, to forcing librarians into the role of social workers. At the same time, do we give enough thought to the people who aren't there? The ghosts of those who could have been part of this community but, for various reasons, are not.

To make a change, unspeakable questions and uncomfortable conversations are often needed. Let this chapter guide you through them. It's an invitation to look beyond the buzzwords and see the people – all the people – who shape and are shaped by libraries.

There's a term you don't hear these days: Palaces for the People. The library really is a palace. It bestows nobility on people who can't otherwise afford a shred of it. People need to have nobility and dignity in their lives.

– Eric Klinenberg

Essay

Orchards of Tomorrow - Libraries, Colonialism, and the Fight for Freedom



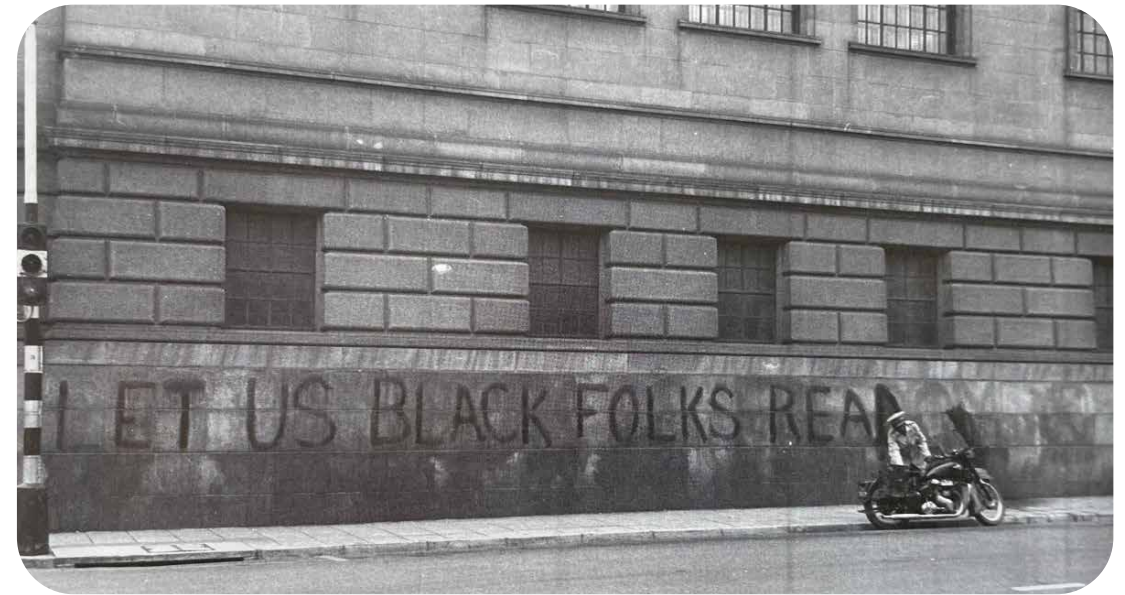
Name
Lwando Xaso

Country
South Africa

Year of Birth
1983

Role
Lawyer, writer, curator,
and facilitator

As a young child, Lwando Xaso witnessed South Africa begin a journey from its divided, unequal, and unjust past towards a post-apartheid society. As she came of age, the euphoria slowly but surely diminished. She saw a country and its people, polarised still, remaining shackled to deeply entrenched prejudices. She knew she wanted to contribute towards the making of a country that is more reflective of its constitutional commitments through her work as a founder of the consultancy, Including Society. Lwando is also the host of The Europe Challenge 2024.



The slogan painted by the Picasso Club on the walls of a whites-only library in Johannesburg. Photo courtesy of Ahmed Kathrada Foundation.

One of the earliest leadership roles that helped shape my character as a child was that of 'Library Prefect' at the age of 12. Because of my recognised love for the library, this role meant that I was entrusted with my favourite space in the school as one of its caretakers. I had the job of opening its doors early in the morning to let in students like me who needed a place to gather before classes began. This meant I had first access to the new books acquired by the library. And it meant it was my job to take care of the precious books on the shelves which, as an avid reader, felt less like a task and more like a dream come true.

At the time, my pre-adolescent mind did not fully appreciate the gravity of the fact that just a few years prior, my school would not have admitted a student like me. Most South African schools had been racially integrated only from 1991. Back then I did not have the tools to perceive that my beloved space, which provided me with refuge, escape, fellowship, and joy, was not left untouched by the day-to-day politics of a transitioning South Africa.

I recently gave a talk at a predominantly white school with a history of segregation under apartheid. I doubt that I had been inside a school library since I finished high school. I marvelled at how much more alive the space was compared to my own school library. The walls were covered with colourfully-loud posters of the issues of

the day, curated by students with recommended books for each cause. There were notices of upcoming gatherings, and conversations on themes that showed me how connected the students were not only to the realities of their school, but to the country and the world. I was also impressed by the expansiveness of the authors available, and the subject matters that the book collection covered.

The history of the library at my predominantly white school cannot be divorced from this history.

I was so struck by the dynamism of this library that I asked the head librarian how she had seen it evolve over the years i.e. since the school's integration. She said that until recently, libraries were primarily a passive repository of books – a well organised monoculture. But shrinking reader numbers have forced the modern school library to reconsider its role and mission. She said that, while they cannot compete with the smart phones, nor fix shorter attention spans, libraries can carve out spaces within schools that recognise the real issues and interests of their new and more diverse user base.

Looking back at my school library as an adult who is now well-acquainted with the complexities of history – and as someone who was part of the first generation to be propelled into the integration experiment – I can see all the ways my school library was beautiful, but also incredibly problematic. The books I was exposed to were mostly those set in idyllic boarding schools across the English countryside. I do not remember encountering a black woman author in our library. And there were certainly no books in my home language of isiXhosa, or any other African language. This was the era where an integrated school simply meant opening its doors to black students – and nothing more.

It is easy today to downplay this iteration of integration. However, the history of South Africa places my experience within a longer arch of historical struggle which continues today. It also places the

history of the integrated library, specifically the integrated school library, on a far longer historical arch, starting with the dubious origins of South African libraries as part of the benevolence of religious mission schools in the Eastern Cape.

In the early 1800s, small libraries began as places for native Southern African people to learn to read and write. These English colonial missionary efforts raised literacy levels in these communities, which compelled them to request London-based religious societies to supply their schools with both religious and secular books.

Mission schools and missionaries are lauded for offering a liberal education when the colonial state failed to do so, but they are also considered to have played a large role in colonial conquest. The history of the library at my predominantly white school cannot be divorced from this history.

The supply of books from England led to the formation of reading clubs across the country, and the so-called non-European libraries which were founded in schools were reportedly heavily used. Several independent library initiatives in the black townships can be traced to self-help organisations. Developed in black communities, they started envisaging alternative purposes for reading and libraries. One such self-help organisation was the Zenzele Clubs, with *zenzele* meaning 'do for yourself' in isiXhosa. Started by rural women, Zenzele Clubs encouraged reading and sought to improve the lives of rural women by focusing strongly on subsistence farming and health care.

As time went on, with the help of visionary black librarians, libraries were claimed by black people as part of a cultural movement to produce their own authors who would 'express the feelings, aspirations, thoughts and visions of the race.' The shift from libraries as instruments of colonial conquest to sites of black liberation through reading was encouraged by a popular black publication – *The Bantu World*. It is in this publication that libraries were described as an 'extensive orchard, where one may pick delicious gems to appease their hunger and gather fruit to sell to the world.'

With the progression of colonialism into apartheid in 1948, not only were public libraries segregated, but censorship and book burning

was prevalent. The introduction of Bantu Education – the inferior state-sponsored education for black people that served the interests of white supremacy – led to the closure of many existing, “self-made” black school libraries. Librarians and readers also had to contend with states of emergency and the destruction of libraries. As apartheid’s librarians burnt books, the people burnt libraries which they saw as symbols of the apartheid government. The people met fire with fire.

In response to these developments, anti-apartheid activists sought to develop and sustain libraries in rural areas, townships, prisons, and in exile. Libraries became resource centres which provided knowledge and learning for anti-apartheid activists. And during the turbulent 1980s, the last decade of apartheid, some activist groups also used municipal libraries in townships to plan protests, debate political strategy, and exchange banned material.

Ultimately, all of the political action – both local and international – that played out in the streets, courtrooms, battle fields, and even libraries, led to the formal collapse of apartheid in 1994. Schools across South Africa became the testing ground for a new South African dream.

Even though South Africa is now a constitutional democracy, that does not mean the spirit of *zenzele* (do for yourself) is no longer needed. Like many countries in Europe, there have been fluctuations and decreases in budget allocations for public libraries. So much so that people have taken to building their own libraries. A beautiful example lies behind an unmarked gate on a residential street in Soweto, one of the suburbs of Johannesburg that borders the city’s mining belt. A young man, who understood the detrimental effects of a lack of communal space for young people, sought to remedy this by converting the library in his childhood home into a community library and bookstore called the Soweto Book Café.

For young people who feel suffocated at home, the library has become a place to do their homework after school and a quiet space to relax and read. It has become a place to engage compelling ideas through book launches, community conversations and reading sessions. Many similar examples can be found amongst the European libraries participating in The Europe Challenge.

For me, my school library was a place of escape. But for many young people today, the library is a place for confronting the realities of the day – and a place for *figuring it out*. Throughout our history, libraries have played multiple roles as imperfect places of creation and destruction, oppression and liberation, indoctrination and imagination, and of discomfort and sanctuary.

As apartheid’s librarians burnt books, the people burnt libraries which they saw as symbols of the apartheid government. The people met fire with fire.

‘If librarians were honest, they would say, “no one spends time here without being changed”,’ wrote Joseph Mills in his *Ode to Libraries*. And conversely, the librarians that I met as part of The Europe Challenge recognise that libraries are also changed by those who spend time within them. In the hands of communities, colonial libraries were cultivated into orchards that continue to bear fruits today. Fruits that fed me, enabling me to find new worlds even in the most arid of conditions.

The library is the first place where I had a sense of myself as a leader, even if the conditions were imperfect back then. They still are today, but the library remains a space from which young black people can – in the spirit of *zenzele* – continue to shape themselves and the broader world, reaping what was sown so many years ago, and sowing the harvest of the future.

NB: The history of South African libraries shared in this essay is taken from *The development of South African libraries in the 19th and 20th centuries: Cultural and political influences*, In: T. Bothma, P. Underwood and P. Ngulube (eds). *Libraries for the Future: Progress and Development of South African Libraries*. Pretoria: Library and Information Association of South Africa, 2007, pp. 13-24.

10 Tips for Engaging with Diverse Local Communities

If libraries truly are houses for all, how can they ensure that they are genuinely inclusive, diverse, and accessible? The hive mind of The Europe Challenge librarians share their tips on connecting with diverse local communities.

1

Practise active listening and never operate on assumptions. Ask about your community's dreams – any engagement starts with understanding.

2

Think carefully about who isn't here. We spend a lot of time focusing on existing users – but are we really thinking just as carefully about who we're not seeing?

3

Give up the power! Doing inclusive community engagement in a non-tokenistic way means including your community in all steps of the process, including – and especially – decision-making.

4

Start small. Go and find people where they already are. Dare to reach out. Have courage. And most importantly, don't be afraid to fail!

5

Having staff that represent the communities you hope to reach is a must. You can't expect marginalised communities to enter your spaces if there's no one there that looks even remotely like them.

6

Consider library as a verb, rather than a noun. How can you "do" library outside of the physical space? How can you enable meaningful participation and relationship-building beyond your four walls?

7

Remember that community engagement is a two-way process. Be open and receptive to feedback.

8

Don't forget to apply an intersectional lens to everything you do.

9

Don't be disheartened if things are slow to start. Be patient – trust takes time. Vulnerable communities can be hesitant to engage with state services, so ensure your communication is culturally sensitive to that.

10

Hire a Community Librarian or a Social Librarian – someone with lived experience of the community you are trying to reach.

Conversation

When We Don't Invest in Social Infrastructure, We Shrink Back Into Our Small Individual Worlds

In Conversation: Eric Klinenberg and Marie Østergård



Name
Eric Klinenberg

Country
United States of America

Year of Birth
1970

Role
Sociologist and author of
Palaces for the People

Eric Klinenberg specialises in urban studies, culture, and media. He is the Helen Gould Shepard Professor in Social Science and Director of the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University. In 2018, Eric published *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*. His work examines the role of public spaces like libraries, parks, and universities in strengthening communities.



Name
Marie Østergård

Country
Denmark

Year of Birth
1973

Role
Director of Aarhus Public
Libraries

Marie Østergård led the construction of Dokk1, now housing the main library in Aarhus. Since starting her career in 2001, she has played a key role in developing libraries as democratic spaces. Her work focuses on knowledge-city concepts, partnerships, and design thinking. Marie is Chair of Public Libraries 2030 and leads the mentorship programme of The Europe Challenge.

Marie Østergård: Eric, you are the author of *Palaces for the People* – an amazing book that made you famous in the library sector all across the world. You basically became a bit of a library darling! Thinking about this book, the concept that I've always been curious about is what you call 'social infrastructure' – something that I usually call 'democratic infrastructure'. I was wondering if you distinguish between the two – or if you perceive social infrastructure as more of an umbrella term, under which democratic infrastructure falls as well?

Eric Klinenberg: The concept of social infrastructure didn't really exist in the United States when I started to use it in my book. It has a more robust presence in Europe. In the European tradition, social infrastructure refers to things like the health sector, the education sector, cultural programming, and so on. And I wanted to use the concept differently. When I write about social infrastructure, what I'm referring to are the physical places that shape our capacity to interact with other people. The theory of my work is that when we invest in social infrastructure – if we design it well, if we build it well,

if we maintain it, if we programme in it – we get a lot of returns to our social and our civic life. On the other hand, when we don't invest in social infrastructure, we shrink back into our small individual worlds. We become more atomised, cut off from one another.

Many of the social purposes of gathering places generate returns to democracy – but perhaps not all of them. I guess the reason I use social infrastructure as a larger category than democratic infrastructure is because I'm interested in how people develop relationships with their neighbours, so that they can provide each other with mutual support during ordinary times or during a crisis. One of the first big projects that I worked on where social infrastructure was relevant was a heat wave in Chicago. The social infrastructure in the city was what shaped people's ability to help each other out. That's not necessarily democratic infrastructure. It may be, but if we were under authoritarian politics and there was a heat wave, social infrastructure might still be what shaped people's ability to help each other out. But of course, a lot of the things I write about in the book, including libraries – especially libraries, maybe – are part of democratic infrastructure as well.

Marie Østergård: That's very interesting because I've been having this discussion for some years now, also with library colleagues in the US. Years ago, when I began touring the world to talk about democracy in libraries, the response very often was that libraries were considered as civic infrastructure. It became evident that, for many people, the word democracy translates into a political structure. Whereas I think that in the part of the world that I come from, democracy is a broader term. We see it as a way of life.

I'm interested in how people develop relationships with their neighbours, so that they can provide each other with mutual support during ordinary times or during a crisis.

If you have democratic confidence and democratic self-confidence, you believe you have a voice that you're allowed to raise not just in politics, but also in other daily things that bind us together. This means that you could also have democratic confidence and self-confidence in a country where the political structure is not considered a democracy.

But Eric, I wonder what made you start looking at libraries? Was there something in particular that came from your previous experience?

Eric Klinenberg: Actually, it was not much from previous experience. I grew up in Chicago in the 1970s and 80s, and the library system was in quite bad shape. The libraries were closed much of the time. Physically they deteriorated, they weren't programmed well. Like a lot of public spaces in Chicago, they were places people avoided because they had become decrepit and dangerous.

I didn't really properly discover libraries until my kids were born. Libraries are great places to take your children when you've got a long day ahead of you, and you're looking for something to do that isn't spending lots of money or watching television. I discovered some glorious local branch libraries in New York, which have all kinds of offerings, from books to play spaces, arts and crafts, and various other programmes.

And then at some point I got a visit from a woman named Julie Sandorf, who is the president of the Revson Foundation in New York: a big advocate and funder for libraries. Julie has asked me to help them analyse some data about the way people in New York view the library. I didn't really want to do the project at the time, but her description of what was happening in libraries across the city was captivating. And I decided that, instead, I would just go and explore what was happening in New York's branch libraries on my own. That proved to be revelatory – I was really amazed by all the things I saw libraries doing. It was a universe I didn't understand very well, but I came to see how essential it was for democracy and for society.

This was when I realised that there wasn't actually much literature on libraries from outside the library sciences field. It seemed that the conversation about libraries had unfortunately moved into this

very specialised domain – and that most of the world took libraries for granted. As I developed my ideas about social infrastructure, it felt to me that libraries were the quintessential form of such an infrastructure, and that I needed to write about them extensively.

One of the things that always strikes me about libraries is the amazing people that work in them. They're usually people who have a calling in some way – just like a doctor wants to save lives, librarians want to save lives as well.

Marie Østergård: One of the things that always strikes me about libraries is the amazing people that work in them. They're usually people who have a calling in some way – just like a doctor wants to save lives, librarians want to save lives as well. Similarly, it's amazing to think about the fact that there aren't really many countries in the world that don't have libraries. If you consider libraries as one of the last remaining public, non-commercial spaces – where you can meet people regardless of their gender, age, education, political background, et cetera – then that's an enormous, international infrastructure. When you talk to librarians across the world, you find that, small differences aside, there's so much similarity, regardless of the country. We're never competing – there's a generosity in the sector that seems to unite us, hopefully for the benefit of people everywhere.

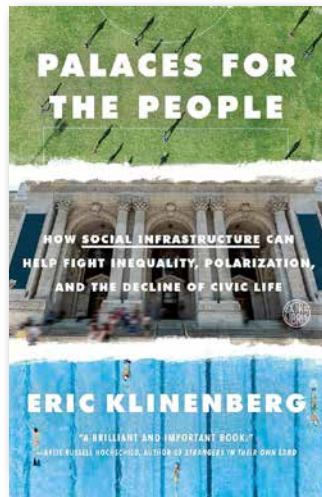
Eric Klinenberg: I think there's a generosity in the library as an institution because the idea of the library is fundamentally that we, as human beings, are entitled to access our shared history and culture. A good society gives people such access with very little limitation or oversight. This core principle has inspired many of the greatest things our species has produced in the world.

However, at this moment in time, this core principle feels very much under threat. We see governments around the world pulling back on their commitment to provide people with this access. We also see real efforts to suppress ideas, to punish dissent, to block access. This can take the form of banning books, it can take the form of banishing people, it can take the form of defunding libraries, and it can be much more repressive still. And sadly, I think one of the things that unites librarians these days is the feeling that they have to defend the idea of an open society.

There's a generosity in the library as an institution because the idea of the library is fundamentally that we, as human beings, are entitled to access our shared history and culture.

Marie Østergård: I agree; we're all following what's going on in the US, and to various degrees, in many European countries as well. Thinking about what you said in relation to the essence of libraries – that they minimise inequality, or provide access to knowledge – it's fascinating that this same essence had already been identified as an important foundation of democracy when the first libraries were established. For instance, in Denmark, politicians realised that in order to have a strong democracy, you needed to have people who were well-read and had access to knowledge. Even though this essence hasn't changed to this day, we all know today that knowledge doesn't just come from reading books. It also comes from interacting with other people, from people working together.

This idea is very much at the core of library projects in The Europe Challenge. If, in the past, the library was this noble institution that would provide you with knowledge and answers, libraries today are so much more than that. They're your neighbourhood libraries, your branch libraries that co-create their programming with local communities. They're the spaces that help people grow in their own lives without indoctrinating them.



You wrote *Palaces for the People* in 2018. Since then, a lot has happened, and the world has changed – not always for the better. Thinking about the developments to social democracy in the world, what do you think is different for libraries compared to when you first wrote the book?

Eric Klinenberg: I'd like to think of libraries today as playing an even more important role in bolstering formal democratic societies. For instance, in the US, libraries really stepped up as places where you could register to vote, drop a ballot, or vote in person on the day of an election. This happened during the pandemic – libraries have really become a more important part of the formal democratic system since 2020. And many libraries in the US and Europe have stepped up their efforts to inform citizens and broker difficult conversations in what's become a very divided society.

But of course, libraries have also become targets for the suppression of ideas. For generations, libraries have benefited from bipartisan support across the political spectrum. And unfortunately, I think libraries have become caught up in the culture wars. This has led to the right side of the political spectrum vilifying the library as an institution: attacking librarians as professionals, and pushing campaigns for banning books and blocking ideas. While I see potential for libraries to become bastions of democracy, I also see the threat that poses to the right. Compared to 2018, I'm much more afraid today of a resurgent right in the US, Europe, and around the world, attacking the library as an institution in order to seize more power.

Marie Østergård: Which is unfortunately what's happened throughout history at different times, for different reasons.

Eric Klinenberg: Compared to Europe, in some ways it's been very surprising to see that happen in the United States. We've obviously never quite achieved our democratic ideals here. We've always been a democracy in the making, but never a fully-shaped, fully-formed democracy. But I don't think many of us anticipated that we would be in the grips of an authoritarian cultural push in the way that we are now.

Libraries have also become targets for the suppression of ideas.

Marie Østergård: I have one final question to finish off. Remember when you first came out with *Palaces for the People*? I was listening to a talk that you gave at the time, and I realised that you're now touring libraries because – finally – somebody from outside the sector had addressed the importance of libraries. Was there something in the response from the library field that surprised you?

Eric Klinenberg: I didn't know the library field at all. I had some friends in the field, but I'd never taken a course in library science. This outpouring of appreciation was completely unexpected to me. It had never occurred to me that people would even read it, let alone come to think of it as an important book for the field.

It was extraordinary because I was suddenly being invited to speak at libraries all over the world, and to help them make the case for what they were doing. I was asked to participate in projects to get more funding from the public and the philanthropic sectors, or to raise awareness about the things that libraries were doing generally. It was interesting to me to hear people from the library world tell me time after time that they didn't really know how to advocate for themselves, or to explain their value in a way that was compelling – that stepped outside of the internal debates. Thinking about the library sociologically, identifying its role in democratic societies and modern culture, and comparing it to other institutions had real value that they hadn't seen.

Libraries as Houses for All

The Europe Challenge Case Studies

Home is where we feel safe. But what happens when someone lacks a place to call home; a place where they can feel loved, appreciated, and secure? Discover 20 Europe Challenge initiatives that are transforming libraries into safe havens for marginalised and at-risk groups, including refugees, migrants, LGBTQIA+ communities, and individuals with experiences of homelessness, poverty, violence, or drug abuse. These initiatives provide essential support and security to those who need it most.

Key words

Community, diversity, inclusion, refugees, migrants, marginalised groups, LGBTQIA+, safe spaces.

Types of libraries included

Public, school, feminist, community, volunteer, university.

Learn more about the cases in this chapter!



This House is Your House

- 📍 Chester, UK
- 🏠 Storyhouse
- 👥 Cheshire, Halton and Warrington Race Equality Centre (CHAWREC)

Working with refugee families who have made Chester their home, the Storyhouse library is creating a welcoming space - translating resources and bringing the library to multilingual communities through storytelling, audio books, and other engagement opportunities.



A Creative Hub for Young Refugees

- 📍 Varna, Bulgaria
- 🏠 Pencho Slaveykov Regional Library
- 👥 Ukrainian refugees and other migrant or minority groups

On Bulgaria's Black Sea coast, this regional library has become a lifeline for young Ukrainian refugees, acting as a hub for art and cultural activities. Together, visitors are building a community and developing essential skills for the future.



Tales from the Street

- 📍 Aarhus, Denmark
- 🏠 Dokk1 Aarhus Public Library
- 👥 Værestedet drop-in centre and local community

Partnering with a local drop-in centre, Tales from the Street is reimagining Aarhus Public Library as a more inclusive, democratic space - encouraging people experiencing homelessness, psychological issues, or drug abuse to share their stories and make their voices heard.



Queering the Library

- 📍 Berlin, Germany
- 🏠 Central and Regional Library Berlin
- 👥 Oyoun, Transcodiert & mehr_blick

Three community organisations are exploring how Berlin's Central Library can transform its spaces, literature, and perspectives, making them safer and more welcoming for the city's queer communities - as well as creating a vibrant archive of queer culture.



Painting Murals, Breaking Down Walls

- 📍 Hoogeveen, The Netherlands
- 📖 Bibliotheek Hoogeveen
- 👥 Hoogeveen Urban Arts / Urban Unity

Painting Murals, Breaking Down Walls tackles poverty and isolation by bringing young people together to paint colourful murals in at-risk neighbourhoods - using street art to rebuild social cohesion, reduce crime and create safer communities.



Soul Food for Migrant Youth: Positive Integration through Art and Culture

- 📍 Paris, France
- 📖 Library of Goethe-Institut Paris
- 👥 Soul Food

Paris is buzzing with culture, but many young migrants feel excluded. This initiative is changing that by hosting creative workshops that culminate in a community event - featuring various art forms, music, and culinary delights that highlight cultural diversity.



Challenging Stereotypes, Reclaiming Public Spaces

- 📍 Athens, Greece
- 📖 Feminist Autonomous Centre's Feminist Library
- 👥 MiQ community

This feminist library in Athens tackles social exclusion and challenges stereotypes around gender, sexuality, and migration. The initiative helps marginalised communities reclaim public spaces and share their stories through talks, books, and exhibitions.



Nurturing a Multicultural Community

- 📍 Athens, Greece
- 📖 We Need Books
- 👥 Greek Forum of Migrants

A multilingual library in a diverse Athens neighbourhood, We Need Books works with the Greek Forum of Migrants to build a more inclusive space where underserved communities can connect, make decisions, and thrive.



Reimagining the Libraries: VR & AR as New Tools of Georgian Knowledge

- 📍 Tbilisi, Georgia
- 📖 Library about Georgia
- 👥 Georgian internally displaced people (IDPs) and Ukrainian refugees in Georgia

With digital technology, this library is helping displaced people from Georgia and Ukraine tell their stories - using virtual reality and augmented reality to inspire empathy and awareness of the profound impacts of their experiences.



Breaking Down Cultural Barriers

- 📍 Barnet, UK
- 📖 Finchley Church End Library
- 👥 Community Network Group CIC Place

Post-Brexit, this north London library provides a platform where people can engage with each other, re-establish common values, and respond to the social needs of a diverse community in the face of rising isolation and xenophobia.



Manga Days

- 📍 Chemnitz, Germany
- 📖 Stadtbibliothek Chemnitz
- 👥 Kraftwerk e.V.

This library collaboration invites young LGBTQ+ communities to join manga activities, featuring a cool new app and 3D costume-printing. Celebrating individuality and diversity in a supportive environment, the programme inspires a lifelong love for libraries.



Illustrations of Social Exclusion: Co-designing an Inclusive Library

- 📍 Athens, Greece
- 📖 Children's Open Library
- 👥 Ploes Day Centre

This Athens initiative helps marginalised teenagers improve their life chances; through open dialogue, teenagers discuss how to improve educational processes, sparking conversations for local change and striving to reduce school drop-out rates.



A Community Celebration of Diversity, History and Culture in Marino

- 📍 Dublin, Ireland
- 📖 Marino College JCSP Library
- 👥 Marino Residents Association

Uniting to tackle rising anti-immigration sentiment, and to encourage inclusivity in this deprived neighbourhood of Dublin, this library at a further education college works with residents to organise community festivals and other initiatives that celebrate diversity and sustainability.



Book of Your Life (BoYL)

- 📍 Budapest, Hungary
- 📖 University Library & Archives of the Eötvös Loránd University (ULA)
- 👥 Student Union of the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE EHÖK)

This university library in Budapest has partnered with its diverse student body to create a vibrant community hub, with activities that champion cultural diversity and inclusion - promoting a shared sense of belonging for all students.



Breaking Down Cultural Barriers for Refugees

- 📍 Ormož, Slovenia
- 📖 The Franc Ksaver Meško Library, Ormož
- 👥 Ormož Adult Education Centre

Together, a library and an adult education centre in Slovenia are integrating Ukrainian refugees into local cultural and social life by nurturing their talents and hobbies - through cooking classes, literary evenings, exercise classes, and other initiatives.



Bridging Worlds: A Collaborative Initiative for Youth, Libraries, and Inclusive Communities

- 📍 Tortona, Italy
- 📖 Biblioteca Civica Tommaso de Ocheda
- 👥 APS La Fenice

Bridging Worlds is a buddy initiative for young people with migrant backgrounds, pairing younger children with older youths to share their traditions and cultural challenges. The library also hosts events celebrating diverse cultures to build local connections.



Meet. Eat. Art

- 📍 Cambridge, UK
- 📖 Bar Hill Library
- 👥 Bar Hill Community Association (BHCA)

Providing a recipe for community integration, newly-arrived migrants and locals share their skills and cook together at monthly community kitchens. After a communal meal, attendees take part in dynamic arts activities - building friendships and community connections.



Queering Lublin

- 📍 Lublin, Poland
- 📖 Biblioteka Azył
- 👥 Local LGBTQ+ community

In Poland's shrinking civil society, Queering Lublin works with young LGBTQ+ people to create safe spaces. Through workshops, books clubs, and discussions, the goal is to make new connections with libraries and communities across Europe.



Verborgen Verhalen (Hidden Stories)

- 📍 Haarlem, The Netherlands
- 📖 Bibliotheek Zuid-Kennemerland
- 👥 Verborgen Verhalen - Stadsreporters

In Haarlem, Hidden Stories connects local and migrant women to share autobiographical stories through workshops, storytelling events, and exhibitions. Promoting cultural understanding both locally and internationally, these activities create connections, and combat discrimination and xenophobia.

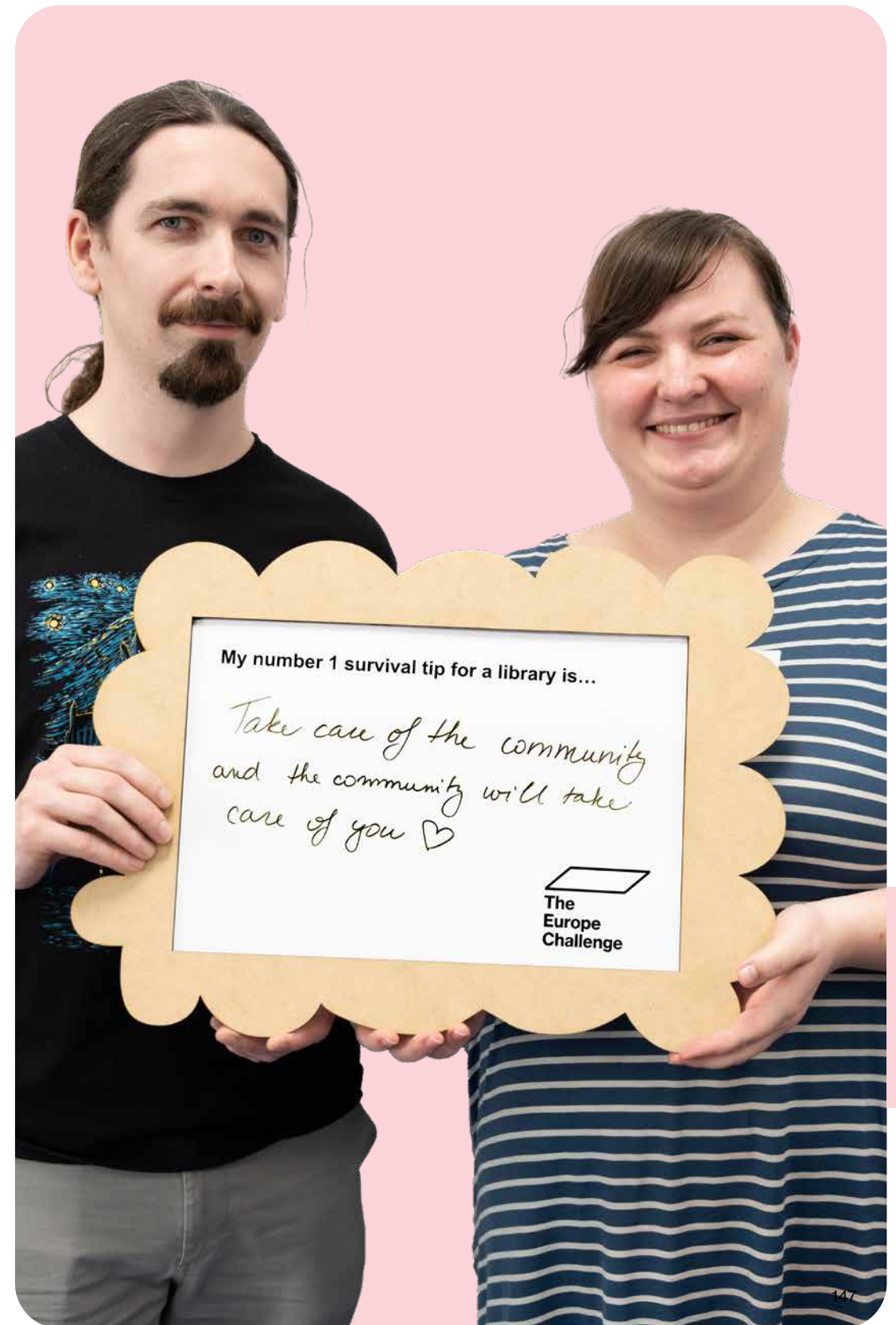


fREAD Yourself. Women in Shelters and the Impact of Libraries

- 📍 Rome, Italy
- 📖 Sapienza Università di Roma Library System
- 👥 Associazione Differenza Donna, an organisation for women and children suffering from violence

Providing educational, cultural, and recreational activities for women and children affected by violence, this initiative brings together a women's centre and a university library to support women's journeys towards autonomy through literacy, economic independence, and self-confidence.

Meet The Europe Challenge librarians
and community representatives!



Your Complete Library Record



Name
Camilla Macpherson

Country
United Kingdom/
The Netherlands

Year of Birth
1977

Role
How a Library Changed My Life writing competition
winner

Camilla Macpherson is a UK-based writer. Her novel, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, was published by Random House in 2012. It has since been translated into Dutch, German, and Polish. Camilla recently spent five years living and working in The Hague, the Netherlands. Since her return to London, she has been writing a historical crime novel set in war-time Holland.

How a Library Changed My Life was a writing competition held by the European Cultural Foundation in Spring 2024. Six winners were selected from nearly 300 submissions across 47 countries, each showcasing the life-changing impact of libraries.

Centrale Bibliotheek
The Hague
The Netherlands
15 May 2024

Dear *Ms Smith*

Subject: Your Complete Library Record

As per your recent request, I set out your complete library record below. I hope it is useful for your research project.

Name: Charlotte R Smith

Library membership number: 7002824612

Library branch: Centrale Bibliotheek, The Hague,
The Netherlands

1. The Holland Handbook: An indispensable guide to the Netherlands [3 January 2023; renewed three times – maximum allowed]

Description: This book contains essential information for immigrants on all aspects of life and work in the Netherlands, including housing, transport, healthcare, learning the language, and making friends in your new country. It's time to buy a bike, and acquire a taste for stroopwafel and bitterballen. Good luck!

2. Moving House: Everything is different [3 February 2023]

Description: A book to help overcome the challenges of moving, from packing and unpacking boxes, constructing flatpack furniture, meeting the neighbours, and turning your new house into a home.

3. Table for One [14 February 2023]

If only I had known you then...

Description: One hundred recipes for the solo-cook.

4. Complete Dutch language course for foreigners:
From Level A1 to B1 [reserved 14 February 2023;
available 15 March; renewed twice]

Description: An essential guide to understanding and speaking Dutch. Develop your skills through real-life scenarios. And remember, the best way to learn is by talking to a Dutch speaker.

5. Appointment at the language cafe [28 March 2023]

Join language learners for conversation in the café hosted by librarian Femke Meijer. Learn Dutch and make friends. Remember, everything gets better with practice. All attendees will receive a free badge to wear when they are out and about that says: 'Speak Dutch with me!'

Not that I would wish a broken leg on anyone, but behind every cloud shines the sun as we Dutchies say... more than happy to help a colleague out.

6. Ziezo by Annie M. G. Schmidt [2 April 2023]

A collection of poems for children by acclaimed writer Annie M. G. Schmidt. The perfect introduction to Dutch culture and writing.

So you did borrow it? It was a good recommendation, no? I knew you liked me right from the start.

7. Appointment at the language cafe [11 April 2023]

8. Appointment at the language cafe [25 April 2023]

what a good student you were back then! It is usual, the new language-learner is always so enthusiastic at the start. It generally does not last.

9. Appointment at the language cafe [9 May 2023]

10. Cooking with love – stimulating stories and recipes [9 May 2023]

Description: A collection of recipes guaranteed to inspire romance.
Sub-category: Aphrodisia.

you should make that steak recipe again, yes?

confirmed...

11. Lessons in Heartbreak [9 May 2023]

Covers all aspects of heartbreak, from infidelity to bereavement. How to decide whether to stay or go.

How many times do I have to tell you it was just a stupid misunderstanding.

12. Appointment at the language cafe [11 July 2023]

Thank God you came back.

13. Appointment at the language cafe [25 July 2023]

Thank God.

14. Appointment at the language cafe [27 July 2023]

To assist our advisers, please describe the nature of the issue you would like to discuss: *How to acquire permanent residence in the Netherlands. Legal implications of getting married in the Netherlands.*

Presumptuous you?

15. Lonely Planet Guide to Venice [2 August 2023]

Description: How to enjoy your visit to the most romantic city on the planet. Tips on the best restaurants, shops, and hotels, and how to escape the crowds.

And I thought we just "stumbled across" that shop selling the rings...

16. What to expect when you are expecting [1 September 2023]

Description: The ultimate guide to pregnancy, full of insights, tips, and advice.
Essential reading for all first time parents.

No way?! You knew in September?!

17. The Happiest Kids in the World: Bringing up Kids the Dutch Way [27 May 2024, long overdue]

It's true, you'll see! Just wait.

Description: Why are Dutch children so happy? What is their secret? This book will explain everything.

We at the Centrale Bibliotheek look forward to reading your book about building a successful life in the Netherlands, and will be pleased to stock a copy once it is published.

Yours sincerely,

D. Visser

Dirk Visser, Assistant Librarian

P.S. I love you!

now we're talking

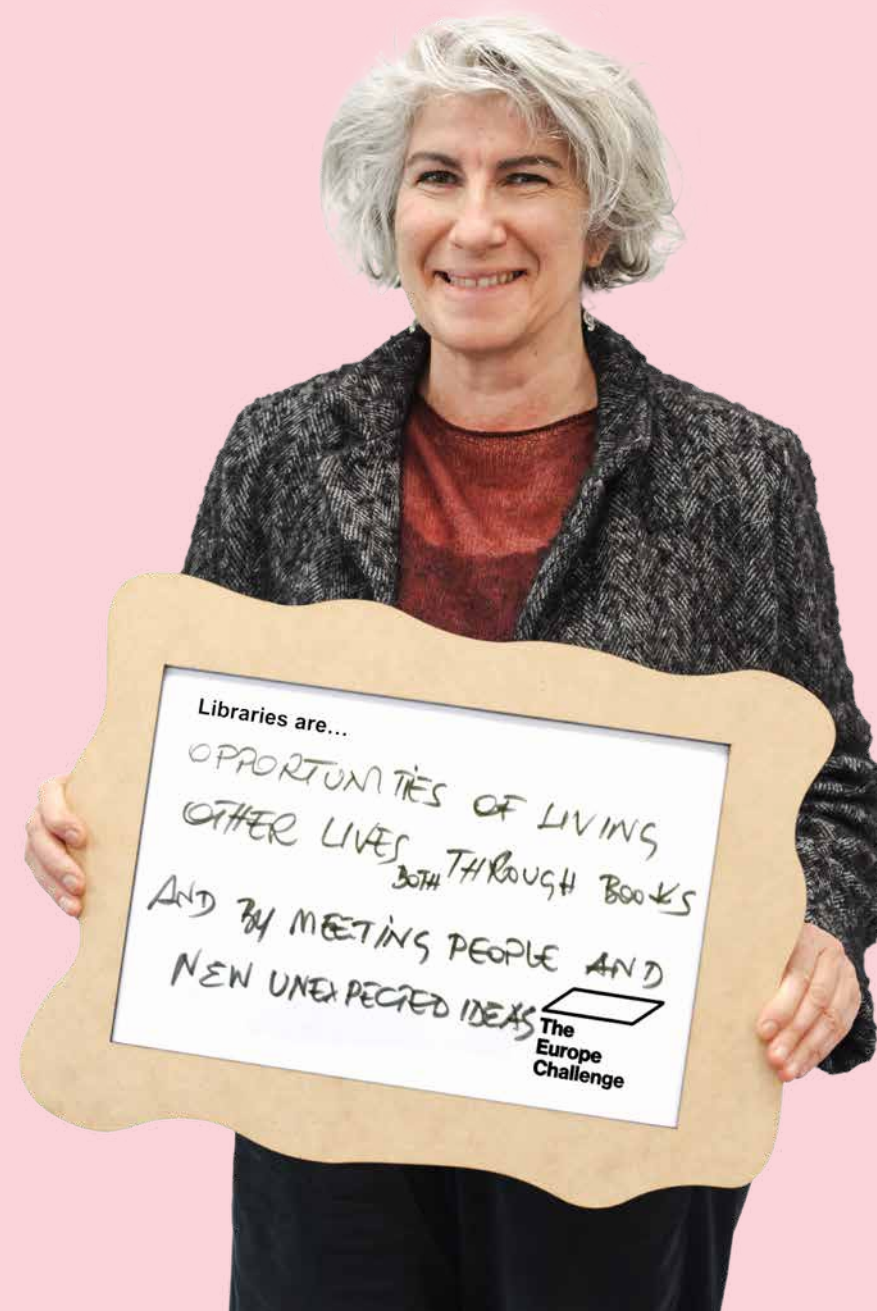
Author's note:

Although the lending history set out above is a fictional account, it's inspired by real life. When you move to a new place, you often don't have friends. When you move to a new country, you likely don't even have the right words to express yourself. Luckily for all of us, there are libraries.

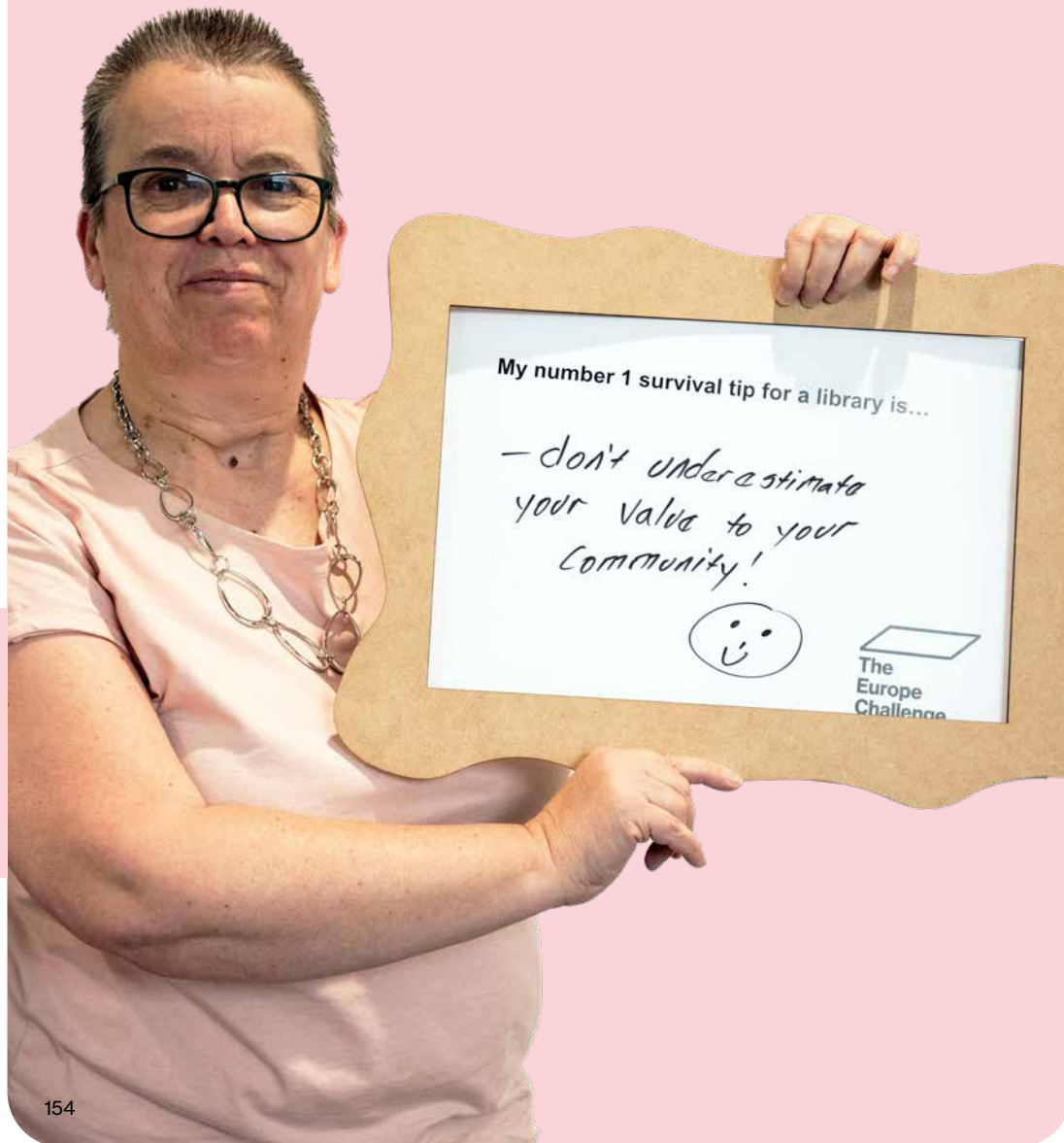
I moved to The Hague in 2017, and almost the first thing I did was join the wonderful Centrale Bibliotheek. I was able to borrow books, at first in English, and then, as my language skills improved, in Dutch. I borrowed the test papers that helped me pass the state Dutch exams. I attended events. I saw exhibitions. I ate stroop-wafels in the café. I was always made to feel welcome. Unlike the person whose lending history is set out above, I did not fall in love at the Centrale Bibliotheek. But perhaps I fell a little in love with the Centrale Bibliotheek.

All items mentioned above are available to borrow from The Hague's library network. All activities are also available.

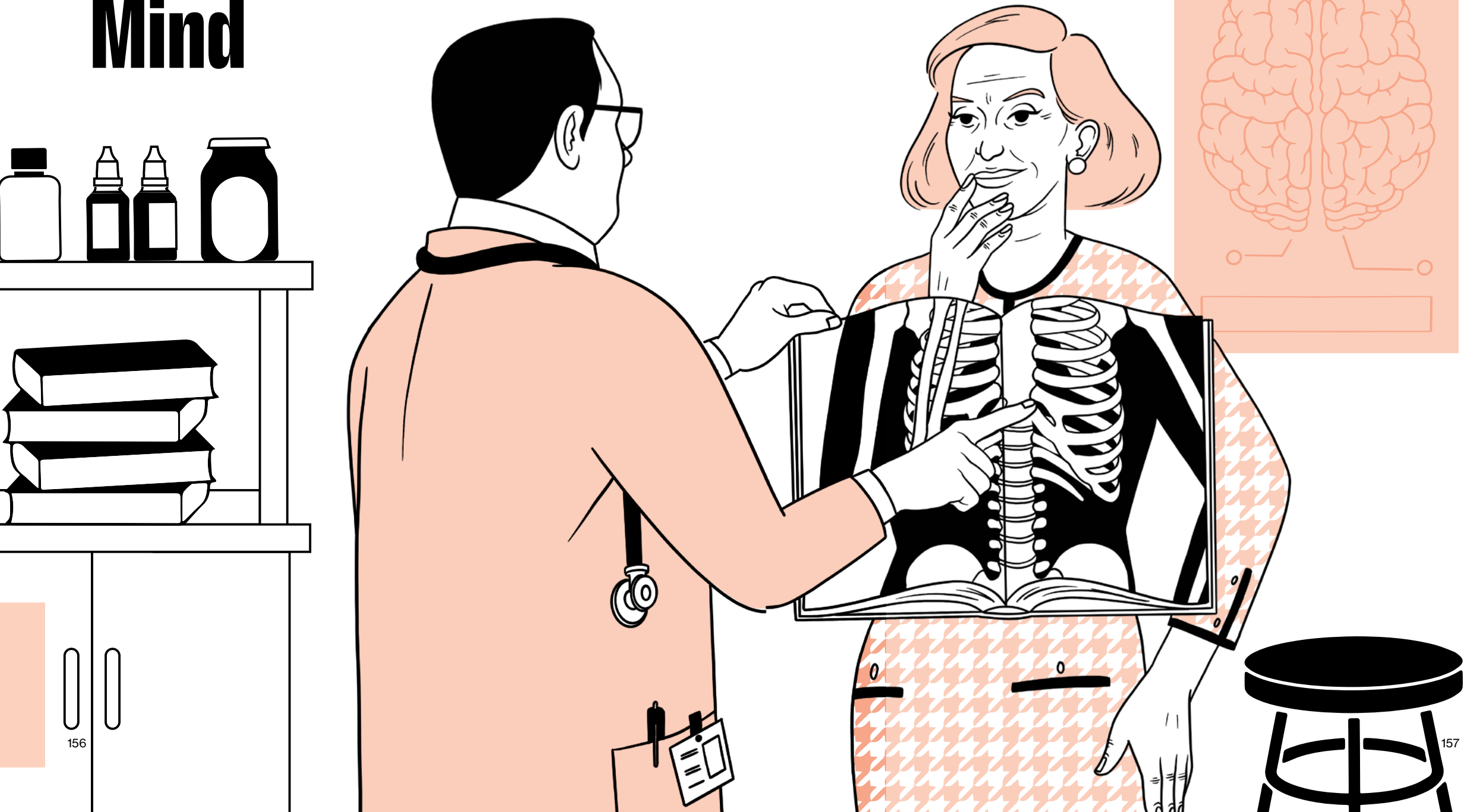
Meet The Europe Challenge librarians and community representatives!



Meet The Europe Challenge librarians
and community representatives!



Libraries as Hospitals for the Mind



Introduction

Did you know there are over 65,000 libraries in Europe? Now, here are some other startling facts: loneliness can be deadlier than smoking 15 cigarettes a day. And more than 150 million people in Europe struggle with a mental health condition. This isn't just a crisis anymore – it's a pandemic.

Picture this: all of those 65,000 libraries transformed into sanctuaries for the mind. Imagine them offering bibliotherapy and reading on prescription, becoming places where people go to reset and connect with others, face-to-face, beyond their phone screens. Envision a world where talking about mental health isn't a taboo; where everyone can openly admit, without shame, to feeling lonely at times.

Mexican poet Cesar A. Cruz once said that 'art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable', a line later appropriated by British street artist Banksy. What if libraries in Europe embraced this philosophy?

We believe they should.

**That's what a public library means:
something communal.**

– Kate Atkinson

Interview

A Cosy, Comforting Corner of the Internet - and Life

Jack Edwards - 'the internet's resident librarian' - on the power of #BookTok and young people's mental health



Name
Jack Edwards

Country
United Kingdom/
United States of America

Year of Birth
1998

Role
Author, #BookTok star,
and largest book content
creator on YouTube

Jack Edwards is known as 'the internet's resident librarian'. As well as book reviews, his weekly videos cover topics such as banned books, popular culture, mental health, celebrity book trends, and the impact of social media on the book world. Jack has a keen understanding of Gen-Z and the ways in which young people connect with reading through social media. In 2023 and 2024, he presented the official livestream of the Booker Prize to audiences across the globe.

You first shot to fame in the #BookTok community as 'the internet's resident librarian', with over 1.3 million subscribers on your YouTube channel. Is there a particular library in your life that played a role in shaping you or your career?

My local library growing up ran a summer reading challenge. You had to read a set number of books, and then go in and speak to the librarian about them. As a young person, it pushed me not only to consume books, but also to think about how they made me feel, how I was responding to them. I think that was crucial for me and my current career – it's how I realised that I loved talking about books so much.

When I turned 18, I started volunteering at that same library. The roles were then reversed – I was asking young people about the books they'd read. That felt really empowering; it was such a full circle moment to be able to give back to the community. I later volunteered at my university library, and now that I'm working on a book of my own, I still do all my writing at a local library. I don't rent a coworking space or anything like that: I just go to my library! Thinking about it now, libraries have been one of the most consistent things in my life – no matter how things changed, the presence of a library has always been a constant.

#BookTok is changing the way people read. The algorithms dictate which books become bestsellers, shaping what's read by millions around the globe. Why do you think young people in particular have been so attracted to #BookTok? How are these online trends changing libraries?

I think Susan Sontag once said that a library is like an 'archive of longings'. Aren't we so lucky to have all these people who distilled the nuances of their life experiences into palatable, digestible, couple-hundred-pages-long volumes? Reading books means learning about the world, about human nature and the human condition from people who might have lived full lifetimes different to our own. That's why I'm such a big advocate for trying to get more young people reading.

To answer your question, I think the beauty of #BookTok is that it democratises reading and the book world for younger generations. It makes it more accessible. You don't have to be an academic or a book critic employed by a magazine to recommend a book on

#BookTok. You can just be someone who read a book that really resonated. I think such recommendations are also the most endearing ones: on #BookTok, we can directly see the response that someone had to a book, whether it made them emotional, whether it made them laugh, whether it turned their day around, and if they now feel more positive about the world. I think that's why younger generations find #BookTok so empowering – it allows them a glimpse into the world of another human being, into how they responded to a particular book.

I think the beauty of #BookTok is that it democratises reading and the book world for younger generations. It makes it more accessible.

The nice thing about #BookTok is that it also helps us when we go to a library or a bookshop. Amongst the noise of however many volumes these spaces have, it helps us narrow down the huge, sometimes overwhelming displays into something more manageable. We're going in with some direction: a wish list of recommendations by people that we trust.

Negative mental health, isolation, and loneliness are on the rise in Europe. Do you believe that libraries and books have the power to help in any way?

Absolutely. Having third spaces you can go to, that make you feel safe, is of the utmost importance. Jorge Luis Borges once said: 'I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library'. I think that's true – libraries have a way of taking you out of the hustle and bustle of your daily life and allowing you to have some calm and quiet. They have a way of making you feel accepted, like you belong. In our current age, this is something all of us are looking for. I think that's why people are so drawn to meditation and mindfulness – a library is a physical manifestation of that, which is magical.

This is also why – in fiction – we regularly see people who escape to retreat to libraries. Just think of Ruth Ozeki's *The Book of Form and Emptiness*, or Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*. In these books, we see characters with nowhere else to go, who are feeling so overwhelmed by life and their mental health, being able to seek solace in a library. I firmly believe that life imitates art, and art imitates life – that's why we have to do everything we can to make sure libraries are always there for people who need them most.

Have you personally experienced that library spaces have a therapeutic effect on you or support your mental health?

Yes – my experience has always been that whenever I need a quiet moment, a library is one of the first places I think of. I used to find my university library very comforting. It provided me some much-needed separation between my home life, where I slept and cooked, and the academic mindset. I found it very comforting to see everyone around me working on something. That's another thing too – as much as libraries can be places for relaxing, they can also be places where we mobilise ourselves, where we get motivated.

Whenever I've moved to a new city and didn't know anyone, being physically present in a library made me feel considerably less alone. There's something in a library that makes us feel part of a culture, part of a society – we all descend on that same location to be nourished creatively, be it to work, to pursue knowledge, or just to relax, to be. It's a great equaliser, a place where there's no judgement, where we're all equal. So whenever I move to a new place, the library is the first thing I Google. Where is it? How do I get my library card?

As much as libraries can be places for relaxing, they can also be places where we mobilise ourselves, where we get motivated.

There's a lot of talk about how social media often has a negative impact on young people's mental health. Do you think communities like #BookTok and #BookTube have a positive effect?

I hope so. Too much of any of these platforms can also, of course, be a little toxic – I think it's important we don't overdose on content. But I do think that it's nice to be able to provide a kind of cosy, comforting corner of the internet. It's great that young people have access to such a democratic space online, where we all share the same interests. A space where we encourage each other to think critically about the books we consume, a space where we can engage in meaningful discussions.

Living in an age with a very high information diet that encourages over-consumption in every sense of the word, I also like the idea that #BookTok and #BookTube invite us to slow down. These spaces ask us to engage with something that takes a while to read, something that you really have to focus on for a little bit. I think it's nice to be able to provide that space for people – when you read, it's just you and the page. The rest of the world doesn't matter.

Whenever I've moved to a new city and didn't know anyone, being physically present in a library made me feel considerably less alone.

As the 'internet's resident librarian', what are three books you'd recommend to someone going through a hard time?

Oh, I love that question! Let me consult the library in my brain...

The first one that comes to mind is *Days at the Morisaki Bookshop* by Satoshi Yagisawa. Although not a library, this novel is all about being surrounded by books. It's a book that encourages you to think about slowing down and not trying to achieve everything by a certain age. There's this really lovely quote that talks about being

a little boat in the harbour – it's okay to put down your anchor for WWa while to just stop and float. You're allowed moments of rest.

In a similar vein, I would recommend *A Psalm for the Wild-Built* by Becky Chambers. It's a really comforting read about a monk who meets a robot – you follow these two different entities who discuss their alternative approaches to life and their different ways of seeing the world. At one point, one of the characters says: 'I just don't feel like I'm enough,' to which the robot responds: 'you keep saying that you're not enough, but it's okay to be doing your best and just existing in the world, taking things day by day.' Imagine the song *What Was I Made For?* by Billie Eilish, but in a book. It addresses this really common crisis that we all have – the crisis of who we are. What makes us individuals? Is it all worth it? And the book's answer is: yes, it is. Keep going.

When you read, it's just you and the page. The rest of the world doesn't matter.

Lastly, I would recommend the poetry of Mary Oliver. She talks about nature being one of our greatest teachers, and she's constantly in conversation with the authors who came before her. She slows down and thinks about the minutiae – the little details, the small pleasures that make up our lives, whether that's her dog Percy, or reading a really great book. Her poetry encouraged me to slow down and be confident with where I am right now, rather than being preoccupied with where I'm aiming to get to.

What's your favourite thing to do if you're having a bad day? It might be something you do to lift your mental health or help you disconnect?

I'm a big fan of a good walk. That's perhaps somewhat overused advice. But my addition to that would be a good audio book. Throughout all of history, people have always sought comfort in other people telling us stories. The power of storytelling is crucial to human survival as a species. That's how we learn, that's how we

inherit knowledge from the generations who came before us – and I think this oratory tradition of literature providing solace is just as relevant today as it was in the past.

So whenever I'm walking, there's a story being told to me in my ear. I love listening to memoirs specifically. I think it's such a privilege to be able to hear another person tell the story of their own life. I think many people don't realise that they can borrow audiobooks from their local library. I constantly use an app called Libby, where you can instantly rent an audiobook for free with your library card. I really recommend it to everyone – it's the one thing I'm always shouting about on my channels.

Even though one of the hallmarks of #BookTok and #BookTube is talking about going to a bookstore and buying a book, we could also point people in the direction of libraries and better signpost what they provide.

What are some of the main challenges for libraries in the future? How should they adapt to these challenges?

I think the recent pressures on libraries to ban books in different countries are really concerning. It's vital that libraries continue to be spaces where all books are accessible and available – of course in a contextualised format. Having access to information, especially in an academic context, is crucial.

Another challenge is that a lot of people simply don't know what's available in libraries nowadays. That's the responsibility of libraries, but book creators could help. Even though one of the hallmarks of #BookTok and #BookTube is talking about going to a bookstore

and buying a book, we could also point people in the direction of libraries and better signpost what they provide.

Libraries could make use of some of the trends from #BookTok and expand them into physical spaces. I've recently seen a real rise in young people identifying book tropes that they enjoy – specific niches in the book industry that aren't as clean-cut as romance/fantasy/thriller. Things like "cottage core", "enemies to lovers", "dark academia". If libraries are aware of these trends, they can become better at curating selections of shelves that people are attracted to. I've seen this happening already, so perhaps it's about embracing this shift to a greater degree. This is especially important, as it's a great way to platform authors from minority groups who don't have the biggest exposure. If we put their work side-by-side with some of the more popular books, we encourage the act of discovery. We can say things like: "if you've enjoyed this book, you'll love this one as well!"

If you could send libraries across Europe a message, what would you say?

I would say the biggest thank you! If I could hug every single library, I would. What you do is so vitally important – that's what I would want to tell each person who works at a library, whether they're stocking the shelves or cleaning the toilets. I think that every single person who contributes to that space, making it somewhere so magical and wonderful for us to escape to, deserves the greatest recognition. We appreciate you so much, so thank you.

Libraries could make use of some of the trends from #BookTok and expand them into physical spaces.

10 Tips for Becoming a Sanctuary of Wellbeing

How can libraries transform into havens of mental wellbeing, community, and connection? Check out these 10 tips from the insightful Europe Challenge librarians!

1

Ensure that *all* of your library staff have adequate training, not just the front office. It's the only way to build long-term relationships with vulnerable groups, and to address the (often unintentional) ableism that is present in our societies.

2

Start a bibliotherapy group! Bibliotherapy is based around the idea that reading can be healing. Therapeutic book clubs should be facilitated by trained professionals, but a lot of resources are available online to help you get started in your library.

3

Think about the small things you can do to make Europe's pandemic of loneliness a little more bearable. Have a chat, truly listen, smile, and take the time to do your work with warmth, regardless of how busy you are.

4

Sometimes, being clearer about the simplest things that your library offers can be enough: things like power plugs to charge phones for vulnerable individuals, universal free access, a room to meet other people, a chair to rest on.

5

Keep in mind that an approach based only on goodwill and empathy is sometimes insufficient. What feels correct to you might not be correct for people in fragile, emotional states. Proper training to increase your confidence when working with these groups is key!

6

Think about activities that bring people together, and help visitors feel like themselves, without the fear of being judged: jigsaw puzzle tables, adult chess, bridge-card games, knitting and crocheting clubs, mindfulness sessions, art therapy.

7

Partner with a local mental health organisation, and get involved with the Libraries On Prescription movement. Social prescribing and community referrals are an important way to make non-clinical mental health services accessible to all.

8

Launch a Silent Book Club! It's like a happy hour for introverts – it appeals to all generations, and to shyer individuals in particular. The group reads together in quiet camaraderie for an hour, and people are welcome to share what they were reading over a cup of tea afterwards (without any pressure to do so).

9

Become a safe, judgement-free hub of information that destigmatises mental health challenges. You can prepare book displays on mental health and other materials to help people manage stress and access local support services (e.g. psychological assistance).

10

If you have a library café, join the Chatty Café Scheme. It's really simple – all you need to do is offer "Chatter & Natter" tables where customers can sit if they're happy to have a coffee and a friendly chat with other customers or volunteers.

Every Day for The First Time



Name
Louise Scollay

Country
Scotland, UK

Year of Birth
1978

Role
How a Library Changed My Life writing competition
winner

Louise Scollay is a Senior Library Assistant at the Shetland Library. She has been happily ensconced in the world of books, archives, and libraries for over 20 years. Living in the remote Scottish island of Shetland, Louise is heavily inspired by nature and the seasons. Whilst writing regularly for pleasure, she has only felt brave enough to enter one competition (this one!).

How a Library Changed My Life was a writing competition held by the European Cultural Foundation in Spring 2024. Six winners were selected from nearly 300 submissions across 47 countries, each showcasing the life-changing impact of libraries.

Every day that Clara comes to the library,
It is the first time that Clara has been in the library in years.
Delighted to be welcomed in by someone who knows her name –
*You must have a good memory! I haven't been here in years –
Will I still be a member?*

Every day that Clara comes to the library we answer her questions,
Like it's the first time that Clara has been in the library in years.
Some days she is younger than she is –
I'm looking for a little job!
Some days she knows that she no longer lives in her house.
Some days she doesn't know she lives in a care home –
Cruelly parallel to where she lived.
Between both lies the library – a safe limbo.
*They keep moving me around...
I suppose I'm lucky you are still here.*

Always she chats,
Blithe. Arms behind her back,
Left hand clutching right wrist,
Wireless tether like a watch –
Keeping an invisible meridian to the care home.

Some days confused, but seldom upset –
Often full of girlish whimsy.
Other days carrying an arm she has hurt,
But she can't remember why.

Every day that Clara visits the library,
She has a routine –
And she doesn't even know it.
*Oh! I've not been here in years!
Oh, you library staff are so helpful –
I've always said to...someone
That you are, and so cheerful!
I've just come over from where I live now –
I'm still settling in.
Am I still a member of the library? I've not been in years.*

Sometimes she catches on as she walks the same route,
Towards the groaning trolley of withdrawn books.
*I sometimes buy a book from here, don't I?
Maybe I have been in recently ...*

She looks around me, beyond me, for the answer to wash back
to her –

...Maybe not.

And she expels a chuckle and claps her hands.

Anyway, what I've come in today for is –

...

I was wondering –

...

Do you have any history books?

She has circled the trolley and now will check her pocket.

I don't have any money today.

I tell her she can just take one because –

'It's not every day that you come to the library.'

Her round eyes widen,

And she tells me again

– But for the first time –

How helpful the library staff are.

She goes out holding her book.

Sometimes Clara comes back into the library,

Mere minutes after she left.

I haven't been here in years –

Will I still be a member?

I take her to a computer and check for her, showing the screen.

They keep moving my house –

Visibly relieved to see that she is a library member
(there's a bit of luck).

Do you have any books for sale? Any history books?

And we tread the same route around the library again.

Commenting on the library and the oh so many books –

I seem to have a book in my hand – did I bring it in?

The town hall clock strikes noon,

Oh I think they come with food at 12, is it 12?

'It is – you will be able to enjoy your book after your lunch.'

– *Yes, that's what I came here for.*

I walk her to the door.

'Do you know where you're going today?'

She points with her book in hand to the street she used to live on.

I use my arm to show her the way,

She hooks her own around it.

Today Clara needs a chaperone –

Unsure, but allowing her footsteps to remind her.

We go along a few feet.

'Can you see that door?' There?'

Her step quickens. Her belly rumbles.

I've never had this kind of door-to-door service before.

The library is marvellous. I always say it.

Yes, you do.

A member of her team meets us at the crossing.

We share a nod.

He tells her her lunch is served.

Oh, aren't I so lucky?!

It's cruel, but it also seems a correct word.

How *lucky* that every good day is your first day in a library?

How *lucky* to know somewhere in your changing memories

That the library is safe?

That the library can answer your questions?

Clara can't remember the last time she was there, but

How lucky is she – are we – that her feet carry her to the library?

I watch them walk into the Home.

Hugging myself to the cold, I wonder when she'll be back.

I hope she will be back.

Every day Clara comes to the library,

It is the first time in years.

And every time Clara comes to the library,

She changes library lives.

And she doesn't even know it.

Libraries as Hospitals for the Mind

The Europe Challenge Case Studies

What if doctors prescribed libraries to combat loneliness and isolation? Can library spaces, books, and communal activities offer solace to people of all ages, backgrounds, and nationalities? Discover how 20 libraries across Europe are tackling mental health stigma, ageism, health inequality, and accessibility for people with disabilities. These libraries are transforming into sanctuaries for both body and mind, working closely with their communities to provide vital support and comfort.

Key words

Mental health, loneliness, isolation, disability, wellbeing, bibliotherapy, active ageing, intergenerational activities, healthcare, therapy, healthy living.

Types of libraries included

Public, prison, community.

Learn more about the cases in this chapter!



QuickSilver

- 📍 Bergamo, Italy
- 🏠 Sistema Bibliotecario Valle Seriana
- 👥 Terza University

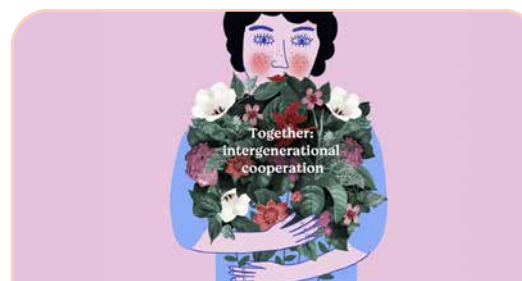
In the villages around Bergamo, QuickSilver is an alliance between public libraries and elderly care associations to encourage active ageing. Together, they bridge different generations in post-pandemic society, and improve pensioners' lives through community activities like crafting, cooking, and reading.



Libraries on Prescription

- 📍 Athens and four libraries across Greece
- 🏠 Athens Comics Library
- 👥 Refugee Week Greece

Imagine libraries offering prescriptions for happiness? In Greece, four libraries are working with a refugee charity to pioneer a 'Library on Prescription' initiative - unlocking the power of storytelling to create spaces for connection and healing.



Together: Intergenerational Cooperation

- 📍 Komenda, Slovenia
- 🏠 Knjižnica Franceta Balantiča Kamnik
- 👥 Zavod Medgeneracijsko središče Komenda

A collaboration between a library and an intergenerational centre, the Together initiative combats loneliness and ageism in Slovenia by engaging seniors and young people in storytelling sessions, book clubs, and computing classes - helping to build intergenerational bonds.



Accessible, Inclusive and Sustainable Library

- 📍 Terrassa, Spain
- 🏠 Terrassa Public Libraries Network (bct xarxa)
- 👥 President Amat Roumens Foundation (LaFact)

From reading clubs to guided tours for students from special schools, or providing signposting and training opportunities for staff, this library initiative is catalysing connections and empowering people with disabilities to thrive in a diverse Catalan city.



How Do You Feel?

- 📍 Genova, Italy
- 📖 La Casa nel Parco ETS - Casa Gavoglio
- 👥 The community around Casa Gavoglio

In a low-income neighbourhood, this community library works with a local mental health centre to tackle stigma and promote wellbeing, encouraging participation in outdoor activities and creative initiatives - and producing toolkits to share their knowledge with others.



Five Ways to Health Equality

- 📍 Oldham, UK
- 📖 Oldham Libraries
- 👥 Care, help and inspire (CHAI) project

Oldham Libraries are working together with a community empowerment group for South Asian women to help improve wellbeing and tackle health inequalities. From exercise to mindfulness activities, this initiative combats social isolation while promoting healthy living.



Together - Towards Healthier, Happier Generations

- 📍 Paderborn, Germany
- 📖 Stadtbibliothek Paderborn
- 👥 SCHLAU Paderborn

Teaming up with a local project on gender and sexual orientation, this library in Germany plays hosts to a series of community events to help local people escape loneliness and isolation - paving the way for happier, healthier living.



Gener-Actions: Intergenerational Solidarity

- 📍 Lisbon, Portugal
- 📖 Biblioteca da Penha de França - Rede de bibliotecas Municipais de Lisboa
- 👥 Fazer do Bairro a Nossa Casa (Making the Neighbourhood our Home)

Can a library unite generations? A Lisbon library and community group are fighting to combat social isolation, connecting older residents with new arrivals and migrant families. "Citizen labs" empower locals to share ideas and reclaim public spaces.



Discover the World with Other Senses

- 📍 Liepaja, Latvia
- 📖 Liepaja Central Scientific Library
- 👥 Liepaja Society of the Blind

In Liepaja, a scientific library has joined forces with an organisation for the visually-impaired, collaborating with speech therapists, social workers, and students to train librarians and improve technology - encouraging inclusive access for all.



Silver Bonds: Empowering Elders, Enriching Lives

- 📍 Marijampolė, Lithuania
- 📖 Marijampolė Petras Kriaučiūnas Public Library
- 👥 Seniors and people with disabilities; club Bičiuliai and seniors club Margainis

Silver Bonds tackles social exclusion and loneliness among older generations of disabled people in Lithuania, providing classes on smartphone use, online banking, and e-health. Alongside craft activities, these classes build intergenerational bonds, community engagement, and psychological wellbeing.



Library of the Future: Virtual Reality for all

- 📍 Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 📖 Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam (OBA)
- 👥 A community of virtual reality enthusiasts

Virtual reality enthusiasts in Amsterdam are donning VR headsets to help the city's public library find innovative ways to tackle digital inclusion and prevent loneliness. Together, they are building a library for the future.

(Photo: OBA & Jimena Gauna)



Community Activators and Programmers

- 📍 St Helens, UK
- 📖 St Helens Library
- 👥 Community Activators

In a town where one in ten people identify as lonely, this initiative combats social isolation and promotes wellbeing by revitalising library spaces through a diverse arts and culture programme designed to attract new library users.



Co-creating Healthcare Solutions

- 📍 Ghent, Belgium
- 📖 De Krook Library
- 👥 Comon and local community

At Ghent's library, residents have joined forces with doctors to create healthcare innovations to improve people's lives. Across a five-day "Make-a-thon", ideas such as a pain tracker or a multilingual phone bot are developed for further testing.



Become Your Favourite Character

- 📍 Žilina, Slovakia
- 📖 Krajská knižnica v Žiline (Regional library in Žilina)
- 👥 OZ Brána poznania (The gate of the knowledge)

Become Your Favourite Character is addressing post-pandemic loneliness with a costume library in Slovakia. The Costume Club comes together bi-monthly to sew, design, and 3D-print sustainable costumes, weaving community connections through shared crafts and events.



Awakenings: Parents and Teachers Meet in the Library

- 📍 Heraklion, Greece
- 📖 Bibliodromio
- 👥 Parents Association of 43rd Public Primary School of Heraklion

The pandemic left many children on the Greek island of Crete feeling socially isolated. This library-school initiative brings parents, children, and teachers together to build a more understanding, inclusive community where learning and healing can happen.



You Won't Learn This at School

- 📍 Opole, Poland
- 📖 Public Library in Opole
- 👥 Normal Thing

In Poland, limited mental and sexual health education forces teens to turn to the internet for answers. This initiative guides them to safe, reliable sources through workshops and expert talks - encouraging open discussions and supportive learning environments.



Reading for Recovery

- 📍 Perth, Scotland, UK
- 📖 Perth Prison Library, Culture Perth & Kinross
- 👥 Prison community at HMP Perth

In Perth, Scotland, a prison library is turning pages towards recovery. Teaming up with local organisations, they offer workshops and a lively reading group to boost prisoners' wellbeing, literacy, and future job prospects.



Libraries as Therapy

- 📍 Vaidava, Rencēni and Vecate villages, Latvia
- 📖 Vaidava Parish Library
- 👥 People from three local villages

Can libraries help us heal? In rural Latvia, three local libraries and communities are pioneering a therapy programme. Through art, dance, and "bibliotherapy", they combat post-pandemic loneliness and anxieties about the war in Ukraine.



A Space of Creativity, Art Therapy and Psychological Relief «Dobroteka ART»

- 📍 Buchach, Ukraine
- 📖 Buchach Town Public library
- 👥 NGO Buchach-ART

Through art therapy and counselling, this library collaboration in Ukraine is supporting displaced people, military families, and those whose lives have been turned upside down by war - offering a space for healing and artistic expression.



Community Connections

- 📍 Blackburn, UK
- 📖 Blackburn with Darwen Library and Information Service
- 👥 Acorn House Care Home

Community Connections tackles care home isolation by offering engaging digital activities, supported reading groups, and memory-sharing sessions for elderly residents. The library loans equipment and supports carers and families - helping to boost social cohesion and wellbeing.

Meet The Europe Challenge librarians and community representatives!



From Kyiv to Wigan, a Journey of Hope



Name
Svitlana Rykychynska

Country
Ukraine/United Kingdom

Year of Birth
1974

Role
How a Library Changed My Life writing competition
winner

Svitlana Rykychynska was born in Ukraine. She graduated from a medical university, then worked as an ophthalmologist. Forced to flee the war in Ukraine, she moved to the UK with her daughter. There, she has fulfilled a long-held dream of writing books, drawing inspiration from her experiences, and from her hopes for a better future for her home country.

How a Library Changed My Life was a writing competition held by the European Cultural Foundation in Spring 2024. Six winners were selected from nearly 300 submissions across 47 countries, each showcasing the life-changing impact of libraries.

I tried to fit these events into a genuine literary text, but nothing interesting came of it. So I have to tell everything as it is. Consider my story a confession.

Rain was pounding outside; the hurricane with a strange female name had been shaking the leaves off the trees for a second day. Lately, I have been trying to avoid talking to her. I must have slept a bit because when I opened my eyes, I saw it was a quarter to nine. Somewhere at the end of the corridor, the bathroom door slammed, which meant my daughter was awake. My heart sank unpleasantly. Pulling the blanket over my ears, I closed my eyes again. I neither wanted to sleep nor to get up. There was nothing I wanted. All my desires had vanished. It seemed that my expiration date had passed, and my batteries were completely dead.

Most of us are used to relying on ourselves; it is much calmer and far more reliable this way. But the world doesn't care. It moves on, seemingly unaware when it knocks us off our feet. We fall into an abyss, and the world continues. The hardest thing to understand is that these inexplicable movements can save us when we least expect it. That day had changed my life, and it happened in an ordinary city library.

Six months ago, I brought my family to the United Kingdom. A remarkable country that attracts thousands of tourists, but we were not tourists. We were refugees, which is perhaps the worst thing that can happen to a person. War is a constant guest in this world, and you live unaware until a bomb hits the house nearby and most of your neighbours are gone. Drones, rockets, mines – all these things are terrifying, but not the worst. People are the scariest thing. I imagined soldiers entering our apartment and became very scared. I have a teenage daughter and three cats. Who would save them but me?

I decided to leave as soon as possible, but my daughter categorically refused. A teenager's world is so small: studies, friends, familiar surroundings. I had to force her; the risks seemed too serious. We set out on the road, heading for the UK, where I had booked a free place for us to stay.

When we arrived, I finally reached my own personal hell. My daughter was suffering. She didn't want to meet peers or go to college. I tried to come up with ways to entertain her, but it didn't

Six months ago, I brought my family to the United Kingdom. A remarkable country that attracts thousands of tourists, but we were not tourists. We were refugees, which is perhaps the worst thing that can happen to a person.

work out well. Our relationship was falling apart, and any communication ended in tears. Additionally, one of our cats became sick and seemed to be dying, which upset her even more.

They say major upheavals make us stronger, or conversely, turn us into helpless children. I was stuck somewhere in between. Job hunting and domestic problems didn't let me relax; I had to put on a confident facade. Three or four months passed, and then I found a lump in my breast. The doctor asked me to come to the clinic for a biopsy. My usual calm life was crumbling at its foundations. I wasn't afraid of death; I was afraid of leaving them alone. I didn't tell my daughter. She had enough problems.

'Mom!' someone knocked on the door. I peeked out from my bedroom hiding place.

'Some man has come, asking something about gas,' my daughter said.

'Alright, I'll handle it,' I replied, getting up from the bed.

Repair work was starting near our English house, and we had kindly been warned about it. It would be noisy until the evening. I seized this excuse and persuaded my daughter to go to the city centre.

We found the right bus and set off. I had forgotten my phone at home, and my daughter's phone occasionally lost its internet connection; Google Maps didn't work, and we soon got lost.

'Hey, look, what's that?' my daughter stopped, trying to check the direction. Across the street, I saw a large glass building. It stood out from most others with its size and modernity.

'Let's go closer and take a look,' I glanced both ways, still unused to driving on the left. The building turned out to be a city centre library. It looked modern and quite large. We went inside. Almost immediately, a smiling woman approached us. She realised it was our first time there and wanted to help. My daughter was a bit confused, but she still followed her. The librarian suggested we register and showed us some interesting new books. My daughter didn't usually read much and had last been to a library on a school trip in elementary school. I was very surprised when she decided to register and chose two books for herself.

At home, my daughter realised that the books she had chosen didn't interest her, and needed to be returned. The next morning, she went to the library again. Buses near us didn't run often, so she walked more than an hour each way. The same librarian met her at the library and helped again. Enchanted, my daughter chose something new, even though she hadn't planned to. The new books turned out to be interesting; she read them quickly and took the now familiar route to the city centre. Gradually, she got used to the area and began going to the centre almost every day. She would buy herself an ice cream and go to the park to read, sitting on a bench. Interestingly, the weather that summer was not typically English; the sun shone almost every day.

About a month later, my girl brightened up. She met two boys her age in the library. They showed her the college they attended, and she decided she wanted to become a student.

I don't know – maybe there are exceptions – but it seems to me that happy children are the most important thing for a mother. Watching my daughter, I calmed myself down. Our cat recovered, I underwent an examination, and the doctor said he was almost sure the results would be good. That is what this story is about. I don't know if the reader has felt what I felt. Maybe not. But when you put your emotions on paper, they seem to diminish immediately. Believe me, the library saved me.

Dedicated to Wigan City Library.

Meet The Europe Challenge librarians and community representatives!



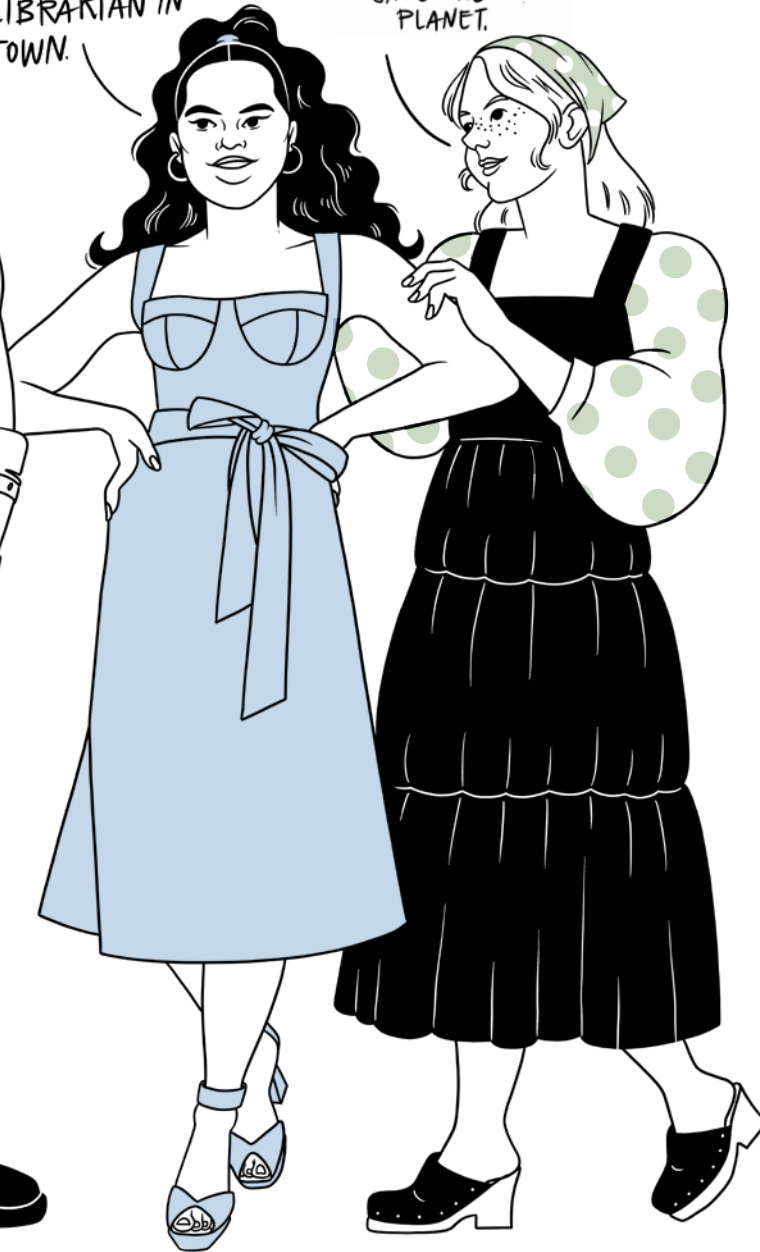
Don't Forget the Library Fashion!

HAS ANYONE SEEN MY ANCIENT GREEK DICTIONARY? IT'S VITAL FOR MY AESTHETIC.



The Dark Academia Boy

MOVE OVER, KEN! THERE'S A NEW LIBRARIAN IN TOWN.



The Barbie Core Girlie

JUST HERE TO FIND A BOOK ON BAKING PIES AND SUSTAINABLE FARMING TO SAVE THE PLANET.



The Cottage Core Gal

I WAS BORROWING BOOKS BEFORE IT WAS COOL, YOU'VE PROBABLY NEVER HEARD OF THEM.



The Library Hipster

GLASSES? CHECK. SKIRT? CHECK. MASTER OF THE SHUSH? DOUBLE CHECK.



The Old School Librarian

Colophon

Editor-in-chief

Ajda Milne

Editorial team

Inka Jelinek Jurkova

Nicola Mullenger

Vivian Paulissen

Tendai Terrence Thondhlana

Visual concept & design

Dagan Cohen, Changency

Jillem, Changency

Illustrator

Anja Slibar

Portrait photography

Domininkas

Edithink

Copyediting & proofreading

Vicky Anning

George King

Printing & binding

Pantheon Drukkers

Learn more & get in touch

theuropechallenge.eu

culturalfoundation.eu

Published in Amsterdam, September 2024.

The Europe Challenge is initiated by the European Cultural Foundation.

**European
Cultural
Foundation**

The 2024 edition of the programme is supported by the Scottish Library and Information Council, public funding through Arts Council England, Fondazione Cariplo, and Deutsche Postcode Lotterie via Deutsche Bibliotheksverband.



The delivery partners for the 2024 edition are Including Society (SA), Changency (NL), DOKK1 Aarhus Public Libraries (DK), Public Libraries 2030 (BE), and OBA Public Libraries Amsterdam (NL).



CHANØENCY

DOKK1



oba

How are libraries fighting misinformation and strengthening democracy? How are they addressing climate change and the pandemic of loneliness spreading across Europe? On a spectrum from surviving to thriving, libraries represent some of the last remaining safe public spaces for everyone. Discover how they are transforming Europe through contributions from library architect Francine Houben, climate activist Mikaela Loach, sociologist and *Palaces for the People* author Eric Klinenberg, #BookTok sensation Jack Edwards, media entrepreneur Esra Karakaya, and many more, including the librarians themselves.



**The
Europe
Challenge**

theuropechallenge.eu