Nothing beats a good book – especially when it talks back.

Students, staff and faculty at the Augustana campus of the University of Alberta had the opportunity all last week to borrow 'living books' and have conversations with people having personal experience on specific selected topics.

"Readers who wanted to learn about a certain topic came to our 'living library' and met with people whose life experiences embody that subject," explained Augustana head librarian Nancy Goebel.

"The human 'book' answered tough questions and, because of the face-to-face contact, was able to help the reader examine biases and stereotypes."

Book titles included: Healing from childhood sexual abuse, in which Kim Fordham shared her story of childhood sexual abuse and healing; Adopted Native, in which Mike Clermont shared his experience as an adoptive native in northern Ontario; Male Feminist, with Jeremy Mouat; U.S. Citizen, with Mark Chytracek; Leaving Nazi Germany to live in Canada with Dittmar Mundel; The experience of racism in Canada, Germany in Uganda, with Feisal Kirumira; Autism, with Aaron Grimm (who is an autistic student at the Augustana campus) and his mother, Vanessa Grim; and Experience the Francophone in Alberta, with Jerome Melancon.

"The reception was fantastic," said Goebel. "It was really exciting. We had books who were student, staff and faculty and we had readers who are student and staff and faculty. It was a community educational opportunity but also a community building activity."

The 'books' could be 'read' by oneself, or as a member of a group.

"We thought we could get more participation if we had groups but not everyone is comfortable speaking alone with someone he or she does not know or with whom she or he is unfamiliar," said Goebel.

"The biggest group we had was six people."

Augustana is only the second university in Canada that has had a 'living library.'

"For Nancy to have brought the idea here is really a big deal," said Fordham. "I think it is really important that we celebrate what she has done with this because it is not something that is mainstream in Canada or anywhere in the world."

The first face-to-face library was launched in Denmark by human rights activists nine years ago to promote understanding and compassion among people of varying races, genders, lifestyles and religions.

"I felt it was the perfect initiative for me to be involved with because I am also the human rights advisor.
here,” said Goebel. "The people who agreed to be the books have incredible information to share. The concept of the living library falls closely within Augustana's mandate to challenge students to consider hard issues, think critically and actively engage as citizens."

The Grimms, who are from Wetaskiwin, have been doing presentations on autism for years.

"Aaron has been on this campus for four years, so there were a lot of questions we took about it," said Vanessa. "I think it was enlightening for the 'readers' to see who he is and realize that he is more than autistic."

Fordham agreed to tell her stories about childhood sexual abuse because she believes it is important that people talk about the issue and know that, after it happens, healing is possible.

"I think it is important for people to have a role model who tells them there are ways of dealing with the trauma and that it is possible to work through the issues and get to the other side, where joy is possible," she said.

Leslie Lindballe, one of the 'readers,' was impressed with the effectiveness of the 'living books.'

"Being able to talk with someone is a great way to increase understanding of a topic and lose some of your prejudices about it," she said.

Danielle Hachey said she 'took out' three 'books' on the final day.

"I was scared a little bit because the topics were very personal and I didn't know if I was going to say the right thing, or if I was going to ask a question that would upset or offend someone, but having the conversations was a good first step. The topics are things people should not be afraid to talk about, speak about or keep behind closed doors. They should be out in the open and people should be willing to listen and provide support."