

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT WITH ANNE SIBLEY O'BRIEN



As an established writer and illustrator you've collaborated with other authors and editors on books. How was working with your son different? What was your collaborative process?

There was no way to know before we started whether we'd work well together as a mother-son team, but it turned out to be a real treat. We naturally evolved a process that worked well for us, and didn't encounter any conflicts or difficulties in becoming equal partners.

We divided the profiles and each took half to research and write. Perry was attending Cornell University during the time we were working on the book, so I traveled to Ithaca several times where we could collaborate in person, writing in his apartment, talking in coffee shops, or researching in the public and university libraries. The rest of the work was done on Perry's trips home to Peaks Island, and by email and phone with each other and our editor.

We also benefited enormously and had a great time working with our focus team of middle-school students who called themselves "Gandhi Publishing." Those conversations were critical in figuring out what we wanted to say and how we wanted to say it.

In early drafts we figured out a basic form for each profile, starting with a short, cinematic, you-are-there kind of scene, followed by an overview of the person and/or the movement, and ending with notes on the historical context. We exchanged and critiqued each other's drafts of the individual profiles before submitting them to our editor. Our writing isn't usually similar in style, but perhaps because we've been listening to each other for twenty-five years, we were able to easily find a common voice. One of the fun things has been the discovery that people often can't tell which profiles were written by Perry and which were written by me.

We valued and depended on each other's strengths in areas other than writing. In addition to his experience as a soldier who went through the process of becoming a conscientious objector, Perry is an experienced and skilled researcher. I functioned as the project manager, keeping track of the development of the book and making sure we had all the pieces we needed. I created the illustrations after the text was completed, but we explored visual ideas throughout the process, so Perry had a lot of input in the content and style of the art.

Spending so much time focusing together on a topic about which we are both passionate was a rich experience. We enjoyed it so much that we're considering writing another book together.

***After Gandhi* profiles fifteen nonviolent resisters spanning one hundred years. Were you affected by one particular person or event more than others in the book? Were there any that you wanted to include, but couldn't due to space limitations?**

I was particularly affected by Nelson Mandela, because in 1998 I had had the opportunity to travel to South Africa and tour the prison at Robben Island. It was a vivid and deeply moving experience, like a pilgrimage. I learned that Mandela, though a remarkable human being, was simply one of many heroes who endured that imprisonment and turned it into a transformative experience, and that the extraordinary accomplishment of a peaceful transfer of power in ending South African apartheid was the achievement of all of them.

This book only scratches the surface in telling the incredible stories of people who have chosen nonviolence as a strategy for changing the world. We decided to narrow the book's focus to specific actions of nonviolent resistance which we could share as scenes. This meant we reluctantly left out some very significant people, such as the Dalai Lama! We had hoped to include nonviolent resistance in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in the pursuit of gay rights, in Native American activism. Then there are all the people we haven't even heard about yet; just the other day I heard about the amazing courage of the Women in White who risked their lives resisting violence in Liberia's civil war. Some of these stories will be available on our website, and others will be discovered by young readers who want to know more.

You were raised by medical missionaries in South Korea and your son, Perry, was an army medic in Afghanistan before obtaining conscientious objector (CO) status. How did your experience as a child, and later as a mother of an outreach worker abroad, influence you as an artist and activist?

The core of my activism is the knowledge that, across race, culture, class, and all kinds of differences, we all belong to each other. If we're all connected, then any time one of us is suffering, all of us are, whether we recognize it or not. I think compassion is a natural human emotion and only needs to be nurtured in order to flourish. Responding to other people and trying to set things right serves the helper as much as the helped, because it is a deep human longing to be useful and to be significant. I learned this from my parents' example of choosing to live and work as partners with Koreans, and their passion for ending suffering and seeking justice. I learned it also from Korean friends and extended family who welcomed and embraced me.

Another big influence of my years in Korea was the experience of being a white American there, which made me very conspicuous and undeniably privileged. When I came back to the U.S. for college, I felt compelled to explore my identity as a white person in America and as an American in the world. I have spent decades examining racism, in myself and in others, how it affects people of color and how it affects me. This has been an exciting and liberating process. The more I learn, the more I'm filled with hope about our creative capacity to transform ourselves and our communities.

My Korean background also gave me a lifelong fascination with the wonder of human difference. As an illustrator and writer, I try to show how beautiful people are, in all our glorious variation.

I keep learning about how much courage it takes to be true to yourself.

The journey that Perry has taken from joining the army in August 2001, through receiving his discharge as a CO in November 2004, through working as an antiwar activist, continues to be a profound one for him and for his family. I've learned so much more about my connections to other human beings, from U.S. soldiers, veterans and military families, to citizens of Afghanistan and Iraq.

After Gandhi teaches children important lessons from history. What would you say to children who ask how they can use these morals in their everyday lives?

I wrote an entire section for the book, "Living Nonviolent Resistance" which we didn't end up including but will be posting on our website (AfterGandhi.com) when it's launched in January. Here's a summary of the lessons we learned from studying the lives of Gandhi and those who came after him:

Start small.

Follow your passion.

The struggle is within.

It's not about one person.

Nonviolent resistance is active and powerful.

The leaders of nonviolent resistance are not saints, but ordinary human beings with faults and challenges.

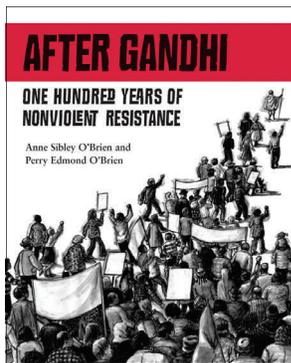
"First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win."

Have a connection to something larger.

It's tough work, full of risk and sacrifice.

Each person has an individual path.

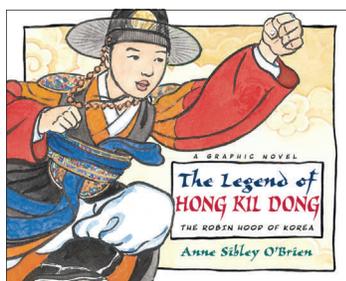
Books by Anne Sibley O'Brien



978-1-58089-129-5 • HC • \$24.95
Ages 9–12
February 2009

After Gandhi: One Hundred Years of Nonviolent Resistance

This book explores the work of Mohandas Gandhi and his legacy through fifteen profiles of activists who chose nonviolent resistance as the path to change. The book focuses on heroic individuals who were in direct physical danger and chose to respond with nonviolence.



978-1-58089-302-2 • HC • \$16.95
978-1-58089-303-9 • PB • \$7.95
Ages 9–12

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Hong Kil Dong, the son of a powerful minister, is not entitled to a birthright because his mother is a commoner. After studying martial arts, divination, swordplay, the uses of magic, and the wisdom of the Book of Changes, Kil Dong sets off on a quest to discover his destiny and claim his rightful role as a wise and just leader.