

# AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT WITH PERRY EDMOND O'BRIEN



**1. You undertook this project with your mother, an already established children’s writer. How did the idea for the book come about, and what was your collaborative process?**

*After Gandhi* was originally imagined by my mother and some fellow author/illustrators. I wasn’t recruited until later. Originally she just asked me to help with the research aspect, but the material was so exciting and relevant to my activist work that eventually I volunteered to help write.

I was a little anxious about committing to such a huge project with one of my parents. At the time, it seemed like a perfect recipe for mother-son estrangement. I was really shocked at how easily we collaborated, despite our wildly different writing styles and work habits. We divided the profiles in half, but some people have said they can’t tell who wrote which pieces. This is shocking (and maybe a little scary), given that the profiles aren’t dramatically different from our first drafts.

**2. Is there a particular person or event in the book that has influenced or impacted you more than others?**

The story of Muhammad Ali certainly resonated with me as a fellow conscientious objector. I find him particularly compelling because Ali didn’t just challenge a powerful government, he took on the ancient, mythical notion of what it means to be a fighter. Here was a guy who had become world-renowned for his skills in the ring, a real masculine icon, and he was refusing to bring that natural talent for violence into the battlefield. The obvious reaction from mainstream culture, of course, was that Ali was somehow suddenly a coward, a fighter who was literally afraid to take off the gloves. There may have even been some truth to that—war scares everyone—but I really believe Ali was committed to a deeper, and in some ways, scarier fight—the fight for his own soul and our country’s.

It’s the same spirit, I think, that drives the veterans’ anti-war movement. We never stopped believing in the importance of fighting; we just changed the way we fight and what we’re fighting against.

**3. All of the people in *After Gandhi* chose to fight injustice with nonviolent resistance. During your research, did you come across other common traits that linked these people?**

We did our best to profile nonviolent resisters representing a range of race, class, gender, geographic origins, etc. That being said, I think the single unifying force behind all of these incredible people is that at some point, they decided that their personal moral instinct was more important than the agenda of a larger, more obviously powerful body.

**4. In November of 2004 you were granted an honorable discharge as a conscientious objector to war, after serving a tour of duty in Afghanistan. In what ways have you continued to oppose war since then?**

Shortly after my discharge I founded [www.peace-out.com](http://www.peace-out.com), a comprehensive online guide for soldiers interested in the conscientious objection process. I also joined Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), which has grown to more than 1500 members in over 50 chapters across the country. I've attended almost every major national demonstration against the war and was an organizer of an event called "Winter Soldier: Iraq and Afghanistan." Winter Soldier brought more than 50 combat veterans to Washington, D.C., to testify on systematic human rights abuses in Iraq and Afghanistan. A few months later our testifiers were invited to speak in front of the House Progressive Caucus.

I'm currently serving as IVAW's representative to the steering committee of United for Peace and Justice, the nation's largest antiwar coalition. I'm also working with the New York City chapter of IVAW to continue the work we started at Winter Soldier, collecting the oral histories of veterans who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**5. What are some specific ways that kids and teens can practice nonviolent resistance in their own lives?**

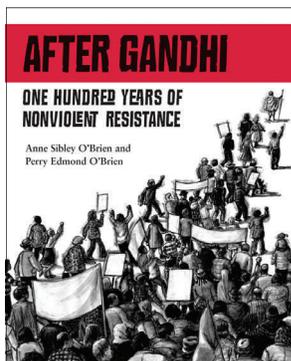
It's an obvious answer, but the first step is to get involved. There are so many important causes out there, and so many incredible organizations doing great work, and they all need more members. But more specifically, they need members who are interested in thinking strategically about nonviolence, and are willing to work to win real justice for people. Another factor common to all of the individuals profiled in *After Gandhi* is that they knew organized nonviolent resistance was a skill that had to be learned and practiced. This is a skill that's relatively new to the world, and there is so much room for it to be refined and perfected. My greatest hope for this book is that it will help young people understand that, and contribute in some small way to the continued improvement of this essential tradition.



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**Books by Perry Edmond O'Brien**

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**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.

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