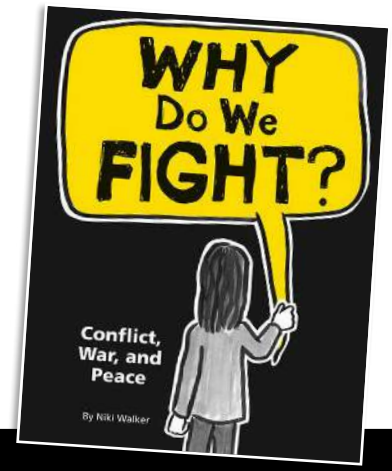




A CONVERSATION WITH AUTHOR NIKI WALKER



AUTHOR Q&A

Q: You've described *Why Do We Fight?* as a "roadmap" or a "toolkit" for kids. Can you explain what you mean by this?

A: From the start, I wanted this book to explore global conflicts—the root causes of why they happen, why they become violent—without telling kids *what* to think about them. I wanted the book to show kids *how* to think about them, so they could form their own informed opinions, and I wanted this knowledge to be applicable to any conflict, anytime, anywhere. I wanted to make kids aware that, although conflicts are often presented in oversimplified terms of good vs. bad, right vs. wrong, or as being sparked by a single event or disagreement, they're more complicated than that. I also wanted them to be unsatisfied with anything that presents conflicts in such simple terms so that they would want to dig deeper.

So if a young person hears news coverage on a particular conflict and wants to better understand it, this book will help them make sense of it. They'll have enough knowledge about conflicts in general to know what questions to ask, where to look for and find answers to those questions, and how to think about those answers in a way that deepens their understanding of the specific conflict.

Q: One of the most striking elements of *Why Do We Fight?* is its ultimately hopeful message for young readers that conflicts need not automatically be resolved with violence. Was this always your intention for the book?

A: When Steven Pinker's book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, came out, I saw him interviewed on *The Daily Show*, where he asserted his view that the world is actually more peaceful today than it was at any other point in history. And I was intrigued. I thought about why his arguments would come as such a shock to me, and how my then-cynical worldview had been shaped up to that point. I began to question why people generally accept that war is inevitable, and the more I asked those questions and looked for answers, the more I was drawn to Peace Studies. Everyone always wonders why war happens, but we don't usually wonder why peace happens. So I talked to my editor and told him that I thought the book needed to be about resolving conflicts and understanding relationships as much as it needed to be about the violent outcomes of conflict. Conflict is inevitable, but does violence have to be? That is the foundational idea underlying the book.

Q: Readers might be surprised to learn that your background is in writing and editing children's books rather than in political science, global policy, or conflict studies. Can you tell us a bit about the extensive research you embarked upon to write this book? What kinds of experts did you consult?

A: Basically, I read everything I could get my hands on for months, just to prepare the outline for the book. The subject matter is so vast, covers so many fields of study, and has so many conflicting views and interpretations that I wanted to make myself aware of as many of them as I could, so that the book would be inclusive and balanced. I wanted to hear a variety of voices on the subjects I was researching, from activists to participants in conflicts to political leaders to experts in negotiation and conflict resolution.

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A: Once I had an outline in place, I zeroed in on specific aspects of conflicts and their underlying causes, geopolitics, conflict resolution, and peace building. I researched everything from op-eds to news coverage of specific conflicts to statistics to scholarly articles in journals. I watched lectures, speeches, and documentaries. I surveyed kids' books on the subject and books for adults.

Q: What was the most surprising information you uncovered during your research?

A: Researching this book changed how I see the world. I came across many different kinds of experts who opened my eyes to the possibilities for peace. I was pleasantly surprised to read assertions about the relative peacefulness of the world today and to learn how many peace agreements have been signed in recent years. The most surprising thing I learned, as obvious as it sounds, is that violence doesn't have to be a foregone conclusion to conflict. I think a lot of us adults have forgotten that—we don't have to just accept violence or be resigned to it.

Q: Who is your ideal reader for *Why Do We Fight?* What audience were you envisioning as you wrote the book?

A: One thing my editor and I talked about was writing a book that spoke not only to kids but also to the adults in their lives. We wanted this to be a book that would help parents answer some of the deeper questions kids have about conflicts. Our goal was to make a vast, complex, and overwhelming subject accessible for kids while offering moments of insight or new ways of thinking about these concepts to their parents.

While writing, I tried to envision myself sitting down with a 12-year-old kid and explaining these ideas to him (I have a son, so that is probably why I always imagined a boy), anticipating his questions and trying to think of examples and parallels that would be meaningful to him in his everyday life. I imagined a bright, inquisitive kid who hears news coverage of conflicts on TV or the radio and wonders "Why?"

Q: Your book does a remarkable job of discussing the "nuts and bolts" of conflicts entirely without polemics or one-sided rhetoric. Do you have basic tips for parents and educators who want to teach kids *how* to think about conflict rather than *what* to think?

A: I would say, always acknowledge how complex conflicts are. Don't be satisfied with simple, easy answers or with answers from only one perspective. Be aware of your own perspective, as well, and how it colors your worldview and your interpretation of events. And don't ever be afraid to say, "I don't know, but I bet we can find out!"

Q: In your opinion, what are the most important skills we can equip our children with to help them become better future citizens of the world?

A: I believe that teaching kids to think for themselves, to ask questions and think critically about the answers they get—who's giving the answers, what are their interests, and so on—is one of the most important skills we can teach them. I also think teaching kids to appreciate that there are multiple perspectives to consider on any issue is important, especially as the world becomes increasingly interconnected.

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Whose Lens Are
YOU Looking
Through?

CONVERSATION CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE . . .

Q: As a parent yourself, what are some of the most difficult questions your child has asked you over the years? Do you ever wish you could go back and change your answers to those questions?

A: My son is six going on thirty, so we've had some interesting questions for sure. Just about every one of them starts with "Why?" Some of the more difficult ones are about the systems grown-ups have put in place to run the world, because to a kid they just don't make any sense on an intuitive level. One thing he really doesn't understand, for instance, is why some people lost their homes in the credit crisis. He understands that people could no longer pay their mortgage, but he just cannot fathom why houses would sit empty when there are people who need them.

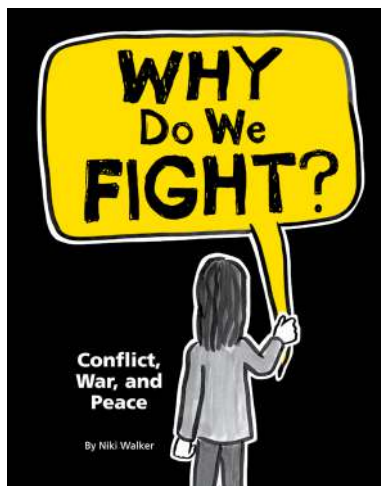
So far, I haven't wanted to change any of my answers. My husband and I try to be honest with him, and I think that helps because we haven't had to go back and revise our answers to fit new information he's received. We don't tell him everything about the world and what happens in it, obviously, because we appreciate that there are some truths that are just too difficult for a child his age to handle.

Q: Tell us a bit about your experience writing and editing children's non-fiction. It sounds as if you've made a career as a "research synthesizer" for young people.

A: You could definitely say that! I began my career fresh out of university working for Bobbie Kalman, who has built a career and a company—Crabtree Publishing—out of creating children's non-fiction for schools and libraries. I wrote a number of books for Crabtree and from there, I moved on to projects for other educational publishers both big and small. Over the years I've written more than 20 non-fiction titles for young readers and developed and edited more than a hundred.

I've always loved the challenge of unpacking big topics for young readers. Kids are smart, and they can handle more information than they're sometimes given credit for, but the information needs to be presented to them in a way that's interesting, that's accessible, and that resonates. So as a writer I'm always balancing between making sure I'm being clear without being condescending. I love that kids have a fresh way of seeing the world and thinking about it, and that they're open to new ideas—writing for them is very exciting.

END.



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Conflict, War, and Peace

by Niki Walker

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