

STRIKE Q&A

1. What compelled you to tell this story? Why do you tell historical stories? I confess that the real reason I write most of my books is purely selfish: to inform myself. Looking over the nonfiction books I've written in the 2000s, they have been about events that occurred during my childhood, or earlier, about which I personally want to know more. They have been about people who were instrumental to bringing about positive change to the social landscape, but who were more or less lost to history. These were people who weren't and typically aren't studied in school as part of civil rights units, but they should be because they were doing the real work of advancing social justice and building the foundation upon which other figureheads stood. I feel a responsibility to shed light on the contributions of these individuals. I also have a deep interest in justice, equality, and fair play. These personal traits have led me to the topics I've written about. I choose to write about them for young people largely because I am a teacher at heart. I want our youngsters to ask questions about these periods in our history and the attitudes that existed, and decide for themselves whether they were just, right, and fair.

What compelled me to write *STRIKE!* is my interest in the labor union movement and recent attacks against unionization, my background of teaching migrant students in a farming area to which I often return, an awareness that field conditions on many corporate farms have gotten worse in recent times, and a realization that for one reason or another the Chávez story was incomplete. When I began researching the grape strike, Filipino Americans emailed or phoned to ask me to tell the whole story, the story of the generation that began the strike, without which Chávez would not have had the platform he eventually had to rise to power. I have tried to do that.

STRIKE! is the most difficult book I've ever attempted to write, and there were many moments during its evolution when I thought of quitting, thought of giving up writing for good (and almost did). It was a gritty story and encompassed even grittier social issues. At this time in our history when there is much anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican sentiment, it was almost too much emotionally to delve into the topic and see that people and their attitudes have not evolved to a marked degree. Further, I encountered every obstacle imaginable—from sources pushing their own agendas to those who wanted to control what I wrote. But I told the story, with the help of an able and patient editor, because it's one that needed telling, especially now, and because someone has to challenge our younger generation to be compassionate, inclusive, just.

2. What was the hardest part about telling this story? I alluded to some of the difficulties in my answer above, but *STRIKE!* has many threads running through it. It is not merely the biography of César Chávez or of Larry Itliong. Rather, it is the story of the strike. It is about poverty, fairness, unionization versus anti-unionization, the powerless versus the powerful, prejudices, the health of workers and consumers versus the profits of corporate farming, the balance between civil action and

religious spirit, and hope. Yes, it is about hope. Keeping all the threads identified and weaving them into a whole fabric that made sense was a major challenge.

I like to begin my nonfiction books with what I call my door in, and the logical “door” was the September 8, 1965, Filipino American strike action against the grape growers in Delano. From that point, I had to retrace my steps, as it were, to tell the backstory. If readers didn’t know that growers had months’ earlier agreed to pay these workers a higher wage, the wage they were asking for in Delano, they might not understand the why and how of the grape strike. I knew Chávez was going to be a major part of the book, so I had to introduce him, explain his life, and show how and why he got involved—even if reluctantly—in the grape strike and this brought into play how Filipino American farm workers viewed his hesitation. I also needed to attempt to give equal page time to Larry Itliong, the organizer of the strike, even if information about him was scant.

Originally, I had planned to end the book at the point where the grape contracts were signed in 1970, but the struggle in the vineyards was only the beginning of a longer story, because even before the historic day all the parties came together in Delano, there was turmoil in the lettuce fields of Salinas. So the story is like *The Little Engine that Could*, except for our purposes it might be called *The Little Book that Grew*. On top of this, I decided to title the chapters in Spanish and English, an idea my editor liked so much that she decided I should do the pull-out quotes in Spanish and English. My Spanish can get me through most of a restaurant menu and I can stumble through Spain and Latin America, but the language is much nuanced. I had to call in a professional translator to nail down the correct terms as used in context and culture.

Essentially, nothing about this book was easy. From juggling the many threads to coping emotionally with the topic to colleagues who questioned the wisdom of writing about this often invisible population to trying to offer a glimmer of hope, it was all difficult—except for the title. I knew before I’d written the first word it would be called STRIKE! (in all caps).

3. What was your process of researching and telling this complex story? I chuckle when people ask about my process because there are weeks, days, months when I’d say I have no process at all. A person in thought mode often appears idle, and I spend a great deal of time thinking about a project before launching into it. Essentially, I like to do a lot of reading before writing the first word, especially with a complex topic like the farm labor movement. As I read, I’m looking for that door into the story that I mentioned earlier. This must be something that will capture my attention and, with luck, also that of young readers. It must be something that will make readers ask “Why?” or “What happened?” It must be something that will make them want to read further to find out more of the story. Once I find that point, I begin writing, but I am not a fast writer. I craft each sentence before moving on to the next. I re-read. I revise. There are days when the story advances only a paragraph or two. This used to frustrate me, especially when other writers would

boast about adding an additional thousand words or more to their work each day. I have come to accept that this is my way, my process of writing. Each day I read from the beginning, making adjustments in language and word choice, correcting punctuation, etc. So I'm not someone who sits at the keyboard and writes the story in one swoop. I am not what is called a "fluid" writer. This may be because of my academic background or some quirk of personality, but that's how I work.

I also am not someone who takes notes on three-by-five cards, color-coded by thread. My penmanship has gotten so bad over time that I can't read my own notes. So I either purchase or I photo copy every resource I use and highlight. Besides a dictionary and thesaurus, a highlighter is one of my most valued writing tools. This means the threads of the story are stored mentally. (And you ask why I seem distracted at times!) When I write, the floor of my office is neatly organized into piles—drafts, oral histories, newspaper sources, etc.—so I am not someone who stores materials in three-ring binders, notebooks, or files. I pile. I figure when I can't make it to my desk without knocking something over, the book surely must be done.

4. You offer workshops for teachers on how to use primary sources in the classroom. Why are primary sources so important to use? What are the benefits? What can teachers do to help students engage with a photo, a newspaper clipping, a document? What I like about primary source materials is that they give a person—the writer and the reader—real insight into the characters' thoughts and personalities at the time under study. Newspaper articles written in 1965 about the grape strike are much more revealing than those secondary sources that were written much later. Reading reports written by the local, conservative, white-owned press and comparing/contrasting them with ones written about the same events in *El Malcriado*, the voice of the farm worker, is like the difference between black and white. Oral histories give a reader a glimpse into the inner thinking of individuals—what are his or her attitudes about race, working conditions, violence, the poor. They reveal motivations. Newsreels of the day are even more candid. I believe when you include these sources into your own writing, it helps the people and events about whom you are writing come to life in the readers' minds. This is not to say I don't rely on secondary sources to become familiar with the scope of a topic. I do, and I am indebted to them. But primary sources allow the writer to put flesh on the bare bones of fact. At the same time, writers need to be cautious of primary sources because they don't tell the whole story and sometimes, especially in the case of oral histories, they can distort the facts. With my current project, one individual's oral history totally changed the facts of a situation after everyone who might have contradicted his new version were deceased. So a writer needs to dig and needs to find corroboration. In this case, if I had relied solely on this one primary source and all the secondary sources that were based upon it, the facts of my story would be inaccurate.

In the classroom, primary source materials can be valuable assets to teachers. They can use them (or copies of them) to have their students draw conclusions: what is going on in this photograph, when do you think it was taken and what are your

clues, or what do you think this article or document (“The Prayer of the Farm Workers Struggle,” on page 76, for example) is about and why. To introduce a unit on California history or the union movement, have your students look at the image on page 33 showing farm worker housing in Imperial County, California, and imagine a winter night or summer day living in it. Use the cartoon on page 24 as a mystery object to introduce a unit on the grape strike, the 1960s, or Filipino American history in California and have your students draw their own conclusions as to its meaning. There is no need to include the caption; there are hints in the cartoon itself.

5. What readers take away from a book depends on their own life experiences. However, as you told this story, what did you hope readers would take away from *STRIKE*? While it’s true that readers take from a story what they bring to it, I think it’s possible to give them the vicarious experience of being a farm worker by having them read about it and by sharing those primary sources I discussed above. This is the wonder of books! When Chávez talks about the entire family picking peas all day and only earning twenty-cents, it’s bound to have impact. How would they like to do a job for eight or ten hours and earn so little? (Teachers could have their students write about a time when they were unfairly treated in a similar way.) There are many points in this book where readers can be given the opportunity to step into the shoes of the people involved. My goal is to have young readers get a sense of what it was like to be a farm worker, and experience how the odds and history were stacked against them. Moreover, I hope they understand that only by standing together (unionization) did they accomplish any positive change and that it takes vigilance to retain those achievements.
6. What were some of the most challenging aspects of having children of migrant workers in your classroom? What were some of the most rewarding aspects? As a teacher, one of the biggest challenges of teaching migrant children was their lack of attendance. They missed school so much, either because they were in the fields helping their families earn money or they were caring for younger siblings so their parents could work. It was so difficult for them to keep up. Early on, they would be placed in a class depending upon their age, rather than upon their achievement level. In other words, a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old might be functioning at a sixth-grade level but find himself or herself thrown into a class of sophomores. It was a recipe for failure. Even the tracking of records from one school system to the next was difficult because often by the time we received a student’s transcripts, he or she would have moved to follow the harvest of crops.

So many, though, were determined to get ahead through education and would come in early to school to catch up. The last half of my high school teaching career I taught a writing program I had developed—low enrollment (twenty) with a full-time aide—where I taught one skill set at a time and used picture books often as quick entry into the concepts I was teaching. (For some of these students, the picture books I kept in class were the first they’d ever read cover to cover. It was always exciting to watch them advance to longer books.) I have always believed that one

learns to write through writing and because the program's class sizes were intentionally small, we were able to do just that. We wrote daily, from very basic structure in the beginning to the more complicated by the end of the semester. Watching these students develop their writing skills into polished communication was a great reward. I was writing and publishing at the time and would share my own revision experiences with my students. At one point near the end of a semester, a youngster who had already written his five-paragraph paper numerous times, called me over to give his work a preliminary read. I must have made a face or reacted in some way that signaled to him it still needed work. He said, "It needs to be rewritten, doesn't it?" I knew how much effort he already had put into it and it really pained me to tell him, "Yes, the fourth paragraph isn't clear. Look at your sentence structure." His reaction both surprised and pleased me. "It's okay," he said. "Professional writers have to do their work many times." I doubt that any of my students went on to become professional writers, but I am confident that by the time they left my care most of them could communicate clearly through the written word. Many went on to community college and a few even to college. When I saw them marching for their diplomas with beaming faces, it always caused my heart to beat a little faster.

Still, there were students I failed to reach. One young man had been beaten down and told he was a failure for so long that there was no reaching him. He sat in class day after day simply occupying space. He had given up and I couldn't convince him to even try. He haunts me still, but I have come to realize that much of learning is a dance for two—a teacher who is willing to give and a student with a desire to learn.

7. In one of your early nonfiction books, you documented the difficult life of a migrant family living near San Diego (*A Migrant Family*, 1992). You also show the sense of community, work ethic, and family love. Why do you feel both aspects are important? It has been pointed out to me before that many of my books—even my sports books—speak to a strong work ethic. It isn't intentional or something I am aware of doing. My parents instilled in me a sense of working to achieve my goals, and I am a goal-setter. At the end of each year, I still set goals for myself and post them on my white board where I'll see them every day as a reminder. I suppose my focus on community (which I'll interpret to mean friendships) and family result from growing up in a small family—a mother, father, maternal grandfather, and me—and in communities where friends were few and the distance between them far. There were not many kids my age with whom to play, so I tended to value the connections I did make. I suppose it is only natural that my writing reflects these attitudes. Again, it isn't something I set out to do.

The migrants I've written about work harder than any other group of people I know. They do work that most of us would shun. Despite often being cheated out of what they've been promised by those employing them, they continue to strive toward their goals—survival, a better life, the hope of a brighter future for their children. Although they have little, I've seen that they are generous with what they do have. They draw strength from their families and community. When I wrote *A Migrant*

Family, I recall one member of the community had gotten into some sort of trouble, and he was asked to leave the migrant camp. They had a self-policing system despite living in tarpaper shacks in San Diego's canyons. For the most part, they are honest people simply trying to get by.

I write what I see or what my research reveals. In *We Are One*, Bayard Rustin's belief in nonviolence was instilled by his grandparents. In *Black & White*, Fred Shuttlesworth relied on like-minded followers to eventually achieve his goal of African American dignity and respect in Birmingham, Alabama. In *STRIKE!* Larry Itliong knew he needed the community of Mexican workers to support the Filipino American action or it would fail. We rarely achieve things independently. There are always other factors helping us—our families, our friends, our determination.

8. You have written four books that profile non-violent resistance and taking action in a way that speaks loudly. Why did you tell these particular stories? First and foremost, the four books that profile non-violent resistance are about people. This makes them interesting to me as a writer. I've often said I couldn't care less about the Civil War as a topic. To me, it's boring. Give me the diary of a Confederate or Union soldier, though, and it is quite possibly a different story. People. I am an observer of people. I like to find out about them by watching them or seeing them revealed through research. If it sounds like I'm admitting to being snoopy, well . . . yes, I am. I am also curious, so when I ran across a footnote in an article about Rosa Parks that said ten years before she made her stand on that Montgomery bus, Bayard Rustin had done the same thing in Louisville, Kentucky I wanted to know why I knew one but not the other. I am fortunate to have had parents from Birmingham, Alabama, who told me stories early on about the way blacks were treated in the South and how they didn't want to raise a family in that tense environment. They taught me to value every human being and to walk away from a physical fight if I could. If I gravitate toward stories of non-violent direct action, it's because I believe in my core that fighting only leads to more fighting.
9. *STRIKE, A Migrant Family* and the armadillo books talk about the importance of community. Are there themes like people caring for one another that particularly interest you as a writer of fiction and non-fiction? I had been writing for several years before it dawned on me that many, if not most, of my books have the theme of community and the value of friendship. *Merry Christmas, Old Armadillo* and *Trick or Treat, Old Armadillo* are both about the importance of community in supporting our elderly population (instead of shipping them off to Sun City to be forgotten). *Country Bear's Good Neighbor* was another picture book that dealt with community, this time the friendship between two neighbors. *Cory Coleman, Grade 2* is about a bully and how Cory ultimately deals with him in a classroom setting. *Elliot Fry's Good-bye* is about the community of family. Love and caring are important issues in all of them.

The nonfiction books I've chosen to write, as opposed to those I've been assigned, all deal with community and the role it plays in shaping the people and events I write

about. If I had been raised under different circumstances, say in a violent neighborhood or in foster care or on a deserted island, I would likely be writing something else. The truth is I don't want to analyze it too deeply because whatever it is that draws me to these subjects or themes, even when they're a bear to write, seems to be working.

10. What caught you by surprise in your STRIKE! research? I was unaware that Chávez had opportunities to improve his own life and that of his family with offers from the AFL-CIO to merge his union into the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee and later from the Kennedy administration to head the Peace Corps in Latin America. Either one would have meant financial security for him and his family, but he declined both because he needed independence to lead an organization his way, without any interference from anybody else. When his wife didn't want to move to La Paz because it brought back bad memories of a confinement at the tuberculosis hospital there, he moved anyway. His reactions to these events struck me as selfish, despite the compassion he displayed publicly for the farm workers. I also couldn't help but recall the Filipino American's distrust of him in the early days of the strike and their sense that he was someone with a tremendous ego who needed the spotlight of center stage. This go-it-alone attitude foreshadowed the UFW's decline as he separated himself more and more from the workers he claimed to represent. He began to refuse to entertain ideas other than his own. He essentially surrounded himself with people who wouldn't question his authority over decisions he made on behalf of the union. Some of the research suggested he grew to resent the farm workers and hinted that he wasn't as devoutly religious as he appeared, using the *peregrinacion* (pilgrimage), hunger strikes, and the workers' Catholic faith as recruitment tools to gain sympathy of supporters and as photo opportunities. The media were always happy to oblige. This vision of Chávez as self-centered and ego-driven was eye-opening and caused me to temper my adulation of him. It points to the fact that our heroes seldom are what they seem; they are human and subject to the flaws thereof.