

War & Peace: A Guide To Literature And New Media: Grades 4-8 by Virginia A. Walter. Westport: Libraries Unlimited, 2007. 276 pp. ISBN 1-59158-271-7

Careful the things you say, children will listen
(Stephen Sondheim, *Into the Woods*)

You cross your fingers and hope they never ask you:

“Where do babies come from?”

“What’s AIDS?”

“Some kids call that other kid a <insert epithet here>. What’s that? Is that bad?”

The Tough Questions. How do you explain any of these sensitive topics to a child? It’s unlikely that telling him or her to go look it up in an encyclopedia or in some scholarly journal would truly answer the question, but are you prepared to answer the question yourself? You could refuse to answer (“You’re too young to understand.”), or you could delay the inevitable (“Ask me when you’re older.”) and that may alleviate *your* discomfort, but it won’t alleviate the child’s uncertainty. What if the child is asking you because his or her parents haven’t provided a satisfactory answer?

Today, there’s a new set of questions:

“If fighting is bad, why are we at war?”

“Who are we fighting? Why?”

“When will it end?”

With instant access to events as they are happening, not only through commercial media (e.g.: newspapers, television, etc.) but also modern social networks (e.g.: IM’ing, YouTube, MySpace, etc), there are more avenues than ever for children to learn about the larger world around them—ways that bypass parental and adult intervention—and children do not always get enough information to understand the Big Picture, hence their curiosity, uncertainty, and even fear which leads to those tough questions.

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Virginia A. Walter has been a strong advocate for excellence in library services to children and young adults and treating their information needs with dignity and respect. She spent 25 years as a public librarian and the past 17 years as a professor at UCLA’s Graduate School of Education and Information Studies and many of her teaching and research interests focus on children’s information

needs and resources. As in her previous bibliographical works on war (Walter, 1993) and on HIV/AIDS (Walter & Gross, 1996), Walter takes a sensitive and often controversial topic and provides information resources and strategies to help adults caught in the crosshairs of a child's innocent, discomfiting, yet critically important inquiry that, if answered compassionately with information appropriate to their abilities, will aid that child's understanding of the complex and confusing adult world around them.

Adults often find it difficult to talk to children in their care about issues and events that are important in the adult world... How much truth should one tell? Sometimes books can provide the language and the frame of reference to get us started on these difficult conversations. Books can extend a child's experiences beyond his or her own everyday world and make abstract or historical concepts more concrete and comprehensible. (Walter, 2007, p.viii)

*War and Peace: A Guide to Literature and New Media, Grades 4-8* is a continuation and expansion of her previous work, *War and Peace Literature for Children and Young Adults* (Walter, 1993). It covers materials published from 1991-2004, and includes previously omitted materials as well as other formats. Yet it is much more than just an annotated bibliography about conflicts and conflict resolution. It is a complete, all-in-one manual that helps adults understand children's information needs and rights, find appropriate resources for framing the issues and contexts, and begin a discussion, not only with children, but also among adults—librarians, teachers and parents—to help meet children's information needs.

Part I starts with a well-known children's librarian's mantra: "The Right Book for the Right Child at the Right Time." It provides justifications and rationales for dealing seriously with children's questions about war since it is now a fact of current American culture and has significant effects on children. This section also addresses children's information rights, a concept that may be difficult for some adults to acknowledge and even more difficult for some to accept. This can help librarians and teachers who need to strike that delicate balance between their own professional ethics against parental prerogatives and responsibilities for their own children's upbringing. This section concludes with suggestions for using the resources in Part II, whether the reader be a librarian needing something for readers' advisory or for program planning, or a teacher looking for curriculum resources, or a concerned and confused parent "navigating...the broad, uncharted waters of children's book publishing and new media" (p.15). She also briefly touches on issues in child development and tips for how to effectively share and discuss these sensitive topics with children.

Part II contains the heart of the work—an annotated bibliography of books and new media (CDs, DVDs and websites). The resources in this section—nearly

350—were selected through bibliographic and book review sources as well as serendipitous browsing of bookstore and library shelves, and Walter has read, listened to, or viewed all of them. The bibliography is divided into six chapters: WAR AS HISTORY, HOPE AND GLORY, THE CONSEQUENCES OF WAR, THE HORRORS OF WAR, THE AMERICAN HOME FRONT, and PEACE AND ALTERNATIVES TO WAR. Each chapter has an introduction, which provides an overview of the topic itself and how those issues are reflected in the resources selected. These resources are then listed, grouped alphabetically by format with author/title/publication information, and recommended grade levels, which actually range from Grade 2 through high school and beyond, but which intersect the target grades of 4–8. Entries are designated as *fiction* (F) or *non-fiction* (NF) and whether Walter deems them *highly recommended* (HR), *recommended* (R), or *recommended with reservation* (RWR). The annotations are extensive, providing descriptive and evaluative analyses, connecting themes with other resources, or highlighting aspects of the resource in question or supplementary materials that can be useful for stimulating further reading. This section concludes by bringing together many themes from the previous six chapters to address two case studies: the Trojan War and September 11.

Part III contains resources for adults who want a more historical, sociological or psychological background to war and its effects on children—books and journal articles as well as bibliographic guides to specific works (e.g.: *Journey to Topaz*), subjects (e.g.: Arthurian fiction), or events (e.g.: World War II). The appendix and indices provide multiple points of access. Resources from Part II are indexed by author, title, and subject as well as by the 10 National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Thematic Strands, which is extremely useful for teachers in lesson planning and also for librarians preparing programs in collaboration with schools. There is a separate author and title index for the resources listed in Part III.

It is hard to find fault with this book. There are other bibliographies of literature for children and young adults that deal with war/peace issues (Eiss, 1989; Holsinger, 1995) or difficult/sensitive issues (Day, 2000; Pyles, 1988), but none has put it all together in quite the practical and useful package that Walter has in her works. True, the chapter PEACE AND ALTERNATIVES TO WAR is the shortest, but the resources in the section on THE HORRORS OF WAR can be considered, in Walter's words, "[implicit] pleas for peace" (p.170), as can those in the section on THE CONSEQUENCES OF WAR. Perhaps in the title and subject indices, resources could have also been designated by grade levels, *fiction* or *non-fiction* (F/NF) and/or recommendation (HR/R/RWR) rather than being identified simply by format. A separate index by grade levels might also have been handy, as would mention of any awards and honors to add credibility to the resources.

A chapter containing research in education or psychology on bibliotherapy, the value of literature in a child's cognitive development or how fiction has been used to teach difficult or abstract topics, might have been a useful addition to *War & Peace*. While this book itself is not meant to be used for bibliotherapeutic purposes or to focus on theories in information studies, education or psychology, more articles such as the few cited in Part I could be of great aid to teachers and librarians responding to concerned parents over the inclusion of resources in the curriculum and in library programs or collections. The articles might also help to reassure parents that it's OK to address their children's questions in this manner. Still, these are very minor quibbles about an otherwise stellar resource that adds much to the sparse literature about how adults can best answer children's Tough Questions about these sensitive topics.

This is a book for adults who care about children living in the frightening, complex, and uncertain world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is an increasingly interdependent world in which events in Kabul or Pyongyang can suddenly make a difference in Los Angeles or Minneapolis. (Walter, 2007, p.vii)

[T]he notion that children have a right to information that affects their lives is a significant justification for the existence of this book. Children often need assistance from adults before they can exercise their rights. This book can serve as a guidebook for adults who act as information advocates for young people. (Walter, 2007, p.7)

*Careful the things you do, children will see and learn.  
Children will look to you for which way to turn, to learn what to be.*  
(Stephen Sondheim, *Into the Woods*)

## References

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### **Reviewer**

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