

JOHN DONOHUE

Author of *Sensei* and *Tengu*

KAGE

THE
SHADOW



A Connor Burke
Martial Arts Thriller

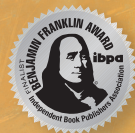
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JOHN DONOHUE is the author of the award-winning Connor Burke martial art thrillers *Sensei*, *Deshi*, and *Tengu*. An anthropologist who researches and trains in the martial arts, he is associate editor for the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* and member of the advisory board for the National Association of Professional Martial Artists. John Donohue, a black belt in karate and kendo, resides near New Haven, Connecticut.

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PROLOGUE

Dawn. I lay for a time coming back to the world: the warmth of a blanket, the cool air of a day yet unborn touching my face. The hitch of old injuries. The tug of memory.

A Tibetan monk once told me I walked a path as narrow and dangerous as a razor's edge. As in many situations, he could see far and well. That monk wasn't just concerned with peril in the normal sense: life is, after all, suffering. He was worried, instead, about things of the spirit.

I look across the room where I have slept alone: even in the half light I can see a table against a wall. My swords rest there in a wooden rack that I made by hand. The stand is nothing fancy; merely the functional product of the whine of a saber saw, my hands' guidance, attached to the familiar aroma of cut wood. The weapons had become so much a part of me that I felt they deserved a holder that was equally personal. I've read comments about the cold steel of a blade, but they're written by people who are strangers to my art. The blade isn't cold; it is warm, a thing alive like the cycle of breath or the pulsing of blood.

The old adage is that the sword is the soul of the *samurai*. I used to dismiss it as equal parts hyperbole and mystic mumbo-jumbo. I'm no longer so sure. When you spend hours, days, years with a thing, surely a connection of some kind is shaped. The wrapped cloth of the *katana's* handle, the nubby ray skin beneath, no longer feel like things that are external to me: they *fit*. They fill the void of my curved fingers as if my hands were shaped to hold the weapon.

It's a tool of sorts, of course; a means to an end. But there's more to it than that. Maybe I've been in the *dojo* so long that things Japanese have become part of me; form and function, beauty and utility, merged into one. The swordsman's art is a curious alchemy: a synthesis of steel and spirit where the outcome is more than the sum of its parts.

The old timers tell stories of swords that were finely wrought and yet cruel: *setsuninto*, killing swords. They were weapons whose inmost essence drove their owners mad. Other blades were as cruelly beautiful, but imbued with a spirit that inclined to do good. They sang in their scabbards to warn of danger; they were bright and clear and miraculous things and, in the right hands, could be *katsujinken*, life-giving swords.

In the right hands... how to tell and who is to judge? I've made decisions in my life and done things I am not proud of. And yet they seemed necessary. Like a pebble tossed in a pool of still water, each action sent waves in many directions. Some I anticipated. Many I did not. And I wonder.

In the half-light of each starting day, I lay in silence, alert to the swords in the rack. Hopeful. Fearful.

In the silence of dawn, will the blades moan to me or will they sing?

COYOTE

The *coyote* picked his way quietly over rough ground, climbing up the slope to a spot where he could watch and wait. The border smuggler, the *coyote* named Hector, settled down and listened to the faint rustling of the desert night. There was movement all around him; things hunted in the darkness, skittering and squealing, unseen. After a time he heard a different noise—the sound of men as they scraped their way over the canyon lip. Their voices were soft murmurs pulled apart by the night breeze. Hector strained to hear what was being said, but could not. The intruders paused at the canyon rim as if getting their bearings. They shone green lights on the dirt, tracing the tracks of the men Hector had sent off into the gully to the rendezvous. Hector watched calmly and waited for the small knot of men to head up the gully as well. If he felt anything at that moment, it was chagrin that the people he had led might be caught. But, they knew the risk. He himself didn't sense a threat, and was confident that without the burden of his human cargo he would melt away and leave these pursuers behind. But instead of following the trail leading up the gully, they swung their lights around in measured arcs, looking for additional sign. Hector's eyes narrowed as a faint concern began to flicker in his chest. The lights steadied, focused on a new track.

Hector's.

He realized with a shock of cold certainty that he was wrong

about the danger. The pursuers that he had vaguely sensed during the night journey across the border had not been intent on intercepting the men he was delivering. They weren't the Border Patrol. They weren't even interested in the identity or purpose of the men he was smuggling into the US. They had, instead, been following him to learn the secret of the route he had made through the desert. It was a basic foundation of his trade: *control the route and you can control the business*, he thought. He slipped out of the shadow of the rock outcropping he was crouched beneath and began to make his way away from this new source of danger. He moved cautiously, tense with concern that he make no sound. He knew that once a specific trail was known, a guide like himself became merely a liability. And on the border, liabilities were inevitably abandoned to the rocks and sun. Their remains gleamed, bone-white with the passing of years, a reminder to travelers of the danger of the territory through which they passed.

Hector had been a border smuggler for more than five years. He knew all about the dangers. If the desert was harsh, the competing gangs that struggled to control the border's business were even more so. Hector had learned to trust few people, hug the darkness like a friend, and to choose the more difficult and out of the way crossings for his business. A *coyote* had many things to fear.

The Americans were the least of Hector's problems. No matter what their publicity claimed, the Americans could not close the border. The long line between Mexico and the United States was an abstraction on a map. It was an illusion bent by topography and cracked in the desert sun. On the ground, lines on a map had little meaning. The Border Patrol rocked

along rutted tracks near the most likely points of access. They scanned the horizon for movement, safe in their trucks, the murmur of the radio a faint under-current in the wash of the air conditioning. Hector the *coyote* had learned the lessons well from his uncles and cousins who had gone before him into this business: go where the *gringo* did not wish to go. Go at night. Move quickly, but don't rush. Plan.

And watch your back. Hector was careful to keep a low profile in the border towns. He maintained respectful relations with the various gang leaders in the area, paid the protection money demanded of him, and relied on a small network of family members to assist in the growing business of smuggling "special" items across the border. They were efficient, discrete, and successful. That was why, when the strangers from the capital had come looking for experienced guides, Hector's people were chosen.

Like most things, there was a hierarchy of services in the *coyote's* world. Anyone could try to cross the border, and any number of eager young men, armed with broken down sneakers and makeshift canteens crafted from old bleach bottles, would offer to serve as guides. The true *coyote* watched them silently through squinted eyes, the skin on their faces taut and etched by the hot breath of the desert. They said nothing and let the young men go. More often than not, their careers were short-lived; the desert, or the gangs, or the Border Patrol people saw to that end. Amateurs were a sad feature of most professions, but not a significant drain on business in this one. In the *coyote's* world, success was survival.

The stakes grew exponentially once the *coyote* moved beyond smuggling *campesinos* desperate to work backbreaking days on American farms and construction sites. There were other things

to smuggle, and if the risk was greater, so too was the reward. These were deals that were not cut on a dusty roadside by the rear of an old pickup truck. The men you met were not hungry and weighed down by their past and lumpy bundles of possessions formed into packs with garbage bags and old twine. These deals were made by quietly assured men, whose eyes were as fathomless and glittery as vipers. The parties met in the dim shelter of bars after each side had carefully weighed the competence of their intermediaries, had listened to the rumors on the street, and after each side had scouted out an alternate means of exit.

Hector's people would watch the late model SUV's churn a cloud of dust down the street. When they reached the rendezvous, young men with dark glasses jumped out and scanned the rooflines. They dressed for the city, yet their shiny boots were immediately coated with the powdery dust of the desert. The wind pushed, hot and fitful, at paper trash in the street. You could hear sounds coming from a distant alley, where stringy dogs snarled and fought each other for the gristle and bone remains of something unidentifiable. People scuttled toward doorways, nervously eyeing the men from the SUV—quick, tight sideways glances, before they shut themselves behind the safety of thick doors. The young men didn't seem to react to anything in particular, but took it all in. They watched the pattern of activity, sensitive only to the ripple of the unexpected. At a signal, their principal would emerge from the vehicle and the *coyote's* people would follow him into the dark room.

In these situations, respectful greetings were always the first item of business. Drinks offered. The conversations were formal, reserved, and terse with an odd combination of respect and tension. The deals themselves were models of simplicity.

Something needed to cross the border. Sometimes it was an object. Other times it was people. The *coyotes* never asked what the packages contained or who the people were. They weren't interested in details beyond the professional assessment of the logistics of transport. A target date for departure was made. Another was established for delivery. The *coyotes* always insisted on some flexibility with the dates for security purposes, but they knew the value of dependability as well. A pickup point was proposed, debated, established. The price for services was negotiated. Payment arrangements were made.

Hector had developed a reputation as the man to come to for particularly sensitive transport jobs. Even the *viejos*, the old timers, admitted that he had a knack for moving through the roughest terrain, of scouting out routes that consistently evaded the American interdiction patrols. He used these routes sparingly, saving them for the most lucrative jobs. The men from the capital paid well for this work, and the high price guaranteed Hector's continuing enthusiasm as well as his silence. But just below the surface of these deals there lurked something more sinister: the potential for violence or betrayal. The chance that it could blow up in your face, or that the price for failure would be higher than you could bear.

Most times, Hector convinced himself that he was too good to fall victim to these undercurrents. He was young and crafty and therefore successful. He was sure that one day he would be a legend on the border. But the old women would watch him silently from a distance and murmur darkly. In life, they knew, there was beauty, and merit, and skill. All these things faded. And the only thing left to you was *suerte*, luck. It was the most fickle of powers, alighting on one man for a time and then deserting him for no apparent reason. They watched Hector,

the *coyote*, marveling at his success. But then they crossed themselves and gestured against the evil eye. *The day will come*, their looks said silently. *Even for you, Hector, the day will come when luck will betray you, disappearing like water spilled in the desert sun.*

This latest crossing had been an important one—the arrangements had been meticulous and the deal was cut with great formality between Hector and the men from the capital. They were men of great seriousness, and he treated their need for special arrangements with respect. The three men he was to take across the border were young and fit, dark eyed, but not *Mexicanos*. It was imperative, Hector's clients insisted, that there be no contact with the Border Police. If a crossing were not possible, he was to bring them back rather than risk their arrest. They provided Hector with a cell phone and a number to call once he reached the rendezvous point on the other side of the border. His instructions were to use the cell to make a call once they were across, leave the three men at the location specified, smash the phone and bury the parts, and not look back.

Hector had taken in the instructions without comment, content in the details and the payment. His knowledge of different routes was a valuable commodity. There were various families and gangs vying for control of the most lucrative smuggling routes. Hector went to great pains to avoid observation from rivals, to hoard this knowledge, and to use his most secure routes only for special jobs. His discretion was rewarded with jobs such as this one. His secret trails were as secure as sparing use could make them, and their nature made them practical only for the fittest travelers. His cargo would be up to desert travel, his clients had assured him. And they smiled at

each other as if enjoying a particularly good joke.

Hector couldn't remember the precise moment during the night crossing when he began to suspect that he was being shadowed. He always made a habit of scanning his route ahead whenever the terrain made that possible. He often checked his back trail as well. He paused to listen in the night, having the cargo crouch down in silence at intervals. They did what he said without protest. To Hector, they seemed like men familiar with noise discipline and quiet travel in out of the way places. They waited patiently in the darkness. Their eyes sometimes caught the glitter of starlight, but they said nothing to give away their location, content to let their guide set the pace.

Hector's vigilance had revealed nothing alarming during the night passage. But a nagging feeling, like a faint breath of clammy wind across the nape of his neck, lingered with him. He redoubled his security checks, scanning the night's horizon lines for threats, pausing often to strain to hear the telltale sound of a boot scraping across the hard ground. He typically did not travel armed, but on these special trips he sometimes found a weapon useful. An old long-barreled .38 was tucked into his waistband, covered by his shirt. He had never used the pistol in anger and it gave him little comfort this night. To shoot, you needed a target you could see.

They reached the drop off point two hours before dawn. Hector led the men into a small canyon that opened from a spur of rock that pushed out from the hills rising in a rough jumble of rock in front of them. He walked quickly into the darker confines of the canyon, his hand brushing lightly against the side of the wall. He felt more protected out of the open desert and uttered a faint sigh of relief at completing the journey. He almost laughed at his fears, but some residual sense of

foreboding choked off the emotion. He cautiously flicked on a flashlight, the lens covered with a red filter to preserve night vision. The canyon was littered with boulders of various sizes. There was a winding path through them, but it took caution and care. Hector hadn't come this far only to break his leg.

The men he was delivering followed him to the end of the canyon. Here, the narrow defile widened to a roughly circular space perhaps twenty meters wide. Looking up, you could see the night stars shining; remote pinpricks in the remote disk of sky at the top of the canyon. Hector motioned to his travelers to squat down around him. He flicked the light off and could hear their faint panting in the darkness, the sound contained and amplified by the rock walls.

"What now?" one asked him in English. He did not sound like an American. But Hector forced himself not to speculate. These men were packages. Nothing more.

Hector checked the fluorescent hands of his watch. "We wait until four. Then I call." He stood up and stretched his back. He turned back down the trail, straining to see in the darkness of the canyon. Nothing. He faced the men and flicked on his light once more, playing it along the wall of the canyon.

"The Old Ones lived here," he told them. Up the cliff at a ledge some ten meters off the ground, the men saw the jagged opening of a doorway, framed by uneven rock masonry. In the daylight, they would have seen the black stain of ancient campfire smoke that licked out across the dwelling's ceiling and up the doorway's lintel. The *coyote* played the light carefully up the surface of the cliff, showing them the regularly-spaced handholds. "You climb up here to the mesa top. Follow the gully northeast for perhaps two kilometers. It washes out into a sandy bed. The truck will pick you up there."

“And you?” It was the most conversation they had made all night.

“I lead you up,” Hector said simply. “Then I go back.” It wasn’t completely accurate, but it was all they needed to know. When the time came, he made the phone call and then led the way up the canyon wall, playing his light along the surface to show them the handholds. They clambered over the rim at the top and Hector pointed them down the gully to the rendezvous. He squatted in the darkness until the sound of their passing faded, content in a job completed.

And then he heard the clink of a rock kicked loose from the canyon passage below.

Hector felt the adrenalin rush of alarm grip his chest at the same time that he acknowledged that his gut instincts had been right: they were being tracked. Still crouching, he backed slowly away from the edge of the canyon. He touched the pistol in his belt like a talisman, took a deep breath, and thought.

They do not know the trail. Otherwise they would have intercepted us at the end. He squinted off down the gully in the direction he had sent the men he had brought across. *It will take time to discover the way up. By that time, the rendezvous will have been made.* He grunted softly in satisfaction: he had a professional’s commitment to completing a job. If whoever was tracking them had hoped to hijack his package, they had failed. All that remained now was for Hector to elude them and make his way back across the border. He hefted his canteen and felt how light it had become. There was water and food stashed in the cliff dwelling below him. He had planned to rest there during the day and return with the coming of another night. Now his pursuers blocked access to his supplies. Hector would have to wait until they realized they had failed to intercept him and

left. Then it would be safe to grab the supplies and head home by another route.

The rationality of the plan comforted him, despite the shock of being tracked. He would have to review his security procedures before heading out again. For now, however, he believed that he merely had to hide and wait.

But things hadn't worked out as he anticipated. The approaching day brought with it the awareness that they were coming—for him. Hector began to move away from the canyon rim, throwing glances behind him in the dim grayness of coming dawn, but the shadows and shapes of the rocky desert twilight could have held a hundred pursuers and he would have been none the wiser if they were gaining on him.

Hector worked the pistol out of his waistband. If the men moving up the cliff below him had tracked him across the border and done it carefully, they now knew one of his most closely held secrets. And perhaps this was not the first time he had been followed. He had to admit that this was a possibility.

So why come for me now?

Hector had a sudden mental image of one of the old women of the town, a leather-faced specter with wet, red-rimmed eyes. She had warned him that luck was a passing thing. Now, in the darkness, Hector imagined that she looked at him with the penetrating stare of a *bruja*, a witch. Her mouth moved, and the night around him seemed to mimic her voice.

Perdido the wind whispered. Danger.

Hector exploded across the slope, suddenly breathless with certainty and the need to escape. If the trackers knew his routes, then all they needed to do was eliminate him. *Control the route, control the business.* If they caught him, he would

simply disappear in the night, one more *coyote* swallowed up in rock and heat.

The men down below had scaled the cliff. They heard Hector's movement. Their hushed voices sounded strained and urgent, and the sound of their boots on the rock grew louder. Hector stumbled along the slope, hands outstretched for balance. He wanted to use his flashlight, but feared that it would give his position away. His mind was racing reviewing what he knew of the terrain, of the possibility of escape. Of survival.

He skittered along a slope of loose, flat rock fragments. His passage was marked by the clatter of rocks cascading down the hill. He lost his footing and, as his arms windmilled, the pistol went flying from his grasp, clattering into oblivion along with the moving rocks. Hector heard his pursuers closing on him and knew he couldn't waste time searching for the weapon. He reached firmer ground, breathless with effort. But this was no time to rest. He bent double, using his hands to propel himself forward. Hector never sensed the cut in the hillside until he plunged into it. The sudden sense of weightlessness; for a moment he thought he could fly.

Hector went down hard. Although the drop was not more than a few meters, it was studded with rocks that caught him on the tumbling plunge to the bottom of the cut. He lay there, tasting blood, and rock dust, winded. He tried to move, felt the stab of pain in his ribs and almost shrieked out loud when his leg shifted.

Broken.

He gasped, trying to get his breathing under control. Along the crest of the hill, the horizon was lightening. He would be able to see the silhouettes when his pursuers came along the slope, if he waited that long. But Hector knew that to wait was really just

to die. He began to drag himself along the bottom of the cut, moving in painful jerks that made him bite his lip with the effort of staying silent. He didn't look back. He didn't see the shadowy shapes of his pursuers, shapes that paused at the arroyo's edge and then fanned out to look for a safe way down.

Hector's world had narrowed down to the dirt and rock of the arroyo floor, to the imperative need to keep moving, and to the jolting stabs of pain that accompanied each lurch forward. His mind raced, seeking an escape. If he could elude them, move toward the rendezvous... He still had the cell phone. He could even call the Border Patrol. They would merely deport him. It was an option to consider.

The fact that Hector could think like this, could plan despite the pain, and could adjust and react to the situation, were the qualities that had made him such a good *coyote* in the first place. That and luck.

He knew now that he would not be able to outdistance his pursuers. His only option was to hide. Another jolt of pain shot through his leg and Hector dragged himself into the meager shadow of a creosote bush. He was panting, he realized, and made a conscious effort to quiet his breathing. *They will hear you*, he reminded himself. Hector strained to listen, to sort out the bird sound and the faint pulse of wind from noises that suggested something more sinister. He was sure that his pursuers were still out there. He closed his mouth, knowing that it would preserve moisture. He would need it. His water bottle had been lost in his shambling, twisting escape from his pursuers. But the need for water discipline was a distant concern. First he had to survive.

The night was fading. The *coyote* could sense the growing power of the sun looming just below the horizon. In the sparse brush along the arroyo, birds had started to chirp, but the only sounds he heard were rougher things: the gasp of his own breath and the scrapes and thuds as he dragged himself painfully over the stony earth. The end of night brought no comfort to him: the heat would kill him if his pursuers did not.

Hector dragged himself deeper into the space between the creosote bush and the rocks near it. He lay there, silent and still, like all animals when they hide from hunters. His heart was hammering in his chest. He closed his eyes and saw the image of the old *bruja*, her eyes red and insistent, boring into him. *Pobrecito. Luck fails us all.*

Exhaustion dragged on him. His body burned, his mind grew fuzzy. His eyelids drooped. Hector jerked his eyes open, unsure whether the sound of a voice was real or something from a dream. In the spreading light of the desert morning, the creature that loomed over him was a thing of shadows and swirls. He had the briefest of moments to react to the terror of discovery, unsure of what he was seeing. A man? Its tattooed visage was more like a devil. Hector's last moments were a jumbled mix of pain and confusion. The clutch in the chest as he realized he was doomed. The sharp throb of shattered bone. The thing above him calling in triumph to the other hunters. Arms that lifted high into the washed out blue of a morning sky, as if pronouncing a benediction.

The jagged rock came down on Hector, again and again, until he lay still, slowly seeping moisture into the hard ground of the borderlands. In time, flies would come to swarm over the sticky pool of fluid until the sun rose, fierce and full, and baked the moisture of Hector's life away, sucking it deep into the desert's heart.

2

LESSONS

The things we remember best tend to come to us in special ways—often linked to extremes of emotion like joy and fear. Or pain. My teacher had been shaped in a tradition where both fear and pain were constant companions because, the old masters believed, an authentic life was one that didn't deny these most inevitable of experiences, it just learned to transcend them.

Yamashita is a *sensei*, or teacher, of the martial arts—the *bugei*—of old Japan. The *bugei* are many things—ways of fighting, of physical training, aesthetic disciplines forged out of the most horrific of practices. My teacher is a master of the form and the essence of these systems, a lethal man whose spirit is as keen and polished as the blade he teaches me to wield. He is simultaneously demanding, exasperating and amazing. I've been banging around the martial arts world for almost thirty years now, and I've never seen anyone like him.

I use the word banging literally. Lots of people today think they know something about the martial arts—black belts and Zen, *ninja* in dark pajamas jumping across a movie screen doing cartwheels that would make an astronaut toss his lunch. The death touch. Wispy masters who never sweat and are never defeated. But Grasshopper, this is all an illusion.

To train in the martial arts is like being apprenticed to frustration, to the burn of effort, and the unattainable criteria of perfection. There's no glamour, no reward beyond the ones you create in your own heart. You struggle along the path and your

teacher goads you or challenges you, always three steps ahead and always waiting, his eyes betraying nothing but demanding everything. And you try to give it.

In the process you take some lumps. I've broken my fingers and toes more times than I can count. Some ribs. Until a few years ago, my nose was intact, but that's a thing of the past. It's probably not a huge tragedy—I have a relative in Ireland who once said I have a face like a Dublin pig. When I do my warm up stretches in the morning, I can feel the tug of years of muscle damage all over me and the buzzing reminder of an old dislocated shoulder. There are small white scars on both my hands from a morning when I tore through jagged undergrowth, focused only on the fight to come. I have a long slash of a scar down my back that I got in a sword fight on the night when I began to truly understand what all this training had turned me into. And there are other, less visible marks.

Late in the night images sometimes come unbidden, and I'm pulled back into a whirl of adrenalin and heat and blood. But you cope. You learn to breathe deeply and wait for the sweat to dry. You wait for morning to come and with it the light to remind you of the present. My scars suggest where I've been, not where I am. Most days, I'm in Yamashita's training hall, honing my technique in closer imitation of him and putting his lower ranked students through their paces.

The *dojo*—what Japanese martial artists call their training hall—is a big space, with high ceilings and a polished floor of tightly fitted hardwood strips. There's a mirror on one wall that we use to check ourselves for correct form. Sometimes I catch a glimpse of my features while I prowl the room, and the face is both familiar and strange. For at times it appears to me that my eyes have become as hard and flat as my master's.

That day, I was grinding some swordsmen through a particularly tricky exercise. My teacher has started to hold seminars lately for martial artists who aren't his regular students, but who study related arts and are looking to deepen their skills. We get people who are trained in all sorts of systems. They enter the training hall in uniforms that have been worn into supple functionality. Some are in the karate or judo uniforms known as *gi* and have tattered and faded black belts riding low on their waists. Others wear the more formal pleated skirt known as a *hakama* and tops of white or blue or black. They all stand quietly, people who are centered, balanced, and coiled like steel springs ready for release. They don't impress Yamashita too much, because just to be accepted as one of his regular students you usually need black belts in a few different styles, recommendations from some seriously advanced teachers, and an almost infinite capacity to suffer. But I watch the seminar students carefully and treat them like dangerous, barely domesticated animals.

It's not paranoia on my part. The presence of outsiders at our *dojo* is new, and at first I was puzzled about why Yamashita would allow this. My teacher doesn't advertise anywhere and just to find the converted warehouse where we train, you have to know where you're going and be willing to thread the obscure backstreets of the Red Hook section of Brooklyn. But a small stream of fanatics do make the journey along the hard cement and past the harder eyes of Red Hook's less desirable element. It took a while, but ultimately Yamashita's reasons for sponsoring these seminars became clear: he wasn't interested in letting people in to see him; he was letting them in to see *me*.

I'm his senior student, although when you say it like that it doesn't begin to get at the core of our relationship. He has

forged me into something, a version of himself, and we are tied together with filament so fine and so strong that the link is as invisible as it is undeniable. I struggled against it for a time, but I've come to learn to accept it. I move just like him now, and if my footsteps take me along slightly different routes, I know that in essence we travel the same path.

So these seminars were Yamashita's way of letting people know who I was and that I would one day assume leadership of the *dojo*. We have both been scarred by our pasts and now, imperceptible to most, my teacher's movements tell of his wounds. It's something I try not to think about: it's bad for my head and my heart.

But I'm not just being sentimental. My teacher has taught me better than that. I watch the trainees with slightly narrowed eyes, judging them, measuring their skill, and trying to divine their intent. They look back in much the same way. Bringing a bunch of highly skilled fighters together, pointing someone out and implying that he's better than everyone else in the room, is the martial arts equivalent of pouring chum into shark infested waters.

These seminars have the feel of those old Westerns where a bunch of new gunmen stalk into town looking to take on the local prodigy. You can hold up your hands and protest you're not interested in a fight, but people just smirk in disbelief and you know, deep down, that you'd better go get your weapon.

In the martial arts, we meditate and talk about the nature of training as a *Do*, a path, to enlightenment. But there are lots of ways to accomplish this end that don't involve pounding on people in the way we do. Ultimately, no matter how hard we deny it, there's part of us that *likes* that aspect of the *bugei*. The heat. The contact. The fury, trapped and funneled

into something truly dangerous. No matter what the particular martial art system is called or what the techniques look like, there's a basic pattern to advanced training: you get pounded and you pound back. The easily bruised should not apply.

I've taken my lumps in the *dojo* and in places far more terrifying as well. I prefer to approach training as a way to fine-tune my technique. I save punching on the afterburners for the real thing. But no matter how calmly I speak to people at these seminars, no matter how much I stress that we're here to learn from each other, I can see that deep down they don't buy it. They wait and watch, hoping for an opportunity to prove to Yamashita that there was a better choice for his top student than the guy leading the exercises. I brace myself to prove them wrong.

And, I've come to realize, this is also part of Yamashita's plan. Everything in my master's world is a means of training. The fact that someone at a seminar may take a run at me is not necessarily a bad thing. From Yamashita's perspective it's more like icing on the cake, or a pickled plum in the middle of a rice ball.

It's not all tension, of course: a few participants at the seminar weren't strangers. Some of the *dojo* regulars were there to help out. A while ago, Yamashita and I had met a woman named Sarah Klein who practiced *kyudo*, the Japanese art of archery. We had both been attracted to her, although for different reasons. Yamashita had been intrigued by her focused energy, and while I had been drawn to that spirit, I was intrigued by so much more. What she saw in me was anyone's guess, but I was glad that she saw something. And I was glad she was at the seminar today.

Sarah's not a big person, but when watching her slight figure move, you got a sense of grace and strength rare in most

people. It may have been that suggestion of physical potential that made Yamashita take her on as a student. She was dark-haired with big eyes and a heart shaped face. Just seeing her across a room usually made my stomach flip. Today, as I moved around the seminar participants, she'd occasionally catch my eye for a split second and I'd see a hint of the smile I knew she was suppressing. Sarah has a great smile.

I kept my *sensei* face on, however, and resisted the impulse to wink at her. For now, I had to keep the seminar participants in check. We were executing a series of moves that in the beginning look a lot like the *mae* routine in your basic *iaido kata*. *Iaido* students focus on practicing a series of connected techniques known as *kata* that involve the art of drawing and cutting with the Japanese sword. In the first *kata* that they typically learn, students sit in the formal kneeling position, their swords sheathed. As they sense an attack being launched from the front, they rise on their knees, then draw the sword from its sheath and cut in a wide lateral arc across their front, planting their right foot forward so that only the left knee remains touching the ground.

In the sequence as traditionally practiced, the lateral swipe is followed up with a vertical cut. The idea is that your attacker, kneeling before you, starts to move. You swipe at him, but he jerks back just out of range. You follow up by drawing yourself forward with your right leg and then cutting down in what is meant to be a decisive attack to the head.

As I say, it's pretty standard. Except in Yamashita's *dojo*. He doesn't think it's particularly realistic that someone who has dodged your first strike would remain seated and waiting for your follow up. Much more likely, he says, that the attacker would rear up and then back away, well out of range.

Which means you have to chase him.

It sounds simple enough, but Yamashita is always as interested in finesse as he is in functionality. In many ways, he doesn't even consider them two separate things. So in his *dojo*, after the first cut, the swordsman has to lunge far forward while remaining crouched. Your opponent is standing up by this point and expects you to rise as well. So, my teacher explains, you do the opposite and pursue him from the lower position, driving forward while remaining alert to the possibility of counterattack.

It sounds easy, but is difficult to pull off. The crouching position is awkward, and it takes time to get the knack of using your muscles correctly. If you rely too much on the left foot to propel you, you tend to topple forward, providing a dangerous gap for your opponent to exploit. Too much right leg, and you drag yourself forward and can't move fast enough or far enough to be effective. In years past, when Yamashita demonstrated the technique, it looked as if he was being jerked across the floor by an invisible wire: a feral gnome bent on your destruction. His posture was impeccable, and his hips drove him forward while his legs worked smoothly together to close the gap between him and his opponent, his eyes intent and his sword boring in for the kill.

The visual memory of that attack burns in my brain like the afterimage of a lighting flash. I work every day to replicate it. That day, I had demonstrated the basic idea and a less terrifying version of the move itself to the men and women at the seminar. They watched me coldly, nodding as I shot across the floor. I could see the thought flash across their eyes: *if he can do it, I can*. Then I began what for those people was probably one of the most unpleasant hours of their lives. Because the only way to begin to learn something like this is through repetition.

I had them lurch back and forth across the *dojo* floor. The line of trainees completed the awkward trip. “Good,” I commented flatly. “Again.” They churned across the floor once more. When they got back, more than a few began to stand to take some of the strain off their legs. I shook my head but didn’t say a word, just swept my arm back in the direction that they had come. Off they went.

After thirty minutes or so, their faces were flushed with effort, their palms sweaty on the handle of their wooden training swords. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sarah blow a strand of her fine brown hair away from her eyes, draw a focusing breath, and stoically continue. She needed no prodding.

Breath control was second nature to most of these people, but even so I heard some gasps. I knew that their leg muscles felt as if they were on fire. But I kept them at it. It wasn’t just that as long as they did this exercise I didn’t have to worry about what else they might try to pull on me. It was because my teacher and his teachers before him and now, I suppose, even I, believed that the best learning takes place at the white hot juncture where the body and mind are thoroughly fatigued. And as I looked at the trainees, I sensed that some of them were starting to make the move their own.

That’s what training in the martial arts is about.

After a few more tortuous minutes, I called a break. I wanted to burn these people, not break them. They stood up gladly and walked around the room, blotting their foreheads with their sleeves, waiting for the muscle cramps to ebb a bit. I edged over to Sarah.

“How’s it going?” I asked quietly.

“I don’t know what you had planned for later tonight, Burke,

but dancing is definitely out of the question.” She smiled.

“The Irish don’t dance,” I informed her.

“Come on,” she protested, “I’ve seen those girls in those fancy little dresses jumping around. What’s it called?” I had recently taken Sarah to a *féis*, a festival that featured Irish step dancing, bagpipes, and other forms of Celtic torture.

“Step dancing,” I told her. She nodded silently at my answer, as if her point were made. “But did you ever notice,” I continued, “that when they dance, they keep their arms pinned to their sides?”

“So?”

“That’s because in the old days, when the English lords would make the peasants dance, the Irish knew that they had to do it, but they decided that they would refuse to enjoy it.”

Sarah looked me up and down, quietly pensive. “It explains so much about you, Burke,” she concluded. Then I saw the laughter in her eye and knew I was being teased.

The seminar wound its way through the morning. We worked hard with *bokken*, the oak swords that are the basic training weapon here. We also did some empty-hand techniques, stressing joint locks and pressure point techniques that made the nerves jangle. It wasn’t totally new stuff to most people in the room—trainees in arts like *iaido* or *aikido* or *kendo* can see some faint hint of their styles in what Yamashita does. But there’s a difference: a harder edge, a more concise motion—it’s difficult to explain in words. To see it revealed clearly, you have to experience it. Which can be a problem. In the *Yamashita-ha Itto Ryu*, my master’s system, a full-bore demonstration usually leaves someone moaning on the ground.

The demo had to come eventually, of course. It was what

they were all really here for. They'd heard about Yamashita; they wanted to see the real deal. But so far, all they got was me. I could tell it was bugging them. Yamashita Sensei was there, of course. He drifted along the edges of the room, silent and contained, but you could feel him and sense his energy. Martial artists at a certain level of training can pick up the psychokinetic energy called *ki*. We all emit *ki*, but it viscerally pulses off someone like my teacher. You can suppress it somewhat or, if you're really good (and Yamashita is) you can ramp up the energy projection until even the dimmest pupil can feel it.

He was doing it on purpose.

As the men and women here today trained, they felt the pulse of Yamashita's *ki*, his energy, washing over them. Yet he stayed in the background, content to let me run the class. And what did they sense from me? I'm not sure. Most of them were probably too caught up in trying to master what I was showing them, in trying to look good in front of Yamashita. That kind of thing tends to dim peripheral awareness. In any event, they were glancing occasionally between the two of us as if comparing. Average looking white guy versus Asian master whose energy field was pinging off them like sonar. Who would you watch?

Eventually, Yamashita looked at me and nodded. It used to be that he gave me a great deal of verbal direction. He said he was compensating for the damage done to me by all that studying for my Ph.D. in Asian History. He didn't need to say much to me anymore.

I called the class to order. They sunk attentively to the left knee, which permits everyone to see the instructor and hear his words. "OK," I said. "You're looking good." Many of them looked like they had been soaked with a garden hose, but they

were all hanging in there. I liked that. “Relax for a minute.” They settled in a rough circle around me and sat with crossed legs on the hard floor.

“We’ve been working this morning on various things—movement, sword work, some nerve points. In lots of ways, it’s a sampling of a continuum of aspects in the system we train in here.” I winced inwardly at the word *continuum*. Over the years, I’ve tried to lose some of my pointy-headedness, but I guess Yamashita is right—I *have* been damaged. I saw one guy smirk slightly at my choice of words. I didn’t respond to it, but an idea was forming in the back of my mind.

“Most modern martial arts forms tend to focus their training on a limited range of techniques,” I told them. It was nothing new to them. I could see that in their eyes. “At the higher level—where many of you are—you’ve got to expand your practice to include the integration of other techniques, other perspectives.” I held up my hands, fingers splayed, and then joined my hands together. “Meld them.” I began to walk around the circle a bit, making some eye contact with individuals.

“The exercise we practiced this morning that was based on *mae*,” I continued, “is a case in point. Depending on how you play it, it’s got elements of sword-drawing and weapons use, of *aikido*-like entering techniques, and then the potential for an almost limitless series of applications using strikes or locks or throws.” I watched them carefully as I spoke. There’s a well-honored dictum in the martial arts world that people who talk about technique can rarely *do* technique. First, I had used an egghead word like *continuum*. Now I was going on and on, making some points that had to be patently obvious to people with their experience. So I watched their eyes. Some

were expressionless, but I saw one guy—the same person who had smirked—looking at me with just the type of aggressive skepticism that I needed.

“Now let’s take a look at the application, OK?” I saw a few satisfied nods around the circle and got the message—*it’s about time*. When I gestured to my smirking friend, he rose eagerly to his feet in a smooth, powerful motion. His look told me that he had been waiting for something like this all day.

I made the rest of them back up and widen the circle. There was no telling how this would go. My opponent and I sat about one and a half meters apart from each other, just out of attack distance. As we settled down into the formal sitting position known as *seiza*, I held up my hand. “You want to wear *kote*?” I asked my opponent. They’re the padded mitts that protect the hands and wrist in arts like *kendo*. They come in handy sometimes.

He looked at me pointedly. “I don’t see you wearing any.”

I nodded.

He smiled tightly. “I’m fine, then.” He was probably in his late twenties. His hair was cut short and you could see powerful cords of muscle anchoring his head to his neck. This guy was built. He was also taller than I was—not a surprise, since most men are. He thought that when I offered the *kote* that I was asking him a question. Maybe he thought I was being overly conscientious. Or perhaps I was trying to needle him. There was probably some aspect of all these things at work. Mostly, however, I was just playing for time, getting a good look at him, registering the length of his arms and legs, and figuring out my options. It wasn’t a particularly fair tactic. It’s what Yamashita calls *heiho*—strategy.

We took our places and prepared. Usually, the senior person

serves as attacker, but since I was demonstrating the full application of the technique, my partner would start. We sat for a moment, breathing quietly, wooden swords at our left sides. The man sitting across from me on the floor seemed calm. Confident. Contained.

His sword began to move. I had been watching him and the others all morning. They were all pretty good. So I knew that if I lost the initiative here, his sword would have swept across me. At his first twitch, I had already begun to move.

My *bokken* swept in an arc across his face, forcing him to pull back. I scrambled forward in the crouch we had practiced and he shot up and backwards to avoid the pressure I was bringing to bear. This much was standard, almost scripted, and everyone in that room expected it. But now the interesting stuff was going to happen.

Because once my opponent stood up and got slightly out of range of my sword tip, he had a variety of options. His attack could come in many forms. The trick in doing something like this wasn't just in mastering the awkward series of scrambling motions we had practiced, it was in being able to cope with what would happen once your moves brought you into the radius of your opponent's weapon. Like now.

I tried not to give him the option to think too much by continuing to jerk myself forward in that low crouch, my sword seeking a target. He parried and backpedaled, and I could see the awareness in his eyes, his realization that whatever he was going to do would have to be lightning quick, because I was moving in, and if he didn't do something I was going to churn right through him.

He moved slightly to his right as I came forward and he snapped his sword down at my left shoulder in a quick, hard

motion. I whirled in toward his blade, simultaneously moving my left shoulder out of range and bringing my own sword around to beat down his weapon. The wood shafts barked on contact. But he was pretty good: he held on and kept trying.

His impulse was to get the sword's blade back up for another try at me. He went with the force of my parry, sweeping his *bokken* down and then up in a counterclockwise sweep that was designed to bring his weapon into the high position, ready for a strike.

As his arms came up, I shot beside him in what the *aikido* people call an *irimi*, or “entering” movement. Now we were both facing in the same direction. I used my left hand to grab his neck from behind. I squeezed hard. It's not that I was going to make much headway against those muscles; it's that people hate to have their head or neck held in any threatening way.

He jerked his head to his left as if trying to look over his shoulder—it's a reflexive action—but he also moved to try to break my hold at the same time. As movements go, it was OK, and perfectly understandable. But for that one split second he had lost focus on his sword. I was still beside him and his right arm was stretched out, gripping the haft of the wooden sword.

I lifted my *bokken*, the point straight toward heaven, and then brought it down vertically, slamming the butt into the cluster of nerves on the inner edge of his right forearm.

It's a funny feeling. Sort of. I heard him gasp and then the *bokken* fell out of his hands. I dumped him on the ground and put the tip of my own sword about an inch from his nose. He wasn't stunned by the fall and his eyes crossed slightly as he focused on the tip of my weapon.

I moved away carefully, taking three steps backward to bring me out of range, and bowed formally to him.

Yamashita strode forward. He picked up my opponent's sword and looked around the room. "So..." he commented to the watchful trainees. "Application is always more interesting than rehearsal, *neh?*" I saw some heads nod ruefully. In more than one face, I saw a dawning gratitude that someone else had been selected to serve as a training partner. Yamashita moved toward the man I had put on the floor. He got up, but I knew that he wasn't going to be able to use his right arm for a while. His eyes bore into mine. For the first time that day, I let my own eyes bore back into a trainee's eyes. *Shoulda used the kote, bud.*

Yamashita watched the silent exchange. "What we have seen here is a lesson with two aspects. Like a sword blade, there are two sides, *omote* and *ura*, the front and the back, the obvious and the hidden." He canted the wooden sword in his hand to show one side of the blade, now the other. I saw some frowns from the group as they failed to follow his logic.

Yamashita saw it, too. He sighed. "*Omote*. Burke Sensei has clearly demonstrated how the technique you began to train this morning can be finished in a match. It is not the only application, perhaps," he said and paused to give me a subtly arch look, "perhaps not even the most elegant. But certainly effective."

Heads nodded, and Yamashita stood there for a minute, saying nothing. The lights of the *dojo* made the wooden floor gleam and, if they seemed to make his eyes deeper and darker, they also made his shaven head shine in imitation of the hard surfaces of his world.

Finally, someone raised a hand. "Yamashita Sensei," the question came. "What was the second lesson?"

My teacher looked up and regarded the expectant circle of trainees. He smiled slightly. "Ah. The hidden lesson?" He

looked around. “You spent all your time waiting for me. Doing what Burke Sensei said, but waiting for me. The wise warrior keeps himself hidden, in the shadows. *Kage*. You know the word?” Heads nodded.

“Just so,” my master finished. “My pupil keeps himself in shadow. Like most people, there is more to him than meets the eye.”

The lesson was over.

3

TALES

I was talking to a bunch of mystery writers about the realities of fighting: how it works and the toll it takes. And how long it takes to recover. The overfed guy was incredulous.

“A week!” he protested, his eyes blinking in outrage. The conference room was a soothing beige and the hotel’s mammoth air conditioning units kept the desert heat from seeping into the building, but I felt a bit warm anyway. The fluorescent ceiling lights played on the lenses of the man’s round steel-rimmed glasses. He had a big mustache that helped balance out his jowls and he held a hardcover book to his breast, front cover out, so everyone could see. *Look. This is mine. I wrote it.*

I nodded and held my hands up to calm him. “A week to ten days,” I repeated. The rest of the audience murmured in displeasure as well.

“But I can’t have my main character laid up for that long,” the writer continued. “It would destroy the pacing of the novel!”

I nodded in sympathy. “Sure.” But it seemed that they wanted something more from me. I looked around the conference room at the fifty or so people whose eyes were sharpened in concern. I began again. “I’m not telling you how to write your books,” I pointed out. “But the fact is, when you take a good beating, you can figure that you’re going to be like the walking wounded for at least a week. Trust me, in the real world, people don’t take punishment like that and bounce back right away.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Donohue is a nationally known expert on the culture and practice of the martial arts and has been banging around the dojo for more than 30 years. He has trained in the martial disciplines of aikido, iaido, judo, karatedo, kendo, and taiji. He has dan (black belt) ranks in both karatedo and kendo.

John has a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. His doctoral dissertation on the cultural aspects of the Japanese martial arts formed the basis for his first book, *The Forge of the Spirit*. Fiction became a way to combine his interests and *Sensei*, the first Connor Burke thriller was published in 2003. John Donohue resides in Hamden, CT.