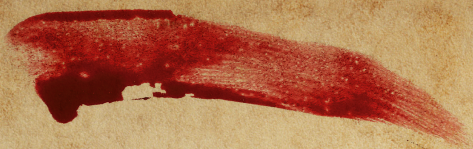


JOHN DONOHUE

Author of *Sensei* and *Enzan*

# KEPPAN

THE  
BLOOD  
OATH



A Connor Burke  
Martial Arts Thriller



## Praise for *Keppan: The Blood Oath*

John Donohue once again evokes the world of Japanese martial arts, discipline, culture, and chaos. In this novel, though, there is an ample salting of other worlds, including the rich but tainted American yoga culture, the rough trade of sex tapes, and the mobster dimensions of Japanese corporations and Russian oligarchs. These worlds spin by, in and out of his hero's orbit like errant moons enriching the story and setting an ever-larger stage. The characters are palpable. The reader can almost smell their sweat and see their tics, see his or her face in the shiny side of swords, hear the springs of pistols issuing subsonic rounds. Fans will find that author's protagonist, Burke, to be familiar but also more nuanced; damaged but all the more engaging because of it, missing his master and seeking equilibrium and trying to banish his pain. A new level of work for the author and a treasure for his faithful and for thriller enthusiasts alike.

—*Monk Yun Row/Arthur Rosenfeld, Ordained Taoist Monk (China) author, Daoist teacher, Tai Chi master, speaker*

*Keppan* packs the wallop of Bruce Lee's powerful one-inch punch. It examines the aftermath of tragic violence and death, dealing with grief and facing one's own mortality, which lifts the novel above standard genre fare. Donohue demonstrates his maturation as a fiction writer who delivers emotionally charged insights into complicated relationships, all wrapped in a tightly paced mystery. The Connor Burke series just keeps getting better and better.

—*Brian R. Sheridan, Assistant Professor of Dept of Communication—Mercyhurst University, journalist, and martial artist, co-author of America in the 30s*

Donohue's Burke series is among the best in the genre. Not only does he have some of the best drawn action sequences set to the page, but his use of different cultures coexisting and mingling throughout his narratives sheds new light on aspects of the human condition that can really use it. This series is a case study on the elevation of "genre fiction" to literature. I'm eager to see where this series goes from here. Like Burke, I'm not done mourning Yamashita.

—*Meron Langsner, PhD in theatre history, author, award-winning playwright, theatrical fight choreographer*

John Donohue excels at his martial-spirit Connor Burke novels because John is the real thing: a masterful author and a master of martial arts. *Keppan* offers more than just realistic action and attitudes; its mystery train takes readers into the deep questions we all face.

—*James Grady, author of Robert Redford's Three Days of the Condor and 2024's The Smoke in Our Eyes*

Observing their surroundings, some people are able to discern more than others, be it an astute detective, anthropologist, or martial art master. In *Keppan* readers experience the unfolding of a thriller that sparkles with minutiae that punctuate the story. Few have the depth of academic perspective and actual barehand combative experience to create such captivating fiction as Dr. John Donohue—a master at wielding swords and words.

—*Michael DeMarco, Taiji instructor, publisher of The Journal of Asian Martial Arts, CEO Via Media Publishing, author of Wuxia America*

*Keppan: The Blood Oath* is a masterfully written martial arts thriller by a true master of the martial arts. John Donohue blends philosophy, action, and New York grittiness throughout this tale featuring his protagonist Connor Burke. It's a riveting read for not only martial artists, but for anyone who enjoys a suspenseful, page-turning thriller. Highly entertaining!

—Alain Burrese, JD, author, martial artist

The Burke series captured my imagination. Donohue masterfully uses his knowledge of martial arts and storytelling abilities to draw the reader in, respectfully representing Japanese martial arts culture while telling a fantastic story. This is a series I will read again and again.

—Daniel Keupp, chief instructor in the United States for ShinShin Ryu Iaijutsu

A gripping story of Conner Burke, expert swordsman, and the passing of his beloved sensei, Yamashita. As Burke struggles from injuries received defending his teacher's life, he must now contend with outside forces trying to control his dojo and an investigation of a famous yoga teacher's mysterious death.

John Donohue's expertise in the sword arts shines in this powerful story of greed, murder, and swordplay. Besides presenting a page-turning plot, John infuses his work with Japanese combat wisdom that fans of martial arts action will find fascinating.

—Loren W. Christensen, Portland police officer (ret.), martial artist, author of *Dukkha: Sam Reeves thriller (series)*



KEPPAN  
THE BLOOD OATH

Also by John Donohue

*Sensei*

*Deshi*

*Tengu*

*Kage*

*Enzan*



JOHN DONOHUE

KEPPAN  
THE BLOOD OATH

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*For Dan Keupp Sensei  
Master of the Ryushinkan:  
Yamashita would approve.*

Out here . . .  
In the old man-killing parishes  
I will feel lost,  
Unhappy and at home.

—*Seamus Heaney*

# PROLOGUE

*He set aside the agitation of the day and entered the discipline of complete quiet. As the old guru had told him, preparation and persistence were all. The room was dark and silent, but he could sense worries swirling around him—the seemingly endless demands, conflicts, and reversals of his business that increasingly left him feeling overwhelmed. But he had set himself on this course of practice and it seemed the more that he pursued the awakening of Kundalini, the coiled inner power, the more he felt overwhelmed by the day and the greater his yearning for the night. Here, in the dim silence, he forced himself to ignore his worries and lose himself in pranayama, the exercises of breath control.*

*With time, the swirling cloud of worries dissipated, and he moved into the series of postures laid out in Vinyasa. He flowed slowly and cautiously so that haste would not break the calm that, with growing strength, began to flow over him. The yogic postures were old and familiar things, but the sequence of postural change the old guru had given, along with the exotic Ayurvedic herbs, seemed to enhance his perception. It was a new and challenging experience, but he warmed to the exercise, and decades of practice created a smooth flow to his movements, despite the strain.*

*He could sense the coolness of the evening against his warm skin, feel the steady linkage between motion and breath. The night was still, and he felt himself simultaneously rising and falling as his awareness sharpened. His heart thudded steadily, a living cadence for his actions. His breath moved in and out like the tide.*

*He set himself in padmasana, the lotus position, spine erect and*

*his hands in the wisdom gesture known as jnana mudra, resting on his knees with palms up and the thumbs and first fingers touching. He waited in complete stillness. Then, cautiously, his breath moved, and the Gurmukhi chant began to rumble in his chest, welling up and out through his voice, a sacred chant repeated with each exhalation, over and over again.*

*This was the critical time. He had built up to it over many days, purifying his intent and intensifying his practice. Now he gave himself over to the words of the chant that filled both him and the cloak of darkness, the noise swelling and swirling around him.*

*Then the tingling began: a feeling like an electric current rising up his spine. It grew in strength, and he struggled to keep his breath deep and regular, to keep the chant measured and smooth as he experienced the alarming surge of power. His heartbeat quickened, and he noted his anticipation and excitement, but did not focus on it, letting the awareness float up and bubble away.*

*The power uncoiled from deep within him. It rose up. He breathed. He chanted. He felt the awakening growing in strength. His heartbeat grew faster as his body reacted to the sensation that started to surge through him. He lost the rhythm of breathing, a stutter that briefly wrecked his focus, but he worked through it. This is why the training was so long and so vital. He mastered himself once more and the sensations returned. The heart thudding in measured tempo, the breath moving smoothly.*

*The awakening of Kundalini was a powerful event, and the unprepared were at great risk. This was a point that the old guru had stressed to him.*

*The spine tingled again, and he felt a sensation like a cool breeze pass across his palms and the upturned soles of his feet. The current crawled around his spine, rising, growing stronger. His*

*heartbeat sped up and then began to grow erratic. The cool breeze began to change: there was heat on his hands and feet. Heat deep within him, climbing, expanding.*

*He breathed, working to control the sensations, feeling his heartbeat grow jagged. The chant became a low growl as all his control became focused on the thing that was happening inside him.*

*There was sweat, deep rasping breaths. His muscles began to twitch involuntarily. He worked to center himself, struggling to contain the experience. His eyes opened wide, his breath sawed in and out. He tried to remember the old guru's instructions. His chest hammered; his breathing grew desperate. The heat grew, and his awareness expanded painfully into . . .*

### Darkness

I jerked upright in bed, not sure what I had heard out in the night. It could have been a car door slamming, the bang of a truck hitting a road seam on the distant highway, or a cat yowling in pain or desire. It didn't matter. My heart hammered, and I was dappled with sweat. My eyes were wide open, searching the night for dangers that existed mostly in my head.

"It's called hyperarousal," the therapist had said. "The sorts of things you're experiencing: feeling tense, the difficulty sleeping, being easily startled." She had given me a small, reassuring smile. "With what you've experienced, it's perfectly understandable." Her voice was warm and calm. She was a scientist and believed that naming something was the same as knowing it, that corralling up my symptoms and pinning them in a cluster to the relevant entry in the DSM-5 was tantamount to curing me. She was sincere and caring and patient.

I wanted to punch her really hard.

But that's just another symptom. They weren't sure whether it was Acute Stress Disorder or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: "time will tell," she said soothingly, "let's work on getting you better."

I had swallowed my anger and nodded with resignation. During the day, I'm working on it and the symptoms seem to be better, but at night all bets are off. Sometimes I sleep soundly. Other times I rocket into wakefulness and my heart is beating a call to arms and I hear the shooting all over again in my mind.

I smell Yamashita's blood. My sensei.

I rolled out of bed, shaky and off-balance. I padded out to the rear of the house where there is a room with a bare floor and no furniture except for the low table with a wooden stand that cradles the black slash of a sheathed sword. Yamashita gave me that sword and taught me how to use it. Now, I teach others and the action is both a constant reminder that my sensei is gone and tangible proof that in some ways he never will be.

I sat down on my heels in the dark, slick with sweat, and tried to calm the wild beating of my heart. When the dreams come or memory surges through me and creates this panicked wakefulness, I take refuge in some of the first things my teacher had shown me long ago: the discipline of the breath, the power of the mind to yoke the body into obedience.

But my breathing was ragged. I shivered. I wished that, somehow, my sensei would speak to me.

But he never does, at least in the ways I wish. I sat there in silence until dawn came and the monsters in my head went back into hiding.



# CHAPTER 1

Daytime brings its own challenges. A Saturday morning class and they were all there: three ranks of expectant, eager students in the deep blue uniform of traditional Japanese sword arts. They kneeled, motionless, the white oak training swords resting by their left sides. To even gain admittance to this training hall, they had spent years mastering other arts. Some had been battered on judo mats, others on the hardwood floors of karate dojo. But they all had the keen eyes of fighters: they knew how to see, not just look.

And, knowing that, my job today was to fool them.

The dojo where we studied the Yamashita-ha Itto Ryu had been conjured up by the sheer will and mastery of our old sensei, Yamashita. His choice of location for the dojo—Red Hook in Brooklyn—was a puzzler, as was his seeming commitment to ply his art in obscurity. He was the closest thing the New York City area had to a real master of the old school martial arts, and yet he made no move to advertise his presence and admitted students only grudgingly. But over the years word had spread and each person in this room had eventually heard of Yamashita. We had all knelt before him with written introductions, trying to calm our nerves, asking to be accepted as students. The few who made it were forever changed. He was a brutally relentless teacher, a conjurer, but also a surrogate father of sorts. His mastery of his art was total; but it was his knowledge of each of our flaws and our potential that was most frightening. His death had rocked us all, but I felt it perhaps

more than any of the other students. And it was not simply because I was there on that cold December morning, in the chaos and noise—when he had surrendered his life to protect us. It was because, in his passing, he had laid a heavy burden upon me.

Every dojo needs a sensei: I was the one chosen to take his place.

Even on my best days, I'm not sure I'm up to it. I trained with the man for years, knew the level of his skill and the depth of his insight. I've struggled to emulate him, to take his lessons and make them my own. But even though I've learned to move like my teacher, and some of the students say I've even started to talk like him, I feel a nagging doubt. No matter how hard I try, I'll never be Yamashita's equal. My own failings press on me with a gravity made more powerful by my shame: because when the gunfight erupted on a cold December morning, I lived, and he did not.

And, of course, there are the wounds. Very few people in the room where Yamashita died had escaped unscathed. For some, it was simply the thrumming psychic aftershock of fear, pain, and sadness. Others had additional, more prosaic injuries. The gunshot damage meant that it took me over a month simply to be able to hobble with a cane and, six months later, I was still in physical therapy trying to regain full functionality. It's frustrating. I know on a cognitive level that it will take time for the muscle tissue to heal and stretch to the point where I can move without the pull and burn that is with me every day like a bad memory. But Yamashita's dojo has never been a place for the walking wounded. And the sensei is supposed to be someone to imitate, not to pity.

So, when I am in the dojo in front of the students, I smother

any outward sign of pain. I carefully choreograph my movements, hiding my limitations. I make my face a mask, haughty and impassive, and fool them all. *Look*, my expression lies, *I have no limitations. I am in complete control. I am the sensei.*

They all knew I had been shot, of course. They had seen me hobble into the dojo after a stint in the hospital. But that was months ago and while on a rational level they could acknowledge that healing takes time, on an emotional level, their expectations were for a reassurance of continuity. What they wanted from me was what they had wanted from Yamashita: they wanted to be amazed, to be challenged, to be inspired.

And if trying to live up to these expectations meant that my hip joint felt like it was filled with ground glass when I moved a certain way and my muscles twanged and cramped up, making my stomach tense with the effort it took not to groan, then that was what I owed them. It was what I owed him.

Besides, today we had visitors.

Asa Sensei looked at me. “So. You see the problem.”

He had brought some of his advanced students for a lesson, and we were both standing, watching them at work. It was an honor of sorts: Asa is a highly ranked *kendoka* who also practices *iaido*, the art of drawing and cutting with the *katana*, or Japanese sword. The art has connections with the older systems of swordplay that flourished in the overgrown garden of Japanese fighting systems, and *iaido* was a relatively new shoot grafted onto ancient stock.

Asa was leery of the tendency of modern *iaido* to lose some of its older, rougher flavor. He said that he brought his students to me so “they could be reminded of *iai*’s more elemental roots.” It was an elegant turn of phrase. He was, after all, an

elegant man. He knew, like all of us in that room, that the sword arts were tools for the pursuit of higher things. But at heart, Asa shared the insight given to me by Yamashita: the sword is simply a blade. It may be curved and polished, dressed up with metal fittings and silk wrappings. But don't get lost in the metaphysics; at its heart it has been sharpened so you can use it to hack at things.

Which is where I came in.

To an outsider, Asa's students didn't look much different from my own. They were dressed in the traditional uniforms of Japanese swordsmanship, working diligently through the solo exercise of sword *kata*. They were serious, focused, and intent. Their technique was solid and to see them in the act of drawing, cutting, and then sheathing the sword was a real pleasure: they were elegant and fluid. But there was of course an issue. We had been watching for some time and I hadn't said a word. I had more respect for Asa than to point out their flaws.

But eventually he brought it up by asking me whether I saw the problem. We both knew I did. I looked at Asa and gave a small shrug, rocking my head back and forth. "The *nukitsuke* and *noto* are solid," I offered, referring to the actions of drawing and then sheathing the blades. I was trying to ease my way into a critique.

"And yet," he prompted.

"It's a subtle thing," I said.

Asa smiled faintly in amusement. "Is that so?" I didn't reply immediately, so he continued. "Really, Connor, at this level of training, most refinement is subtle. I brought them here for a reason, you know." He motioned me farther from the students. "It *is* a subtle thing, and I have been trying to make them aware of it." His tone suggested he had not been completely successful.

“They’re *kendoka*,” I said, “they should understand about *zanshin*.” The word refers to a type of focus that is supposed to continue even after a technique is completed.

“*Zanshin*,” Asa sighed. “A thing best learned while fighting. But all their fighting is with bamboo staves, not real swords.” I nodded in agreement. Kendo students spar with bamboo foil called *shinai*.

“So, you want me to show them?”

Asa smiled faintly, but there was something feral in the expression. “For many of them, *iai* seems tame, without the excitement of a kendo bout. They go through the motions of the *kata*, but I am not sure they are convinced of its merits.”

“You want them convinced?”

Asa sighed. “Sometimes a sensei’s voice is so familiar that it is not always heard clearly.” He paused in thought. “I want them to experience something that will wake them up.”

“You could do it.”

“Of course. But I am an old man who started his training over sixty years ago. But you . . . you are one of them. It will seem more attainable seeing such skill from one so young.”

I almost laughed. I wasn’t feeling very young that morning and perhaps Asa knew that. But he was looking for a favor and I couldn’t say no. And in the back of my mind, I wondered: was it possible that Asa wanted me to show him something as well?

With Yamashita’s passing, there had been some consternation among the local hard-core Japanese sensei when I took over the training hall. It’s nothing new: the Japanese have many delightful characteristics, but they also harbor a deep chauvinism that fosters a belief that outsiders can never truly grasp the essence of their culture. They feel that there are subtleties that escape round eyes like me.

*Subtleties.* Maybe my choice of words and Asa's echo was what got me wondering. He was a close friend of Yamashita and had, in time, come to a grudging acceptance of my role as Yamashita's senior student. But with Asa, as with Yamashita, the world is viewed through the lens of the swordsman, where every event was a type of test.

I sighed inwardly. But it was a rueful acknowledgment of a situation I had been in before.

So, I went to give Asa's students a lesson.

Every fight is an exercise in reaction and counter-reaction. Two opponents have an almost infinite series of potential moves they can make, conditioned only by the limits of human physiology and the weapons being employed. The *kata* of *iaido* are more limited: they are solo forms that are meant to be both exhibitions of specific technique and a distillation of a particular set of actions. They tell a story: a swordsman draws and cuts laterally at an opponent, who dodges back to avoid the blade. The attacking swordsman adjusts forward, bringing his sword around, point to the rear to ward off a possible second attacker, then raises his weapon and executes a decisive vertical cut, cleaving the opponent in front of him. Since it is choreographed and the sequence of actions never varies, the pitfall of an *iaido kata* is that it becomes a dead, and not a deadly, thing: a story without suspense, since each move is known beforehand.

In Yamashita's dojo we practice *kata* as well, but with a difference. The swordsman is required to always remain open to a break in the *kata's* pattern, to be alive to the fact that the action may not unfold as anticipated. Particularly in paired exercises, Yamashita's dictum has always been, if you can break the pattern and take your opponent's sword, do so. Your job

is to fight, not to cooperate, and if the opponent's moves lack focus, if the sword becomes "dead," then you have an obligation to point that out to your opponent in the most direct way possible. The demonstration typically involves bumps, bruises, and hard feelings.

Subtleties, yes. Niceties, no.

I called the class to a halt, and they crouched down as I paced in front of them and spoke about dead blades and live blades, focus and *zanshin*. They watched me patiently, but they had all been banging around the martial arts for years; they had heard all this before.

And this is where my cunning began. Some might call it lying. Years ago, Yamashita had introduced me to another way of describing it: *heiho*, or strategy.

In the more traditional schools of Japanese arts, there is not a lot of explanation and discussion. This comes as a shock to outsiders, who have seen way too many movies and have ingested far too much New Age philosophy. Seeing actual training always comes as a rude surprise to these people, since once you get beyond the fancy costumes and archaic weaponry, what you see is very serious, generally silent people who are grimacing and sweating and practicing the same thing. Over and over. And over.

No talk about Bodhidharma. No daydreaming about intrinsic energy or endless discussion about authentic selves and centering. If you want conversation, go to Starbucks. There is, in fact, an unstated but deeply held belief in the dojo that people who talk a great deal about martial arts don't do them very well. We've all seen these types of people: they arrive with stories of the dojos they've been to, opening chewed-up duffle bags that rattle with the sound of inferior quality wooden weapons.

Their bags contain a multinational selection of training uniforms and a tangled rainbow of rank belts casually yet purposefully on display. The whole thing looks to most of us like a sad collection of souvenir mementos from the kiddie ride in Martial Arts World: been there, done that, got the belt.

They come for a while, eager to talk and impress, looking for someone to engage in conversation. We tolerate them for a while because at any given time maybe 90 percent of anyone who walks into a dojo won't stay long enough to learn anything, and most of us have given up trying to predict who the persistent ones will be. But generally, the talkers don't last. They get quieter and quieter as training heats up. They eventually either get comfortable with a conversation conducted in grunts and hisses or they fade away and we're all glad for the peace and quiet.

So, the little discourse I was giving to Asa's students that day was designed to play on this attitude. And I stretched the discussion out far longer than I needed to. It was easy enough to do: I have a doctorate in East Asian History and a mind cluttered with arcane (and I have come to realize, largely useless) knowledge. There's a reason why people say PhD stands for Piled Higher and Deeper.

As I spoke to the class, I could see the look of their eyes change: doubt was fogging their vision. *Is this guy for real?*

It was exactly where I wanted them. Some of my own students lingered in the back of the class, smiling quietly to themselves. They weren't fooled. Not anymore. But Asa's students were my targets today.

So, I called the class to order, and they stood up. I chose one of Asa's students.

"*Mae*," I said, naming the first *kata* they were practicing. "I



need everyone to see, so we'll do it standing up, OK?" *Mae* typically begins from a seated posture. It was true that I thought the class would see better if we were standing, but I was also pretty sure my hips couldn't take the strain of the seated exercise. Lying? *Heiho*?

"I need you to stay focused and stay alert, OK?" I told him. He was a big, burly swordsman, and he loomed over me. Tucked in the belt at his side was a sheathed training sword about three feet long. I stood facing him, holding a wooden replica of a *wakizashi*, the short sword of the samurai. Unlike my opponent, I'm not particularly tall or muscular or impressive. I stood there, a short guy with a short sword, smiling at him.

He smiled back and nodded his understanding. "*Hai*," he answered. Yes.

Asa's student began the *kata*, reaching across with his right hand to begin drawing the blade from its scabbard. It arced out across him, a lateral cut from his left to right, that stopped with the tip pointing in my direction. It was a good cut, nicely executed, and the blade came to a stop exactly as it should have.

Which was the problem that both Asa and I saw. With the first cut executed, the swordsman's next move is to sidle forward, simultaneously thrusting the sword over his left shoulder to counter any potential attack from behind and to prepare for the finishing cut to the imaginary opponent in front. For a split second at the conclusion of the first move, the sword was dead. The swordsman assumes that the first cut has unbalanced the attacker in front, which permits the next sequence of action.

But in my experience fighting is largely a game of "what if?" What if your attack fails? What if the thing that you expect to happen doesn't? These are the kinds of things that can give you bad dreams: nightmare scenarios where the attacker keeps

coming, the blow fails, where nothing seems to work.

Being aware of the danger of possibility is what keeps the sword alive.

When Asa's student completed his cut, I saw the gap in his focus. The next steps were obvious: instead of dodging back away from the arc of his sword's cut and staying where it was safe, I shot forward inside his weapon's strike radius. The initial propulsion comes from the left leg, but even so I felt my right leg cramp with pain as I moved. *Ignore*. My momentum kept me going and I reversed my grip on the short wooden sword, holding the blade portion and wielding the thicker handle like the business end of a hammer.

I brought it down on the man's fist, right at the juncture where the thumb met the hand. It wasn't a crushing blow—I'm not a sadist—but it broke his grip. The sword clattered to the floor, and it was a simple thing to pivot around and get him into a joint lock. Even so, he fought me on it and the limitation in my right leg meant I was not as stable as I should have been. So, as he pushed against me, I let him do it. As he straightened up, I kept pivoting, coming up behind him. My leg felt like it might give out, but his momentum was helping me, so I grabbed his shoulders and continued his movement. In an ideal world, I should have kicked him behind the knee to help collapse him, but I didn't think I could risk standing on one leg. In the end, it didn't matter; I brought him down on his back with a satisfying thud.

He came back up. And I held up a hand to make him pause.

"Your turn." I handed him the wooden sword and took a bokken from a rack on the wall. The practice swords of *iaido* are generally not sharp—beginners have an unfortunate tendency to slice the web of their hand between thumb and forefinger

when sheathing a sharpened blade—but even so, facing someone with a metal sword can be intimidating. I didn't want any doubts from Asa's students, any appearance that I was giving myself an unfair advantage.

So, I used the wooden sword and began the sequence of *Mae* as it had just been performed. The guy knew what was expected of him and was looking for payback of a type, so I could see him getting ready to jump toward me after the first cut. But my sword was alive. I performed the first lateral cut exactly as it should have been but maintained focus on my opponent. As he began to move in, I simply brought the sword down into the middle position, the point of my weapon facing him and forestalling any action. Nobody likes to get impaled on a sword, even a wooden one. I set myself like a rock, the tip of the bokken pointed at his throat, my eyes sharper and my expression implacable. I let him try a few times, but he couldn't get past me. I was relieved, since my muscles were urgently signaling that they were not up to anything but relative immobility. Fortunately, after years of training, I have mastered the technique of doing little, but threatening a great deal.

"So," I finally told Asa's students. "A simple thing, yes?" My voice sounded a little raspy, even to me, but I soldiered on. "Keep the sword alive. Form is good. Function is better." I bowed to my opponent and felt the cord of muscle in my lower back tighten in advance of a spasm. I waved at them to continue with their training and Asa nodded at me in satisfaction. *Lesson complete.*

By the time we knelt at the end of the session my right side was a mess. I kept my face impassive and moved slowly down into *seiza*, the formal seated position. *Breath, remember*

*the breath*, I thought. I had noticed an unfortunate tendency on my part to hiss when the muscles cramped up. I sat immobile through the ending ceremony, with Yamashita's old friend at my side. The students bowed to Asa and to me. I inclined my torso forward to return the honor, trying not to wince. Then, unexpectedly, Asa moved in front of me and bowed low, thanking me on behalf of his students for today's lesson. I bowed back, surprised at this unusual gesture, but then noticed the look in his eye.

Asa moved his chin slightly toward me. His mouth barely moved. "Get up," he whispered.

Given the way my muscles were acting, getting up without looking hobbled was going to be a problem. There was going to be a point when the hip and thigh muscles locked up and my right leg dragged forward, turning what was supposed to be a smooth and dignified motion into a stagger. I knew it and Asa knew it, despite my best efforts at disguising the pain. By kneeling in front of me, however, Asa was going to block some of my movements from direct view of the class. It wasn't much, but it was enough. I had practiced the motion of sitting and standing in front of a mirror for months. During that time, I watched myself carefully, cataloging the points at which my mouth twitched with pain, or my eyes narrowed in difficulty, and I had learned to mask these tics. Mostly. I had been proud of my ability to disguise my limitations, and so now when I made it to my feet and straightened up, I felt relieved and curiously proud. *Ta da! The gimpy sensei.*

I bowed to Asa. "Thank you."

He nodded and rose to his feet. "Thank you, Burke Sensei."

It was the first time he had ever called me that.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**John Donohue** has been banging around dojo for more than 40 years. He's an expert on the study of the martial arts.

Fascinated with the themes of human action and potential he uncovered in his research, John began thinking about the fictional possibilities inherent in the world of the martial arts. He began working in earnest on *Sensei*, the first Burke/Yamashita thriller, released in 2003. The sequel, *Deshi*, was published in 2005. The third "burkebook," *Tengu*, was published in Fall 2008. The fourth book in the series, *Kage*, was released in 2011. The fifth book in the series, *Enzan*, was released in 2014.

John has always been fascinated with other cultures and was attracted to the Asian martial disciplines because of their blend of philosophy and action. He began studying Shotokan Karatedo in college. He joined practical training with more formal education, completing 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* (1991).

John has worked in the hospitality, advertising, and publishing industries, but for the bulk of his non-writing career he has been a higher education professional, working as both a teacher and senior level manager at a number of colleges—strapped, as he says, to the wheel of administrative karma.

During that time he continued to think about and do martial arts. He wrote *Warrior Dreams: The Martial Arts and the American Imagination* (1994) as a companion piece to *The Forge of the Spirit*. Always interested in the spiritual dimension

of martial training, he wrote *Herding the Ox: The Martial Arts as Moral Metaphor* (1998). Fascinated with the process of learning the modern Way of the Sword (kendo), he wrote *Complete Kendo* (1999). He also edited a book of martial arts readings, *The Overlook Martial Arts Reader, Vol. 2.*, published in 2004. John is also the author of many articles on the martial arts. Fusing the way of the pen and the way of the sword, while writing John 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.

## PRAISE AND AWARDS FOR THE CONNOR BURKE SERIES

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**JOHN DONOHUE** is the author of the award-winning Connor Burke martial arts thrillers *Sensei*, *Deshi*, *Tengu*, *Kage*, and *Enzan*. He is an anthropologist, a nationally recognized expert on martial arts culture, and a higher education professional of over thirty-five years. John Donohue is a black belt in karate, kendo, and iaijutsu and resides near New Haven, Connecticut.

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