

How Stirling Silliphant, One Of The 20th Century's Greatest Writers, Became My Mentor

Chapter 2 of 8 A Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins with a Single Step

By John Corcoran

“Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.”

—T. S. Eliot, poet

As an avid movie buff from the time of childhood onward, I knew who Stirling Silliphant was, all the way back to his creepy “Village of the Damned” in 1960. His screen credits always seemed to be as large as the screen itself and were plastered all over TV shows and movies I — and my generation — grew up with.

Stirling’s name really hit home with me as a teenage karate practitioner back in my hometown of Pittsburgh, PA. “Black Belt” magazine had been touting Bruce Lee regularly in its pages ever since he had co-starred in the 1966-67 TV series, “The Green Hornet,” and I read every issue of “BB” like it was the bible.

Stirling, who was then training privately with Bruce, wrote a nice part for him as a mob henchman in 1969’s detective drama, “Marlowe,” including a fantastic scene where Bruce demolishes the detective’s office in a ballet of directed violence. (Among other projects, Stirling also wrote Bruce into a co-starring role in the 1970-71 TV series, “Longstreet,” in which Bruce generated more fan mail than the series’ star, James Franciscus.)

Also in ‘69, “BB” published another article about Bruce teaming up with Stirling and actor James Coburn on a dream project called “The Silent Flute.” The picture has a long history in its on-again, off-again march to reality on the silver screen in 1978 and it’s covered in sharp detail in my friend Nat Segaloff’s biography of Silliphant. (I’ll address my strange connection to this film in later chapters.) This dream project favored Bruce in an extraordinary way; in it he would play *five* different roles.

Seeing the pictures of Bruce and Stirling together in that “BB” article further sharpened my interest in Stirling. To me, his image exemplified the successful

Hollywood writer. All of the magazine’s buzz about various martial arts films and the exciting champions fighting in major California karate tournaments underlined my personal reasons for eventually moving from Pittsburgh to Los Angeles, the martial arts mecca, in late 1972. I arrived with dreams of being a professional writer and, within nine months, became one!

Staying One Step in Front of “Starving Artist”

For you to understand what it took me to reach the point of actually connecting with Stirling, I must first explain my situation and the challenges I faced when the idea of approaching him first hit me.

After serving as an editor of “Black Belt” and “Karate Illustrated” (1973-74) and “Professional Karate” (1974-75), I became the first professional full-time freelance writer in the martial arts field (late 1975 to late 1979). This was a tough way to try to make a living. I cranked out a ton of articles for various U.S.-based magazines in my genre, which, given the low pay scale at the time (\$150-\$200 per article), was certainly insufficient to pay the bills. To some extent, I got to know the meaning of the dreaded term “starving artist” first-hand.

Fortunately, my youthful drive and ambition exceeded my income. So, I set new goals to pursue a whole series of sideline ventures to prop up my earnings. Little did I realize that I would have to pioneer and/or elevate just about every literary aspect in my industry just to make a decent living. It was one of these side ventures that led me to my first “remote” contact with Stirling Silliphant.

Only a few of my sideline pursuits worked, but most

of them didn't. The worst failure was pitching all manner of mainstream, mass-market magazines on article ideas for martial arts topics and/or prominent black belts and champions. In a seven-year freelancing period, I think I ended up with about a 99% failure rate. (My favorite rejection letter, which today is framed and placed prominently on my office wall, is from the executive producer of "The Twilight Zone" — the second-wave, 1980s version of the classic series — rejecting my purely science-fiction script submission.)

My biggest mainstream breakthrough was a 1981 article about taekwondo master Jhoon Rhee for the weekly "Parade" Sunday supplement. Its circulation was 37-million copies at the time.

I was in the transitional situation when an artist of any type must learn how to deal with abject rejection — or not. Most young writers, during this period of dire straits in their careers, are overwhelmed by failure, give up and move on, typically taking jobs they dislike or even hate. Not me. I had other irons in the fire.

Never Give Up!

One life skill that superior martial arts training instills in a student is to never quit! As a karate black belt, I was imbued with that quality from my years of training. I learned karate the hard way, through rugged, injurious workouts under tough ex-military instructors, during the pioneering period of karate's expansion from Asia to America now "affectionately" referred to as the "Blood-and-Guts Era."

Back then, as opposed to today's streamlined, sophisticated martial arts classes, the training was intentionally geared to weed out the weak so that only the strong survived. The students were almost exclusively adult males and you sparred without the benefit of any protective equipment or concern for weight/size differential. When you earned a black belt back then, as I did, you *really* deserved it.

As author Robert H. Schuller put it so perfectly, "Tough times don't last, tough people do." So, when I failed at one thing or another in my early literary career, I moved on to try something else. Here's what worked:

1) All of the freelance articles I wrote were about the

biggest American stars in the martial arts. Thanks to the martial arts movie boom created by Bruce Lee from 1972-75, martial arts magazines were now published throughout the world in different languages. Recognizing a unique opportunity, I became the first martial arts writer in America to "syndicate" my articles, selling them to foreign martial arts genre magazines around the world. Thus, I could write one article and sell it multiple times in different languages. At the height of these efforts, I sold one article — my exclusive overview of Elvis Presley's 18-year martial arts involvement, following his death — in six languages.

2) When I wrote the hottest breaking story in my field, which many times I did as a dedicated and well-connected journalist, I forced the American editors/publishers to pay me as much as \$500. At the same time, martial arts magazines always paid writers "upon publication," which could mean as long as six months after submission. For the "hot" stories I wrote, I forced them to pay me "upon acceptance" — often reluctantly and, occasionally, accompanied by profanity.

3) I took a part-time job with the Professional Karate Association (1976-79), one of the two main sanctioning bodies that pioneered the sport of kickboxing. Besides working on the promotions of its major televised championship fights, I wrote the publicity kits that helped build Bill "Superfoot" Wallace, the PKA's superstar champion, into a mainstream-media sports star.

4) I started taking screenwriting classes at night to learn the craft of writing movies.

5) I launched a side career as a book author with partner and co-author Emil Farkas. Emil was (and is) a bright, ambitious instructor who owns the Beverly Hills Karate Academy and was then known as "Karate's Teacher of the Stars." He taught more celebrities than anyone else in the business at the time and was also very well-connected with powerful movers and shakers from many industries.

Emil wasn't a professional writer, but an excellent idea man and researcher. We were already working on one of his great ideas, an ever-growing manuscript for the first martial arts encyclopedia. In 1976, he pitched me on the concept of writing a simple question-and-answer book covering all aspects of the martial arts. If I would spend three months writing most of the book's

contents on speculation (no pay), Emil would, at his own expense, take the finished manuscript to New York City, the mecca of publishing. There, he would find a good literary agent to represent us who could potentially sell the book to a major publisher.

At that time, major New York publishers rarely published a book in the martial arts genre. So, the prospect of taking our project into the major leagues greatly appealed to me. I finished the book and, true to his word, Emil flew to New York and landed not just a “good” lit agent but a major one, Aaron Priest. Aaron had recently brokered a blockbuster \$1-million deal for syndicated humor columnist Erma Bombeck’s fifth book, “If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?”

After Aaron advised us to pass on the first two immediate offers, within just two weeks Simon & Schuster offered us a \$12,500 advance to seal the deal. The book, retitled “The Complete Martial Arts Catalogue,” was published in 1977. The word “Catalogue” was all the rage in New York publishing at that time, to play off the then huge mainstream success of a book entitled “The Whole Earth Catalogue.” So, regardless of content, many books had that unusual word attached to their titles.

“The Complete Martial Arts Catalogue” was the first question- and-answer book in our industry. It remained active on Simon & Schuster’s backlist for a decade and, ultimately, sold some 65,000 copies! Sales on that scale were considered outstanding for a genre book. The book successfully launched Emil and my careers as authors. It also led to my first two attempts to contact Stirling.

In Pursuit of the Master

While composing the “Catalogue” in 1976, I had intentionally added a few Q&As about Stirling, and added a picture of he and his wife, Tiana, practicing karate together in their uniforms. Now that I was taking screenwriting lessons, connecting with Stirling was continually on the backburner of my thoughts.

By chance, my friend, Grandmaster Jhoon Rhee, the “Father of Taekwondo in America,” was visiting Los Angeles and asked me to pick him up at the airport. We drove straight to L.A.’s Koreatown, where he

treated me to lunch at its finest restaurant. Master Rhee had been a close friend of Bruce Lee’s. Each year in the late 1960s, he brought in Bruce as a special guest at his big national martial arts tournament in Washington, DC.

One of Master Rhee’s students was a gorgeous Vietnamese-American named De Thi Thanh Nga (better known as “Tiana”), whom he introduced to Bruce. Bruce later introduced her to Stirling and, as things turned out, Stirling and Tiana (stage name, Tiana Alexandra) married in 1974. After Bruce left for Hong Kong, Stirling also had trained with Master Rhee in taekwondo.

I knew of these relationships. So, that day at lunch, I asked Master Rhee if he would call Stirling on my behalf to find out if Stirling would consider taking on an understudy. Before we left the restaurant, Master Rhee kindly made the call to his office, but Stirling was out of town on a movie location. So, no-go on this first networking attempt.

But now, a year later in 1977, my “Martial Arts Catalogue” was published and I moved forward to Plan B. I sent a copy of the book and a personal cover letter to Stirling’s office at Warner Bros, inquiring about a possible understudy situation. Any copies of my cover letter are long since lost. But you can read Stirling’s reply to me accompanying this chapter.

Stirling politely fended me off. Other young writers might have seen his letter as yet another rejection. *Are you kidding?* He actually *answered me!* I was ecstatic!



Picture of Stirling and his wife, Tiana, from my book, “The Complete Martial Arts Catalogue.”



WARNER BROS.

Warner Bros. Inc.
4000 Warner Boulevard
Burbank, California 91522
213 843 6000
Cable Address: Warbros

Nov. 3, 1977

Mr. John Corcoran
6530 DeLongpre Ave., Apt. #9
Hollywood, CA 90028

Dear Mr. Corcoran:

I'm sorry it's taken so long to reply to your good letter of September 16, but I only visit my office at Warner Brothers from time to time while I am away on vacation and Mrs. Joy, my associate, holds the mail for me until I do come in.

I really enjoyed reading "The Complete Martial Arts Catalogue" and find it to be a treasure house of information. Thank you for thinking of me and sending it to me.

I do understand you wish to become a screenwriter, but I am afraid that I'm neither equipped for nor able to teach an understudy. My work is intensely private and my life is especially arranged to cut me off from people rather than involving me with them. I know, because of your involvement in martial arts, that you will understand this need for isolation and personal meditation.

I have to confess that I really don't know where to begin to advise you how to start a career as a screenwriter, because for every screenwriter there was a separate beginning and the ways are not only diverse, but infinite.

I realize none of this is of any help to you and I'm sorry about that, but I can only wish you success and hope that you accomplish your goals.

Again, thank you for your fine book.

All best wishes,

Stirling Silliphant

SS/nj



A Warner Communications Company

Stirling's reply to my first letter to him inquiring about a screenwriting apprenticeship with him.