

A NOVEL APPROACH TO THE MARTIAL ARTS

BARRY EISLER USES HIS KNOWLEDGE OF JUDO, KARATE AND BRAZILIAN JIU-JITSU, AS WELL AS HIS 3 YEARS IN THE CIA, TO CRAFT ONE BEST-SELLING BOOK AFTER ANOTHER

by MARC COHEN • photos courtesy of BARRY EISLER

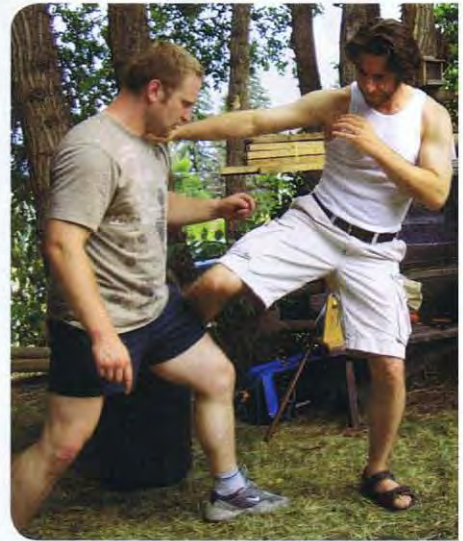
SAY YOU'RE A WRITER WHO NEEDS TO CREATE THE PERFECT SECRET AGENT. YOU BUILD YOUR CHARACTER AS A WEST COAST KID WHO EXCELS IN WRESTLING, RUNS CROSS-COUNTRY AND IS A STRAIGHT-A STUDENT. YOU HAVE HIM STUDY BOXING AND *SHITO-RYU* KARATE WHILE HE'S AN UNDERGRAD TO BOLSTER HIS HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT SKILLS. NEVERTHELESS, HE FEELS AS THOUGH SOMETHING'S MISSING—WHICH IS GOOD BECAUSE IT MOTIVATES HIM TO CONTINUE HIS QUEST TO AUGMENT HIS SKILL BASE.

THE FICTIONAL HERO GRADUATES FROM COLLEGE AND ATTENDS AN IVY LEAGUE LAW SCHOOL. WHILE THERE, HE BEFRIENDS TWO VISITING *JUDOKA* FROM THE KODOKAN AND OFFERS TO SWAP WRESTLING LESSONS FOR JUDO LESSONS. UPON GRADUATING, HE DECIDES HE LIKES JUDO SO MUCH HE'LL TAKE A JOB WITH A LAW FIRM THAT'S PROMISING TO POST HIM TO JAPAN, WHERE HE CAN ENROLL AT THE KODOKAN AND CONTINUE HIS STUDY OF THE GRAPPLING ART.

NOW, TO MAKE THINGS MORE INTERESTING, THE KODOKAN-TRAINED BLACK-BELT LAWYER TAKES A JOB WITH THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY. ... >>



CONGRATULATIONS! THE BACK STORY HAS ALL THE MAKINGS OF A BEST-SELLER—OR EVEN A SERIES OF BEST-SELLERS. READERS ARE SURE TO BE HOOKED. NOW, IF YOU WANT TO REALLY BLOW THEIR MINDS, REVEAL THAT THE LIFE OF YOUR PROTAGONIST, WITH A FEW MINOR MODIFICATIONS, IS REALLY YOUR LIFE. THAT, IN A NUTSHELL, IS THE SERIES OF EVENTS SURROUNDING BARRY EISLER.



WHY did Eisler use his life, with all its twists and turns, as the back story for the hero in his novels? Simple. Because writers tend to write best about things they know well. So when Eisler concocts adventures for his lead character, John Rain, a half-American, half-Japanese assassin who works for the CIA and uses his judo skills in his numerous run-ins with the bad guys, he's familiar with the subject matter. (Well, maybe not the part about being an assassin ...) When he has Rain work out at the Kodokan and other *dojo* around the world to hone his skills, he's writing from firsthand experience.

Funny thing is, as interesting as Rain and his international exploits are, Eisler is even more so. The fictional adventures he creates on paper only hint at the missions he might have taken part in but never talks about. (He will say that his training included seven weeks of paramilitary work and 20 weeks of spy schooling.) Eisler possesses a razor-sharp intellect and wields it like a *katana*, using it to carve out plots and subplots that draw the reader in from Page 1.

From a martial arts perspective, Eisler, like Rain, is a perfect weapon. In addition to having honed his skills in boxing, karate and *jujutsu*, Eisler holds a black belt in judo. Although he's now too busy to roll around on the mat as much as he'd like, whenever his schedule permits, he takes private lessons with the leaders in the industry, including firearms expert Massad Ayoob, SPEAR founder Tony Blauer, adrenal-stress pioneer Peyton Quinn, reality fighters Marc MacYoung and Wim De-meere, and Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* instructor Dave Camarillo.



EISLER'S devotion to grappling blossomed between 1993 and 1994, when he lived in Tokyo. He trained obsessively at the Kodokan, working out five to six days a week, one hour a day in the foreigners' class and another hour in a *randori* (sparring) class. He also took part in the monthly competitions and endured 10 full days of *kangeikou*, or winter practice.

Despite the hardships, he remembers the Kodokan as an awe-inspiring place. People move to Tokyo from all over the world just so they can train there, he says. Why? Because the culture is infused with energy and passion, he says, and the amount of accumulated experience that walks its halls every day is overwhelming. >>

THE JUDO CONNECTION

Members of the U.S. Judo Association's board of directors have begun corresponding with Barry Eisler regarding his literary achievements, such as having won the prestigious Gumshoe Award, and how he's helping publicize judo and the Kodokan. It's their opinion that because of Eisler's efforts, countless readers have been exposed to the art and its headquarters *dojo*, along with the many benefits of training. Gary Goltz, president of the U.S. Judo Association, said the organization plans to honor Eisler for his contributions at one of its upcoming national events.

—Marc Cohen

WITH all the years Eisler has invested in his study of the ways of the warrior as they're embodied in Kodokan judo, classical Japanese jujutsu, shito-ryu karate and Brazilian jiu-jitsu, it's ironic that he owes his life to a decidedly nonviolent teaching he learned on day one.

As any experienced practitioner will attest, the most important lesson of judo is *ukemi*. Loosely translated, it means "body protection." Also known as breakfalling, it's the first thing a student learns because of its paramount importance: It enables you to fall or receive a throw without being harmed by scientifically dissipating the force of the impact. In essence, *ukemi* makes getting thrown a nonevent.

So how did breakfalling save Eisler's life? While he was conducting research for the manuscript that eventually became *Rain Fall*, he wandered onto a Tokyo construction site. Looking around at what would serve as one of the book's settings, he fell through a platform and landed 18 feet below on a bare concrete floor. After writhing in pain for a bit and doing a quick mental check to see whether he was still in one piece, he stood up and asked two astonished onlookers if they could direct him to the men's room. It was a scene that could have come directly from a John Rain book.

In case you're starting to regard Eisler as more than human, he's quick to point out the repercussions of the fall: "Although landing in the *ukemi* position saved me from broken bones and worse, I couldn't sit or lie on my back for almost a month. You would have thought I was in a car wreck. But I was incredibly lucky."

Or just well-trained in judo. ✘

About the author:

Marc Cohen holds a sixth-degree black belt in judo. He's been a fixture in New York judo for more than 45 years, the past 30 of which he's spent as head instructor of the Go Rin Dojo in Long Island. For more information about Barry Eisler and his books, visit barryeisler.com.

PAPER TO SCREEN

Several years ago, Barry Eisler adapted his first book, *Rain Fall*, into a screenplay. "That was a fun and broadening experience," he says. "When it was published, Jet Li optioned the rights. It was very flattering. When that option expired, Barrie Osborne, producer of *The Lord of the Rings*, optioned the first three books."

In 2009 Sony Pictures Japan released its interpretation of the novel. The film featured Gary Oldman as the CIA station chief and Japanese actors portraying the rest of the cast, including protagonist John Rain. "It's very different from the book," Eisler writes on his Web site. "I can't take any credit or blame for the movie because other than selling the rights to the book, I had no involvement."



EISLER, THE EARLY YEARS

Barry Eisler has made a career out of chasing the forbidden arts. As a 10-year-old, his imagination was set in motion by a policeman's revealing quote: "It's fortunate that Houdini didn't turn to a life of crime because if he had, he would've been difficult to catch and impossible to hold."

Eisler began amassing a collection of books espousing forbidden knowledge. "My wife wouldn't let me display them until I got published," he says, grinning. "Now she lets me put things like *21 Techniques of Silent Killing*, *Escape From Controlled Custody* and *Kill Without Joy!* on the shelves because she can always tell a curious guest, 'Well, Barry's a writer; it's research.'"

Anyone who's read Eisler's work knows that it oozes realistic martial arts. His ability to incorporate convincing battles into his plots comes from years of experience, all of which began with wrestling. "I recognized early on that wrestling is an outstanding martial art with great self-defense applications," Eisler says.

Like countless other martial artists around the world, he started training because he was fed up with being bullied.

—Edward Pollard



REQUIRED READING, COURTESY OF BARRY EISLER

- Rain Fall* (John Rain's debut)
- Hard Rain* (second Rain book)
- Rain Storm* (third Rain book)
- Killing Rain* (fourth Rain book)
- The Last Assassin* (fifth Rain book)
- Requiem for an Assassin* (sixth Rain book)
- Fault Line* (new hero: Ben Treven, black-ops soldier)
- Inside Out* (sequel to *Fault Line*)

NEXT UP: another Rain book ("It opens at the Kodokan, where John Rain is training again," Eisler says.)