

It's (Only?) a Book

I have a strict policy of never lending a book from my library. This started when I was in Junior High School and was constantly looking forward to the new Scholastic Library book list we'd get in homeroom. Classics for 50 cents! I took advantage of the sale almost every month. Great for my leisure reading and for the "free-choice" book reports we had to do every once in a while.

Billy M. never took advantage of the sales, either because he did not have a lot of extra cash or, as likely, because he avoided reading anything that was not required. One of those "free-choice" book reports was coming up soon and he saw that I had an abridged edition of *Ben Hur* that looked slim enough for him to tackle. He begged me to lend it to him just for a week. "Okay, but make sure I get it back."

"No sweat."

Two weeks later, we met at the WWI statue downtown to get my book back. He was there, a little late, but with the book. Its cover was tattered and he had scribbled in ink on the front and back. When I called him on putting my property through a world war, his attitude was, "Hey, it's only a book."

My attitude was, "What the *HEY* do you think you're doing? This is a BOOK!"

I tried to avoid becoming too compulsive about this policy once I became a sensei. I had the two issues of *Black Belt Magazine* in which Bruce Lee first published his iconoclastic articles and I lent them to a student who not only did not return them, but also did not himself return. My non-lending policy was reinstated in full. To this day, I'd rather *give* you a book from my shelf than lend you one. Take it, it's yours. If I want another copy, I'll buy one. (Unless of course it has my notes in it, in which case you are more likely that I order you a copy on Amazon than allow you to take my copy from my home.)

When a non-martial artist asks you to show him some stuff, for entertainment or so he can learn just enough to protect himself in a dark alley, he is not only showing his ignorance of the traditional martial arts, but also showing disrespect to the study of those arts. His attitude is, "Hey, it's only a martial art," while yours is closer to: "I rather buy you a Derringer than show you the littlest bit of what it took me so long to learn."

Often, people cannot help their ignorance. They can, however, help their attitudes; and a martial artist's attitude about his art will help influence theirs. As the head instructor of a dojo, I tried to keep a professional and respectful attitude about the martial arts, refusing to be hired out for kids' birthday parties as the alternate for a magician or clown. To me, a *budo*, although it can be entertaining, is not primarily entertainment.

I would gladly do a demonstration for a Cub Scout Blue and Gold Banquet as long as it promoted educating the scouts about martial arts. I once agreed to do a Cub Scout demonstration only to find myself entertaining a troop of rowdy boys in blue shirts while the parents retreated to the other end of the hall to drink coffee and light up. I made sure that all future demonstrations would carry the proviso that the adults in attendance were to be in present for this *educational* event.

You can argue that the very reading an *abridged* version of *Ben Hur* shows disrespect for the novelist's creation, but I think getting the essence of an important book into a 13-year-old is more important than making him read all 500 pages. The analogy to traditional budo is that even the most fervent reader (martial artist) can take in only so much of the art at once and may occasionally need an abridged lesson, a shorter week, or a vacation; however, whether one studies his art once or five-times a week, one need not deface it.

"It's only a book," means the book that is returned to you is of little consequence, while, "HEY! This is a BOOK!" means that, abridged or not, the book matters. So too with the martial arts.