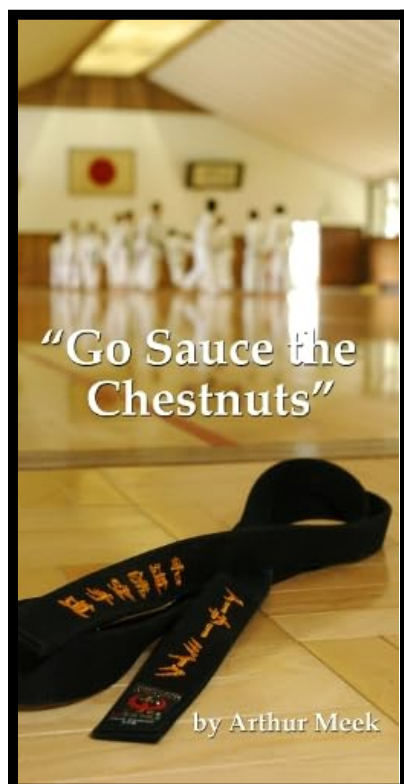


Karate Book Review: *Go Sauce the Chestnuts* by Arthur Meek

Reviewed by: Domenico Capilongo



On the surface, this seems like just another memoir about getting a chance to practice karate in Japan. It is, however, something rather different; much like the author, this book is not pretentious, and it is not trying hard to be anything it's not. It's not about learning karate per se or studying Japanese history or culture. It is, rather, an honest and captivating account of a young man who has a once-in-a-lifetime experience to see if he has what it takes to train in a unique dojo whose main focus is to build strong karate fighters. It's definitely not a self-help, self-aggrandizing "come-train-with-me-because-I'm-great" memoir. This is a must-read for anyone who practices karate but, more specifically, anyone who practices Wado Karate and knows about the famous Nihon University Karate Club, known as Nichi Dai.

The Japanese university karate club system had a profound effect on the history and development of the art. After World War II, universities in Japan began an intensive training network of martial arts and sports clubs, much like the United States' college football or basketball systems. This system made karate competition popular, increased enrollment, and, it can be argued, even influenced its technical development. Nihon University Karate Club, being one of the strongest, practices the style of Wado and has produced some of the most famous Wado instructors in the world, namely T. Suzuki and M. Shiomitsu. Shiomitsu Sensei went on to establish the international organization called the Wado-Ryu Karate Academy, now headed by the acting chief instructor and author of this book.

There are many great things about this memoir, starting with the fact that we are finally allowed into the legendary Nichi Dai dojo. The book chronicles a behind-the-scenes look into the daily training, camaraderie, and unique coaching style of this famous place. What really hooks the reader, though, is found in the epigraph before the story even begins: "Nichi Dai had a reputation; severe training methods that turned out great fighters. Could Arthur handle the heat?" Much like any hero's tale, that is the question: will our hero succeed? Will he make it, or will he drop out and go home? This is what really holds your attention throughout the story.

There are many wonderful, unexpected, and often humorous moments that happen along the way. These are presented as though you are training in the dojo too. This makes it easy to connect to the fish-out-of-water hero who is trying to survive the training, improve his fighting, navigate the language, overcome homesickness, and avoid letting anyone, namely Shiomitsu Sensei, down. The writing style may feel at times like a diary, but then you are reminded that the challenge of navigating the uncertainty of these daily events is the real essence of the story.

This book really resonated with me because of my connection to the author and my time living and training in Japan. I trained in a dojo in Yokohama for two years run by former Nichi Dai students and attended by fresh graduates. I also competed in Japan against this level of fighter. The book reminded me of my time there, as well as my recent lessons with the author, who truly exemplifies the technical and Nichi Dai mindset in both his practice and teaching.

There are many classic takeaway messages in the book: you should always try your best, respect and learn from other cultures, and never give up. What came through most strongly for me, however, was something that Shiomitsu Sensei says often when describing what you need most when you fight. When teaching, he smiles and says, "What you need in kumite is guts!" He describes it as a pushing forward intention, a no-fear mindset, keeping only the attack in mind. I heard this often in my dojo in Japan and again here in this book. You see it on almost every page, especially when the coach is reminding students to never move back while fighting. This is also a great life lesson: give everything you do a forward-looking, full-spirited, and undying focus. Finally, there is much to be learned on a technical level as well. For example, there are many training methods discussed, as well as coaching and mentoring details and wonderful play-by-play kumite moments that any karate reader can learn from.

It is hard to say if an average reader who does not practice karate would enjoy this book; there is so much talk of daily training and technique. However, I brought this up recently at a dojo gathering, and the wife of one of our instructors, who was reading the book herself, said she was enjoying it and really wanted to find out what happens in the end.

Go Sauce the Chestnuts, a title whose meaning you will have to read the book to find out, is a wonderfully fast-paced and engaging look into a legendary dojo and a transformative moment in the career of one of the most important Wado Karate instructors in the world today.

Domenico Capilongo is the author of several books of poetry, *I thought elvis was Italian*, *hold the note*, *send*, and the short-fiction collection, *Subtitles*. His most recent book of poetry is *1972*, is the third-prize winner of the 2024 Di Cicco Poetry Prize. He also recently won an international literary award from Italy. He is a high school creative writing teacher, librarian, and is a 6th Dan in Wado-Ryu Karate. He is the head instructor of the Toronto Wado-Ryu Karate club in Canada.