

'Memoirs of a Karate Fighter' a real kick

Latest of three books by former karate champ

By Stephanie Thiessen
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

As a former British karate champion, Ralph Robb knows what it's like to fight with his hands. Now, as an author of three new books, Robb's learning what it means to fight with words, casting light on the shadows that surround racism, mental illness and other serious topics.

"They're (to provide) entertainment and highlight social issues as well," the Miltonian said about his recently-released books, two of which are fictional, and one that's autobiographical.

With the three books released in Great Britain within a one-year period, it's safe to say this has been an exciting year for Robb.

'Memoirs of a Karate Fighter' is his newest book, which illustrates his fights on and off the mat, including his experiences as one of a very few black residents in an area in which the National Front — a far right political party that opposed immigration and multiculturalism — was very active.

Tragic ending to friendship

Woven throughout the account of Robb's experiences in the world of martial arts is a story about a dear friendship — with Robb's training partner and cousin — that ended in suicide due to mental illness.

Although the book is currently only available in Great Britain, Robb said he hopes to have it released in Canada early in the new year.

At his peak as a martial artist, Robb was a British champion and won a silver medal in the European Championships in the under 21, light heavyweight level.

A number of injuries and other life issues caused him to cease his competitive career in his late twenties. Now, he said, those wins are "irrelevant".

"That's another life. I'm over here now, leading a Canadian life," he said dismissively.

Although the autobiography appears at first glance to be about karate, the sport simply provides a backdrop to serious issues Robb dealt with during his young adult years, he told The Champion.

The autobiography, which takes place

in England, has been in the making for about 15 years and is Robb's first non-fiction work.

Robb said it wasn't easy to write, because it meant making his life an open book — literally — and allowing readers into his mistakes and regrets.

"Writing about yourself is very difficult. You don't want to reveal the inner side of you," Robb said, adding he seldom talks about his years as a karate champ.

One of the regrets he reveals in the book is not being able to help his cousin, who suffered from schizophrenia.

Many people still regard talking about mental illness as taboo, Robb said, and that needs to change.

Robb said he hopes his children will read the book and better understand where their dad came from.

Robb and his wife have four children, aged 23, 18, 16 and 13.

Loves writing fiction

Robb's quick to admit he much prefers writing fiction, and writes under the name of Sylvester Young.

"The characters in my books are amalgamations of people I know," Robb said.

Earlier this year, he published a teen/young adult novel about a black soccer team playing in England, called 'More Than a Game — A Story About Football and Other Stuff'.

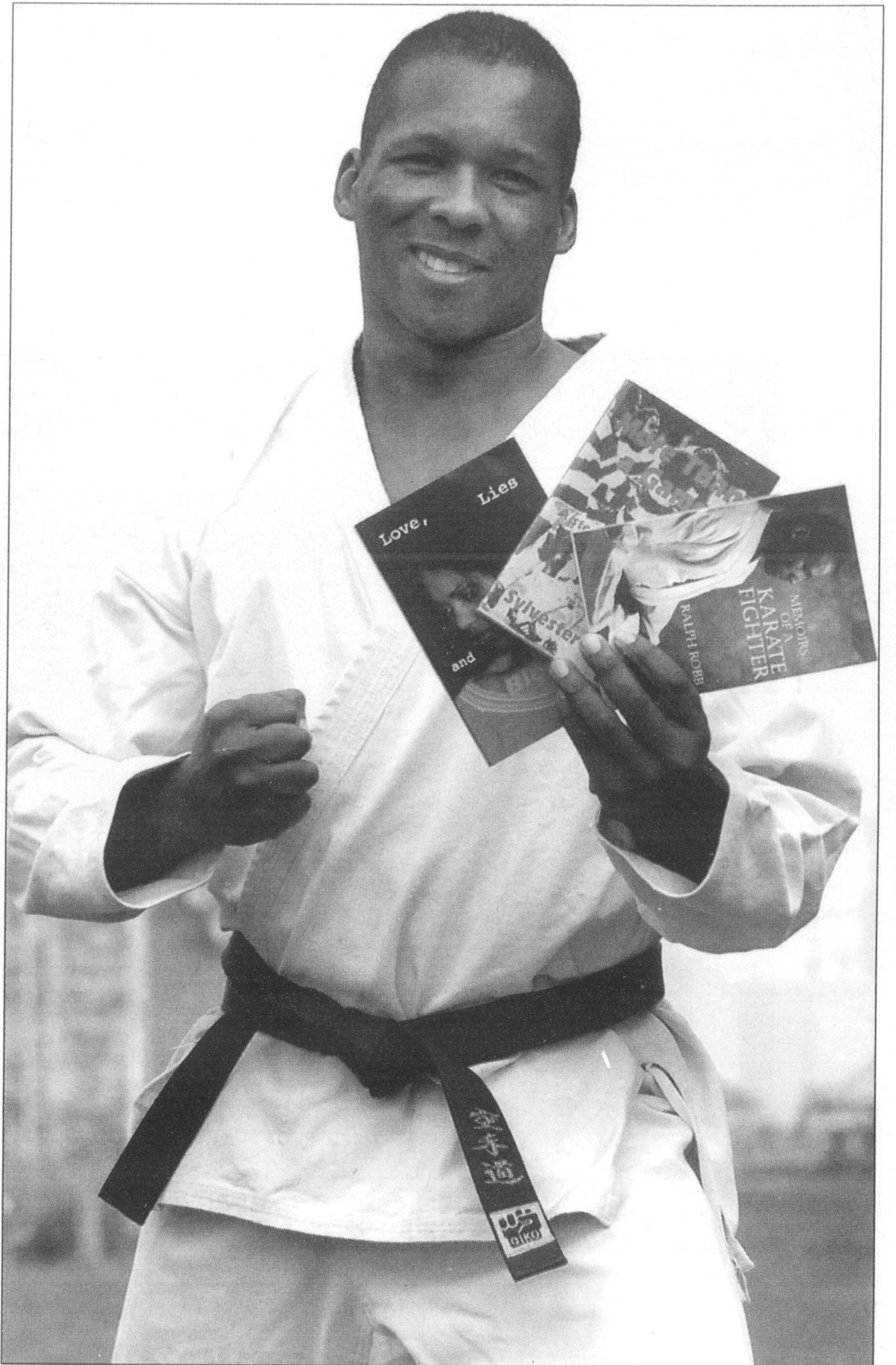
This novel is being used in conjunction with several anti-racism campaigns and schools in Great Britain, something Robb said he's very pleased about.

His second novel published this year, under the fictitious name J.S. Noon, is a thriller he wrote with a friend entitled 'Love, Lies and Bleeding'. It follows the adventures of a Toronto private investigator as she tries to stop a people-trafficker in London.

Robb's books have all been published by an Irish company, Raldon Books, which was started by a friend.

Although Robb's stories are set in England, he said he's very much a Canadian at heart, and has been living in Milton for 12 years now. "I love it here. It's the best country in the world. Canadians don't know it until they travel around and see how others live."

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THEMS FIGHTIN' WORDS: Ralph Robb holds up his three books, including the latest — 'Memoirs of a Karate Fighter'.

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