I considered Michael Winner a friend. Not a friend in the sense that he'd loan me 50 bucks when I was short on rent, but a friend in that his kindness, openness, advice and cheerful nature were inspiring to me, personally.

I like to think I perhaps brightened his day on occasion as well. Maybe there was a mutual appreciation; I'm not quite sure. All I know is that learning of his passing this morning (he died at age 77 after an illness), I feel a great sense of loss. All fans of old-fashioned, unironic, no-nonsense genre filmmaking should too.

Winner, the British-born director turned culinary know-it-all (he enjoyed a second career as a celebrity food critic in London with the *Sunday Times* column "Winner's Dinners"), forged his sensibilities in his homeland on everything from sex comedies to social satires, but it wasn't until he began making American genre films in the 1970s that his name became synonymous with controversy. That, of course, primarily stemmed from his legendary and highly influential 1974 vigilante thriller DEATH WISH, starring Charles Bronson as architect Paul Kersey, who, after his family is viciously assaulted and his wife murdered, decides to bypass the law, get a gun and "cleanse" the streets of its human scum.

DEATH WISH did the opposite of what a horror picture tends to do; while explicit fright films tend to ignite the indignity of the moral right, Winner's outlaw-championing melodrama

outraged the more liberal-leaning populace, who called the film out as an endorsement of "private justice." Those in the middle who just wanted a good, stylish yarn well told couldn't care either way, and insured that the movie raked in lots of green, making already veteran actor Bronson an international superstar and Winner a rough force to be reckoned with.

Predictably, when Winner did try his hand at horror, the results were just as interesting. His 1972 film THE NIGHTCOMERS is a chilling, atmospheric prequel to the classic Henry James ghost story THE TURN OF THE SCREW (first adapted to film as 1961's THE INNOCENTS) that cast Marlon Brando against type in what would be one of his finest roles. And in 1977's lurid theological chiller THE SENTINEL—perhaps one of the scariest films of the 1970s—his utilization of real "freaks" for the hellish climax caused an uproar on both sides of the social fence.

In the 1980s, Winner was embraced by eccentric moguls Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus at Cannon Pictures, and given even freer rein to push the envelope. His belated, bloodsoaked sequel DEATH WISH II came in 1982 and is a textbook of antisocial, ultraviolent problems and reactionary solutions that, typically, had critics railing loudly against not only the movie, but the director himself. The sleazy, Tom Holland-penned 1985 creeper SCREAM FOR HELP was barely released and offered much sex and depravity, while the same year's DEATH WISH 3 saw Winner poke fun at both the franchise and his legacy by delivering a completely over-the-top orgy of gunplay and satire. The film has since become a cult classic.

THE SENTINEL stands as one of the most frightening films I have ever seen, and back in 2008, before I was hired to edit FANGORIA and was putting together a little book about my favorite horror movies, I tracked Winner down via one of his witty food columns and requested an interview, intended to accompany and add context to my essay. Michael responded immediately and was game, giving me what I needed but also suggesting I read his autobiography WINNER TAKE ALL. A week later, that superlative book was in my mailbox, signed and personalized for me. That meant something. I took an interest in his work, and in turn he took some time for me.

I stayed in contact with Michael over the years, and recently, it struck me to do an even longer, career-spanning piece in FANGORIA. The resulting feature ran in FANGORIA #312 and was well-received by readers and Winner himself, who sent me a hard-copy letter thanking us for the “very accurate” interview in our “jolly magazine.” That letter is framed on my wall.

Michael even gave me advice when I was trying my hand at making a feature film, suggesting that I not worry and rather enjoy every minute of the process, because a first picture happens only once. Obvious advice, of course, but it stuck in my head and inspired me, and it’s still there every day because it came from a man who indeed enjoyed every minute of his life, triumphs and tragedies alike. And though many of his friends and contemporaries had passed and he seemed saddled with an ache about days and friends long gone, Michael was still looking to the future—still wanting to perhaps go another round and make another picture, despite battling health issues, some of which stemmed from food poisoning, from cuisine no doubt sampled on the job for his column.

Rest well, Mr. Winner, and thank you for the spark and the great films. There aren’t many like Michael Winner left out there. If you find one, treasure his or her spirit while you can.