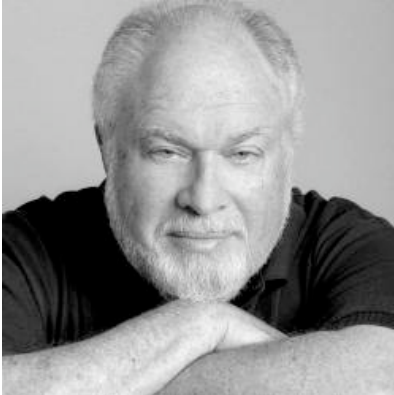


Good Times Home

## Memento Morty

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### *A look back on the adventurous life of Morton Marcus | By Lisa Jensen*

One afternoon in August, 2008, Morton Marcus appeared at our door with a cold bottle of champagne for my husband, Jim Aschbacher, and me. It was unusual for Mort to drink much at all, let alone in the middle of the day, but he wanted to make a toast. "I love you guys," he told us. "I've had a great life."

It was a classy way of telling us the news: his cancer had come back.

The previous October, Mort had undergone intensive surgery no one was sure he'd survive—including Mort. Determined to have the last word, he'd e-mailed out what

he called his "last poem" the night before. But Mort, a onetime boxer and lifelong fight aficionado, bounced back like the champ he was. Declared cancer free that January, he got back to the business of co-hosting "The Poetry Show" on KUSP, the "Cinema Scene" TV show on Community TV, leading bi-weekly film discussions at the Nickelodeon, and editing his upcoming poetry collections. In June, he and his wife, Donna Mekis, were able to take another trip to one of their favorite places on earth, Cavtat, on the Adriatic Coast of Croatia, to complete research on Donna's book about the Croatian community in Watsonville. By the time Mort found out his cancer had staged a dramatic comeback, he figured he'd already received a tremendous gift in those precious extra months; it was a gift that would keep on giving for another year, and more, while Mort, as usual, got on with his busy life.

I always referred to Mort in print as a "poet, film scholar, raconteur, and bon vivant." A born storyteller, he pursued the good life with gusto, always surrounding himself with great company, great talk and, especially, great food. (On top of everything else, he was an avid, intuitive cook.) Well-traveled, well-read, and politically conscious, no one was more aware, or more outraged, by the suffering in the world than Mort. But his response (besides advocating for human rights as poet, teacher, columnist, and union organizer) was to live every day as fully as possible. He was still regaling visitors less than two days before he lost the final round to cancer on the morning of October 28.

When I first arrived in Santa Cruz, Morton Marcus was the most famous person in the world. "The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems" had just been published, his byline appeared regularly in the alternative weekly, Sundaz, and he was a fixture at literary readings all over town. He was also a celebrated and rigorous English instructor, and film guru to generations of awed Cabrillo College students. When I first encountered Mort at Nickelodeon press screenings, in my early years as a film critic, I was too shy to talk to him.

But Mort, like me, was a self-taught film critic. Neither one of us ever went to school to study film; we just went to the movies, every chance we got, throughout our respectively misspent youths. Of course, Mort had seen basically every movie ever made, from all countries and eras, and remembered every shot. (Me, I'm lucky if I can remember what I saw last week.) His knowledge of film history was intimidating, to say the least. I might never have plucked up the nerve to approach him at all if Jim (aka Art Boy) hadn't become an artist. Mort and Donna came to Open Studios one year and bought a painting that Mort loved. Soon, he and Jim were collaborating on a chapbook, then a poster in honor of National Library Week. Mort also commissioned a painting from Jim for the cover of Mort's book, "When People Could Fly."

Collaboration could be challenging with a perfectionist like Mort, who was liable to go nuts over, say, the wrong font. But Jim, the most even-tempered of men, knew how to stay calm, crack jokes when appropriate, and, if extreme measures were called for, top Mort's most egregious puns with groaners of his own. Mort loved it, loved Jim's unerring ability to give him a hard time, and the four of us became

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fast friends.

In 1997, Mort and Donna introduced us to Bruce and Marcia McDougal, who owned the Davenport Cash Store. Back in the '70s, the McDougals had run the fabled ceramics school, Big Creek Pottery, where Mort frequently cooked dinner for the students. Oddly enough, our first meeting did not involve food: Mort wanted us to start watching the PBS 12-part series, *The Ascent Of Man*, on video. (Mort didn't believe in entertainment without educational value.) We started meeting once a month at each other's houses to watch the next installment, but conversation and, inevitably, food, became our primary focus. After 11 episodes, we were too superstitious to watch the last one, as if concluding the series might somehow spell the end of our collective friendship. We never did watch that last episode.

When Bruce and Marcia bought a centuries-old mill house (or moulin) on the River Yonne in the Burgundy region of France, they expected the rest of us to come enjoy it with them. It was an offer not even notorious homebodies like Jim and me could refuse—let alone a world traveler like Mort, especially when the very first trip to Europe the six of us took together began with four days in Paris. As widely read in world history as he was in film, Mort was a marvelous impromptu tour guide, always ready with a compelling tale—real or imagined—about virtually any building or byway encountered. And who else but Mort, while on our way to one of those lengthy, multi-course French dinners at a highly touted Parisian restaurant, would stop to buy a pastry he couldn't resist in a patisserie window?

At the moulin, we all took turns cooking meals we shared on the back porch, overlooking the Yonne—eating, talking, telling each other our life stories, always laughing. A small bridge connected the moulin to a tiny wooded island in the middle of the river full of shrubbery and birds. One day, Mort and I whiled away a quarter of an hour trying to describe the arc of a swallow's flight that did not include the verbs "swoop" or "dip." (We couldn't do it.) Another evening, we all decided to write a mystery together: "Murder at the Moulin," Mort suggested, "or The Corpse in the Copse." Mort's poem, "The Baker's Wife" (in his collection, *Pursuing The Dream Bone*), with its wry, yeasty sensuality, was written during a stay at the moulin, where we all made daily trips to the village boulangerie.

Back home in Santa Cruz, we always watched the Oscars together, where Mort upheld the courage of his predictions, however misguided. He once tried to bet me \$100—during the two seconds the presenter was drawing breath to read the winner—that the juggernaut that was *Million Dollar Baby* would not win Best Picture because it was Martin Scorsese's "turn" with *The Aviator*. I didn't have the heart to take his money.

Mort was generous to other writers and welcomed other viewpoints. When he was invited to the Steinbeck Center to discuss "The Grapes of Wrath," he asked Richard von Busack and me to join him. For five years, he hosted Wallace Baine, Bruce Bratton and myself in an often contentious year-end discussion of the year's best movies for his Saturday morning Nickelodeon audience. He loved that gig at the Nick. Always learning from his audience, he loved it when somebody showed him a different way of looking at a movie. He wanted people to think about movies, not just chow them down like popcorn.

A couple of years ago, Mort asked me to edit an early draft of his 600-page autobiography, "Striking Through The Masks." He listened thoughtfully to my notes, and agreed with every suggestion to break up run-on sentences, and cut out duplicate phrases and other non-essentials. Two weeks later, he called me up. "You'll be happy to know I made all the cuts you suggested," he began cheerfully. "But I added another 40 pages."

That was Mort. So many ideas, projects, passions, it's astonishing that one life could contain them all. Mort professed not to believe in an afterlife, but I'm not so sure. A dear friend, and a vigorous, questing presence in Santa Cruz arts and letters, Morton Marcus lives on in the hearts of everyone who knew him.

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A memorial celebration of the life of Morton Marcus will take place on Saturday, November 7, at the Cabrillo Crocker Theater, from 1 - 3 PM

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written by Ron Slack, November 06, 2009

Hi Lisa,

Really enjoyed reading your article on Morton Marcus. While I never met the man, I was familiar with his work. You really showed the human side of this incredible man, and I appreciate you bringing him to life for me.



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