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A Memoir for Mort

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WEDNESDAY, 05 MARCH 2008 00:00 | [CHRISTA MARTIN](#) [A&E](#) - [LITERATURE](#)



Inside the prolific local poet and writer's latest read, and why it's one of his biggest milestones yet

I have known Morton Marcus, or "Mort" as his friends call him, for many years now, and I've interviewed him numerous times. I can recall two specific interviews in which he helped me enormously in providing an overwhelming amount of information needed for my journalistic assignments. This much I can say about "Mort": He does things in a grandiose way. Whether it's

through his prolific poetry or serving fine cheeses, coffee and baguettes over two hours of conversing about Santa Cruz writers (that's story No. 1) or inviting me to join "The Breakfast Club" (story No. 2) with himself, Sandy Lydon, Geoffrey Dunn, George Ow, Jr. and the late Tony Hill, for waffles and fruit at the Walnut Avenue Café for a series of interviews on a book that Ow published a few years back.

My sense is that it will be no different when I interview Marcus about his upcoming memoir, "Striking Through the Masks." He spent five years working on the book. In nearly 600 pages, he tells dramatic stories about his childhood, happy stories about discovering his gift for writing and everything else in between.

Marcus joins a cadre of friends and fellow writers on Thursday, March 13 at the Holy Cross Parish Hall in Santa Cruz, where they will read from his book, and honor his life and work. The event will include such notable locals as husband-and-wife writing team and long-time friends of Marcus', Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, and James D. Houston, as well as Dunn, Ow, Ellen Bass, Lydon and Deng Ming-Dao. It will be an interesting, large-scale, locally driven literary event, reminiscent of literary days long gone, when groups of writers would gather and share their knowledgeable musings.

It's 10 a.m. sharp when Marcus rolls up in his silver car at his beautiful Westside home. He parks, hops out quickly and apologizes if he's late. (He's not.) In one hand he carries a plastic bag full of morning pastries for us to eat, while we examine his life during an interview. In the other hand, he carries a few copies of an article that was recently published about him.

Marcus is no stranger to getting press. The renowned poet and writer has both written for newspapers and has had plenty of articles written about him. But this time, it's different. He's entering a new phase of his life—the memoir writer.

As Marcus ushers me into the house, the author unleashes his thoughts on why people don't read. Later, as we nosh on the food, I begin to throw hordes of questions Marcus' way—about his childhood, his book, his first poem, his acceptance into the acclaimed Iowa Workshop, attending Stanford University, teaching at Cabrillo College, his interests in film and on and on. But the conversation starts with why people don't seem to be reading anymore.

And from there, the poet answers the only way he knows how—poetically: "No one is reading poetry, few people are reading novels. We're saying good-bye to the book. They (the younger generations) are doing everything visually through television. ... When you read a novel in the 17th or 18th century you didn't have other things to do. And now you've got video games, and these unbelievably stupid and embarrassing reality shows. People don't go out and do real stuff. They don't travel. They're in with their computers. Cell phones and iPods remove you from the world around you. You go out jogging or walking, put on an iPod and you don't hear the birds. You're isolated. It's self-involvement."

If so, then is writing a memoir self-involved? It could be for a lot of people, and for years Marcus has argued against this practice for that very reason. But in the case of "Striking Through the Masks," again, for Marcus, it's a different experience.

"My ego is not really that invested in this," he says. "I never write anything about myself unless it is about everyone else. It seems as though I'm writing about myself but I'm not. The personal has to be the universal."



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“Do I want them (readers) to learn anything about me?” he adds. “I don’t think so. What I want them to do is look at another person’s life and see what that person learned from the world ... especially ideas like empathy and compassion ... concern for your fellow man. There’s a strong moral sense in this book.”

And that “moral sense” is what may set the prolific, respected author apart from other memoir writers. “I think one of the things that has gone wrong with American literature is young writers have become so self-involved and all they write about is their dysfunctional family and all that,” he says. “What I’m saying is get out in the world. If you’re talking about your wife, brother, sister, realize it in a larger social historical context. People are not doing that. ... I think this is a real major problem going on in America right now.”

So how does one solve that problem? By encouraging people to read. And while “Striking Through the Masks” may seem like a daunting task to take on (at 600 pages) in order to achieve that goal, it’s doable.

The book is written in vignettes—small stories within chapters. Someone interested in reading about one of the saddest childhoods out there might read the beginning section, while another who’s curious about the prestigious Iowa program may jump into that section, and still others who are intrigued by Marcus’ history and experiences in Santa Cruz may find those sections and chapters compelling. Still others, perhaps the poets and writers among us, will find chapters dedicated solely to literature. All in all, it’s sort of like reading an enormous book of short stories, and in many sections, it serves as a poetry primer.

The “enormous book” was originally written in Marcus’ trademark style—by hand. While the technique may seem old-fashioned, it’s invaluable for the author. “Writing is visceral for me,” he says. “I’ve got to feel it coming, moving down my arm.”

Film writer for Good Times, Lisa Jensen, offered her editing assistance, and all-around fantastic human being and real estate mogul George Ow, Jr., published the book via his Capitola Books publishing company.

“Personally, I have said my goodbyes and hopefully left no emotional scars on anyone who has known me,” Marcus writes in the epilogue. He continues, “Well, almost anyone. I have recognized at least a few of my faults, and those who have read this book thus far I’m sure have recognized many others. But in the end I am left with my work and the values it espouses.”

Morton Marcus’ new book, “Striking Through the Masks,” will be featured at a book launch at 7 p.m. Thursday, March 13 at Holy Cross Parish Hall, 170 High St., Santa Cruz. Admission is free. The book sells for \$18.95/paperback, and \$30/hardcover. For more information about the author, visit MortonMarcus.com.

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