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Santa Cruz poet Morton Marcus lived a life 'devoted to excellence'

By Wallace Baine
Posted: 10/29/2009 01:30:04 AM PDT

Morton Marcus, one of Santa Cruz's most prominent literary figures, died Wednesday at his home in Santa Cruz after a long battle with renal cancer. He was 73.

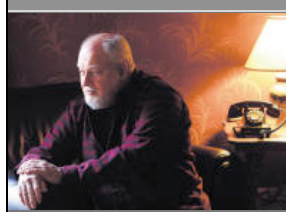
Marcus leaves a legacy of influence in at least three separate spheres. He was an internationally recognized poet, having published 10 books of poetry. He was also a celebrated film critic and historian. And, for 30 years, he was a mainstay on the English Department faculty at Cabrillo College.

A former Santa Cruz County Artist of the Year 1999, Marcus just last year published his 500-plus-page memoir "Striking Through the Masks," which served as both autobiography and re-evaluation of poets and writers of his generation. His final book of poems, to be titled "The Dark Figure in the Doorway," is slated for 2010 release.

"He was larger than life," said Santa Cruz poet Joe Stroud, who knew Marcus for more than 40 years. "Mort loved nothing more than to have a meal and to have a conversation. I think of him as a conductor almost, eating and drinking and driving the conversation this way and that. It was unforgettable experience."

Marcus' fingerprints are everywhere in Santa Cruz literary circles. He led a free-wheeling film discussion group twice a month at the Nickelodeon, up to his last days. He was the co-host of a popular public-access TV program on film called "Cinema Scene." Until recently, he hosted KUSP's "Poetry Show." And he influenced countless students over the years at Cabrillo

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Poet Morton Marcus strikes a thoughtful pose in his Santa Cruz home... (Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel file)

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Marcus was born and raised in New York City. As he outlined in "Masks," his early life was a time of severe emotional trauma. His father left when the boy was 3 and Marcus was shuttled back and forth between boarding schools, between bouts of watching his mother endure abuse at the hands of a stepfather.

"He began his life in such an unpromising way, with so many strikes against him," said Mark Ong, a longtime friend and student who helped design many of Marcus' books. "It's a real testament to what was inside him that he became the man he did. I used to call him up and say, Why are you not insane?"

After a youthful flirtation with boxing and a stint in the Air Force, Marcus came to California in the early 1960s, and to Santa Cruz in 1968.

"When Mort came to Santa Cruz, there was no poetry scene whatsoever," Stroud said. "He developed the reading series at Cabrillo and in various restaurants and bookstores, bringing such poets as Vasko Popa, Michael McClure and Al Young, among many others."

He began publishing in the 1960s and achieved a wide readership with his volume "The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems," which, said Stroud, seemed to capture a distinct back-to-nature essence of the period. "Mort was a master of so many different kinds of poetry. Lyric poetry, comic, cosmic, prose poetry. In fact, during the last part of his career, he really became one of the finest in the world at prose poems."

At Cabrillo, where he also served as the president of the teachers union, Marcus was known as a great lecturer, and those public speaking skills carried over in his discussions at the Nickelodeon, which attracted a loyal core audience for years. He traveled widely, reading his poetry in workshops and serving

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as poet in residence at universities across the country.

In his later years, he wrote poetry, translated work from the Serbian poet Vasko Popa, and composed a libretto for an opera. He also helped edit a history of the Croats in the Pajaro Valley written by his wife, Donna Mekis, and his sister-in-law Kathryn Mekis Miller.

"Mort was a giant, loving intellect where you could have rich, very in-depth discussions about almost any subject," said longtime friend George Ow Jr. "If you wanted to discuss any movie subject. Chinese poetry over the last 3,000 years, Greek and Roman mythology, hiking paths of Greece and Crete, best places to stay in Prague or Croatia, the history of Cabrillo College, New York City baseball, the San Francisco 49ers or anything else, you would have a good time and learn a lot."

Mark Ong said Marcus, both as a teacher and a friend, demanded excellence but recognized the difficulty in achieving it.

"He was a person of integrity and great dignity and lived what he espoused," Ong said. "His was a life of inquiry, a life of rigor, a life devoted to excellence."

"He was a man of incredible energy," Stroud said. "He had enormous passions and he pursued them with zeal. He lived the life of the mind, and he lived the life of the heart as well."

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 BORN: Sept. 10, 1936
 DIED: Oct. 28, 2009
 HOME: Santa Cruz
 OCCUPATION: English Department faculty member at Cabrillo College for 30 years; published poet and author; film critic and historian
 EDUCATION: Master's degree, Stanford University
 SURVIVORS: Wife Donna Mekis; daughters Jana Marcus and Valerie Marcus Ramshur
 SERVICES: To be announced

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