

Marcus unmasked: A Santa Cruz cultural icon sorts through his past in a painfully honest new memoir

WALLACE BAINE - Sentinel staff writer
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Is Morton Marcus a man of contradictions?

Well, he is a professional poet, and what poet worth his metaphors is not a mass of contradictions, obsessions and warring intentions?

Consider, for instance, this whole business about his new book, "Striking Through the Masks: A Literary Memoir" [Capitola Books]. It is a book that was never supposed to happen.

"I never intended to write my memoirs," said the author who will, nevertheless, celebrate the publication of that memoir at a public reading and booksigning March 13.

"I have written against writing memoirs because it's too self-involved, and writers should be involved more with the world than with themselves. And what I've seen going on for the last 20 years in American literature is all these self-involved kids, and older people, talking about family dysfunction and how they hated their father and mother. I really didn't want that. I think writing has to be much bigger than that. It has to include society. It has to include the world."

How then to jibe the writing of a memoir with the very public disavowal of such a practice?

Marcus says it himself -- "include the world."

"Masks" works as a kind of two-fer. On one hand, it's a spirited, absorbing, at times brutally honest account of a heroic 20th-century literary life. Marcus has been a familiar face on the Santa Cruz cultural scene for more than 35 years, as a published poet of national repute, as a longtime teacher at Cabrillo College, as host of KUSP's "The Poetry Show," as a contributor to this newspaper and other publications, as the co-host of the film criticism TV program "Cinema Scene" and as the leader of a regular film discussion group at the Nickelodeon.

Yet, even with a beloved [and not so beloved] figure of that kind of local celebrity, the new memoir reveals what is sure to be surprises even to Marcus' close friends.

On the other hand, "Masks" is a nearly encyclopedic catalog of great writers of the age -- Raymond Carver, Robert Bly, Czeslaw Milosz, Al Young, Andrei Codrescu, Tillie Olsen, Adrienne Rich, Charles Simic, James Houston and more -- told from a writer



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel
 Morton Marcus taught at Cabrillo College before retiring. He is also an active film critic and radio host.

FIVE THINGS YOU MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT MORTON MARCUS

During the summer of 1952, Marcus stumbled into a piece of American history when he had a curious encounter with future president Richard M. Nixon. Marcus was working as a waiter at a Delaware resort where he was the room service waiter on duty for Nixon, who had just been nominated as Dwight Eisenhower's running mate, and his family for a week.

Marcus, a mere teen at the time, was duly impressed with Nixon's regal wife, Pat. But Tricky Dick was different. Marcus said that Nixon was introduced to him and his buddy at a dinner, this after a week of serving the Nixons in their room. Nixon acted like he'd never laid eyes on either of them. The next day, the Nixons departed, without leaving a tip.

When Marcus was part of the famed writer's workshop at the State University of Iowa, he got to see behind the public facade of literary bad boy Norman Mailer. Marcus and several of his fellow aspiring writers went out to a party with Mailer, at that time considered one of America's most daring young novelists. Mailer taught the writers a bar game called 'thumbsies' and challenged all comers at the game. One writer accepted the challenge, and after losing several games, finally got good enough to pin Mailer and win.

Mailer responded by instantly punching the winning writer in the jaw, dropping him to the floor, and accused him of cheating. The crowd, which had earlier adored him, turned on him.

Then, of course, who could ever forget standing accused of having Communist leanings in a very public setting? In the wake of the Cuban Missile

1962, Marcus was working as an elementary school teacher in Point Arena in Sonoma County. He initiated a class project, and he told his kids that they write business letters to President Kennedy and Soviet premier Khrushchev on their opinions about the Cold War. Several hours, the school board had called a meeting at the school gymnasium with several people in attendance. One by one, the board members accused Marcus of being a Communist and demand that he be fired. He talked his way out of that scrape, and became an accepted member of the community. But, he developed a fear of the FBI during that period that would bother him for several years.

Marcus was living with his then-wife Wilma and their daughter Jana in New York City, broke and desperate to get back to California. The plan was to

Marcus suggested that Wilma go on 'Jeopardy' to win enough money for the move. She was, in fact, selected to be a contestant and won \$1,800 on the

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who knew them all as friends and colleagues.

Marcus was originally approached to write just that, a personal account of a variety of contemporary authors that he had come to know in his almost-50-year career as a poet and teacher. He credits the late novelist Gina Berriault as his inspiration to fold his own story into the stories he told of his fellow writers.

"But if I were going to write a memoir," he said, "there had to be a theme, which became my education and how I became the person I became, ethically, metaphysically, everything."

Early on in the handsomely illustrated book is evidence to suggest that the literary life was an unlikely path for the young Morton Marcus, that he was more likely to lead a more disreputable life. On pages 12 and 13 are reproductions of front pages of New York newspapers from the fall of 1941 reporting the gangland slaying of a Jewish mobster named Abe Bebbchick. That was Marcus' Uncle Abe.

Bebchick ran the numbers racket in Brooklyn in the late 1930s and was the head of Marcus' extended family, a group of Slavic immigrants who, with their aggressively sharp-elbows way of life in the crucible of Depression-era America, have come to obsess Marcus over the years.

"All of these people are just larger than life. They just take the risks and do the stuff that has to be done. We've all become very tame as human beings compared to what they were."

Marcus was born in 1936 in Brooklyn. His father left his mother when the boy was 3. "I only ever saw him twice again in my life." Growing up he was shuttled back and forth between boarding schools -- which he refers to as "Oliver Twist gruel houses" -- and, even when he was home, he endured the horror of witnessing a stepfather -- "husband No. 4 or 5 or 6," he says -- brutally abuse his mother, beating her, pulling her hair, attempting to drown her in the bath. Even Marcus admits such an upbringing is highly unlikely to produce a literary lion.

"There is an enormous rage inside me, and I know it," he said. "Masks," then, is an attempt to figure out how he got from Point A, a kid reared in an atmosphere of violence, and Point B, the man he is now.

Another aspect of the man's personality serves his memoir well, at least to the reader, if not for those mentioned in the book. Marcus brings to the book a fearless kind of honesty -- at least, an honesty as he sees it; even Marcus is quick to admit that honesty isn't the same as accuracy.

Friends and family members may blanch at some of the details in the book that are both generous and unsparing. Many of those who are the brunt of criticism are some of the most luminary names in contemporary American literature. The late Wallace Stegner is portrayed as spiteful and passive-aggressive. Robert Bly, who is often credited as one of the great popularizers of poetry in the mainstream, is accused of intellectual hypocrisy. On the other hand, figures such as Tillie Olsen, Al Young and Raymond Carver are the subjects of some of Marcus' most tender and heartfelt tributes.

Such reactions point to another dominant theme of Marcus's book, the clash between the aggressive, emotional, honest-at-all-costs approach embodied by Marcus, and credited by him to his Slavic roots, and the laconic, close-to-the-vest, inscrutable emotional style particularly common in the Western American male and many of the friends and colleagues with whom Marcus has been close over the years.

"Many of the people I consider my good friends are -- I'll just say it right now -- are these uptight WASPs. And dealing with them has been very difficult for me. But you know what? It's been very difficult for them to deal with me. Very difficult."

As a result, the book is replete with stories of Marcus finding himself in situations that inevitably led to confrontations, many of them life-altering confrontations, from youthful tales of enduring humiliations at the hands of anti-Semitic bullies to accounts of surviving the not-always-forthright dealings of the literary world.

The story with the most metaphorical resonance in the book is about a poetry reading in which Marcus read poems about the collapse of his first marriage with his ex-wife weeping in the audience as he read, a decision that opened him up to criticism from Bly and his close friend, the poet Joseph Stroud, both of whom were present at the time. Marcus admits that it was hard to do, but necessary to serving the art form.

"Art is a very hard view of the world, no matter how uncomfortable it is."

Marcus -- who survived a health scare last fall that had him wondering if he would live to see the publication of the book -- is the first to declare that "Striking Through the Masks" is imperfect as history. But it does work as a kind of testament to holding close to emotional honesty, whatever the costs. It's a lesson, he said, that he learned very early in life, when his mother wouldn't allow him to hide from the bullies that tormented him.

"I've come to realize that I really couldn't be frightened and live this life. Life was not worth living if I had to be afraid all the time. That's all there was to it. And this is a larger issue that I never would have faced back then, but if I had to die in order to not be frightened, then I would die."

Contact Wallace Baine at wbaine@santacruzsentinel.com.

show, enough for the move west. When Marcus first suggested the idea, Wilma asked "Why not you?" "Because I've got a beard, and you're pretty and outgoing -- and that's what the networks want." When Marcus was named Santa Cruz County Artist of the Year in 1999, one of the first visitors he had was Lou Harrison, a composer of international acclaim who called Santa Cruz home for years. Harrison didn't linger, but he brought a gift, a laurel tree. Marcus and his wife Donna planted the tree that day, and it still stands in their yard as the Lou Harrison Laurel.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Book signing and reading in celebration of 'Striking Through the Masks,' by Morton Marcus. Guests include James D. Houston, Geoffrey Dunn, Deng Ming-Dao, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, Ellen Bass and the Cantiamo Chorus, led by Cheryl Anderson.
WHEN: 7 p.m. Thursday.
WHERE: Holy Cross Parish Hall, 170 High St., Santa Cruz.
COST: Free.
Details: 475-9042.
find it online: Hear our interview with Morton Marcus in its entirety on www.SantaCruzLive.com.