

# GOOD TIMES

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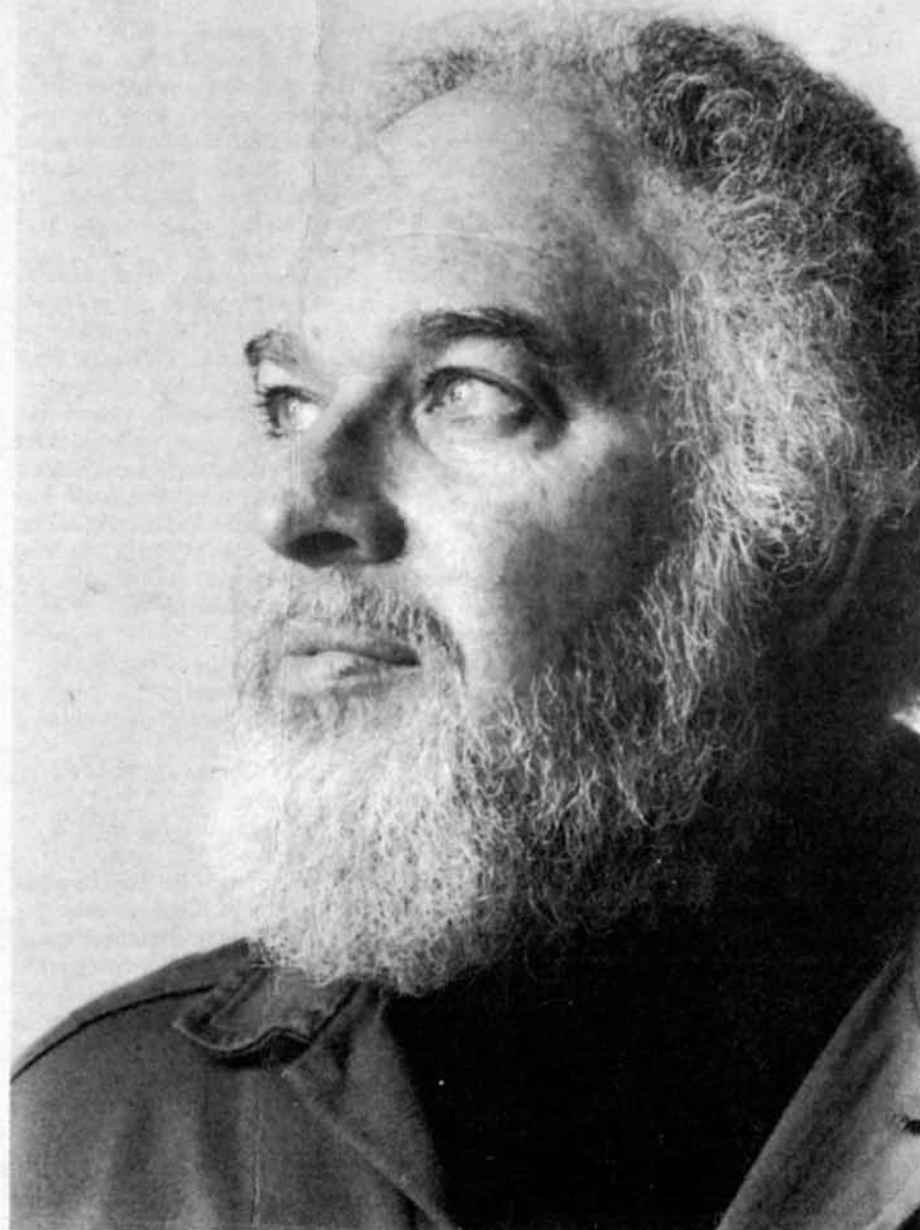
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## MAN OF LETTERS

Novelist, teacher, poet Morton Marcus writes of 'everyman's family' in his new book of poems, *Pages From a Scrapbook of Immigrants*



*'My hope is that the power of writing will make people change their lives,' says Morton Marcus*

by Geoffrey Dunn

**I**N A thoroughly poignant short story by the great Russian writer Isaak Babel, a young boy is sitting in a study sharing late-night tea and gingerbread with his aging grandmother. She graciously allows him to stay up past his bedtime and then launches into a series of tales about Russian history and the Jewish family into which she was born. Finally, after recalling a story about her wayward husband — the boy's grandfather — she falls silent and begins to cry. Then suddenly, as if struck by a premonition, she wails out to her startled grandson, "You must know *everything!*"

For Santa Cruz poet Morton Marcus, Babel's story struck a profound and resonant chord. He, too, sat at the feet of elderly relatives listening to stories about his family's life in Czarist Russia. "When I first read Babel's story, I identified immediately," Marcus notes. "I also had to know *everything*, that is, 'everything' in the most profound sense of the term — all that is meaningful about self, family and life."

Marcus, indeed, has a voracious appetite for knowledge of all that surrounds him. Every few years, he says, he embarks on an intellectual journey in which he pursues his chosen subject matter with an all-consuming passion. His endeavors apparently know no bounds. In addition to his poetry, he is also the author of a popular spy novel, "The Brezhnev Memo," and he wrote the text for the

highly successful multimedia production of "The Eight Ecstasies of Yakeo Iwasaki," which played to overflowing crowds here in 1984 and '85.

In recent years, he has molded himself into an expert on film history, about which he teaches a course at Cabrillo College, and for which he has been commissioned, by the Bay Area Television Consortium, to write a book.

And this month, Marcus's career as a poet has reached new peaks with the publication by the prestigious Coffee House Press of "Pages From a Scrapbook of Immigrants: A Journey in Poems."

"Pages" chronicles the plight of

Marcus's Russian-Jewish family from the mid-1880s to the present. It is a thoroughly accessible collection — certainly the poet's most masterful to date — and in both language and scope has the feel of a vast Russian novel that has been refined to pure gold.

While the details of "Pages" are specific to Marcus's ancestors, the sensitivities and emotions of the book are universal. In the collection's introductory poem, "The Photograph," Marcus writes of finding an old family photo in his mother's drawers. After staring at it indefinitely, the images in the poet's hands begin to blur:



Figures from his book: Mother, left, and the murdered Uncle Abe.

*The house could be in Kovno, Vilna, or Carnarsie.*

*Is this his uncle, really? That his aunt?*

*The photo could belong to someone else.*

*The family could be anyone's.*

"While I have taken it upon myself to be the chronicler of my family," Marcus explains "it struck me that I was not really writing about my own family in 'Pages,' I was writing about everyman's."

**T**HE man who has become the poet laureate of Santa Cruz was raised in an environment that was anything but lyrical. Born in the Jewish ghetto of New York City during the heart of the Depression, Marcus was first sent to boarding school at the age of 3, and by the time he was 18, he had been sent to over two dozen of them.

"Not only was I the new kid in boarding school 30 times," Marcus jokes, "I was the new Jewish kid." As a result, he grew up pugnacious and aggressive, a streetwise survivor who always knew he would have to make it on his own.

An admittedly poor student, Marcus made up for his scholastic shortcomings with extra intensity on the playgrounds of the city. Basketball was his specialty, and through it he earned a scholarship to an upscale prep school. Sometime during his teens, a sympathetic instructor grabbed Marcus by the collar and forced him to read a book. It was part of James T. Farrell's "Studs Lonigan"

trilogy, filled with the sensual — and sexual — urban reality of Marcus' own life, and he was hooked on literature thereafter.

Following a "wild" four-year stint in the Air Force, during which time he published his first poetry, Marcus enrolled in 1958 at the University of Iowa, home of the famed Writers Workshops, where he studied under literati Donald Justice and Paul Engle.

The winner of a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship in 1961, Marcus came West to study in the masters program in creative writing at Stanford. While there, he made friends with an energetic cadre of young, talented writers, including Santa Cruzan Jim Houston. It was Houston, along with his wife Jeanne, who eventually encouraged Marcus to move to Santa Cruz in 1968 and take a job teaching English at Cabrillo.

With a wife (his ex, Wilma) and two young daughters (Valerie and Jana), Marcus thought Santa Cruz seemed like the perfect place not only to raise a family but to pursue a literary career as well. After a lifetime of vagabonding, he was ready to set down roots.

"There was this dynamic artistic energy to Santa Cruz back then," Marcus recalls. "A creative energy. Not only in terms of art — although art was pervasive — but in terms of lifestyle. People were trying to create a new way to live."

Shortly after his arrival in Santa Cruz, Marcus published his first book of poetry, "Origins," a collection of sparse, terse poems which, in fact,

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# Man of Letters

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point to some of the themes which he would later address in "Pages."

At the same time, Marcus began what he calls his "entrepreneurial era," in which he spearheaded a number of poetry readings at Cabrillo and a variety of local restaurants. The readings brought in an assortment of nationally known poets — among them Michael McClure, Dianne DiPrima, Robert Bly, Charles Simic and Mary Norbert Korte — and helped to showcase aspiring local talents such as Stephen Kessler, Robert Lundquist, Anita Wilkins, Peter Beagle, Carol Staudacher, Gregory Hall and Barbara Bloom.

The readings, along with the publication of two more books in 1972 — "Where the Oceans Cover Us" and the widely popular "Santa Cruz Mountain Poems" — turned Marcus into Santa Cruz's most visible poet. He was developing a national reputation and his poems were being selected for a variety of literary anthologies.

Writer and critic Andrei Codrescu hailed Marcus as "the kind of priest-poet who gets to the light by tearing up the universe in ecstatic dance," while his contemporary Simic declared that "Marcus is one of the most readable and moving poets of our generation."

In 1977, the now-defunct Santa Cruz Jazz Press published Marcus's experimental prose poetry, "The Armies Encamped in the Fields Beyond the Unfinished Avenues," and four years later, "Big Winds, Glass Mornings, Shadows Cast by

Stars: Poems 1972-1980." Both books are currently in reissue by Marcus's own Brown Bear Press.

**I**N THE spring of 1980 Marcus was asked to contribute a poem to a special literary journal honoring the Santa Cruz Italian fishing community. The assignment rekindled his creative juices in a new direction.

For three months, Marcus toiled on the epic poem, "It Begins Right Here," which was originally published as the centerpiece for "A Day on the Bay" and which now serves as the concluding poem in "Pages." Although not conscious of it at the time, Marcus was being pulled towards a chronicle of his family.

Unlike the decidedly modernistic "Origins," "Pages" is strongly influenced by the Slavic literary tradition (Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Vasko Popa and others). It is also intrinsically American — as noble as Whitman's and as foul and sensual as Henry Miller's.

In "Pages" we meet the poet's great uncle, conscripted as an 8-year-old boy into the Russian Army for 25 years. We see a young girl (his great aunt? a cousin?) running through the fields of Lithuania, a girl whose "heart is an egg, where the unborn bounce and jurch, impatient to be born, as wild as she is." We discover the chilling revelation of his grandmother about his grandfather: "After the first month I never loved him ... If in Russia we had divorce, I wouldn't be with him now."

In the second section of "Pages," Marcus takes us on the prototypical

immigrant journey — "from harbors that do not need a name, on ships most people do not remember. For a destination no one can be sure of." Ultimately, for most, that destination was Ellis Island and the tenements of New York City, a dog-eat-dog world where hard fists and strong wills prevailed.

Finally, we meet the poet himself, referred to by Marcus in the third-person as simply "the boy," and we follow him through his ragtag, often painful journey through childhood.

It is also through the eyes of "the boy" that we meet his immigrant family — his mother, a teen-age Miss Coney Island; the femme fatale who "shuffled English and Yiddish on her tongue"; his Uncle Frankie, "the Jewish cowboy"; and his Uncle Abe, the gambler, murdered in 1941 by Irish or Italian thugs:

*with two bullets in the  
back of the head  
to separate him from his  
life  
and from the one hundred  
thousand  
he was carrying from a  
poker game.*

Marcus takes the boy through manhood up to his final, powerful poem, in which the poet, now speaking in the first-person, is sitting in his Westside home overlooking Monterey Bay. There, he recalls the moment that his grandfather, an impoverished peasant, decides to leave Russia for America.

*Sometimes I think he  
comes  
to the door, and with cap  
in hand*

*stands outside with sight-  
less eyes.*

*At times, I'm convinced  
his eyes are in my head,  
and that for both of us,  
and for my mother whose  
vision  
is diminishing to memo-  
ries  
in a city on another shore,  
it begins again right here.*

**N**OW in his early 50s, Morton Marcus still charges at life with a youthful vigor. Recently remarried to Santa Cruz native Donna Mekis, he continued to teach film and literature courses at Cabrillo, while working on both the film book and a new novel and hosting a weekly poetry show on KUSP (Tuesdays, 9-10 p.m.).

An intense, gregarious bear of a man who still maintains an affection for prizefighting, Marcus is somewhat of an imposing figure when he enters a room, but beneath the hard-wrought exterior is a warm, affectionate man, self-effacing and full of humor. In a recent poem, "Self-Portrait at 50," Marcus describes himself as "the jolly Leprechaun dressed as a Jewish bear," and indeed he is that, but there is a serious side, too.

*I weep, I kiss the ground,  
I jig to my own dirge.  
Cut off, the fog around my  
nose,  
I wade toward whatever  
comes,  
carrying words and chil-  
dren  
in the tall grass of my  
bones.*

"My goal with my work is to reveal the human condition," Marcus declares, "to expose the way our passions reveal our underlying humanity, that which unifies all of us, the great unity of being and non-being, the make-up of universal design, nothing less. I want to make the reader see it, to create an environment with words that allows him or her to understand who he or she really is. My hope is that the power of writing will make people *change their lives*. I'm aiming at nothing less than a revolution in attitude from mankind."

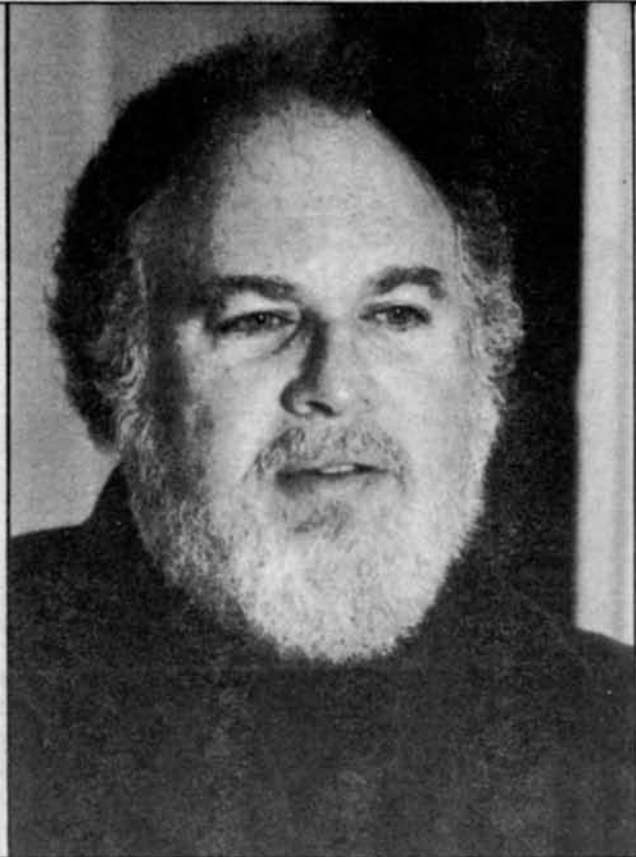
A tall order, no doubt, but Marcus feels compelled to take his swings. "Years ago Robert Bly called me a ruthless son of a bitch because, he said, I'd do anything to find answers, destroy anyone to grasp a phantom of meaning and put it in a poem. Well he was right. Unless a poet is that kind of SOB, he'll never write poetry that means anything to anyone else — that makes a difference in their lives."

Poetry, in Marcus's view, is thus not an end in itself — but the means to a greater end. "Life is what existence is all about," Marcus says, "living it, not making art out of it. You don't go around looking for experiences to make art."

"My poems come out of life," says Morton Marcus. "They're all affirmations. They're about finding ways to live." •

*There will be a special book signing for Morton Marcus and Ruthanne Lum McCunn Sunday Nov. 20, 4-6 p.m. at the Capitol BookCafe.*





# Double Signing! Double Celebration!

Join us Sunday November 20th • 4 to 6pm at the Book Café



Acclaimed author **Ruthanne Lum McCunn**, author of "Thousand Pieces of Gold, an Illustrated History of the Chinese in America," and "Sole Sojourner" will sign copies of her newly published book, **Chinese American Portraits, Personal Histories 1828-1988**.

A fast paced narrative, featuring more than 150 historic and contemporary photographs. McCunn presents the true stories of dozens of people who fought against overwhelming odds and survived—and in many cases, prospered, from an Alaskan frontierswoman, to doctors who fought bubonic plague. An inspiring chronicle of perseverance and strength, of dramatic searches for individual and cultural identity.

■ **Special Slide Show before book signing.** See imagery from 'Portraits' at 3:00, upstairs at the Pizza Company (across the alley from the Book Cafe). Narrated by Ruthann Lum McCunn.



Santa Cruz poet **Morton Marcus** will meet the public and sign copies of his 7th book, his masterwork, **Pages From A Scrapbook of Immigrants, A Journey in Poems**.

This is Morton Marcus' story of his family's life in Czarist Russia and in America. The tale unfolds in a series of fifty-six accessible and engaging narrative poems. Filled with humor and pathos, the poems deal with all areas of the human condition in attempting, as Yeats said, "to come into the desolation of reality" that is peculiarly human.

Autographed copies of both books will make wonderful holiday gifts.

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