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A Memoir for Mort

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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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