

metro 2.20.08

Authors 2000

Gary Griggs



CAFE SOCIETY Marcus and a crew of Santa Cruz writers in front of the Cooper House, 1972. Front row, left to right: Victor Perera, Peter S. Beagle, James D. Houston, Morton Marcus, William Everson, Anne Steinhardt, James B. Hall, Lou Mathews. Back row, left to right: Mason Smith, George Hitchcock, John Deck, Stephen Levine, T. Mike Walker, Nels Hanson and Robert Lundquist.

Shaman Without a Mask

The many faces of Morton Marcus **BY STEPHEN KESSLER**



✓ **L**ike the Giant Dipper or Mt. Umunum, Morton Marcus has cut such a high profile in the Santa Cruz cultural landscape over the last 40 years that it's easy to take him for granted. As a teacher for three decades at Cabrillo College, a poet of significant national reputation, co-host since 1986 of *The Poetry Show* on KUSP radio, movie critic and film historian, co-host of the television program *Cinema Scene*, journalist for various local and Bay Area newspapers and all-around arts activist and literary entrepreneur, Marcus has arguably done more than anyone else in these parts to promote and cultivate a community of creative writers and critical thinkers.

In the early 1970s he all but single-handedly created a venue for poets and developed an audience for poetry by organizing a weekly reading series out of which grew a network of friendships and a scene as dynamic as any I've ever witnessed. More recently, his articles in the local

press and public discussion of the latest films have made him a vital presence as a cultural commentator. Though officially retired from teaching for 10 years now, he can't contain his pedagogical enthusiasm, describing himself in a recent conversation as "absolutely intensely engaged in everything."

But taking Marcus for granted would be a mistake, as his close friends learned last fall when he notified them that he was going in for major surgery from which he might not emerge alive. As it turned out, he survived the surgery and now,

at 71, is back in the game at full strength—though the first time I saw him after the operation he looked paler, weaker, wearier and thinner than I'd ever known him to be. The occasion was a memorial reading for Maude Meehan, the much-loved matriarch of Santa Cruz poetry who had died just months before. Marcus was one of more than a dozen poets to speak that afternoon, and once he was at the microphone he seemed to regain his strength, characteristically going on to read for twice as long as anyone else on the program. About halfway through his performance I leaned over to Gary Young, seated beside me, and whispered, "Well, Morty's back."

It Contains Multitudes

My personal history with Morton Marcus precedes our chance meeting on Pacific Avenue in 1968 when we'd both just arrived in town, he to teach at Cabrillo and I to attend graduate school at UCSC. The previous year I'd been a senior at Bard College in upstate New York, editing a little magazine called *The Lampeter Muse*; Marcus was teaching English and coaching basketball at Lick-Wilmerding High School in San Francisco, and had sent me some of his writings. I printed a prose poem of his—the first one he'd ever published.

Our paths crossed frequently in the years to follow, and we occasionally collaborated on or clashed over one thing or another, always in a spirit of mutual respect and solidarity in the effort to integrate our passion for poetry with the public life of the community.

This 40-year association culminated last month in his delivery to me of his about-to-be-published memoir, *Striking Through the Masks*. At close to 600 pages, the handsome volume (published by George Ow Jr.'s Capitola Books) has nearly the heft of Marcus's previous dozen books combined. Its all-embracing scope and ample size are typical of the author's maximalism, his generosity and his gift for rhetorical excess.

Defying conventional notions of the memoir,

Striking Through the Masks is really several books in one: a coming-of-age story, an autobiography, a narrative of the author's various world travels, a collection of sketches and portraits of writers he's known, a mini-anthology of their poems, the record of an ethical and moral education, a self-portrait of the artist, and a cultural history of Santa Cruz. It's illustrated with scores of photographs, and is the kind of book you can either read from front to back, if it pulls you in, or sample selectively depending on which of its many aspects interests you most. Walt Whitman famously bragged that he was large, he contained multitudes, and that whoever touched his book was touching a man. The same can be said of Marcus and his memoir.

One of the ironies of this epic attempt to account for his own history is that Marcus has written and spoken in recent years against the trend of the memoir in American publishing. He has complained about an "all-pervasive self-absorption" that has trapped many writers in the merely personal or domestic sphere and limited the free exercise of imagination, which in turn has constrained their field of vision. Asked to elaborate on this criticism, he says, "People are too focused on themselves and family dysfunction and how they were abused; so it becomes therapeutic, you know, and we can all sit there and say, 'Oh how terrible.' Literature is much more than that."

So how does his book differ from the others? "There has been a sense from the beginning that I am not talking about myself, that I am really looking at the larger picture of the human being, and I am just another human being." He goes on: "One of the first stories I published was about a Jewish tailor, and everyone at the school said, 'How do you know about Jewish tailors?' I don't know anything about Jewish tailors, but what I did was, I put myself in his body and in his mind, and [imagined] as a human being how he would react. That's one of the things that a writer has to do."

Shaman Without a Mask ← 13

Word Games

Born in New York in 1936 and raised partly in Brooklyn, of which the faintest trace remains in his style of speech, Marcus comes from a family whose dysfunction can compete with anyone's. The only child of a mother who married six or seven times (he's still not sure), he was farmed out to 13 boarding schools throughout his homeless boyhood, and had to find his way in the world without adult supervision.

"My father I hardly ever knew; my mother had abandoned me, virtually, so I had to figure out everything myself. How to open a can, how to use a telephone, how to make out a check—this stuff and all the other stuff that we take for granted, I had no one to tell me this, so I had to figure everything out, and it was cockamamie," he says without the least hint of self-pity.

The absence of any sense of victimization is one of the most striking things about the account of his childhood in the new book. How did he manage to come through with so little bitterness or resentment? "Stupidity," he replies. "I didn't know any different. As far as I was concerned, this was normal!"

Frequently the only Jewish kid among gentiles, and feeling himself a perpetual misfit, Marcus learned to fend for himself from early on. He responded to the cruelties of his peers by physically fighting back. "The way you get the bullies off your back is by beating them," he says. "Don't let them beat you." He identified with the weaker kids, the losers, and became their defender, and he credits this awareness of others' suffering with his dawning sense of compassion and desire for justice.

He tells me he started to play what he calls his "word games" because he couldn't draw. "So I started to draw pictures in words. I spent a lot of time in these schools alone; no one wanted to be around me, they really thought I was a mad dog. Because I wouldn't join the bullies, and I didn't want to hang around these namby-pamby kids; I was just on my own.

"And I would try to describe [to myself] what the sound and the look of the wind in the trees was. I was making pictures with words, and I didn't know what I was doing. I could not read till I was almost 10 years old. My mother's homicidal sixth husband—or fifth husband, depending on which calculation—taught me how to read by driving me through New York City and making me read billboards, syllable by syllable. I was just an illiterate, angry, nasty kid. But even then, I never wanted to read."

What turned him around at 14 was a high school English teacher named Richard Martin who lured him into his private library with an offer to lend him any book he wanted.

"I went to his room," Marcus recalls, "and I said, 'I wanna read something dirty.' He didn't miss a beat, he went to the shelves and came back with a copy of James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy. He said, 'I'll make you a deal: you can read all of this stuff, but you've got to talk to me about it afterwards.'"

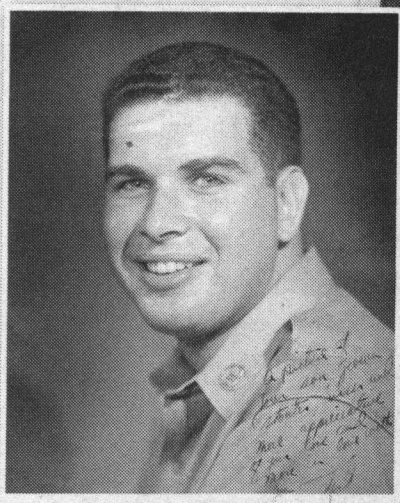
'You start with one ball and you throw it up in the air and you catch it. You do that, and then you take two balls and you do that. . . . Finally you have all 12 balls going in the air, the perfect juggler. But you're still not a master until you throw all 12 balls up in the air and turn around and walk away, and they stay up there.'

From Farrell, young Marcus proceeded to Swift and Rabelais and Joyce, and then to the school library, where he read "every damn book" at the expense of his other studies. But before failing his courses and losing all his basketball scholarships ("Basketball is great because you're moving all the time and your mind's got to move at the same speed, you can't stop to think") he was turned on to poetry by this unconventional teacher. "He tells me that poets are very sensitive to the world around them. I think he may have actually dropped the line that women are interested in poets. Well, that was the prime—I would be able to win the hearts of women—because God knows at 14 I wanted to do that."

Six Degrees of Marcus

Having flunked out of high school, Marcus joined the Air Force at 18, served four years and then, already publishing in his early 20s, managed to get into the Iowa Writers Workshop as an undergraduate on the GI Bill, and from there earned a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to Stanford.

Shaman Without a Mask ← 15



**YOUTH WITHOUT
YOUTH** Marcus in the
Air Force (1956) and with
mother, Rae, in 1941.



How does he explain his transformation from high school failure to brilliant student and very young published writer at one of the country's elite institutions? Voracious reading, for one thing, but there was something else.

"OK, well, poetry has its own little game that it's playing with you, so that you think you're doing it to get women, but suddenly women aren't the interest at all anymore, and it's the words and what you're doing with those words," he says, that reel you in.

Marcus's prolific and varied production as a poet—in books ranging from the spare, archetypal lyrics of *Origins* and *The Santa Cruz Mountain Poems* through the "confessional" poems of *Where the Oceans Cover Us* and the family narratives of *Pages From a Scrapbook of Immigrants* to the expansive accomplishment of his fabulist prose poems in such collections as *When People Could Fly*, *Moments Without Names* and, most recently, *Pursuing the Dream Bone*—has brought him into contact with an extraordinary assortment of other writers, and it is his portraits of them that make for some of the most engaging sections of *Striking Through the Masks*. Polish Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz, current U.S. poet laureate Charles Simic, California poet laureate Al Young, master of the short story Raymond Carver, widely revered poet and blowhard guru Robert Bly, and the Transylvanian answer to Garrison Keillor, Andrei Codrescu of NPR fame, are just a

few of the many literary celebrities with whom Marcus has had close personal relations and whose characters are evoked with revealing anecdotes.

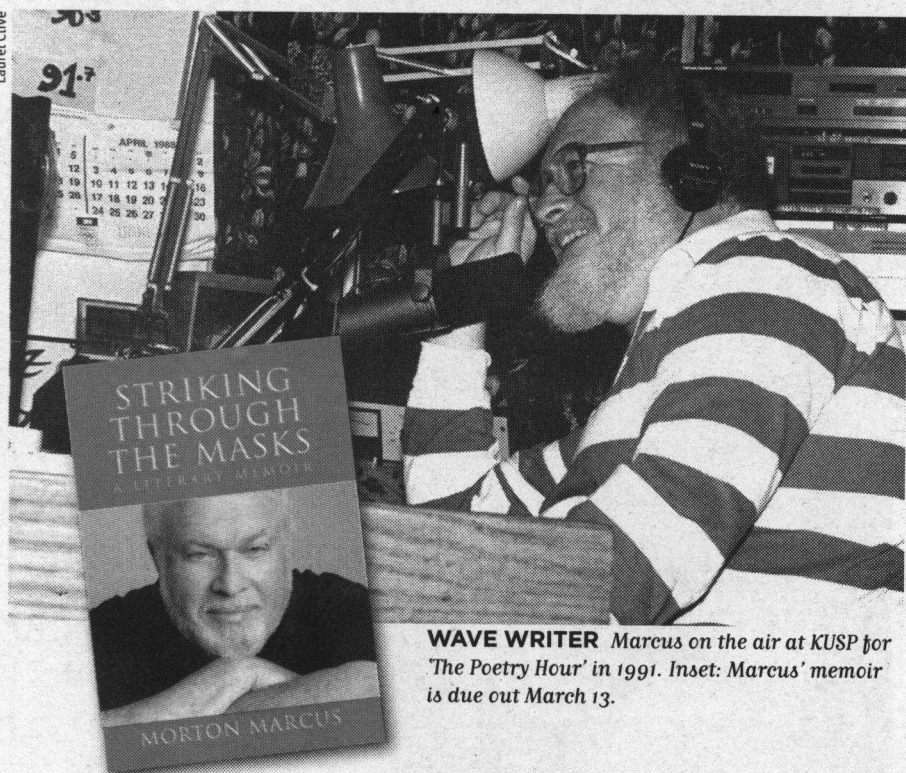
Dean of Santa Cruz novelists James D. Houston, who first cajoled Marcus into moving here; Marcus's longtime friend and Cabrillo colleague Joseph Stroud, one of the best of Santa Cruz's numerous first-rate poets; master poet and printer William Everson; another fine printer and virtuoso of the prose poem, Gary Young; Aptos-based composer and musician Lou Harrison; National Book Award winner Nathaniel Mackey of UCSC—these are among the various local cultural personages whom Marcus portrays as friends and creative comrades. (Disclosure: there is included a brief sketch of me and my work.)

He credits Cabrillo in its early years, even more than UCSC, with giving Santa Cruz its first great infusion of imaginative and intellectual energy. "Cabrillo was a community college, and in those days you did things for the community, so they said, 'If any of you people have any ideas you'd like to do in the community, let us know.' And I went straight to the community services guy and said, 'You don't have a poetry series here; let's start a poetry series.'"

"So the real changing of this landscape, culturally, in this county, as far as I'm concerned, was Cabrillo. We were urged to take part in the community, and it was amazing how many different things we did, and I was just a small part of that."

Shaman Without a Mask ← 17

Laurel Clive



WAVE WRITER Marcus on the air at KUSP for 'The Poetry Hour' in 1991. Inset: Marcus' memoir is due out March 13.

Unemployed Shamans

He notes how things have changed in the years since. "What's happened is that the poet is no longer recognized as having his job in society. The shaman had his job in the tribe—the tribe could not exist without him, you see—and I think one of the things that is going wrong is that connection of the spiritual into the social that was always part of tribal organization has now gone." One of the major themes of *Striking Through the Masks* is that the artist doesn't exist in isolation but in mutually enriching interaction with everything and everyone around him.

Marcus's appetite for life is immense, his intellectual curiosity boundless, the range of his learning vast, his accomplishments as a writer considerable, his family history tumultuous, his travels wide, his energy undiminished after a near-fatal illness, so that even in his eighth decade, his beard and what's left of his hair gone white, he radiates the ardor of an adolescent. "Really, in many ways," he admits, "I've never grown up."

Perhaps this has something to do with his sense of still learning his trade. "The learning process has gone on forever," he tells me. "I used to describe it by talking about rhythm, about imagery . . . and you find there are, like, 12 elements and you've got to master them all. So you start with one ball and you throw it up in the air and you catch it. You do that, and then you take two balls and you do that, and

you take three balls—and it can take years. Everyone learns at a different rate of speed, and finally you have all 12 balls going in the air, the perfect juggler. But you're still not a master until you throw all 12 balls up in the air and turn around and walk away, and they stay up there."

So the poet is a kind of magician, yet also someone with an ordinary job who speaks the same language as everyone else. "I've always felt, with Wordsworth, that the poet is just another person among the people; we may have priestlike visions, but never above, always part of the crowd. But to go beyond Wordsworth," says Marcus, "I think the poet has a job as part of society: I've got to communicate to people because what I'm telling them, as far as I'm concerned, is the real vision of life itself, especially human life, which the society they come from trains out of them, and they have to be reminded of why they are on earth."

"There is a purpose, I don't know what the hell it is, but what I express, what shamans express, is part of that purpose. It reminds the tribe, it reminds the society, and it speaks in society's words. As crazy as that may sound, I really believe that."

STRIKING THROUGH THE MASKS will be launched Thursday, March 13, 7pm, in a booksigning at the Holy Cross Parish Hall, 170 High St. (next to Holy Cross Church), Santa Cruz. An array of well-known local personalities will join the author in readings from the book. Watch these pages for details in the weeks ahead.