

ROOTS

run deep

Award-winning writer anchored firmly in his community

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Authors

✓ **T**HOUGH THE MAN HAS metaphorically traveled the universe, his feet are firmly planted at home. A local muse who has won the hearts and imaginations of readers worldwide, Morton Marcus feels a strong commitment to the town he lives in.

That is precisely why it is so fitting that the Santa Cruz County Arts Commission named the Santa Cruz poet the 1999 Artist of the Year Award. The 16th recipient of this annual award, Marcus is the fourth writer to be honored. As a writer, he shares the recognition with three other Santa Cruz literary icons; poet Adrienne Rich, and writers James Houston and William Everson.

"I consider this a most prestigious art award. Most counties in the United States don't even conceive of an award like this. It is fitting because Santa Cruz has so many national and international renowned artists," Marcus explains. Of the three other writers with whom he shares the honor, the outspoken troubadour says, "I am in really hot company."

A resident of Santa Cruz for more than 30 years, Marcus has eight published books — seven of them poetry — to his name. He has published more than 400 poems in the United States and Europe and is included in 74 poetry anthologies. Much of his poetry is inspired by the coast and mountains in which he lives.

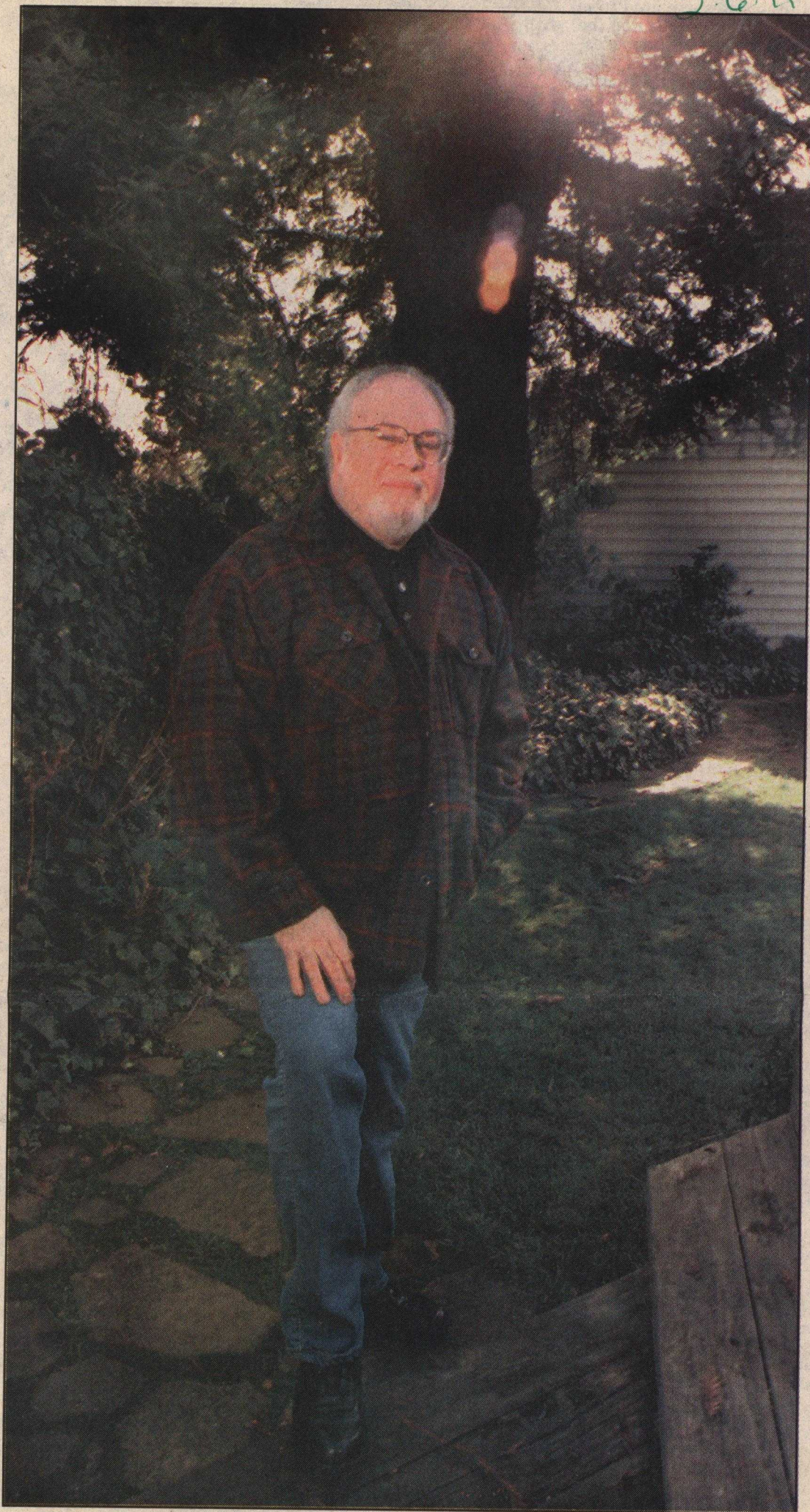
Though his work has been praised by critics and peers worldwide, Marcus feels especially proud to be honored by the community in which he lives.

The power of Marcus' expression obviously isn't limited to the written word. "Though my work is going throughout the world, I am a resident of where I live," he says passionately. "Therefore it is absolutely vital that I become an active community member. One of my strengths as an artist, is the proliferation not of myself, but of my art form in its importance amongst the youth and adults of the county."

Clearly Marcus has dedicated years to practicing what he preaches. Since 1968 he has been a part of many community activities connected to art and culture in Santa Cruz County.

Recently retired from teaching film and literature at Cabrillo College for three decades, Marcus continues community involvement as the president of the Kingfisher Flat Foundation (which fulfills bequests of poet William Emerson's will), as the host of a poetry show on KUSP radio, and as a steering committee member of the Pacific Rim Film Festival. Marcus says "an artist should not be a recluse, but one who creates in solitude while living in his community."

Whether he creates in solitude or is inspired by the people and the beauty of the central coast, Morton



Morton Marcus' words have earned him Artist of the Year honors.

Marcus continues to create. This spring, a selection of his poems will appear in "The Geography of Home: California and the Poetry of Place." His most recent book is a collection of prose poems, entitled "When People Could Fly."

Reviewing "When People Could Fly," the great novelist, poet and musician Al Young wrote "Mort Marcus, one of America's hidden literary treasures, has become a superb master of the prose poem.....Marcus doesn't seem to be out to show off, or prove anything.

the other side of the continent, someone we hope is there, waiting or making his or her way toward us."

Mystical? Maybe. Human condition? Definitely. The 1999 Artist of the Year is sure about the importance of art in everyone's life journey.

"I may be naive, but I still believe education and art can change the world," he says. Marcus is clearly on a mission to positively change both Santa Cruz and the world with his art.

The pure joy of reinventing the world, inside and out, through language and imagination, seems alchemy enough."

Using language to reinvent the world has been an obsession of Marcus' since he was a teen-ager. Shuffled from one boarding school to another, he remembers becoming a juvenile delinquent in order to survive. To cope with the emotional isolation, he would console himself by writing. "I would entertain myself by drawing pictures in words. I'd tell myself stories in which I would have those pictures be as accurate and vivid as possible," he recalls. "To this day, that is really the main description of my prose and poetry. It is the imagery that everyone talks about first."

The poet talks about how that imagery is accessed. "I am constantly trying to break through habitual thinking into higher consciousness. Because I use language so physically, my experience becomes the reader's experience. That is what the art of literature is all about," he says. Drawing on the mystical, Marcus adds, "a successful poem not only speaks to the head and heart, but to the reader's cells. It taps each cell with an instinctive kind of knowing that causes it to resonate like a gong."

A master of words, Marcus' work repeatedly uses myth, symbolism and fables to reflect the human condition. Consider an excerpt from the poem "Journeys" in the book "When People Could Fly:"

"Everything we undertake is a journey. Frying an egg, sipping a beer at a party, or making a bank deposit, we are on a journey as great as the ones undertaken to Troy, Mecca, Mt. Meru, or to Cathal along the old Silk Road.

We slide the egg from the pan to the plate, sit down and eat, then go about our chores, which may involve a 'real' journey downtown or even across the seas.

"But each event is a journey, nonetheless: The egg is a volcano that might have happened on the plate's plateau, and a landscape unfolds on the table beyond the plate.

Although we are seated, we are on a journey across this landscape of crockery and glass, calling out to someone seated on

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel