

Arts & Life »

100-YEAR-OLD HENRY MORGENTHAU III WAXES POETIC AT BALTIMORE READING

By Hannah Monicken | Photos by David Stuck



SPEAKING BEFORE your average poet. The 100-year-old Jewish World War II veteran has taken to his new vocation swiftly, recently and with great success. He read seven of his poems Monday, introducing each one

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with both insight and humor to a very responsive — and receptive — audience.

“Then suddenly on a Sunday, talking recklessly while eating brunch, a gristly piece of meat lodges in my throat,” he said, the beginning of a middle stanza of his collection’s eponymous poem. “I struggle for breath, too annoyed to be sacred./Someone pounds my back to no avail./Out of nowhere an alert pint-sized waiter/performs the Heimlich maneuver./I don’t believe it will



Henry Morgenthau III

work./It does! Uncorked, I am freed.”

Reading his work, Morgenthau is a man transformed — he stands younger, taller, calmer.

He is the author of “A Sunday in Purgatory,” a collection of poetry published last year by the Baltimore-based journal and press Passager Books, which is dedicated to providing a platform for older (age 50 and up) writers. (“I’m qualified twice over!” Morgenthau told the crowd.) He has since been covered in outlets such as NPR and *The Washington Post*.

A longtime television producer (including “Prospects of Mankind with Eleanor Roosevelt” and “The Negro and the American Promise” with Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin), Morgenthau first published a work of poetry in the Passager Journal at a spry 96.

“I like the opportunity to use metaphor for truth and narrative that is endemic in poetry,” he told the JT about his late-in-life foray into the written poetic word.

“That’s the thing about poetry,” said Kendra Kopelke, editor at Passager and director of the MFA program at the University of Baltimore. “It’s there for you your whole life.”

The poems in “A Sunday in Purgatory” range in topic, length and style. Some are short and rhyming while others are longer prose-style poems, all exploring his own mortality, legacy and self.

“We [at Passager] were immediately taken with his work,” Kopelke said. “It was a combination of his advanced age and his youthful introspection —

asking, ‘Who am I really?’ And that’s powerful. I don’t think we’d ever seen that before.”

It’s clear, even after 100 years, Morgenthau is forging his identity, both distancing himself from the family dynasty he was born into and reflecting on the moments in history he played witness to because of it. His father (Henry Morgenthau Jr.) was Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s treasury secretary, his grandfather (Henry Morgenthau) was the U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire for Woodrow Wilson, and his New York District Attorney brother was the basis for Adam Schiff in “Law & Order.” And, truly, that’s just to name a few.

“His surgical examinations of self and his unflinching stare into mortality define the unique and honest voice of this remarkable first book of poems,” reads the back-of-the-book blurb from Peter Balakian, the 2016 Pulitzer Prize winner for poetry.

After reading his selections, the evening was opened up for a question-and-answer period, in which attendees asked both about his work and, inevitably, for the stories that can only come from living a century in the thick of historical moments.

In response to a question about FDR adviser Harry Hopkins, he reminisced about sitting on the steps (in front of Hopkins) of the gallery during FDR’s Dec. 8, 1941 speech declaring the previous day, “a date which will live in infamy.”

With a question about his inspiration in making a book of poems, he took more of a long view of poetry itself,

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likening it to a private garden for a few that is now becoming more accessible.

“Some people don’t think of hip-hop as poetry, but it is, popular as poetry had been in different times,” he said.

The audience adored him, “hmm”-ing and laughing at all the right moments. The praise was audible and heartfelt as the event winded down. Morgenthau enjoyed himself, staying late to sign books and greet his new (and old) fans and telling the JT he had a great time with “the wonderful audience.”

“It was great,” said Elke Durden, one attendee. “He really has a story to tell. He is kind of a classic intellectual, well-educated and very well-rounded.”

University of Baltimore faculty member (and alum) Steven Leyva said he saw in Morgenthau’s work a “noticeable lack of fear” that he found inspiring.

“I thought it was phenomenal,” he said, adding that he could clearly hear Morgenthau’s favorite poet, Robert Lowell, in “the way he approaches poems about the self.”

It’s not hard to imagine Morgenthau accomplishing yet more in his long and storied life. But perhaps this will tide him over for now, as ends his collection:

“From whence dreams come, my poems,/inchoate, anonymous, will be recycled/ forever, if we believe our world’s/forever.” Jr

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