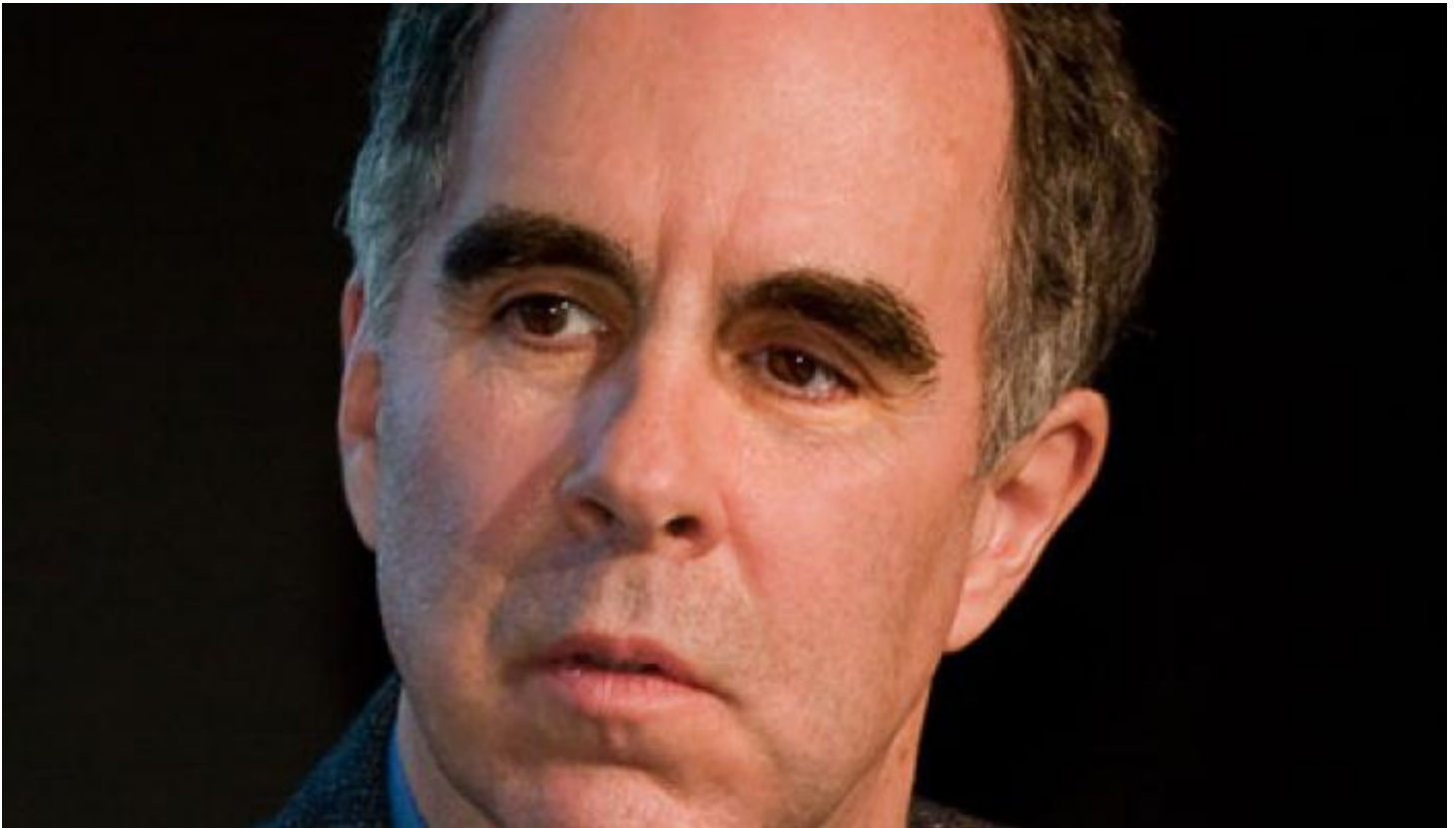


POEMS COMPETITIONS WRITING TEACHERS NEWS VIDEOS

A. F. Moritz



b. 1947

Biography:

Born in Niles, Ohio, in 1947, A. F. Moritz has written more than 15 books of poetry. He has been a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award and he has won the Award in Literature of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the ReLit Award, *Poetry* magazine's Bess Hokin Prize, and the [Griffin Poetry Prize](#). A. F. Moritz lives in Toronto and teaches at Victoria University at the University of Toronto.

Micro-interview:

Did you read poetry when you were in high school? Is there a particular poem that you loved when you were a teenager?:

Yes, I read a lot of poetry during high school. It's hard to choose one poet I loved particularly then, but I think I can do it. It's a poem I love equally today. William Wordsworth's "Michael," a narrative poem that's like a brief epic, a great tragic poem of the modern age and of the ageless human struggle.

In addition to its power, wisdom, and beauty, "Michael" was a poetic confirmation for me. There's a brief, wonderful introduction, maybe 40 lines, where Wordsworth says that he will tell his story "for a few natural hearts", and above all, "for the sake / Of youthful poets, who among these hills / Will be my second self when I am gone." That struck like lightning. I immediately saw, felt and said, / am his second self, me, here, and *these* hills here are Wordsworth's hills. I realized that I knew the beauty and majesty in that little industrial town, its polluted but sparkling rivers, its gutted but beautiful woods, its struggling people, noble if self-defeated. And I've felt that way ever since. That I'm worthy to talk with Wordsworth himself, on the same level, and he welcomed me and gave me that.

When did you first start writing poetry? And then when did you start thinking of yourself as a poet?:

In grade three. So how old are you in grade three? I would have been eight, probably. Maybe nine, if it was toward the very end of the school year. I was a kid who twigged to reading very quickly and easily, and I'd been reading well since the beginning of grade one, and reading big books since the latter half of school year. Things like retellings of the Arthurian story and the story of Troy. I already wanted to be a writer and felt I'd write these titanic narrative myths. In grade three I discovered the short stories of Poe through a book presenting eight or ten of them for children, and I wanted more, so I went to the library and got a big anthology of Poe. Immediately my eye fell on the small section of his poems, and I was mesmerized, and from that first afternoon of reading Poe, drunk on the feelings and sounds and ideas, I wanted to be a poet.

What do you think a poet's "job" is?:

To write well: creatively, authentically, powerfully, beautifully.

That's the answer, in my view. But it contains a lot that's maybe not apparent right on the surface of the words, so let me add a few thoughts.

First, you're "drunk" on the wonder of the words, the wonder that belongs to them but that they only seem to take on within this art. So to write well means to restore the words to the intensity and depth and surprise that belongs to them.

As you grow up, you realize that poetry for you is a passion, which is in part a self-assertion, a pride: the exercise of your powers. We have to remember that the human being has two major components, the body and language. Everyone walks and runs, everyone talks and sings, but what the greatest athletes and the greatest lovers are to the body, the great poets are to language.

So poetry is partly self-development and showing it off. It's self-delighting passion. But you grow to realize that an equal part of life with passion is duty, belonging to a community. Poetry too has to be part of this. And then, if you think about it, you realize that poetry's role is as the guardian and developer of language, and in fact *everything* depends on it. It may seem to lie far in the background, but this is only because it is so basic, so deep, like the roots, like the atomic forces. Just as there needs to be health of body for a society to flourish or even continue, so there needs to be health of language, and all that depends on it: what we call "thought" and "feeling".

Everyone who deals with language — journalists, writers of business report, everyone who communicates via the Web, and so forth — has the duty to use language well so that it thrives and doesn't decay. But the poet first of all and above all.

All this, and a lot more, is there in "the poet's job is to write well".

If you have a poem in our anthology what inspired you to write it?:

Poetry seemed to say to me, "I'm all made of joy, the goodness of being, the beauty of things, despite all evil, pain, loss, and ugliness. I'm a mystery to you: I choose the most painful realities in which to see the greatest exaltation, and together these are the truth."

It seemed to say this to me as rebuke, a criticism of my tendency to absorb all the doubts and gloom of the contemporary worldview into my poetry. And worse even than doubt and gloom, the contemporary feebleness and irony, the sense of "whatever," that things are as they are and the best you can do is swim in them, maybe sedate yourself, maybe make your pile or become a rock star in the slow-motion wreck. The best you can do is live for the weekend in a world that's a prison with, at least for some, a fairly good cafeteria and nice beds and internet.

I'm not saying my poems ever accept these things. No. My temptation is to make them into an argument against these things, and even a sort of philosophical investigation: is this reduced view of humanity that we've created true, or does poetry prove the opposite?

Well, I don't think any poet escapes that question, and a modern poem has to be modern, it has to respond to, and suffer infection from, the diseases of its age. My poems are no different. But "Thou Poem" came to remind me that the pith, the center, the essence, is affirmation, or affirmation-in-sorrow.

That's why at the very beginning of the poem, the poet asks poetry whether it most fears humanity and the world or whether it most fears the abyss of its own mind, its nightmares and doubts. He says that poetry, *his* poetry, lacks consistency and power. Then in the second couplet, poetry answers him by seeming to sublimely ignore what he's said. It says that it is a fully realized love of both self and others, embracing all human diversity but uniting in one human cry.

If you had to choose one poem to memorize from our anthology, which one would it be?:

Only one?! The anthology has so many good ones. Well, I'll choose one and mention another.

I'll choose "Mrs. Kessler" by Edgar Lee Masters from the great book, *The Spoon River Anthology*. Why? Many reasons. It's great. Today, it probably would not tend to be chosen, to be noticed. It's an extremely human poem, tender, wry, compassionate, disabused. Its technique seems quiet but is rock-hard inside, has steel, is like the chiseled epigrams of the ancient Greeks. To recite it isn't easy. It has to sound impressive and at the time it has to have a quiet, unassuming voice, like a woman might really have if she were a poor washerwoman who supported a layabout husband living on his memories in a little Illinois town around 1900. That last line has to be beautiful, mournful, but plain and quiet and matter-of-fact. Not easy!

Let me mention too the beautiful, entirely different, poem by an American poet contemporary with Masters, a poet I also love very much: "Full Moon" by Elinor Wylie.

It's great, what Poetry In Voice is doing with the reading aloud of poetry. One reason why poetry is underappreciated today is that it isn't read aloud, because people don't know how. And it isn't easy, it takes practice. We're used to reading fiction, reports, textbooks, journalism, and so we get used to reading just as processing ideas or following a story. Poetry is utterly, utterly different. Just like the score of a great composer, a poem holds the expression of a great heart and a great moment that has to be unlocked by an equally great performer, who responds. Really to understand poetry, you have to realize that you stand to a poem in the same relationship that Vladimir Ashkenazy did to Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto and any other piece. The composition had to be understood, it had to be practiced, it had to be

performed, and the great pianist had to realize that it could be performed a hundred ways, yet still be itself, and that he would indeed perform it somewhat differently, with a different “reading”, many times. This is true whether you read a poem to an audience or you read it alone, to yourself, out loud or only in the mind’s ear.

Poem(s) by A. F. Moritz :

Thou Poem

Poets >

Christian Bök
b. 1966



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