

BOOK REVIEW

## Review: A.F. Moritz does ‘the hard work of looking back’ with career-spanning *The Sparrow*

**GEORGE FETHERLING**

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED JULY 19, 2018

0 COMMENTS



A.F. Moritz

# SPARROW

SELECTED POEMS

A. F. MORITZ



## The Sparrow: Selected Poems

By A.F. Moritz

House of Anansi Press, 352 pages, \$29.95

In somewhat the same way that a person can become a highly decorated soldier, A.F. Moritz has become a highly decorated poet. The process has taken years. He began publishing in the early 1970s and by 2002 had produced 14 volumes of poetry (not counting seven translations). It was then that he plucked favourites from his first five books to make *Early Poems*. It is only now, however, that he has produced a proper “selected poems” dealing with the whole sweep of his career to date. This was a task he avoided for years because, as he says, “I didn’t want to stop my concentration on current writing to do all the hard work of looking back.”

The title of the new omnibus volume, *The Sparrow*, refers to *Death of a Sparrow*, one of those perfectly constructed, perfectly expressed and unforgettable poems that some of the finest poets succeed in writing once or twice in a long career.

Moritz is not an easily digested, standard-issue poet. Most people use language simply to communicate – to say hello, to argue, to order a pizza, to get through the day. Moritz is engaged in making something that is memorable and freshly meaningful rather than easy. Consistently through the years, he has built complicated patterns of diction that draw on sobriety and intimacy.

In the prelude to *The Sparrow*, he writes: “I am at an age [he’s 71] when words / should be finished / and God knows if such a word exists and, though not speaking it, I at least will hear.” Elsewhere he describes faith as “this wandering in the parks that kindness / has set aside as if I were trailing the caribou / as when twice a year they used to cross the barrens.” These are only two of the many indications of his benevolent Catholicism, just as the longest poem in the book, a celebration of the death of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco, is an indication that he follows the sort of peaceful anarchism long associated with George Woodcock.

Despite the above samples, he is not overtly autobiographical, though from time to time he does seem to let drop decipherable hints of his past and provenance. For example: “February was my mentor in misery, / that hollow pamphlet from yellow skies, basin of dead sparrows.” (There go the sparrows again.) Or this: “About 1890 a shadow disembarked / with Italian farmers at New York. They brought— / some of them spending their last money— / train

tickets to Ohio, and he came with them / settled where they worked, wandered the railroad tracks / and the banks of Mosquito, Meander, Mahoning” (names of obscure American rivers).

He often prefers to speak through characters or character types. For example, he writes sympathetically of displaced Eastern European refugees and exiles in the mid-20th century: “The new ideas in their cafes / are already forgotten in Paris: freedom from God, the age of man.” This suggests that we all become displaced persons through the passage of time, not merely by changes of residence or faltering circumstances. “As the century deepened, unbound from old delusions, / and the Bessemer converter, the pickling mill, gave way to / the microchip....”

In another poem, the speaker retreats from civilization to “a line of mountains / facing another line of mountains / like men facing women at a dance.” Elsewhere, a debilitated painter sits in his studio “filled up with canvases / the sound of my warped guitar, slosh of gin.”

More than 30 years ago, Moritz had a collection published in the elite poetry series of Princeton University Press. Later, he was given an award by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Although he has lived most of his life in Canada, where he is an unselfish literary citizen, until recently many of his familiar champions were senior U.S. figures such as Harold Bloom, John Ashbery (who died this year) and two U.S. poets laureate – W.S. Merwin and the late Mark Strand. Through it all, he has published with a wide variety of Canadian presses big and small.

His real breakthrough came in 2004 with *Night Street Repairs*, which many consider his finest work, though it was the book after that one, *The Sentinel*, that won him the \$50,000 Griffin Poetry Prize in Toronto and made him a much-sought-after figure across Canada and the rest of the English-speaking world. There were times in his earlier period when his material life looked a bit thin, but he now holds multiple professorships and appointments at the University of Toronto.

*George Fetherling is a novelist, poet and memoirist whose books include Walt Whitman’s Secret, Jericho, The File on Arthur Moss and Tales of Two Cities. His latest novel is The Carpenter from Montreal.*