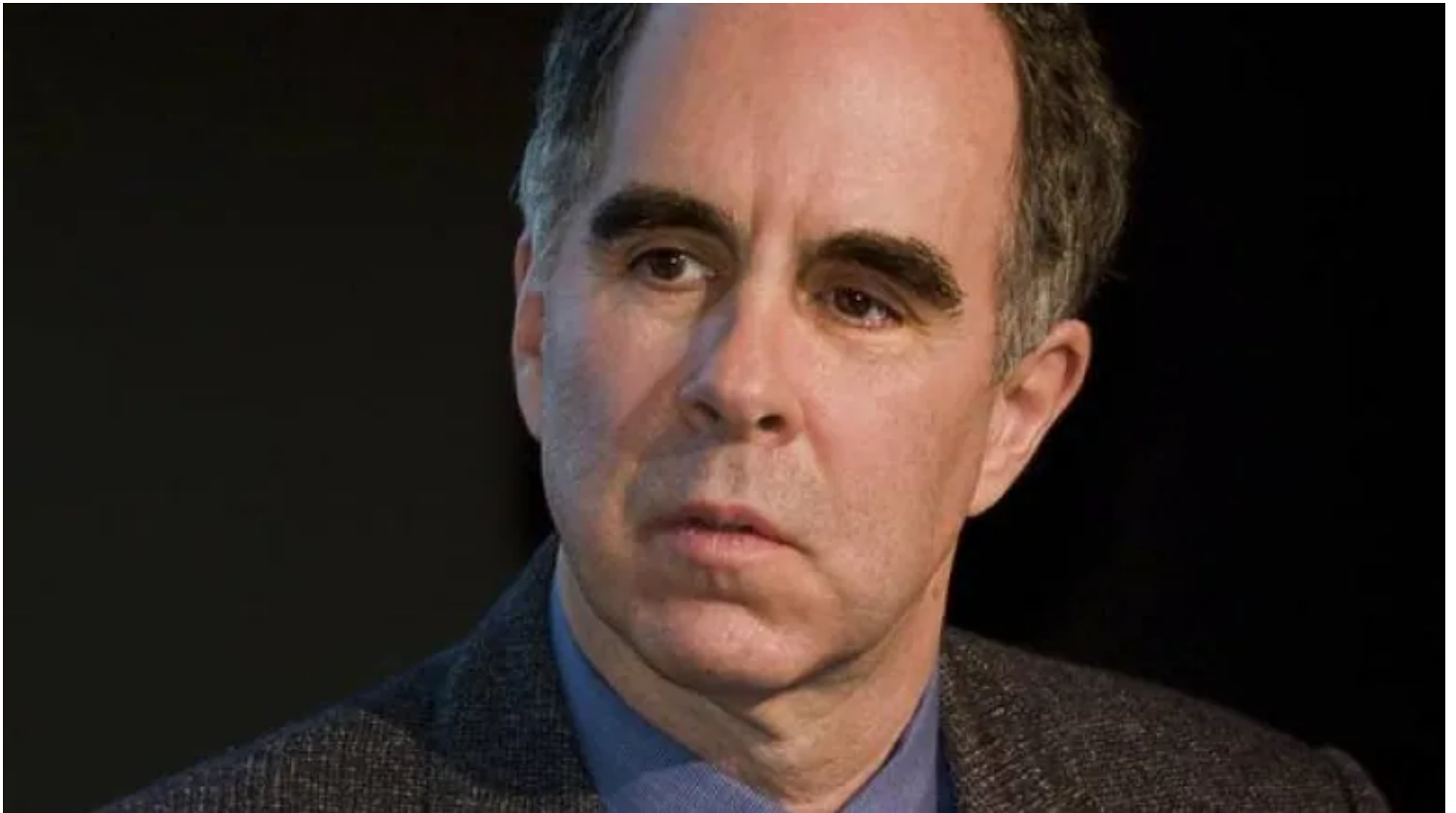


The Sunday Magazine

Poet A. F. Moritz on the under-appreciation of sparrows, poetry's 'uselessness' and more

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Poet A. F. Moritz currently serves as Toronto's poet laureate. He has won the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize, was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award three times, and was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. (Charles Earl)

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The Sunday Edition 39:55

At the outset of winter, a poet for all seasons

Poet A. F. Moritz's subjects include the denizens of all-night cafés, the natural history of words, history, rage, sardines on crackers, mortality, ancient myths and the ruins of abandoned factories.

Some of his writing burns with radical energy. Other poems speak eloquently and gently about the unsung moments of urban life, like the quiet, lonely beauty of a man walking alone, while a city of three million sleeps. Or how a crowd of angry passengers can "improbably, improve the poetry of the bus" upon boarding.

His recent book, *The Sparrow*, pulls together poems from a distinguished career that spans more than 45 years and 15 books.

In that time, he has won the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize, was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award three times, and was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Moritz currently serves as Toronto's poet laureate, and his most recent publication is a chapbook called *The Art of Surgery*. He teaches at the University of Toronto.

Here are some highlights from his conversation with [The Sunday Edition's](#) host Michael Enright.

Why sparrows are a recurring theme in his work

I think that I've identified a lot with the sparrow. It seems to be a denizen of the city that manages to survive as a little element of nature and a little

element of beauty in the little cracks and interstices that human beings leave — like the remainders of nature which are almost all we have in most cities ... raccoons, pigeons and so on. People don't even appreciate them or say thank you. They hate them and find them lice-ridden and so forth.

There's a poem in there that's just called *Love Song* in which the loved one is made equivalent to a sparrow which comes and lands on your table in a café and tries to get a crumb. It manages to survive and find its way, despite the fact that people are swatting at it and ignoring it. This seems to me an emblem of the way the sensitive person has to survive in modern society.

- [The Sparrow: Selected Poems of A. F. Moritz](#)

Why he's fascinated with both isolation and communion

I think [solitude] fascinates me because it's a condition of my own personality, and I'm always looking for its roots. On the other hand, I have a great interest in society and a great desire to participate in society ... To participate in society you ought to be a full citizen, and you've got to go out and join a party and campaign or whatever you're interested in.

I experience all the stresses of modern society, in which you have not just the poet, but the radical and the party leader who wants to deflect society from some of these deathly courses, and yet as a result finds himself completely exiled and alone. Because society has constituted itself to get almost total agreement, even though it's self-defeating agreement, that these values of consumerism, technology, increasing power and wealth are really a way to live. And of course, they're a way to die.

Why he praises poetry for its 'uselessness'

I will say poetry is useless in the same way nature is useless. Nature is the very basis of what we do now. Nature contains things that we can use. But if

you want to think about a forest as lumber, then you think nature is useful, and you pretty soon have nothing but lumber and no forest, and then you're in big trouble. [So we should start] not with saying, "We'd better save the forests because otherwise we'll be out of lumber," but with venerating the forest as a beautiful existing thing... [It] is not useful, but it has things that you can use, and without it you have nothing you can use.

On the human side, poetry is exactly in the same position to mankind as the forest is on the natural side. The way we treat it is exactly the way we treat a waterfront or a river. We turn our back on it. We build ugly buildings that back right up to it. We throw garbage into it. We don't even remember that it is there anymore until it gets so stinking and poisonous that it now threatens us. And yet it's the only reason that your city is even there. Well, ditto with poetry on the human side.

Why he's drawn to poems about solitary urban figures

I'm fascinated by the person in the city, especially the person alone — whether in a gigantic vista, which is for the moment empty ... [or] the person in the crowd. The crowd is all bustling and there's one lonely person in it. We see this all the time. We're walking along and the crowd is very busy and happy-seeming and there's the beggar who might be sitting on the street — perhaps begging, but perhaps so depressed that he's just sitting there or even laying under some blankets.

But it doesn't take a very sharp eye to look around and see other, less obvious people who are clearly alone, sad and depressed. It's one of the aspects of the city that exists in its layout. I think solitude is important for good reasons. Isolation, we could say, exists for bad or harsh reasons. If we think of the city as a whole bunch of little residences — even now, the condo city as a whole bunch of little cubes all stacked up — it's infinitely fascinating and troubling to think of what goes on in each of them. And yet each morning they all open their doors and divulge their little one or two or three into the great stream of mandated togetherness.

- [Moritz, Wright winners of Griffin poetry prizes](#)

Why he believes there is always a possibility of a new beginning

I truly enjoy life. You might not get that from every poem, but as the great poet Thomas Hardy says, "To speak the good exacts a full look at the worst." If you write literature that is just fantasy literature of success or beauty, it's maybe escapism, but people are going to say of it, "That's a wonderful dream." So I want to have the full weight of negativity, whether of man's inhumanity to man or man's robot-like behavior, hit me. Also the evils of contemporary society. But I wouldn't want to live in any other time.

The possibility of childhood and that freshness that you can always go back to and renew yourself — that remains. And it doesn't remain just as pure possibility, because in every cursed thing that people do, there are moments of generosity. The assembly line is hellish and it is anti-human. But you go and actually see one ... very frequently, when it's not working at top speed, it's a place of great hilarity and brotherhood. People manage, in the worst circumstances, to make things human. Their inherent anarchism or childishness comes out, and that's a very, very good thing.

"Humanity isn't extinguished," as the poet Hopkins says. He talks about everything being all paved-over in the modern city, and he says, "For all this nature is never spent. There lives the dearest freshness deep down things." And that's a real statement of my creed.

A.F. Moritz's comments have been edited and condensed. Click 'listen' above to hear the full interview.

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