

RECENTLY
PUBLISHED:

A Sunday In Purgatory

AUTHOR:

Henry Morgenthau III '35
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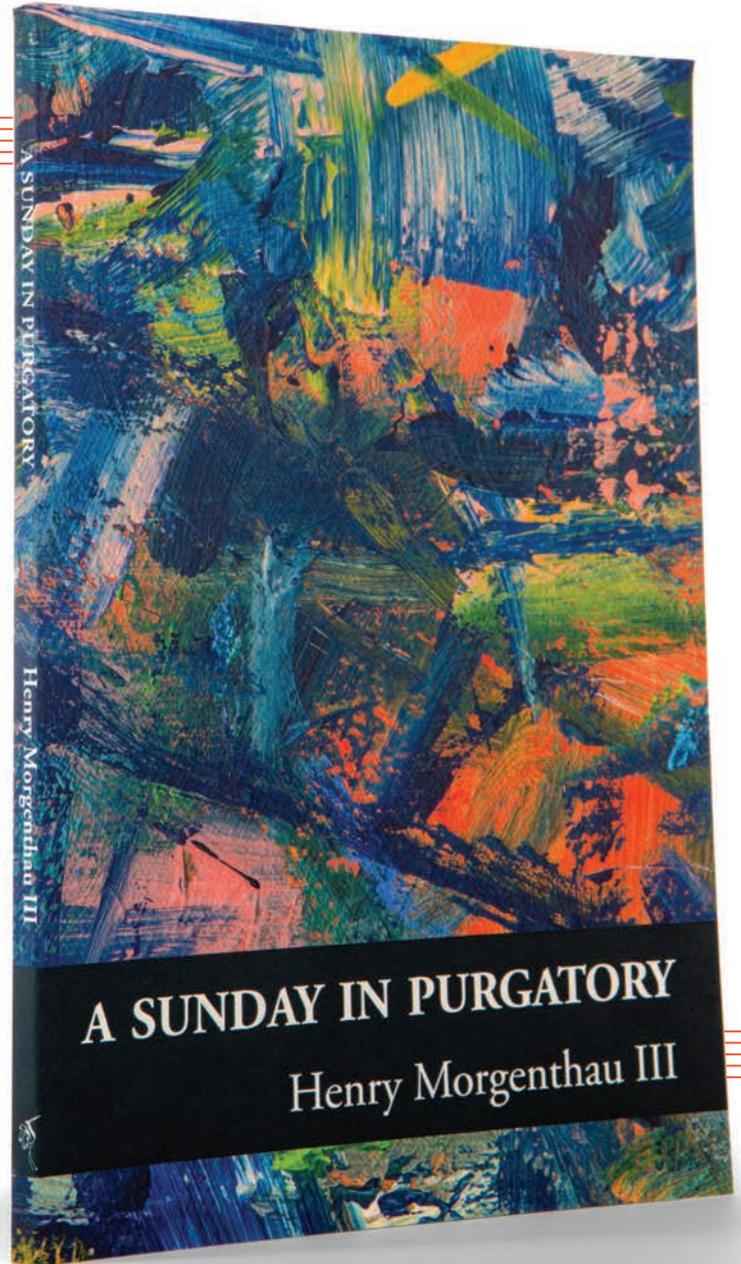
REVIEWED BY:

Jessica Day

Henry Morgenthau, who reached “the three digits line” on January 11, 2017, when he celebrated his 100th birthday, released his first book of poetry this past fall. Describing it as a “delayed vocation,” Mr. Morgenthau’s sharply focused prose is at turns critical and humorous but never maudlin, and *A Sunday in Purgatory* is a fascinating glimpse into what Mr. Morgenthau has called his “long and privileged life.”

As a producer and writer for WGBH in Boston (a PBS member television station) for over twenty years, Mr. Morgenthau received many awards for his pioneering documentaries and talk shows. He also produced the series *Eleanor Roosevelt: Prospect of Mankind*, which she hosted during the last three years of her life. His memoir, *Mostly Morgenthaus: A Family History*, won a Jewish Book Council prize for autobiography/memoir; it focused on several patriarchs in the Morgenthau family, including Mr. Morgenthau’s father, Henry Jr., who served as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Secretary of the Treasury.

During Mr. Morgenthau’s childhood, it was not unusual for FDR to visit the Morgenthau home, and, as Jonathan Shorr, director of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Baltimore noted, the poems in *A Sunday in Purgatory* combine memoir (his father “steady[ing] the trembling hand [of FDR] as he mixed Old Fashioneds and nibbled caviar, a gift from the Soviet ambassador;” to reflections on aging (“Anticipation of death is like looking for a new job . . .”), as well as wrestling with the tension that exists between being part of a famous American family and yet recognizing or yearning to establish one’s individuality.



Mr. Morgenthau also adeptly (and at times mercilessly) approaches the subjects of affluence, Judaism, and death. David Keplinger, who first met Mr. Morgenthau when he signed up for a community poetry workshop that Keplinger was teaching, noted that in writing poetry, Mr. Morgenthau found a space in which to approach subjects that were untouchable in his earlier work as a documentarian and author of memoir. “What draws me to Morgenthau’s poetry is the tough-minded treatment of his subject matter, which is highly diverse,” wrote Keplinger. “. . . the poet is writing a personal and national history that goes beyond dates and people and places, and which begins to map a topography of the soul.”

And yet, in spite of Mr. Morgenthau’s often weighty subject matter, it would be unfair to imply that *A Sunday in Purgatory* is a morbid collection; Adam Hochschild, author of *King Leopold’s Ghost* and founder of *Mother Jones*, rightly commented: “It was a delight to read these poems, heartfelt, wry and sparely eloquent. Some made me laugh out loud; other broadened my literary horizons and sense of what poetry takes on . . .”

Both in an Author’s Note and during a recent NPR “Weekend Edition Saturday” interview, Mr. Morgenthau also emphasized the joyful, freeing nature of his work: “Writing poetry for me is a celebration of the evening of a long life, a coda, a strikingly new expression of my inner being that surprises me as much as those who know me. Now as death kindly waits for me, I am enlivened with thoughts I can’t take with me.”

And fortunately for us, Mr. Morgenthau has taken the time to write those thoughts down. //

VISIT DEERFIELD.EDU/PULSE TO LISTEN TO MR. MORGENTHAU’S “WEEKEND EDITION” INTERVIEW IN ITS ENTIRETY.

YOU’LL CATCH YOUR DEATH

*“You’ll catch your death of cold,” Mother would say
if I went outside without my jacket, cap and mittens.*

*When I was older, plagued with an infected tooth,
the dentist numbed my nerve with Laughing Gas.*

I felt the pain from his drilling but laughed as if

it were hurting someone else, not me.

*Then, at Deerfield, my best friend swallowed
a corrosive base in chemistry lab to end his life,
but recovered to graduate. Next year at Dartmouth,
he lay down across the tracks to wait for the train.*

Now death has begun to catch up with me.

*I’ve lived too long. Merely standing up
and breathing in and out is a serious challenge.*

*At Ingleside, our retirement home, we progress
from canes, to walkers, to wheelchairs.*

*In vain we try to push back looming shadows
as frequent announcements of memorial services
are posted where they can’t be missed:
advertisements luring us to that final vacation.*