



A SUNDAY IN PURGATORY

Henry Morgenthau III



PRAISE FOR *A SUNDAY IN PURGATORY*

“Morgenthau’s poems are crisp, elegant forays into memory both personal and cultural, as he engages, with an ironic, Lowellian eye, a rich cultural history of growing up in affluent Manhattan during the 1920s and 30s. His surgical examinations of self and his unflinching stare into mortality define the unique and honest voice of this remarkable first book of poems.”

PETER BALAKIAN, author of *Ozone Journal*, 2016 Pulitzer Prize for poetry

“A late bloomer, Henry Morgenthau’s talent shows that old age is a wonderful time for self-expression.”

JANE MAYER, staff writer, *The New Yorker*

“It was a delight to read these poems, heartfelt, wry and sparsely eloquent. Some made me laugh out loud; others broadened my literary horizons and sense of what poetry take on: do you mean it’s really possible to write about *that* feeling? *That* memory? *That* experience? It is, and Henry Morgenthau III does it beautifully.”

ADAM HOCHSCHILD, journalist, author, founder of *Mother Jones*

“These precise and nuanced poems examine both the frailties and the strengths of our human nature. Morgenthau writes as naturally of the details of America history does of a lunch with friends, reminding us that the inner and outer worlds are more connected than we might think. Often elegiac in tone, *A Sunday in Purgatory* offers us lessons learned from a lifetime spanning a century, in which hope wrestles daily with despair, and often triumphs.”

ROSE SOLARI, author of *The Last Girl*

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

First Book of Poems by 99-Year Old Author

Passager Books announces the publication of *A Sunday in Purgatory* by 99-year-old Henry Morgenthau III.

The poems in *A Sunday in Purgatory* combine memoir (his father, FDR's Secretary of the Treasury, "steady[ing] the trembling hand [of FDR] as he mixed Bourbon Old Fashioneds and nibbled caviar, a gift from the Soviet ambassador"), reflections on aging ("Anticipation of death is like looking for a new job"), and wrestling with the tension that exists between being part of a famous American family and yet knowing that he's an individual, separate from his family history.

2016 Pulitzer Prize winner Peter Balakian said, "Henry Morgenthau's poems are crisp, elegant forays into memory both personal and cultural . . . His surgical examinations of self and his unflinching stare into mortality define the unique and honest voice of this remarkable first book of poems."

Morgenthau has had a long, distinguished career as an executive producer at WNYC in New York and WGBH in Boston: he produced a three-year long series in which Eleanor Roosevelt interviewed world leaders; he produced documentaries that featured Martin Luther King, Jr., James Baldwin, and others.

His work won Peabody, Emmy, and other major awards and nominations. He founded a center for communication research at Brandeis University. He wrote the definitive book, *Mostly Morgenthau*, about his distinguished family.

Morgenthau's father, Henry Morgenthau, Jr., was FDR's Secretary of the Treasury and played a major role in shaping the New Deal and America's post WWII policies toward Germany. His grandfather, Henry Morgenthau, was ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during WWI and the most prominent American to speak out against the Armenian genocide.

About the difference between his former writing and his present writing, Morgenthau says, "Writing poetry is a way of expressing myself, kind of like abstract painting as opposed to representational."

Passager Books is a not-for-profit press dedicated to publishing the work of older writers, to encouraging the imagination throughout life, and to creating beautiful and welcoming publications. Its literary journal, *Passager*, founded in 1990, has featured work by nearly 1000 poets, fiction writers and memoirists, many in their 80s and 90s.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

photograph by Pantea A. Tofangchi



Having reached his centennial year, Henry Morgenthau III has recently found a delayed vocation: writing poetry. Formerly a producer and writer for WBGH in Boston, a major contributor to PBS, he received many awards for his pioneering documentaries and talk shows. He produced the series, *Eleanor Roosevelt: Prospect of Mankind*, which she hosted during the last three years of her life. His memoir, *Mostly Morgenthau*, won the annual Jewish Book Council prize for autobiography/memoir. He has recently published poetry in *Nimrod* and an essay, “The White House Revisited,” in *District Lines*, published by Politics and Prose. Morgenthau now resides in Washington, D.C.

TOPOGRAPHIES OF THE SOUL:

The Poetry of Henry Morgenthau III,
Excerpts from an “Afterword” by David Keplinger,
Professor of English, American University

A Sunday in Purgatory is the debut poetry collection of a celebrated writer of memoir, a former producer/pioneer of Public Television, and a first hand witness to some of the most gripping moments in twentieth-century American history. The poet came to his new craft at ninety-six years old and spent three years generating the book you hold in your hands. It is not so much a glance backwards as a look inward, his subjects including aging and mortality, the politics of identity, and the shape of wonder.

...

Poetry always demands a disturbance that ejects us from the known. It questions our sometimes too easy labeling of the other and the self. So it is in poetry that Morgenthau has found a space to confront, even unravel, his entanglements, or more: to just describe them as they are. In a central poem, “Ladyfingers,” the speaker tells of a 1920s childhood in which roles within a powerful political and observant Jewish family were set firmly in place, creating a cocoon to protect him, as well as a cage to hold back the desires of the spirit and the body. Morgenthau writes:

On the first day of classes,
boys and girls were separated.
The girls were handed
pastel-colored chiffon scarves

to wave as they gamboled about.
I grabbed one, and followed the girls,
prompting jeers from the boys.
“Hey Ladyfingers,” yelled Henry Furnald,
the best looking boy in the class.
“Hey Ladyfingers!”
He was one of the boys. I was not.

In the poem the speaker is caught between his designated role—as a boy he was given no scarf—and his desire . . . As much as the speaker lays blame on the world into which he was born, he also names himself complicit in the cocooning:

I have lived with the dread of being uncovered.
I have built walls to isolate myself,
to hide behind, to fear, and to hate myself.
Walls fabricated with stony
indifference toward being different.
Not wanting to be touched.
Wanting to touch.

Morgenthau’s poetry *does* finally make contact in the way he longs to, its images and ideas and extraordinary language evocative of what he calls “the soft, sensuous pressure of warm bath water.” A confessional poet, his confession is one of great beauty, because it is an acknowledgement of seeing things merely as they are, without the need to be adjusted or fixed or revised in retrospect. *A Sunday in Purgatory* articulates human feelings—from the subtle and the complicated to the loud and clear—as well as any book of poetry I have read in years.

FROM THE AUTHOR

“In these precious days I dress my private demons in scribblings to come out from behind the shadows that have darkened my long and privileged life . . . in a purgatory where I wait to pass through the open gates.”

HENRY MORGENTHAU III

To listen to an interview with Henry, or to hear him read one of his poems, click one of the audio clips below.



“Why I Write,”
a brief interview



“Burnt Toast,” from
A Sunday in Purgatory

ORDERING INFORMATION

A Sunday in Purgatory

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