

# Home is Where the Art is

## Father and daughter share a love of writing

by Steve Palopoli

**I**T WAS A RATHER UNUSUAL CASE OF GIRL-meets-book that led Jana Marcus to read *Interview with a Vampire* back in 1976. A mere 14 years old at the time, she could hardly have guessed even that it would have a sequel, let alone that the first of Anne Rice's "vampire chronicles" would spawn a mega-selling and much-adored series of books.

Neither could her father, acclaimed local poet Morton Marcus, who picked *Interview* off the shelf at a bookstore when his daughter complained she couldn't find anything new to read. As it was Rice's first novel, he didn't have anything to recommend it except to say, "Here's a book by a friend of mine."

"I knew her husband Stan, who was part of the whole poetry scene that I was in," explains Morton. "I met him through a colleague at Cabrillo, Joe Stroud. We were all part of this group that centered around John Logan, the great American poet who lived down here for years. Stan has come down to Cabrillo to read poetry several times — he's a terrific poet."

Certainly neither father or daughter could have predicted that this incidental gesture would lead two decades later to Jana's first book, *In the Shadow of the Vampire: Reflections from the World of Anne Rice*. But in what might be construed as a rather hefty karmic payoff, the publication of her book this month will coincide with that of Morton's new collection *When People Could Fly*.

Jana, for one, remembers that first encounter with Rice's writings as extremely significant.

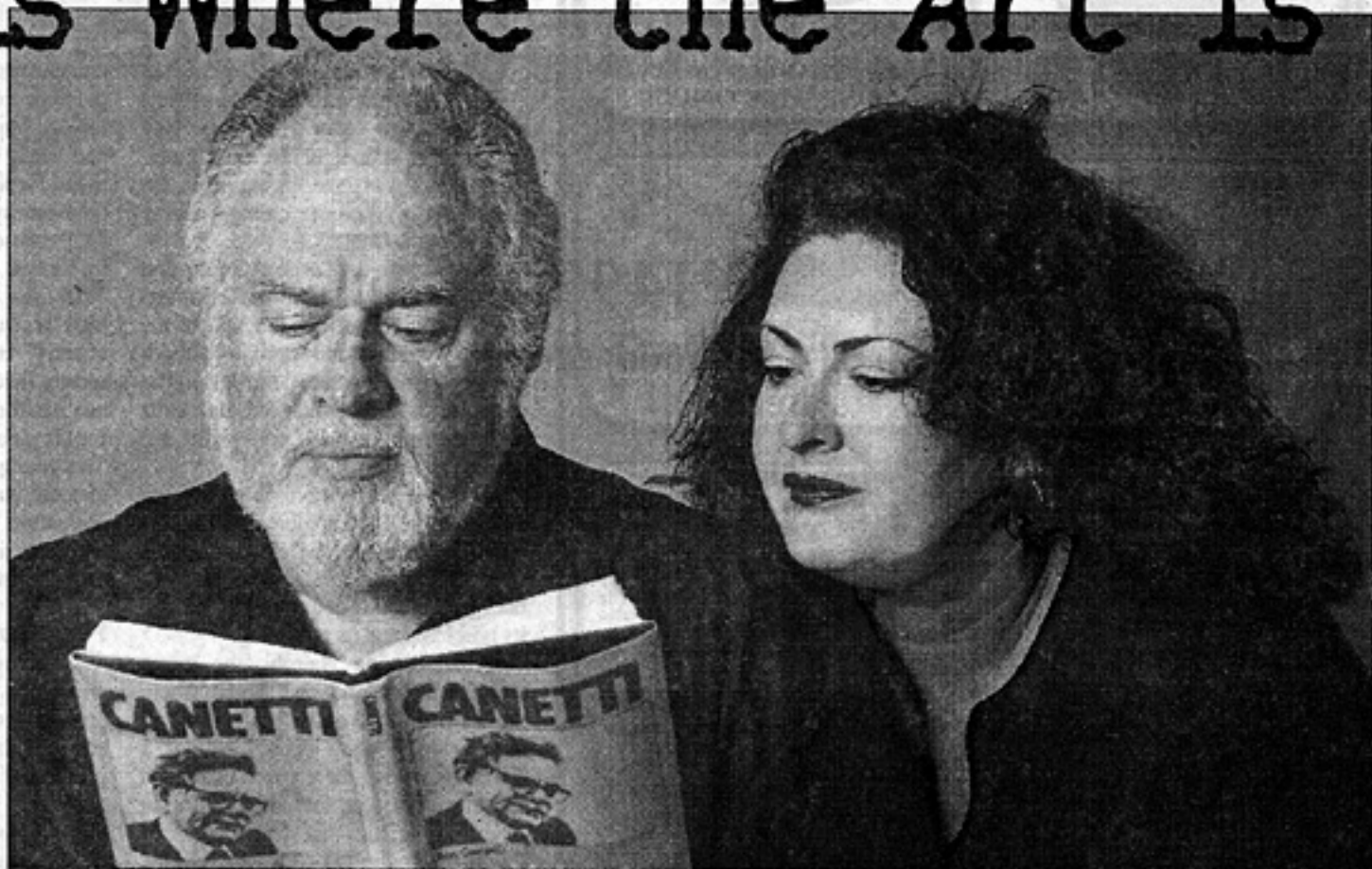
"That book changed my life," she says. "I was so into the vampire thing. I was 14, and that book was just it. I loved it."

### Shadowing Rice

Her affection for Rice's books, and for the whole "vampire chronicle" phenomenon — "I was a vampire every Halloween for like 15 years," she says — explains why she was so interested in covering the author's book signing in Santa Cruz on the *Memnoch the Devil* tour in 1995. At that point, she had been working in documentary photography for almost 15 years. And she had a longtime interest in subcultures, having won UC Berkeley's International Photojournalism Contest in 1994 for *Midnight in Manhattan: A Decade of Subcultures and the Alternative Scene*.

By the time she covered the Santa Cruz event for *GOOD TIMES*, she already had a sense of the huge and extremely dedicated following of fans that poured into every Rice appearance — often in costume as one of the vampire characters — which gave her book signings the air of a rock 'n' roll concert rather than a literary happening. But the real inspiration for her book came after she was introduced to Rice in Santa Cruz; the author, who remembered her father, invited her to the annual costume ball held for members of her fan club in New Orleans.

"Going down to this party in New Orleans, I had no idea what I was getting myself into," she says. "It was just a fun photo



Father-daughter authors Morton and Jana Marcus share a strong mythic sense in their writing.

opportunity. What I saw was really amazing, and I realized that there really was this huge subculture that had risen up around her. When I went down there and saw that there were these 8,000 people who all had stories about how her work had dramatically changed their life, I mean *dramatically*. I just started thinking 'What's really going on here?'"

Her initial questions would eventually lead to *In the Shadow of the Vampire*, which profiles a cross-section of Rice fans, allowing them to tell their own stories and featuring a photographic portrait of each subject.

What amazes about these tales of fandom is not only the wide range of ages and backgrounds, but the way in which these readers have used Rice's books to cope with AIDS, racism, dysfunctional

families, identity and alienation in their own lives. All of the fans profiled — who incidentally include a woman from Castroville, a UCSC student, a Santa Cruz receptionist and a dominatrix from Felton — have staked out their place in what one fan calls Rice's "special universe"; and more than that have used her fictional worlds to get a handle on their own personal reality.

Jana says she chose the format because she didn't want her own opinions or interpretations to get in the way of Rice's fans describing where they were coming from, especially when it involved taboos like blood-drinking and sadomasochism.

"I didn't want to make any judgments about these people or give my opinion about anything. I just wanted them to have a voice," she says. In the end, she thinks Rice's books have such a broad and dedicated following because they tap into a deeper part of the readers' realities. "In a way, she takes you on a journey about yourself," she says. "Her books just sort of confront you with spiritual and psychological themes that really make you think about your own life."

### Myth for the millennium

If there is a connective thread that runs between the two vastly different new books from the Marcus clan, it is certainly that mythic element. That same undercurrent grounds Morton's *When People Could Fly*, an unpredictable collection that takes the form mostly of prose poems. Though the book launches off from the somewhat daunting premise of tracking the entire history of mankind, Marcus expresses himself throughout its 128 pages in short, vivid bursts of well-ordered chaos like "The Story That Had Never Been Written," "The Man Who Kicked the Universe in the Ass" and "My Father's Hobby." After four-and-a-half years of working with the style, his melding of prose and poetry is dead on.

"It's sort of schizophrenic," says Morton. "They're pulling apart — they're two different impulses, and it's the tension between those two impulses that really has created these poems, and it's creating prose poems all around America."

Cleverly, Marcus brings this tension to the surface in one of the book's pieces, "The Myth of History," building the struggle between realism and surrealism in his own work into a consideration of the value of history versus that of myth. In the course of writing these pieces, he came to his own understanding of that question.

"What I came to is that it's not verisimilitude, and it's not myth," he says of his style. "It is the imagination, the primacy of the imagination." Not that understanding allowed him to impose a structure on what he was writing. "It was such a joy to read these things (when they were finished) and see where the hell I was going with them," he says. "Some of them started off as essays, some of them started off as letters, and I just let them roll. It was tremendously exciting to me."

The end result is alternately funny and dark, poignant and absurd. Morton says he hopes readers find it ultimately a very life-affirming work. "It's a very, very positive book in the end," he says. "It's saying, as I say to my students, 'Hey, there really is wonder out there. There really is a magnificence in our daily life, if we would just stop and look at it.'"

Certainly his daughter feels he has instilled such an outlook in her. Jana dedicated *In the Shadow of the Vampire* to her father, with an inscription that reads: "To Mort, who has taught me to embrace the world, guides my imagination to new heights, and always graciously corrects my grammar."

Jana Marcus will sign and discuss *IN THE SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE* Oct. 17 at the Capitola Book Cafe and Oct. 28 at Bookshop Santa Cruz. Morton Marcus will sign and read from *WHEN PEOPLE COULD FLY* Tuesday at Capitola Book Cafe and Oct. 30 at Bookshop Santa Cruz.



Jana Marcus' writer father Morton taught her to "embrace the world."

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