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## Celebrated Palestinian/American poet Naomi Shihab Nye headlines annual Morton Marcus Poetry Reading

By Wallace Baine

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Naomi Shihab Nye was born in St. Louis, and has spent most of her life in San Antonio. But she's always had one foot planted firmly in a land far from the shores of the U.S.

The celebrated 61-year-old poet is the product of an American mother and a Palestinian father. As a young woman, she went to live in Ramallah and in Jerusalem. It was there where she first met her Palestinian paternal grandmother, a devout Muslim who lived to be 106 years old.

Nye is the featured guest reader at the fourth annual Morton Marcus Memorial Poetry Reading, honoring the late Santa Cruz poet, on Nov. 14 at Kresge Town Hall on the campus of UC Santa Cruz.

She has for years referred to her "sitti" (Arabic for grandmother) as a kind of muse for her work, shaping her sensibility as a poet, and as a person. In her career as a poet, Nye has often focused on inspiring young people to discover their own inner poet. And, referencing her own coming of age, she always points to elders as a great source of inspiration.

"I have always talked about the wisdom available through some elders, not all, and encouraged children and young writers to listen and ask questions of older family members while they still can," Nye said in an e-mail interview, "and to pay attention to this deep and twining thread of time and ancestry coming to us through individuals. Some of the best poems I have ever read coming out of classrooms related to grandparents. Living in a Latino city as an adult, this too made sense. I think Latino families have a keen sense of generations and the layering of wisdom."

Nye is the author of more than 30 volumes of poetry, essays, short stories and other fiction. She has won the Pushcart Prize for poetry four times and has many other accolades to her name. Her poems draw from her experiences as a Palestinian-American and often touch on Arab cultural references and metaphors. Though she is not fluent in the Arabic language, she often uses Arabic terms in her work.

"Arabic words pop up in my mind in response to experiences all the time," she said. "I love them. When I hear people speaking Arabic, I feel at home. I am carried away."

Pain is also an element that runs through Nye's work, whether it's her own or the pain of empathy for others. "Poetry and writing are the best for alleviating pain," she said. "Literature extends, deepens and connects us. Reading poetry is the best thing I know to do when suffering deep grief or alienation of any kind. I have often read Morton Marcus's prose poems when I was needing a sense of gravity again. I always loved his gift for linkage, his intelligent humor and elegant description, his alert and subtle eye."

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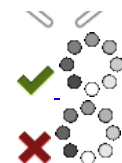
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Nye said that for her appearance in Santa Cruz as a poet, she will defer to the man for whom the event is named. Gary Young, Santa Cruz's first Poet Laureate and a long-time friend of Marcus, will be on hand to introduce Nye and to announce the winner of the 2013 Morton Marcus Poetry Contest, who will receive a \$1,000 prize.

"I will try to make some connections to Morton and his brilliance with moments in general," she said. "I'll probably read more prose poems and paragraphs than usual. But there is always a spontaneous element which one cannot predict till there on the ground. I love Santa Cruz — who doesn't?"

{ Nov. 14 6 p.m. Kresge Town Hall on the campus of UC Santa Cruz. Free. Details: [www.mortonmarcus.com](http://www.mortonmarcus.com) (<http://www.mortonmarcus.com>). }

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