

'Tuesdays with Morrie'

By Mitch Albom.

Doubleday, 192 pgs., \$19.95.

ELLEN JAFFE MCCLAIN
SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH TIMES

Have you ever read an obituary of someone whose life was so full and whose spirit so manifest that you finished reading the obit thinking, "Gee, I wish I'd known that guy?" Brandeis University sociology professor Morrie Schwartz was such a person, and Mitch Albom's account of his final months gives every reader a chance to form a posthumous bond with someone who can only be described as a life force.

Mr. Albom was a workaholic Detroit-based sports columnist and radio/TV commentator when he turned on "Nightline" in March 1995 and found out that his favorite Brandeis professor was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. He ended his 16-year absence from the teacher everyone knew as Morrie, and wound up visiting him every Tuesday from midsummer until days before his death in November 1995.

This short book presents the last few months of Morrie's life as a class, with lessons that are interspersed with flashbacks to Mr. Albom's childhood and college years, plus biographical information about Morrie and extra nuggets of his wisdom and philosophy. Although the framing device can be a little precious, it is effective in getting across Mr.

Albom's main point: that Morrie was a consummate teacher who transformed everyone with whom he came into contact.

The book is best when "class" is in session and Morrie is spinning out one profound idea after another about family, emotions, love, work, aging, or impending death — wisdom that sometimes seems conventional until you stop and think how few people actually live by it. Morrie's vitality, even as he struggles through his final days, leaps off the page.

The book is weaker when Mr. Albom writes about himself, though paradoxically, he left me wanting to know more about how his visits with Morrie changed him. Mitch Albom also writes from "The Short, Punchy, Definitive Statement School." If he weren't a sportswriter, he'd have to become one.

Even though there are a few stylistic flaws, "Tuesdays with Morrie" is powerful and inspirational. Morrie's voice comes across clearly, and it's a privilege to audit his final class. □

Talking With Mitch

When he met Morrie Schwartz, Mitch Albom was a 17-year-old Brandeis University freshman, walking around in gray sweats with an unlit cigarette in his mouth so he'd look tougher than he was. Morrie changed Mitch's life then, and 20 years later, as he lay dying from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease, he changed it all over again.

"He talked to me as an adult even though I was a kid," Mr. Albom said in an interview with the BALTIMORE JEWISH TIMES just after Thanksgiving weekend. "He would listen to you as if you were the first one who came along."

At the time, Mr. Albom wanted to become a jazz pianist, while his parents nudged him toward a more practical career. "[Morrie] liked the fact that I wanted to be a musician. The closer I got to graduation, the more important it was that someone approved of the direction in which I was heading."

After a frustrating time in the jazz world, Mr. Albom got a master's degree in journalism and became a sportswriter. He landed a job as a columnist with the Detroit Free Press and wound up not only writing (and winning awards for it) but sounding off on radio and television, in-

cluding nationally on ESPN.

He'd meant to keep in touch with Morrie Schwartz after graduating from Brandeis in 1979. "I was wrapped up in my life and sort of put my past in the past, and I put people in the past, too," Mr. Albom said. "There is no excuse."

When Mr. Albom started his weekly visits to Morrie, his newspaper had just gone on strike. "What drew me to Morrie was the contentment he had about life, and I was not content with my life."

Mr. Albom, who attended Jewish day schools through 12th grade, found that his Tuesdays with Morrie strengthened his Jewish identity as well: "There are so many things Morrie valued that are values in Judaism: family, the Sabbath, the notion of what's a good life, a well-lived life, the idea of the here and now, that you should be present now — those are Jewish values."

And Mitch Albom learned from Morrie that there's nothing foolish about visiting a loved one's grave and having a conversation. Giving time to relationships ensures that when you're gone, "your voice is still inside people. If you spend that kind of time with people, you'll talk [from the grave] and they'll listen."

— Ellen Jaffe McClain

Book Notes