Strum Reviewed By James Broderick Ph.D of Bookpleasures.com

- By James Broderick Ph.D

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Reviewer James Broderick, Ph.D: James is an associate professor of English and journalism at New Jersey City University. A former newspaper reporter and editor, he is the author of six non-fiction books, and the novel *Stalked.***His latest book is** *Greatness Thrust Upon Them,* **a collection of interviews with Shakespearean actors across America.Follow Here To Listen To An Interview With James Broderick.**

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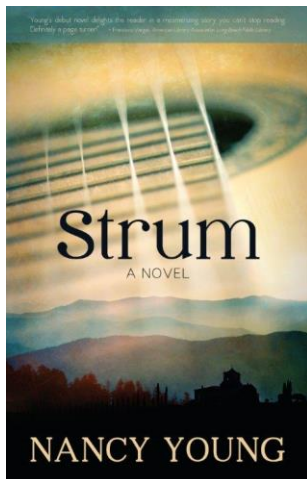
Author: Nancy Young

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Nancy Young's novel *Strum* begins with a French epigram from 17th century French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal that essentially communicates the idea that "the heart has its reasons that reason knows nothing about." It's one of Pascal's better known aphorisms. But the more deeply I read into this poignant and compelling book, the more I kept thinking back to another of Pascal's oft-cited quotes, rendered in English as "If we examine our thoughts, we shall find them always occupied with the past and the future."

Strum not only exemplifies that idea, as well as the tidal pull of time in the sea-changes of our lives, but Young has structured her novel according to that principle, with chapters leaping back and forth in time, from the 1800s to the year 2000. The novel also leaps about in place, from the Canadian hinterlands to the French Alps, from Southeast Asia to Australia.

To describe Strum, with all its digressions and excavations, would make it sound like a complex creation worthy of Pascal himself as it wends its way through a labyrinth of six generations, but the novel is really quite simple, and Young does a great job of keeping the string of significant events hummingly clear. The fulcrum of the book is music, or perhaps "sound" would be a better way of saying it, as sounds both heard and sensed comprise much of the charm and fabric of the book. More specifically, the music of a hand-crafted set of guitars provides the soundtrack to the lives of scores of noteworthy characters one meets within the pages of Strum.

The central conceit of the book – and the pulsating rhythm of its plot – involves how the music of these particular guitars connects a multi-generational mixed race family and the lovers and others who comprise their aural sects as we follow them through time. The novel opens with a vignette of magical realism: a deaf woodworker follows an eerie, enchanting music he hears in a dream, taking him deep into a forest, stalking the source of his nocturnal delight amid the centuries-old cedars that spire skyward.

What follows is an exhausting and exhilarating adventure, taking the readers from the tumult of timber mills to the somnolence of cloistered convents, and later, from the dark and threatening jungle to the stately resplendence of the modern opera house. All along the way, the writing (like the music that floats though the text) remains lush and ornamental, rococo in its rhetorical coloration:

"Her fingers flew up and down the fret board marking out a recuerdo both passionate and lamenting…her gypsy soul found a platform in the soundboard of the instrument and with it the dying embers of her passionate spirit were rekindled and stoked into a blaze. Each rising arpeggio was an ascent into the upper reaches of a Vesuvius summit and the descents a plunge into infinite sobriety."

If such impassioned and emotionally heightened language (unfairly taken out of context here, I concede) seems a bit overheated, it might be best to again remember Pascal, who argued that the fundamental truths of human existence could not be stated, or discovered, through the cold filter of reason. In Strum, Nancy Young affirms that principle in prose that would likely have left Pascal nodding in affirmation.

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