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Pasadena Novelist Travels the World in “Strum”

By CAMERON TURNER

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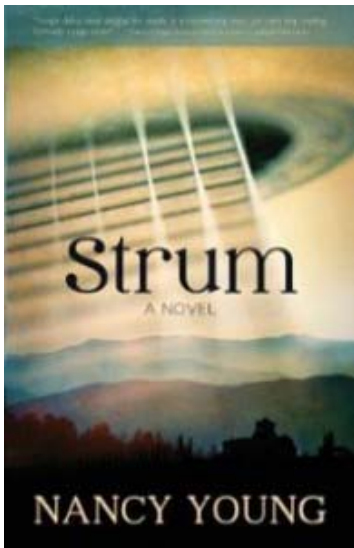


Nancy Young. Photo by Vroman's Bookstore

Pasadena-bred novelist Nancy Young was running an arts development program in Australia when she decided to resume her teenage quest to master the classical guitar. She selected an instrument handcrafted by Seagull Guitars of Quebec, in part because of a line in the workshop's brochure. Young recalls: "It said, 'We only make guitars from trees that have fallen in the forest, and most of them are made from 800 year-old cedars.'" That statement quickened Young's environmentalist's heart and piqued her lifelong fascination with history, art and culture.

"An 800-year-old tree can tell you things that happened 20 generations ago," says Young excitedly. "So, these guitars have imbued in them all of the stories carried by people, and even the wind blowing in from another continent, that came in contact with the tree."

Pondering those possible stories led Young on a five-year writing journey that culminated in *Strum*, Young's sweeping debut of enduring but tragic love, the conflicts of race, the terrors of war and the overwhelming, relentless passion ignited by two exquisite guitars that follow multiple generations of characters across two centuries and four continents.



“I purposely did two guitars traveling in opposite directions around the world. So, we explore the whole European Western tradition and then there's the whole Eastern tradition. And I loved the idea of them coming together,” explains Young.

Strum carries readers from 18th century Canada when Native Americans traded and clashed with French trappers, to the unparalleled glamour of pre-Revolution Paris, through the Golden Triangle of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, to contemporary China, Mt. Everest and the Sydney Opera House. Young immerses readers into these environments through vivid and evocative language. “I'm a visual person. I've been a painter my whole life and this book actually started as a screenplay. But it very quickly became about words and not just image,” she states.

The novel's global sweep reflects the author's citizen-of-the-world perspective. Born in Taipei and educated in Pasadena's racially integrated public schools of the 1970s, Nancy Young has always delighted in absorbing the world's diverse richness. Her passport bears stamps from over 30 countries in Europe and Asia. She studied English, French and Chinese literature, international affairs, filmmaking and business at places like UC Berkeley, Columbia and the University of Hawaii. When she was 26, she climbed Mount Everest.

“I was branded an existentialist in my 20s and I really relished that role!” Young declares with a giggle. “I would just go wherever the train stopped. I met people in cafés. I fell into huge festivals. But I never told my mom I was going — I just went!”

Young's unabashed joie de vivre may account for the thread of elegant, intense sensuality that runs throughout *Strum*. Unleashing a hearty laugh, Young announces, “(My novel) is about love and about generations and families and, I hate to admit it but there is sex involved!”

Then, in a more serious (yet still joyful) tone, Young explains, “I wanted to talk about the personalities of artists and musicians. Without that passion, you cannot be an artist. You have to be able to feel that need, that desire that drives you to do whatever it is that you do. You really have to be driven by it.”

Nancy Young will read excerpts and sign copies of *Strum* during “Local Authors Day” at Vroman's Bookstore, 695 E. Colorado Blvd, Pasadena on Saturday, October 26, at 4:00 p.m.