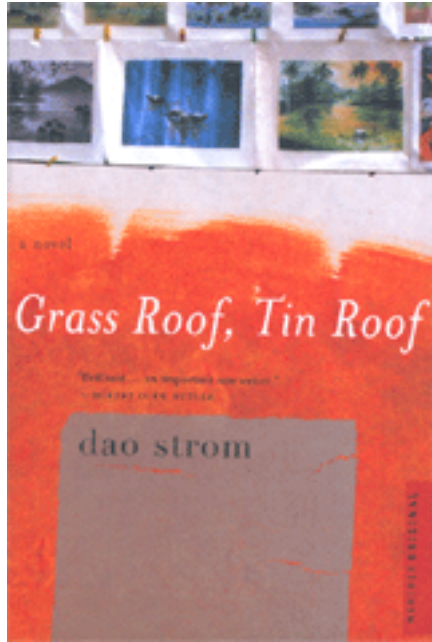


Press Release

Grass Roof, Tin Roof

by Dao Strom

- [About the Book](#)
- [About the Author](#)
- [A Conversation with Dao Strom](#)



Debut Novel Shines Fresh Light on Vietnamese American Experience

About the Book

Offering a young, contemporary, and intimate view of the Vietnamese American experience, Dao Strom's dazzling debut novel, *Grass Roof, Tin Roof*, covers ground touched by few other works of fiction. A powerful story that reads like a memoir, *Grass Roof, Tin Roof* revolves around a Vietnamese family that resettles and lives in the isolation of California gold country. In a beautiful, lyrical voice, Dao Strom explores the myth of westward progress and the psychic consequences of cultural displacement. By weaving together seemingly disparate stories and ruminations, she creates a prismatic reflection of the disorienting immigrant experience. Like Edwidge Danticat, Chang-Rae Lee, and Susan Choi, Dao Strom directs our attention to an important part of the new American melting pot.

Grass Roof, Tin Roof begins with the story of Tran Ahn Trinh, a Vietnamese writer facing government persecution, who flees her homeland during the fall of Saigon in 1975. She brings her two children to the United States, where she marries a Danish immigrant, Hus Madsen, who bears the burden of having survived another war.

The children, for whom war is now a distant shadow, struggle to understand the world around them on their own terms. From each child's introspective first-person narrative, we discover how they have come to terms with their heritage and upbringing and learned to find their way in modern society. These multiple perspectives, shared in Strom's delicate and discerning prose, offer a wide range of insights into issues of exile and identity.

"In whatever fashion the end comes, somehow a marked population of people (be it family or nation) must knowingly or unknowingly join together in an acceptance of the fate of: dissolution. Home — whatever that is — will be extinguished or rearranged. And what

remains afterward, the survivors, eventually they are scattered, too, like seeds, or sent out like scouts but bearing messages they've forgotten by the time they land and begin to roam amid other populations of people. They set up smaller, sadder camps of the old life, always with the same sense of something shattered and undistilled behind them. It is my belief that all survivors contain within them an understanding of the true ephemeral nature of location, but it is up to each to realize this as potent, or terrifying, or meaningless."

Dao Strom's own background provides the basis for many of her characters' reflections. She was born in 1973 in Saigon to a well-known writer and journalist. Her mother fled the country with her when she was a baby, and Strom grew up in the Sierra Nevada foothills with her mother and stepfather.

Grass Roof, Tin Roof is a profound work of intense emotion and rare insight, one that speaks to the author's unique experience. By melding autobiography with fiction and history, Strom paints an intimate portrait of the Vietnamese immigrant experience in a contemporary context, in a way that few other writers could do.

About the Author

Dao Strom was born in 1973 in Saigon. Her mother fled the country with her when she was a baby. Strom grew up in northern California and is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She is the recipient of a James Michener fellowship, the Chicago Tribune/Nelson Algren Award, and several other grants. She lives in Austin, Texas.

A Conversation with Dao Strom about *Grass Roof, Tin Roof*

Q) How large a role, if any, does autobiography play in *Grass Roof, Tin Roof*?

A) This was a necessary and, in many ways, quite personal book for me to write. I will admit that I have taken a lot from my family's and my own experiences, but mostly on a superficial level only, and as starting points from which to build fictional situations. For instance, the impetus to write the chapter titled "Chickens" came from a dim memory of a situation in my childhood when a man came to our property and accused my father of having killed his dog. I don't now remember the actual event or how it turned out, if I ever really remembered or knew it. It is possible that many parts of my book were derived in this way, both consciously and unconsciously, from a store of imagined memories and misremembered or indirectly absorbed anecdotes and ruminations and even purposefully distorted facts. I guess I consider this to be the nature of fiction, at least in the way I'm compelled to write it.

Q) Was there much research involved in writing *Grass Roof, Tin Roof*?

A) My manner of research was something like a process of absorption. There was a period of time during which I read a lot of oral history accounts concerning Vietnam, the Vietnam War, Vietnamese refugees, etc. I also read old newspapers and, on occasion, books about geography, history, odd facts. I looked at photo essays. I read Vietnamese folktales and short stories by Vietnamese authors. And I tried as best as I could to remember and

reimagine accounts of Vietnam I'd heard from family members. There was no real structure or intent I had in going about this research. I simply absorbed what was of interest to me and what moved me. At some point I got the idea for "Papier" and started to write it, rather unconsciously, but I was able to write only the first few pages of it. I knew even then that it was a long story that would take more absorbing and processing of things I'd read and learned and that it was a story that entailed more than I'd experienced at the time, so I set it aside. I did this a number of times. I didn't complete "Papier" until more than two years later. That was the part of the book that required the most research for me.

Q) Talk about the structure of this novel.

A) I struggled a lot with the structure. I began by writing short stories. "Chickens" was written as a short story before I'd enrolled in the graduate writing program at the University of Iowa, which is where I started to work more seriously on the material that eventually became *Grass Roof, Tin Roof*. The largest problem I had, I believe, is that I simply didn't understand what I was doing, technically or artistically, and I spent a lot of time and energy being susceptible to many ideas of form that in the end were not in line with what my ideas and stories actually needed. I wrote a lot of false beginnings, I wrote a lot of fragments. I made a lot of structural plans, trying to imitate what I saw in other books. At some point I stumbled on *In Our Time* by Hemingway and of course loved it and started trying to imitate that as well. This is the model that ended up proving the most helpful finally, though it took another few years of experimenting before comments from a helpful reader guided me back to looking at the structure of *In Our Time*. Though I know my book is not a faithful or even apparent carrying-on of that structural tradition, I do like to think of it as a female and "nonwhite" response to that tradition, in a way — and in the time of another war.

I will also admit I'm not a prolific novel-reader, and so I like to think there can be a genre that falls somewhere in between the story collection and the narrative novel, which is how I think of *Grass Roof, Tin Roof* — something as dense as a novel, yet as potentially fragmented as a series of stories. I enjoy stories and short prose that dwells on moments and that dares to be contemplative; I also like the idea of the long story. Perhaps because of the incongruous nature of my own background, perhaps because it is simply indicative of our times, the idea of following seemingly disparate threads to arrive at a not entirely cohesive whole appeals to me. I like fiction that does not offer tidy endings or clear through-lines, that attempts to take into account the complexity of reality.

Q) How long did it take you to write this novel?

A) Parts were begun in 1994, and the novel reached its final form in 2001.

Q) Certain sections of *Grass Roof, Tin Roof*, especially those in the first-person voice of the middle daughter, seem to have an almost confessional tone. Can you explain why you chose this particular narrative style?

A) This book seemed to call for a searching and personal, at times even emotional, tone. It was not enough to write just character and plot-driven chapters; I wanted the liberty to say things in a way that couldn't be done within the traditional narrative construct of dialogue and action and backstory, etc. The character of the middle daughter, mainly through the episodes and ideas explored in the italicized sections, as well as in the somewhat epistolary

structure of the last chapter, "Passenger," became an apt vehicle for this.

Q) As of yet, with the Vietnam War and Vietnamese immigration being fairly recent in our history, there has not been a lot of literature on these subjects from Vietnamese Americans themselves, especially from the younger generation of Vietnamese Americans. Do you consider *Grass Roof*, *Tin Roof* to be in any way speaking for an unheard-from Vietnamese American population?

A) I would honestly hope *Grass Roof*, *Tin Roof* is not taken to be representative of any Vietnamese American experience but my own, in fact. While I recognize there are certain historical facts and circumstances Vietnamese Americans of my age and generation share, I am very reluctant to say that as a writer or as a person I am knowledgeable about "the Vietnamese American experience," whatever that may be. It is undoubtedly a varied and multifaceted subject. I have, admittedly, a mostly indirect, learned as well as imagined connection to the Vietnam War and all that has surrounded it. I have a compassion for and an interest in these parts of Vietnamese and American history, though I would not in any way consider myself fluent on these subjects. I am also a Vietnamese American person who does not speak the Vietnamese language and who grew up in a predominantly white rural California community. In whatever ways my personal experience of culture and perspective may have permeated the writing of *Grass Roof*, *Tin Roof*, I only hope the result is something that explores the issue of identity on a wider scale, one that is not specific only to the experience of Vietnamese Americans.