

Editorial Reviews

Salon.com

There are several excellent books about modern Vietnam.... [But] none are quite as affecting as Dana Sachs' 2000 memoir "The House on Dream Street." Sachs originally traveled to Vietnam in the early 1990s on a whim and, like many visitors, found herself entranced by its scooter-filled streets and admirably forward-looking people. She soon relocated to Hanoi, worked various oddball jobs, and learned fluent Vietnamese. The radiant hub of her memoir is a profoundly satisfying gender reversal of the usual Yankee-Vietnamese love affair: Sachs falls for a working-class Hanoi man, whose heart she breaks. Sachs' portrait of a rapidly changing Vietnam is as gorgeously homely as pond-dotted and tree-filled Hanoi itself, and while she rarely addresses the war's legacy, this does not at all feel evasive. There is more to a culture than the worst thing that has ever happened to it, and more to a people that has suffered than the fact of its suffering. Sachs respects the Vietnamese enough to pay them the ultimate compliment: She refuses to allow the war to define them.

--Tom Bissell

Amazon.com

Part memoir and part travelogue, *The House on Dream Street* offers a compelling glimpse into Vietnam more than 20 years after the war. Author Dana Sachs foregoes the history lesson and instead takes us into the day-to-day lives of working-class people attempting to succeed in a fledgling capitalist economy. Captivated by the once-forbidden country during a visit in 1989, Sachs returned two years later, took a room with a young family, and set out to immerse herself in the culture.

One of the most charming aspects of the book is that Sachs lacks the bravado you'd expect from a solo traveler. Her slow grasp of the language causes no end of frustration, and her Western looks--"bigger, paler, and richer"--make her an object of unwanted attention. Other facets of crowded Hanoi prove equally challenging: maneuvering a bicycle through dangerously narrow streets, fending off the frequent advances of married Vietnamese men, and coping with the complete lack of privacy as well as the elusive Vietnamese concept of destiny. Despite the often-primitive conditions, the watchful eyes of the secret police, and the intolerable, mildewy weather, Sachs manages to portray her newfound home as an explosion of sensory experience, where "the rich, woody scent of freshly steamed rice" fills the air and "commuters whizzed past... their bright clothes trailing pink, orange, purple, and green across the blue-black asphalt of the road." And then there are the people: Tung, her friendly but on-the-make landlord who loves heavy metal; Huong, his critical but loyal wife who harbors untold hidden strengths; Tra, desperate to return to the States and get her doctorate, even at the expense of her marriage; and Linh, also yearning to escape her husband's tight reins. In fact, most of the women with whom Sachs bonds are torn between their family obligations and a dawning realization of their own rights.

Even as her friends struggle to balance personal goals with marital happiness, Sachs finds herself drawn to Phai, a quiet, inexperienced motorcycle mechanic. Their love affair, illegal and unspoken, flames steadily and then flickers out, as the author finds herself unable to overcome their differences and the prospect of marrying into Phai's impoverished family. In the end, she realizes her love for Phai is only a

personification of her romance with the country itself--but it's as a chronicle of that romance that *The House on Dream Street* truly succeeds. In telling the story of her own discovery and growth, Sachs provides a distinctively personal view of a rapidly evolving country as well as the families who are weathering the transition.

--Lisa Costantino

From *Publishers Weekly*

Sachs calls the bustling Hanoi thoroughfare where she lived in the early 1990s "Dream Street" because of the prevalence there of the city's most sought-after motor bike, the Honda Dream. During the nine transformative years over which she has visited and lived in Vietnam, the "sleek and elegant" Dream, and others of its ilk, muscled out the ubiquitous bicycle. Her memoir covers the time from her initial plunge into the country, as a touring backpacker in 1989, to her triumphant return in 1998 with the husband and son her Vietnamese friends had long prodded her to obtain (even the cyclo driver who first ferried her to "Dream Street" announced her as "Twenty-nine years old. Not married yet"). Most of this engrossing book is devoted to detailing the blissful and exhausting six months Sachs spent settling into a corner of Hanoi in 1992. A journalist who has written for *Mother Jones* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sachs deftly conveys the strange circumstance of being an American walking "comfortably through the streets of Hanoi." Her first Vietnam, the war-torn country she knew from TV, haunts her. She feels compelled to apologize when she meets an injured Vietnamese veteran, and is perplexed when she encounters people who suffered terrible losses in the war who harbor no ill will. However, Sachs is careful not to dwell too much in the past. The real joy in her work is the engaging street-level view of Hanoi that she provides: of a run-in with two men who strongly desire to sing ABBA songs to her; of the social life of the neighborhood tea stall and the warm and gossipy grandmother who runs it; and the effects of the vacillating economy on her new friends. In moments like these, and there are many of them, Sachs bravely renders Vietnam through fresh eyes.
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