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Seattlest Interviews Novelist Monique Truong

by TNIMURA • OCT. 22, 2011



Author Monique Truong. Photo by Damijan Saccio.

*Monique Truong's second novel *Bitter In The Mouth* is one of the most surprising and satisfying contemporary books that we've read in a long time. A combination of coming-of-age stories, historical figures, Southern Gothic, magical realism, and food writing, *Bitter* tells the story of a young girl growing up in Boiling Springs, North Carolina in the 1970s and 80s. Truong's coming to read at Elliott Bay Books at 2PM on October 29th and will have two other Northwest appearances as well.*

We're grateful she was able to answer some questions over e-mail about her writing process and her two books.

Though we're not complaining, it's been a while since *The Book of Salt* came out. What was the writing and research process like for *Bitter In the Mouth*, as opposed to the first one?

The *Book of Salt* was a historical novel set in part in the home of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in Paris the late 1920s and early 1930s. The research was a pure pleasure for me. In addition to the books by Stein and Toklas, it seemed that every American writer who visited with them wrote a memoir that included some insightful, revealing tidbit about the two ladies. The more challenging part of the research was finding historical documentation about someone like Binh, their "Indochinese" live-in cook and the novel's main character.

The research for *Bitter in the Mouth* was primarily centered on synesthesia, the main character's neurological condition that causes her to taste many of the words that she hears and speaks. Though it did take me longer to digest scientific treatises as opposed to gossipy memoirs, that's not the real reason why *Bitter* took me such a long time to write. I wanted to make sure that I really had something else to say. I didn't want to write a second novel for the sake of having another book published.

Bitter began for me with two working ideas: the main character has synesthesia, and she lives in the American south.

Over the course of the seven years that it took me to write the book, what the narrative eventually came to

be about surprised me. I take that as a good sign. Novels should be surprising, especially for their authors.

One thing that connects *The Book of Salt* with *Bitter In the Mouth* is the compelling quality of the narrators' voices. What helps you to create a narrator's voice?

I adore the quirks and constraints of telling a story via the voice of a first person narrator. I do think of a literal "voice." When I'm writing, I often read my work aloud so that I can hear that voice. I think about my narrator's vocabulary, the rhythm of speech, and what he or she says and doesn't say. It's the latter that fascinates me the

most. When we tell the stories of our lives, I think that what we leave out, what we leave till the end, and what we never say are as revealing as the words that we do utter.

Another thing that connects both books is their interest in food, though we wouldn't necessarily call them "foodie" novels. You've also written about food for magazines. How would you describe your interest in food writing?

I cook a lot, and I like to eat even more. In other words, I'm food obsessed. When it comes to writing though, food and cooking are only interesting to me for what they can mean to a character (or to me). I'm interested in how food can seal or trigger a memory. I'm interested in how food can act as a drug or a poison. I'm interested in how food can nourish more than just the body. I'm interested in how food is ritual and reenactment. I think you get the idea.

Linda experiences the words that she hears and speaks as discrete tastes. We're wondering how you managed the logistics of her synesthesia—keeping track of which word she associated with which taste, for example, and how you decided which taste went with which word. (Kelly, the narrator's best friend, is "Kellycannedpeaches" to Linda.)

Linda's word-taste pairings had to follow the basic facts that I had learned about her form of synesthesia: the word-taste pairings are randomly generated by the brain (not dependent on meaning or context of the words), and the tastes had to be ones that she has already experienced in her day-to-day life. In Linda's case, the latter meant that the words that she learned as a little girl had to reflect her mother's incredibly bad cooking and America circa 1975's love affair with canned and processed foods.

I did give Linda some gifts though. The name of her childhood boyfriend, for example, triggers the taste of orange sherbet, and as you pointed out her best friend's name tastes of canned peaches.

Though we don't like to equate autobiography with authenticity in Asian American novels, there are certain autobiographical connections to this novel—for example, you set *Bitter*

in your own hometown, while you used Paris for *The Book of Salt*. What prompted you (or enabled you) to make use of those in this book? Why use Boiling Springs, instead of a fictional place?

Another reason why *Bitter in the Mouth* took me such a long time to write was that in many ways it's so much closer to the bone. Boiling Springs, North Carolina, was the first place where my family and I lived when we came to the U.S. in 1975 as refugees from the Vietnam War. Though Linda Hammerick and I don't have everything in common, we do share a childhood in that small Southern town. We also share the profound lack of understanding of our bodies in that town.

I thought about changing the name of Boiling Springs, but it was too wonderfully gothic. I've never thought of Boiling Springs as a gift--more like a curse--until I decided to write about it. If you are a writer and life gives you a "Boiling Springs," you would be a fool to ignore it or change it.

As for Paris, that was where I found Binh or rather his fact-based inspiration. In *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*, Toklas writes briefly about several "Indochinese" men who had respectively worked for her and Stein as live-in cooks. They obviously made an impression on her, enough for her to remember them in her book, but the way that Toklas writes about them was heartbreaking to me. She described them as liars, drunks, and child-like. I wasn't going to leave them in Paris like that.

We really loved the connections between textbook histories and family histories in *Bitter*. Do you think your interest in history came from your study and practice as a lawyer?

No, my interest in history has to do with my realization in college that textbook history is not objective and is often a subjective framing, with places, people, facts left out. In other words, history is a story. (The law is also a story, by the way.) I weave into *Bitter* the history of North Carolina or rather the history that young school children are first taught about their state: Virginia Dare (the first white baby to be born there), George Moses Horton (an enslaved man who becomes a published poet), and the Wright brothers (whose feats at Kitty Hawk allows the state to boast on their license plates "First in Flight").

What I try to suggest is that there are reasons why children are taught these stories and to tease out why Linda in particular would gravitate to them.

Last question for the English major geeks: we loved all the literary allusions in the book: Gabriel García Márquez, and of course Harper Lee. Was the narrator's uncle "Baby" Harper named for Harper Lee?

Yes, Baby Harper is a tip of my Southern bonnet to Ms. Lee.

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