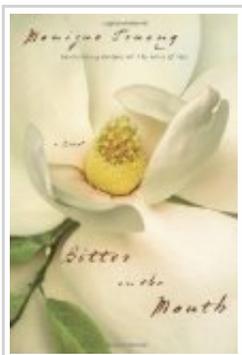


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Monique Truong ("Bitter in the Mouth")

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[Book Notes - Monique Truong \("Bitter in the Mouth"\)](#)



In the [Book Notes](#) series, authors create and discuss a music playlist that relates in some way to their recently published book.

Monique Truong impressed both readers and critics alike with her debut novel, [The Book of Salt](#), one of my personal favorite literary debuts in recent history.

[Bitter in the Mouth](#) is equally impressive. Truong has fashioned a truly unforgettable coming of age story featuring a young girl with synesthesia who tastes words. As a narrator, Linda Hammerick is unique and relatable, and Truong's brilliant depiction of her interaction with her family, friends, and the rest of the world makes [Bitter in the Mouth](#) of the year's most clever and poetic novels.

[Publishers Weekly](#) wrote of the book:

"Truong's mesmerizing prose beautifully captures Linda's taste-saturated world, and her portrait of a broken family's secretive pockets and genuine moments of connection is affecting."

In her own words, here is Monique Truong's [Book Notes](#) music playlist for her novel, [Bitter in the Mouth](#):

I'm a writer of fiction because I can't sing. If I could sing, if my voice was capable of carrying a melody that could pierce your unsuspecting skin and your most vital organ, I wouldn't spend so many of my days alone, moving unwieldy words around on a screen like they were puzzle pieces from different and incompatible sets. I would serenade you, beckoning you from your high window. I would lullaby, power ballad, and hymn my way into your heart. I would Patsy Cline, Dusty Springfield, Dolly Parton, Etta James, and Khanh Ly you (yes, I'm using all those names as verbs), and then I would leave you and do it all over again to someone else.

At the very core of what I try to do with what I've been given—a "voice" on paper, if not in throat—is the desire to create that chill, that sudden weather system, that complete feeling of being embraced from outside and within that I experience whenever I hear a really good song.

So when I think about a playlist to accompany my second novel, [*Bitter in the Mouth*](#), I think about two separate lists: first are the songs that helped me to shape the emotional form and content of the narrative (the writing songs), and second are those songs that are included within the narrative itself (the written songs), of which there are many. Linda Hammerick, the main character of *Bitter*, has a neurological condition, auditory-gustatory synesthesia, that causes her to taste words. She learns early on though that "when strapped to music, words fired blanks." So songs, for Linda, become an oasis where words bring with them only what she allows, where she is in control, which she tells us is one definition of "happiness." The playlist below is my writing songs. [For a list of the written songs, check out my website](#), and, umm, read my book.

The Writing Songs

"Just One Thing," My Morning Jacket

I was listening to this song when I wrote the first line of [*Bitter in the Mouth*](#): "I fell in love with my great-uncle Harper because he taught me how to dance."

My second novel is set in the small town of Boiling Springs, North Carolina, circa mid-70s. There is nothing about this song that evokes that musical era, but there

is something that evokes longing and desire, vague and intangible but certainly in the air like the smell of a rainstorm, heading your way. That emotional atmosphere is to me just another way of saying a "coming-of-age" novel, which I didn't realize that I was writing until many pages and years into *Bitter*.

Lead singer Jim James's (the artist now oddly known as Yim Yames) honey-toned declarations—"Baby, we'll find a way"—also found their way into my book in another way. The great-uncle in the opening line of my novel, within a matter of pages, would be nicknamed "Baby Harper."

"Waiting for the Sun" (live recording), The Jayhawks

I needed a lot of music, seven years worth in fact, to get me from that first line to the final edit of *Bitter*. As I was often writing in places far from the rural south (Brooklyn, Whidbey Island, Donnini, and Bogliasco, the latter two are small towns in Italy), I wanted to listen to bands whose singers had the cadence and rhythm of the American south and, therefore, could bring me back there. (I don't have a southern accent though I did learn how to speak English in Boiling Springs, where my family lived when we first came to the U.S. as refugees in 1975.) I'm not a fan of most contemporary country music though. I favor Patsy Cline, Skeeter Davis, and early Dolly Parton. I love these old school gals, but I also wanted to hear a modern take on the south. I found it with The Jayhawks, a band from of all places Minneapolis. The Jayhawks channeled a kind of strip-down alt-country that sounded as if the members all grew up in small southern towns but then moved away to the big city. (In fact, members of The Jayhawks were for the most part mid-western boys, born and raised).

With The Jayhawks, I prefer their live recordings (in the studio, their songs too often become over-produced and over-complicated). In "Waiting for the Sun" (on [Live from the Women's Club](#)), Mark Olson's acoustic guitar and vocals have just the right amount of laidback southern twang, never verging on parody or caricature. It was exactly what I needed to hear as I was trying to imagine the voices of my southerners.

"Pick Up the Change," Wilco

Like The Jayhawks, Wilco on their first LP, [A.M.](#), is a band from the mid-west that is evoking an ersatz south. Jeff Tweedy's drawl when he sings the word "darling" in this song really opens up those two syllables, until they become like a wide porch where you could sit and catch the occasional breeze.

"You Belong To Me," Patsy Cline

This song is on both my writing and written songs playlists. Cline has the kind of sturdy female voice that I adore. Sure she's loved and lost, but her shoulders are pulled back straight and her head is held high. I "hear" that in her voice, no matter how sad and lovelorn the words are that she sings. "You Belong To Me" is a fine example of the interplay between the two. Also, the lyrics are so lush with the tantalizing allure of travel and the promise of all that what awaits you upon your return. The woman singing this song understands the impulse to do both and wants you to know it too.

"Dancing in the Dark," Cannonball Adderley

His name alone should recommend him to you, but if you need more incentive then start with the six songs on [Somethin' Else](#). These are early Adderley recordings, when his alto saxophone was smoky and languid, especially on this track. I listen to it whenever I needed to take a deep breath. "Dancing in the Dark," is the musical equivalent of one (or, perhaps, a long drag on a cigarette).

"Glad Girls," Guided By Voices

This song says "high school" to me. Not my actual high school experience, as I was already practicing law and working on my first novel when this song came out on the last Guided By Voices LP, [Isolation Drills](#). There's something infectious, carefree, and ultimately elegiac about the simple, repetitive lyrics, and then out of nowhere the prediction that "there will be no coronation, there will be no flowers." The song, in essence, grows up, during the 3:50 minute that it takes to get from the first to the last note. I like that kind of concision. I aim for it in my own writing.

"Everyday I Write the Book," Elvis Costello

I admit it. It's my writing anthem. Although as a writer, I must point out that Costello uses the word "everyday" incorrectly in his title (it should be "every day," as those words joined together is an adjective that means common or quotidian). I sing along to it, and it always makes me smile. Costello is totally right: in the perfect world "I'd still own the film rights and be working on the sequel."

Monique Truong and [Bitter in the Mouth](#) links:

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[the author's book tour events](#)

[BookPage review](#)

[Herald Scotland review](#)

[Library Journal review](#)

[Los Angeles Times review](#)

[Moonwishes Reads reviews](#)

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