

## U.S. novelist chases secret life of acclaimed Japanophile Lafcadio Hearn

For award-winning author Monique Truong, writing fiction is the only way to make sense of a complex world.

A master at weaving threads from practically unknown, small events in history, the 47-year-old Vietnamese-American is renowned for her rich storytelling.

Truong's latest project brought her to Japan, where she spent three months this past spring researching the life of Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), a Greek-born writer who introduced Japanese legends and ghost stories to the world.

Truong immigrated to the Southern United States at the age of 6 after fleeing from Saigon with her family during the closing days of the Vietnam War.

Her adolescence was marked by a sense of isolation, as she grew up as an ethnic minority in a region where racial prejudice was still firmly rooted.

It was literature that helped Truong get through the difficult days of young womanhood. After graduating from college with a law degree, she worked as an attorney for three years, but her admiration for literature prompted her to pursue a different path.

Her first novel, "The Book of Salt," depicted Paris shortly before World War II through the eyes of a Vietnamese cook. The novel won various awards in the United States.

In all her books, the protagonists are people who are separated from their homelands. Truong's intricate expressions and dramatic plot lines evoke readers' sympathy for her characters.

When she writes, she says, she tries to deliberately give a provocative meaning to each word, just like a good poet. Truong says it takes her several years of highly demanding work to complete each novel.

Truong became interested in Hearn after reading his writings that treat the Japanese people and their traditional culture with great reverence. She was also able to sympathize with Hearn as he, like Truong, became detached from his homeland. She also believes Hearn had a lot more to say about Japan, which he could not write in his books.

Truong plans to cast light on the untold sentiments of Hearn through the eyes of four women, including his Japanese wife, Setsu. Truong's instincts tell her that Setsu was also a gifted storyteller who helped her husband write many of his works.

The new novel is tentatively titled "The Sweetest Fruits."

Food always plays a key role in her plot lines. During her stay in Japan, Truong became particularly fond of "shiokara" (fermented fish guts) and "hoya" (sea pineapple), which she said probably would not have suited Hearn's palate.