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Book review: 'Bitter in the Mouth'

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By Gina Webb
For the AJC

"Bitter in the Mouth" by Monique Truong, Random House, 304 pages, \$25.

Monique Truong's fascination with food came alive in her award-winning debut novel, "The Book of Salt," a lyrical account of an expatriate Vietnamese cook in the Parisian home of Gertrude Stein and companion Alice B. Toklas.

Flavor is used more directly in her second book, "Bitter in the Mouth." Here, Linda Hammerick can actually taste words. Her ability, known as *gustatory synesthesia*, is just one form of synesthesia, a neurological condition in which one sensory experience triggers another. Once thought to be imagined or abnormal, synesthesia has been found to be real, even widespread. Van Gogh, Wassily Kandinsky and Vladimir Nabokov are thought to have possessed this intriguing sensory blending.

But growing up in Boiling Springs, N.C., in the mid-1970s, Linda has no name for her disconcerting ability, as overwhelming as it is unusual.

"When my teacher asked, 'Linda, where did the English first settle in North Carolina?' the question would come to me as 'Lindamint, where did the English *maraschino* cherry first *Pepto-Bismol* settle *mustard* in North *cheddar* cheese Carolinacannedpeas?' My response, when I could finally say it, I experienced as 'Roanoke Islandbacon.'"

Not all of Linda's "incomings," as she calls these taste bombs, are negative. Some offer warmth and reassurance, especially names: Mom *chocolatemilk*, Linda's best friend Kelly *cannedpeaches*, her great-uncle, Baby *honey* Harper *celery*, and her childhood sweetheart, Wade *orangesherbet*.

As in real life, the reader gets some relief from this fusion of words and tastes, at times awkward to read, since not every spoken word elicits Linda's synesthesia.

Songs turn out to be harmless -- "when strapped to music, words fired blanks" -- as does the rapid patter of Linda's great-uncle, the family member she's closest to. The safety of the written word launches the second of Linda's most lasting friendships when 7-year-old Kelly sends a letter introducing herself. The girls' habit of communicating through the mail continues after they both leave home and often hides/reveals things they could never say to each other face-to-face.

Linda's synesthesia sets her apart from everyone in Boiling Springs, but despite how she feels, she's not alone. Far more painful secrets isolate the characters in this oblique, brainy story about the way people don't touch -- or touch in harmful ways -- and the extraordinary distance that eventually separates them from themselves and others.

In a restless narrative that moves fluidly back and forth in time, Linda sifts through her past, poring over the summer of 1982, the Hammerick genealogy, fairy tales, North Carolina history and legend, and family photographs in an attempt to locate her place in the world.

The elegantly formal stream-of-consciousness style Truong used in "Salt" here gives way to the down-to-earth voice of an all-American girl raised in a small town in the South. There are moments



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of poetry and sudden insights, but Linda's world at any age is a less enchanted, more familiar terrain -- one of chicken a la king, Seventeen magazine, a boyfriend named Wade, pink lip-gloss, stoner friends in high school, courses at Yale and the way Cheerwine complements barbecue.

Normal, yes, but something is always missing. "We all want a way to know where we should be in the world," says Linda; the key to where she belongs lies in a scene she can't recover, that no one will talk about. All she can remember is its flavor: "If the sky before a tornado could be bitten into and swallowed, then it might have the bitter taste that was my first memory."

In a book where carefully hidden letters, secret photographs and tightly folded notes seem to fall out of the pages, Linda's search for her lost past follows a mystery-lover's trail of clues.

Every member of this '70s Southern gothic tale, with its echoes of "To Kill a Mockingbird" and Carson McCullers' "Member of the Wedding," holds a piece of the puzzle: Her great-uncle, Baby Harper, a shy unmarried librarian who has managed to hide his penchant for women's clothing for years. Her grandmother, Iris, whose dying words to Linda were, "What I know about you would break you in two." Her mother, DeAnne, who reacts with horror to Linda's attempt to share her secret: "Lindamint. Stopcannedcorn it! I won't handleFruitStripe gum crazyheavycream. I won't have it in my familycannedbeets." Her father, who once read her fairy stories whose "sour words" -- "'Cinderella' was a shot of white distilled vinegar" -- kept her from going to sleep.

Truong, who left Vietnam at the age of 7, shares with Linda a part of her life left unknown -- though, as Linda says, it's always been "hidden in plain sight" -- until more than halfway through the book. It's a skillful hand-off of the final piece of the mystery, yet it may not be the answer Linda's looking for after all.

Her real connection may have less to do with her country of origin or the family she grew up in than with an "alternate family tree" that includes a baker from Terre Haute, a flutist from Hamburg and a writer in Tuscaloosa.

It's a satisfying finish to a book that offers up a taste of something many of us search all our lives to find -- that unique flavor we hope to finally recognize as our own authentic selves.

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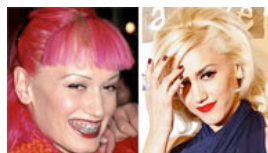
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