



Movable feast:
Gertrude Stein
(left) and Alice B.
Toklas, 1934

THE COOK'S TALE

A debut novel of pungent sensuousness and intricate, inspired imagination

A handful of cooked rice expands to look like much more when reboiled: "The spectacle fools the eyes but rarely the stomach, as the latter is always the more perceptive of the two." Keen appetites and uncertain observations abound in **Monique Truong's** debut novel, *The Book of Salt* (Houghton Mifflin), which was inspired by a mention in *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* of a Vietnamese man who answered an ad ("Two American ladies wish to hire...") and found himself serving as Gertrude Stein and Ms. Toklas's live-in cook in Paris in the early '30s. Truong, who moved to the States from Saigon at age six and was until recently an intellectual property lawyer, calls the man Binh and spins a marvelous tale speculating on his experiences there. The world of these women expands before Binh's eyes as lightly as rice within the tragic chain of events that brought him to their doorstep.

Banished by his father because of his sexual orientation, Binh recalls his years at sea, his lessons in culinary artistry, and his love affairs both in and outside the Stein residence. The details in his description of the idyllic and eccentric reality preserved in that ménage, along with his phantasmagoric Paris encounter with Ho Chi Minh, must be taken with a grain of salt. But neither our awareness of such inventions nor Binh's inability to see the truth, both of his life and of that which swirls around him, dilutes the arousing impact of this novel.

Au contraire.—JANE HERMAN

