

The Week

THE BOOK OF SALT ♦ Monique

Truong (*Houghton Mifflin, \$24*)

For her deliciously written debut novel, Truong cooks up a bitter, complex tale of heartbreak and despair. Inspired by a few lines of *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*, Truong steps into Gertrude Stein's Parisian kitchen to tell the tale of a man named Binh, an exiled Vietnamese chef who catered to Stein and longtime companion Toklas in the early 1930s. What makes this narrative so addictive is not just the peek into Stein's imagined private life and the delectable meals (the description of caramelized pineapples is particularly mouthwatering), but the emotional account of Binh's tragic past, including the abandonment of his beloved mother and a star-crossed love affair with Ho Chi Minh. Both eloquent and original, *Salt* is a savory read. **A-** —*Karyn L. Barr*