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Bitter in the Mouth

Monique Truong follows *The Book of Salt* with a tastier new work. *By Beth Greenfield*



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By Monique Truong
(Random House, \$25)



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Linda, a young woman coming of age in small-town North Carolina, has a fascinating condition—one that causes her to “taste” the words she hears. It forces her to struggle through a distracting bombardment of flavors like canned green beans, sour cream, parsnips and Fruit Stripe gum. But Linda’s relationship with food and language soon becomes quirky background music when compared with the relationships she has with the people in her life, including her overweight childhood best friend, her doting gay uncle, her first secret affair and her oddly distant mother. (Yes, the story is that intriguing.)

This fast-moving and beautifully strange second novel from Truong—whose *The Book of Salt* swept various 2003 literary awards—paints the portrait of an intelligent, observant girl who never quite fits in and doesn’t quite understand why until she leaves home for many years as a young adult and then returns to discover her roots. Truong’s narrative yanks the reader through Linda’s world swiftly and with impressive command. You feel as if you’re breezing through the book sideways, and rarely feel the desire to touch down to get your bearings—save for a handful of moments when the jagged, nonlinear storytelling feels a bit disjointed.

While slightly jarring at first, the part about Linda tasting words—which readers are reminded of constantly because the conjured tastes are included, italicized, in all the dialogue (as in “Don’t tell *brownsugar* any*rice* one*bread*and*butterpickles*,” I said)—quickly becomes second nature and eventually, metaphorical poetry. It has a poignancy that sneaks up on you, just like Truong’s entire clever tale.

Monique Truong reads at [powerHouse Arena](#) Wed 8.

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