

## LITERARY FICTION

BY STEPHANIE CROSS



TO THE END OF THE LAND by David Grossman (Cape £18.99)

**DON'T** let author Nicole Krauss's fulsome — now infamous — advance praise put you off. (To read this book, she wrote, 'is to have yourself taken apart, undone, touched at the place of your own essence ...')

This novel is indeed a great achievement: a complex, moving study of conflict and motherhood that is also vivid, fluid and utterly absorbing.

Fiftysomething Israeli Ora has been living for the day when her son Ofer is released from army service. Having separated from her husband, Ora dotes on Ofer; indeed, the two have planned a celebratory hike together in Galilee.

But on his discharge, Ofer enlists again. Crazed with incomprehension, convinced that he will die, Ora decides to distance herself from any news.

Setting out to walk as planned, she is accompanied by Avram, a friend who has suffered horrific torture during the Yom Kippur war. In telling Avram about Ofer, Ora finds relief; it transpires she is also introducing Avram to his own son.

As the pair pass through scenes of brilliant spring beauty, David Grossman explores how words illuminate the darkest landscapes and how lives can be shaped and preserved through stories.

If this is, in part, a eulogy — not least for Grossman's own son — it reads only intermittently like one.



BITTER IN THE MOUTH by Monique Truong (Chatto & Windus £12.99)

**IN HISTORY** as in photos, what is most revealing is often left outside the frame. This much Linda learns from studying Baby Harper, her great-uncle and the Hammerick family's self-appointed photographer — a librarian bachelor with a velvet divan. While Baby Harper's family

choose not to focus on these (suggestive) biographical details, young Linda naturally finds him enchanting.

Otherwise, in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, the exotic is in short supply: at the Hammerick dinner table, novelty is a new casserole. In spite of this, the world for Linda is overwhelming flavoursome.

Her own name tastes like mint leaves, 'God' is a walnut, and the word 'remember' is 'butterpecanicecream'. But Linda can't identify the exact taste of her first memory: only its bitterness has survived.

Synaesthesia has featured in several novels in recent years, but in none has its treatment been so convincing. *Bitter In The Mouth* is — inevitably — a mouthwateringly delicious read; it also snaps with irresistible wit. This could have remained a slender coming-of-age tale. In fact, it develops into one of real substance.

NOURISHMENT by Gerard Woodward (Picador £14.99)

**NOURISHMENT** in this novel takes various forms, although rarely are they wholesome. Opening in wartime with a bomb, a missing butcher and a providential 'pork' joint, a



brilliant black comedy seems bound to ensue. Mrs Head is not a woman to be overly dismayed by cannibalism, although her daughter, Tory, is horrified at what she might inadvertently have consumed.

Unfortunately, life gives Tory increasing reason to be appalled. Her husband, Donald, has always been surprising: a Glaswegian-born decorator, he can quote Plato (with a Gorbals accent).

But when Donald writes a letter from the Stalag in which he is languishing, demanding carnal sustenance in epistolary form, Tory is truly disconcerted. Realising she must first feed her own erotic imagination, she turns to the owner of the gelatine factory in which she works to aid her investigations.

What is strange about this novel is the way it transforms without ever developing. The laughs of the first third verge on the relentless, but then disappear almost entirely and a harder-edged examination of family life emerges. However, *Nourishment* seems to name and reiterate its themes rather than explore them and, while not a bad novel, seems ultimately held together by will.

