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One Kind of Folks

By ROY HOFFMAN
Published: September 8, 2010

It seems only fitting, 50 years after the publication of "To Kill a Mockingbird," that a Vietnamese-born author who came of age in the United States has written a Southern novel with an Asian-American protagonist who likes to cite [Harper Lee](#). "I was the town's pariah, but no one was allowed to tell me so," says Linh-Dao Nguyen Hammerick, called Linda, the piercingly eloquent narrator of Monique Truong's second novel. "In Boiling Springs," Linda remarks of her hometown in rural North Carolina, "I was never Scout. I was Boo Radley, not hidden away but in plain sight."

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Illustration by Yunmee Kyong

Far more than a sociological tract on "what it was like to grow up *looking* Asian in the South," "Bitter in the Mouth" uses the tension between outsider and insider as a way of examining a tightly knit, indeed claustrophobic, family and village. Despite its references to "Mockingbird," this novel seems reminiscent of "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter," with its hurt souls nursing private truths and yearning for love. "One silence had led to another, and eventually the silences became the life preservers dotting the dangerous ocean between them," Linda says of one of the secrets held fast by the novel's richly drawn characters. Truong explores — and explodes — these secrets at a captivating pace.

BITTER IN THE MOUTH

By Monique Truong
282 pp. Random House. \$25

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[Excerpt: 'Bitter in the Mouth'](#)
(September 12, 2010)

"The Book of Salt," Truong's first novel, also used an artful narrator: Binh, the Vietnamese cook employed by [Gertrude Stein](#) and Alice B. Toklas, who provided his own angle of vision on the Paris demimonde of the 1930s. Food also plays its part in the slyly titled "Bitter in the Mouth," but in a more startling way. Linda experiences synesthesia, which, she learns from a program on [PBS](#), is "a neurological condition that caused the involuntary mixing of the senses." To put it more simply, Linda tastes words. After years of feeling isolated, she is reassured by the program, which suggests that she has "an alternative family tree" whose members include Wassili Kandinsky and [Vladimir Nabokov](#). Linda's own name conjures up mint. Her colorful and supportive great-uncle has the flavor of honey and celery. Her teenage crush is "the orange sherbet boy."

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Truong is wise not to let “Bitter in the Mouth” become an [Oliver Sacks](#)-like exploration of a neurological rarity. While the narrative can become tiresome with its periodic translation of language into food, this device is also used as a way of exploring the early estrangement between Linda and her adoptive mother: “Momchocolatemilk, honest. I meanraisin it. Wordslicorice, they have a taste.” “Lindamint. Stopcannedcorn it! . . . I won’t handleFruitStripegum crazyheavycream. I won’t have it in my familycanned beets.”

“Bitter in the Mouth” slackens when too much North Carolina history is forced into the narrative, and the elegiac early section too often spirals back to Linda’s childhood obsessions, in contrast to the later parts, borne swiftly ahead by the adult Linda’s mix of anger and understanding. Ultimately, though, the novel becomes a moving investigation of invented families and small-town subterfuge, a search for self heightened by the legacy of Vietnam and the flavors of language. Binding everything together is a new Southerner’s deeply American recognition that “we all need a story of where we came from and how we got here. Otherwise, how could we ever put down our tender roots and stay.”

Roy Hoffman, a staff writer for The Press-Register in Mobile, Ala., is the author of a novel, “Chicken Dreaming Corn,” and a forthcoming nonfiction collection, “Alabama Afternoons.”

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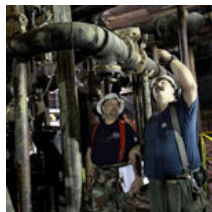
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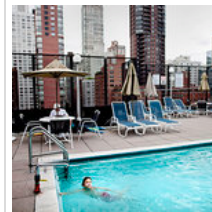
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