

“The Company of Friends”

A letter to the Ladies’ Home Journal Book Club (August 2011)

When I was in the fifth grade, I had a spiral notebook with an orange cover. I wrote in it every day. More accurately, I complained to it every day. In an elongated, wobbly cursive, I chronicled the injustices of my young life: my mother won’t let me wear make-up (not even lipstick!); my best friend was suddenly no longer my best friend (for no reason whatsoever!); the boy whom I had a crush on was caught passing notes in class (to another girl!). That, dear readers, was my first foray into writing a sustained narrative. Please rest assured that I have greatly improved since then and now use far fewer exclamation marks.

I still have that notebook. The blue ink of the Bic ballpoint pen is fading. The orange cover has long disintegrated. My memory of the little girl who filled its lined pages, though, remains clear. She was on the verge of discovering something almost magical—we adults would call it “therapeutic”—about writing: it makes you feel not so alone.

I already knew that this was true about reading. I had one best friend in school, but in the library I made friends in every new book. I missed them all sorely when their stories ended.

Writing, in this instance, in a diary was also turning the page into a companion for me. Receptive, waiting, and always willing to take my side. I was hooked.

I share this with you because at the heart of *Bitter in the Mouth* is the story of another kind of life changing friendship, one that begins when two seven-year-old girls exchange letters all summer long, even though they live in the same small town and their homes are only streets apart. It's a friendship that endures and renews even as the two enter their thirties. Along the way, they ruefully note that "a friendship...could be based on what we shared and what we allowed each other to keep to ourselves."

It's precisely the "withholding" part of the equation that fascinates me the most as a writer and as a human being. Withholding part of our selves and part of our stories is something that we all learn to do, especially as we stumble away from our childhood. What we withhold, whether by choice or by circumstance, is often the true story, the one that inevitably defines us and those around us.

The pages of *Bitter in the Mouth* are not the same as the orange spiral notebook of my youth, but the pages are based on the notebook's content. Writing both made me feel as if I was in the company of friends. I hope that you'll feel the same.

~Monique Truong
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