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Bitter In The Mouth, By Monique Truong

Reviewed by Emma Hagestadt

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The work of Asian-American writers is all too often described as "bittersweet", but in Monique Truong's case this label is, for once, exactly right. Truong's award-winning debut, *The Book of Salt*, offered piquant insight into the life of Gertrude Stein's Vietnamese chef, while food and flavour continue to burst from the pages of her second novel - a coming-of-age story about a woman who suffers from "auditory-gustatory" synesthesia.

Linda Hammerick is different from the other girls in Boiling Springs, North Carolina. Not only are the walls of her bedroom decorated in manly maritime prints, but every word she hears triggers a taste sensation on her tongue, including that of her own name, which brings with it the invigorating freshness of mint.

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How to convey this affliction in a novel, without driving the reader bananas, is a challenge at which the author succeeds, largely by not over-powering us with too many helpings at once. There are certain words Linda craves to hear - Mom (chocolatemilk) and period (blueberrymuffin) - while others - prune (scallion) or character (pickledwatermelonrind) make her pucker and wince. The love of her life, a blond boy named Wade, triggers a shower of orange sherbet in her mouth.

Only best friend Kelly (cannedpeaches) knows about Linda's "incomings", and tries to help her dispel them with the aid of nicotine and Dr Pepper. There are few words which fire blanks, though Dolly Parton's singing and the honeyed voice of Baby Harper - Linda's beloved great uncle - seem to wing their way to Linda's ear sensation-free. As befits a Southern novel, the female figures in Linda's life, her distant mother, DeAnne and sourpuss grandmother, Iris, are only there to impede her journey towards a contented future.

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Invoking the spirit of *To Kill A Mockingbird* - for many years Linda thinks of her father as Atticus Finch and herself as Scout - Truong cooks up a diverting entertainment about growing up clever rather than pretty. Family secrets, first love and teen betrayals all make up the novel's classic menu, though Linda's unusual tastebuds inject a startling poetry into the mix.

Linda's condition follows her to Yale, and later intrudes on her professional life in New York City. It's only when we reach the novel's neat, even bland, conclusion, that Truong finally reveals the roots of Linda's "otherness" and the "tribe" to which she truly belongs.

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