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# A Review of Monique Truong's Bitter in the Mouth (Random House, 2010)

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diaCRITICS will periodically have guest blogs. Here's one from [Stephen Sohn](#), professor of English at Stanford University, where he is completing a manuscript on Asian American cultural production. He often reviews Asian American literature at his [blog](#) and here he discusses Monique Truong's new novel:

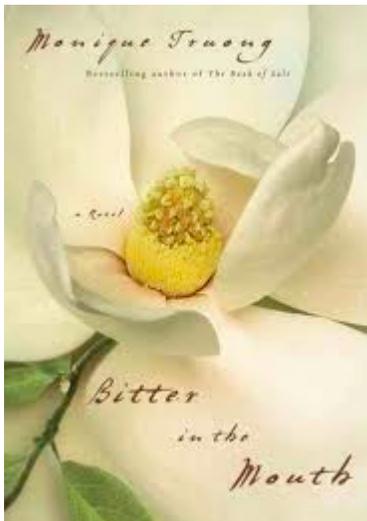
*Bitter in the Mouth* is a tough novel to review because the narrative is given over to a relatively unforthcoming major character, one that reveals information about her life elliptically. This protagonist, Linda Hammerick, is a synaesthetic, a person gifted or perhaps cursed with the ability to sense things in a confusing way. For Linda, language is the site of inquiry as words are often attached to a flavor. That is, whenever someone is speaking, Linda might taste something literally in her mouth. The relationship between word and taste can be random as we discover a name like Leo results in Linda tasting parsnip; when she hears the name Kelly, she tastes canned peaches.



Linda Hammerick grows up in a family filled with tense dynamics. There seems to be little love shown between Linda's parents. Linda herself is very distant from her mother, Deanne. She also maintains a frosty association with her no-nonsense grandmother, Iris Whatley. Linda's closest relationship is with her uncle, Baby Harper. Truong's greatest strength is in her ability to create such a detailed narrative perspective. Like *The Book of Salt*, Truong achieves emotional impact through the first person narration, where we eagerly follow Linda's various adventures. Here, we begin to see how Linda refracts North Carolina history into her life as we get snippets of various figures, including Virginia Dare and the Wright Brothers. We further anticipate the various trials of adolescence, as Linda gets branded with the high-school mark of the beast: the "nerd." Whereas *The Book of Salt* was exceedingly transnational, global, and diasporic in its contexts, *Bitter in the Mouth* is content basking in the regional geographies and cultures of the South, where Dolly Parton, barbecue shacks, and mint juleps loom large. This statement isn't to say that the novel doesn't have any transnational or global elements, but rather that part of Truong's project is to excavate a very specific location, its social contexts, and its idiosyncrasies. On this level, Truong succeeds quite admirably.

Truong excels at creating a fictional world that operates with a specific logic in mind. What Linda reveals to us so late in the novel is in keeping with her very strict upbringing and the relative lack of communication that exists between many of her family members. The fact that Linda faces the challenges of synaesthesia already tells us that she is keeping secrets not only from her family members, but from the readers as well, so when the revelation occurs, one might consider re-reading the earlier sections to see how it is that she tends to gloss over what might have seemed to be a very important piece of information. I'd rather think that Truong's withholding then is really a part of Linda's own desires to self-censure, to keep the words that are literally "bitter in the mouth" from having to exert too much force, too much flavor in her already chaotic world.

Truong is such an assured writer that you won't care that there aren't always cataclysmic events going on; instead, you'll bask in the glow of her character construction and her dazzling prose. You'll be lead inexorably to a moving and fitting novelistic conclusion. Oh, and I'm quite sure the book will make you hungry, so be prepared to have some snacks prepared as you get reading.



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