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AUTHOR APPEARANCE

Monique Truong *reads from "The Book of Salt," 7:30 p.m. today at the Elliott Bay Book Co., 101 S. Main St., Seattle; free (206-624-6600).*

Author takes cook's life off the back burner

By Michael Upchurch / Seattle Times book critic

Call it the Minor-Characters-Have-Their-Say School of Literature. Among its most notable exponents are Tom Stoppard, in "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead," and Jean Rhys, in "Wide Sargasso Sea."

In both those works, the authors latch onto seemingly peripheral characters in older narratives — two clueless brown-nosers in Shakespeare's "Hamlet," the madwoman in the attic in Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre" — and put them in the spotlight. And they do this not just as a stunt, but as a way to reveal aspects of human experience that the source texts suppressed, marginalized or merely overlooked.

Monique Truong

In her fascinating debut novel, "The Book of Salt" (Houghton Mifflin, $24), Vietnamese-American writer Monique Truong joins company with Rhys and Stoppard in high style. Her source text is "The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook," where a casual mention of two Indochinese cooks in the 1930s Paris household of Toklas and experimental writer Gertrude Stein provides the inspiration.

In "The Book of Salt," those two cooks become one: a young man who calls himself "Binh" (not that names are anything to count on in this slippery, shape-shifting novel). After fleeing workplace scandal and an abusive father in Saigon, Binh drifts for years at sea as a freighter cook before landing in Paris. He goes through a series of employers until he's taken on by "the Steins" in 1929.

When we meet him, in 1934, Binh has a decision to make about accompanying his "Mesdames" to America where "GertrudeStein" (as Binh always refers to her) is about to go on a lecture tour. With extraordinary fluidity and in lavishly sensual prose, "The Book of Salt" then circles around Binh's past, his hit-and-miss gay love life and his gingerly loyalty to his employers.

The result is a seductive meditation on changeable identity, covert desire and "the imposed invisibility of servitude." Truong savors, too, the possibilities of language as liberator (in Stein's case) and language as cage (in Binh's, whose French is crudeness itself compared with the fine-tuned, irony-laden turnings of his mind).

For Stein-Toklas fans, the novel delivers an often-droll insider's account of their household. The two women come across as whimsically imperious, yet kind in their fussy way. There's little doubt that they relish each other's company. There's also

little doubt that they're entirely oblivious to the turbulent inner world of their "Little Indochinese," even if they're aware of the occasional drinking bouts triggered by that turbulence.

They have no idea, either, of the effect that Stein's acolytes — most of them young, good-looking and male — have on Binh. One of them, an American Southerner with an identity-obscuring past of his own, takes a fancy to Binh, and their affair precipitates a key complication of the novel.

But there are plenty of complications to go around, whether they stem from Binh's brief career as kitchen helper at the Governor-General's house in Saigon, his confrontations with his alcoholic Catholic father, his abiding love for his (possibly adulterous) Buddhist mother, or his Paris encounter with a charismatic fellow expatriate (identified in interviews by Truong as a young Ho Chi Minh).

All these complications are suffused with the taste of salt: the salty sweat of kitchen labor, the briny tang of sex (Truong is silkily suggestive rather than explicit in her handling of homoerotic desires), "the pure, sea-salt sadness of the outcast," and, in copious detail, the tricky role of salt in fine cuisine.

For Truong, salt — as a taste one craves and an essence one exudes — cuts through barriers of language, culture, race. And as it cuts through, in this challenging, many-layered book, Stein and Toklas become mere supporting players in Binh's own drama.

The motive behind this role reversal has less to do with just deserts than illumination of lost history — deftly orchestrated, wantonly alive. If this is what Truong can do the first time out, there's no telling what she'll pull off next.

Michael Upchurch: mupchurch@seattletimes.com