

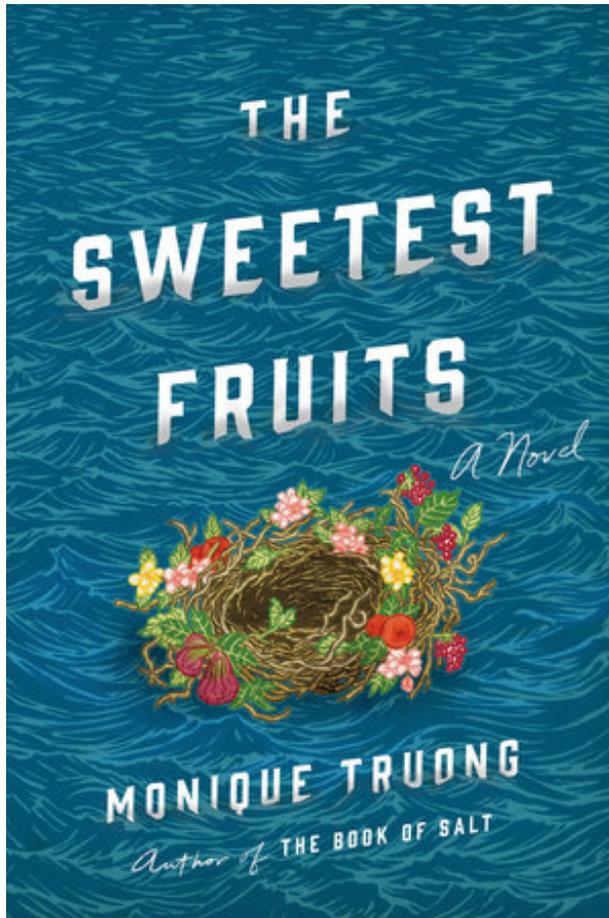
The Life of a Male Writer, Told By the Women Who Couldn't Write His Story

 [electricliterature.com/an-imagined-biography-of-a-male-writer-told-by-the-women-who-couldnt-write-his-](https://electricliterature.com/an-imagined-biography-of-a-male-writer-told-by-the-women-who-couldnt-write-his-story/)

September 6,
2019



In *The Sweetest Fruits*, Monique Truong ventures around the world with Lafcadio Hearn, the Greek-Irish writer who was famed for his chronicles of Japan and New Orleans—reimagining his stories through the eyes of the women who journeyed with him and who undertook epic adventures of their own.



Truong begins in 1854 with the voice of Hearn’s mother Rosa Antonia Cassimati, relating his origin story. She moves forward to 1906, west to Cincinnati, and Alethea Foley, a formerly enslaved African American woman who was Hearn’s first wife. Foley offers the story of her life with him to white reporter. The final character is Koizumi Setsu, Hearn’s second wife and literary collaborator of his Japan works. Truong weaves in the voice of Elizabeth Bisland through excerpts of her biography of Hearn. The novel forms a glorious imaginative reclamation of the stories of those who loved and nurtured Hearn and his storytelling.

I spoke to Monique Truong about who gets to tell stories, the missing voices in history, and why she resists pinning the concept of home to a particular country.

[Buy the book](#)

JR Ramakrishnan: From your acknowledgments section, it almost sounds like Lafcadio Hearn himself thought you should write this book. How did it begin for you?

MT: I was fact-checking my second novel, *Bitter in the Mouth*, and looking through the pages of *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Volume 7: Foodways*. I saw an entry for “Hearn, Lafcadio (1850-1904),” identified as a “journalist, author, and illustrator.” The entry began with Hearn’s birth on the Greek island of Lefkada, then a lonely childhood in Dublin, Ireland, followed by emigration to Cincinnati, Ohio, as a young man, and then migration to New Orleans, where this Greek-Irishman’s contribution to the history of Southern food was described this way:

[Hearn]...opened the short-lived 5-Cent Restaurant and collected recipes of local dishes. Hearn published these recipes in 1885 as La Cuisine Créole, which became the earliest published collection of New Orleans and Louisiana recipes...[, which] continues to serve as an invaluable record of the history of Creole food, New Orleans, and Louisiana.

The entry then offered up this unexpected concluding act:

Hearn moved to Japan, taught English, changed his name to Koizumi Yakumo, married a Japanese woman who was the daughter of a samurai...and continued his voluminous writing.... Hearn secured a place in history after publishing numerous volumes...particularly Japanese fairy tales.

I was intrigued by the cookbook Hearn had authored—I'm a cookbook collector and avid reader, more reader than user of cookbooks—but none of the disparate parts and geographies of the author's life made sense to me. When things don't make sense is when I want to know more. I know more by writing a novel.

JRR: I used to live in New Orleans and he was quite a presence there. I thought of him as an Orientalist (of New Orleans and Japan). Your book turn the gaze *on to the Orientalist through the stories told by the women in his life. What was your impression of him as you got to know him?*

MT: I too thought of Hearn as an Orientalist, a purveyor of the exotic and the Other. Has my sense of him changed after spending eight years with him and the women in his life? Yes. He is a purveyor of the exotic and the Other, *and* he is a man who gravitated to the margins of society because he felt most at home there. He felt himself to be among the Other because of his "Oriental" mother, his "olive complexion," his lack of family ties, his poverty, and his blind eye. The operative word for Hearn is "and," as it is the operative word for us all. We are not merely one thing. We are each motivated by a complicated, complex set of desires and wants. That is what I came to understand about Hearn as well.

As a former refugee, I resist the idea of pinning home onto a particular country because I know that countries can disappear, nationalities taken away.

As I was researching Hearn, those around him who caught my attention were the women in his life. Taken as a group, their stories span the globe. What I wanted to consider was not only Hearn from multiple points of view, but also how the written word and the lack thereof

can determine whose stories and memories are known, documented, and re-documented. Women's access to education, to the written word, and to publication have been proscribed and suppressed. With rare exceptions, what we know of the past is missing their memories, experiences, and voices.

Elizabeth, Hearn's first biographer—and I'm rather convinced the love of his life—and Setsu, his second wife, both wrote books about him, a biography and a memoir respectively. Their works, in my reading of them, had a clear agenda, which was to preserve the prestige and legacy of Hearn as a great man of letters and as a great man. Elizabeth's biography, in particular read, like a hagiography.

Rosa and Alethea, on the other hand, could not read and write, so they did not leave behind a direct documentation of their lives with and without Hearn. His biographers, however, were able to provide damning characterizations of them both: Rosa as childish and petulant toward Hearn's father, and Alethea as impatient and willful toward Hearn. Who were the sources for these characterizations? Hearn's father? Hearn? What were their agendas toward these subjects?

As for Setsu, biographers often note that she was illiterate in the English language but fail to acknowledge that she could read and write in Japanese, her mother tongue. In this respect, she had the clear linguistic advantage over Hearn, who by the end of his fourteen years in Japan, could not claim fluency in Japanese. He relied on interpreters and translators throughout, and he could write brief, simple, childlike letters to Setsu and only to Setsu.

JRR: There seem to be many gulfs of understanding between men and women in the novel. You have Hearn's father and Rosa (and the perfect line: "As it often happened between us, Charles and I agreed not to understand each other") and then Hearn and Setsu, his Japanese wife. Both couples barely share a language. Hearn and Alethea, his first wife, who's African American, have English as a common tongue but there is the separation of race in America. Could you talk about language in the novel?

MT: Though I am a writer, I am a skeptic about our ability to use language as a form of effective communication. To me it's a miracle that any of us can make ourselves understood even to those closest and dearest to us. My previous two novels also explored these gulfs of understanding, as you say, either because of lack of access to the dominant language (Binh in *The Book of Salt*) or because of a subjective relationship to language (Linda in *Bitter in the Mouth*).

In *TSF*, especially between Hearn and Setsu, language is re-structured out of necessity and desire. Hearn's biographers write about how he devised a language for the two of them—a mix of simple English and Japanese—that was used only within their household. My mind exploded when I read about this creation of a language for the domestic and matrimonial sphere.

As a writer, I thought about which words were integral to the day-to-day and which were not. I thought about which words would form the first bridge between the two speakers, who had no shared languages. I thought about the inventiveness of this new language, the nuances of it, and the mechanics of it. I also thought of its inevitable failures.

As a wife, I knew that it was false that Hearn alone devised this language. Setsu *and* Hearn would have created it together. The biographers who credited Hearn alone for the language had dismissed Setsu and her intellect and, most importantly, her will to survive. I did not.

When I went to Matsue, Japan, and to the museum there devoted to Hearn, I found a biography, *A Walk in Kumamoto*, by Hasegawa Yoji that illuminated Setsu's life fully, her years prior to Hearn and those after his passing. In Kyoto, I met Japanese scholars who, like Hasegawa, regard Setsu as Hearn's literary collaborator for she was the one who told him the Japanese ghost stories and fairytales, which he then re-wrote in English which then launched him toward literary renown.

I agree with these Japanese scholars that Hearn was an excellent listener. He knew what to listen for. He knew not to dismiss the stories of women, children, and the common man. He listened to Setsu as she told and retold him these stories in their language, until he finally heard within these stories the reasons for their persistence and longevity. Then he wrote his version of them. That patience paid off, as these narratives were documented in written form, not left behind or forgotten as Meiji Japan (1868-1912) turned toward the West with breakneck speed.

JRR: Alethea is basically dismissed in Elizabeth Bisland's account of Hearn's life. In the novel, you have Alethea telling her story to a white reporter, who's is condescending and racist. I appreciated how Alethea pushes back in your text, as in the moment when she refuses to use the phrase "smart as a whip." You center her in a way that other accounts of Hearn's life have not. How much information was out there about her life?

MT: Alethea Foley—a young biracial woman, who was formerly enslaved in Kentucky—met Hearn in Cincinnati, Ohio, where she was working as a cook in the boarding house where he roomed. What I know of Alethea comes from two documents, which I considered "scrimmed," meaning that the documents profess to be a representation of her voice but are, in fact, mediated by the writer in question.

It has been white men who get to publish, who can claim the status of author and expert, and make their living from writing books.

The first document is a feature that Hearn wrote for the Cincinnati *Commercial*, after he and

The second of the scrimmed documents is an interview that Alethea gave to the Cincinnati *Enquirer* in 1906. The headline of the article read, in part, "Claim...Made by a Negress" and "Ex-slave says she was married to gifted author." The article didn't have a byline, and I thought it plausible that the newspaper would have sent a young white woman, ambitious and hungry for scandal in order to make a name for herself as a reporter, to interview Alethea. The majority of the events that I include in the Alethea section of the novel were taken directly from this interview, which was dense with information about their meeting, their marriage, and Hearn's demeanor and expectations as a young husband.

The reason for the 1906 interview, given two years after Hearn's passing, was Alethea's claim in Probate Court that she was married to Hearn and therefore has a legal right to his estate. The resolve, the will, and the inner strength that Alethea must have possessed in order to say to herself and to the court that she would fight for what was rightfully hers in a court of law. That plus giving the interview, where she was clearly taking her claim into the court of public opinion? I was beyond impressed. I wanted to spend time with this Alethea. I wanted to imagine what and who in her life had shaped her. Alethea is employing her skills as a storyteller to keep the young white woman reporter intrigued enough and in front of her long enough to hear her story, not only Hearn's role in it.

JRR: I was so affected by how Rosa and Alethea were both illiterate. Still, they are formidable despite not having the skills that most of us today would take for granted. As someone who's obviously read an immense amount and written books of your own, how did you inhabit these women who didn't have the ability to read or write?

MT: I write my novels in the first-person voice because it requires that I enter fully into the language of my narrators. It requires me to let go of my own vocabulary, syntax, and relationship to language, written and otherwise. When I shed my own language and attempt to imagine and inhabit another's is when I truly begin to understand a character.

While it's true that Rosa could not read and write, her relationship to language was not impoverished or diminished. She spoke two languages, Venetian and Romaic. Venetian, in particular, came with it the hallmarks of power, privilege, Empire, and assimilation. I imagine how she must have spoken Venetian better than her Irish husband. How she critiques his pronunciation. How she calls it his "shadow language," meaning that she could make out only the basic shapes of what he intended to communicate but not the finer details. How she hangs on to both of her languages, when she is living in Dublin with young Hearn. How she regrets that her son is slipping away from her as he is learning English, the language that would divide them.

As for Alethea, her relationship to language also cannot be characterized as impoverished or diminished. As I've noted earlier, according to Hearn himself, she was a gifted storyteller.

I suppose the answer to your question is that I never assumed that these two women had a lesser or diminished relationship to language or to storytelling because they could not read and write. I never assumed that I was a better storyteller than them because I have access to the written word.

I acknowledge, of course, the excruciating and frustrating limitations placed upon Rosa and Alethea by their illiteracy. To document their stories, they needed an intermediary, a scribe. The storyteller and the scribe, who ultimately has control over the narrative? The desire to control and to maintain the integrity of what is written and what is documented plays itself out in different ways in Rosa and Alethea's sections and is as much a part of their stories as the stories themselves.

JRR: All three characters are telling their stories to other people to be recorded. Hearn himself was a reporter. In some ways, fiction is a form of reportage and your book is a document. Hearn was known for taking liberties with his reporting, and certainly the way he obtains and tells the stories from Alethea and Setsu might be considered appropriation in 2019. He was a white (or shall we say white-passing man in today's terms?) man. I would love to hear your thoughts on the issue of to whom stories belong, and who gets to tell them?

With rare exceptions, what we know of the past is missing the memories, experiences, and voices of women.

MT: Who do stories belong to? All of us.

Who gets to tell stories? If by that we mean who gets to publish books? Then the answer in the U.S. is clear. It has been white men who get to publish, who can claim the status of author and expert, and make their living from writing books.

JRR: In your book, you—Monique Truong, novelist, former refugee, lawyer, Vietnamese American from the U.S. South—tell all of their stories. What would Hearn think of you and this work?

MT: I think Hearn, as a fellow writer and traveler, would be intrigued by how I had made the reverse journey that he did, that I went from the proverbial East to West. I would share with him my own difficulties with learning Japanese, and how my first languages—Vietnamese and French—haunt my written English. I would give him a copy of *TSF*, along with a very strong magnifying glass or a more modern pair of reading glasses so that he can make out the text. I know that he misses Rosa, Alethea, Setsu, and Elizabeth dearly. I think that he would recognize them on the pages of my novel and also see them in a new light.

JRR: Hearn's life was defined by movement. You seemed to have travelled a lot for this book, and I'm sure in general too. I was struck by this line in Rosa's section, when she's talking to the family cook Kanella, and notes: "She had never travelled afar. She did not know how easy it could be to leave, how cowards always depart." Later on, you have Setsu talk about her and Hearn's moving around Japan and of "weak roots." Did he find home, do you think? Does anyone?

MT: I think "home" or rather the feeling of being "at home" can fluctuate from moment to moment, day to day, year to year. It seems to me less dependent on geography and locale and more so on finding a community of friends and beloveds. As a former refugee, I suppose I resist the idea of pinning my concept of home onto a particular country because I know that countries can disappear from maps, nationalities can be taken from you.

Absolutely, I believe Hearn felt "at home" with Setsu and their four children, but as I explore in the novel the Koizumi home or domestic realm was a country apart—the "country inside" I called it—a country that they together created, like the language that they together created. In the novel, I call Japan the "country outside," and Hearn's relationship to that country was much more complicated and fraught than he would wish or choose to believe. Right before his death, Hearn was attempting to secure a teaching position in the U.S. so that his eldest son, Kazuo, could study here. He had made no plans whatsoever for Setsu and the other three children. It saddens me to think what would have happened to the "country inside," if Hearn's heart had gone on beating. What would have happened to that fragile "home" that he had traveled so far to find?