

Monique Truong: Unearthing the Sweetest Fruits

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Photo credit: Haruka Sakaguchi

Award-winning writer Monique Truong had been told her most recent novel, “The Sweetest Fruits,” might be difficult to sell because she didn’t “have a Vietnamese person in the book.” She laughed as she told me, “Uhm, it didn’t stop me. Clearly!” The significance of this statement is not lost on me. As we fight for more and more Asian American representation in the media, we are also allowing for more diversity in narratives, telling the stories we want to tell. And Truong is helping pave the way.

In “The Sweetest Fruits,” Truong paints a portrait of Lafcadio Hearn, a Greek-Irish writer who lived in Cincinnati and New Orleans where he wrote the first Creole cookbook, and then in Japan, introducing Japanese folklore, fairy tales and ghost stories to the West. However, she does this through the perspectives of the women who helped shape Hearn’s life — his Greek mother, Rosa; his African American first wife, Alethea; and his Japanese second wife, Setsu — reimagining their own stories, told the way they want it told. As I read the novel, I was struck by Truong’s ability to not only embody these wildly different, historically marginalized female characters, and their distinct voices, but to also weave them together into a powerful and deliciously evocative narrative.

In my conversation with Truong, she enlightened me on female agency, the art of writing historical fiction, and, of course, sharing the immigrant experience in unconventional ways.

**This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.*

SJP: I read that you came across Lafcadio Hearn while researching Southern food for your novel “Bitter in the Mouth.” Can you tell me more about that?

MT: I saw his name, and [Lafcadio Hearn] was really hard to place in terms of “Oh what is his ethnicity?” And as I read a little entry on him, none of it made sense to me. He seemed to have been an immigrant and a migrant, many times over... This was a man, a writer who had made the reverse journey that I made. He went from West to East, and he did that willingly. As a refugee who came to the States as a child... it’s very hard for me to understand why someone would willingly displace themselves. Clearly, there are many reasons, right? I wanted to know which ones applied to Hearn: what made him continue to travel, and whether he was searching for a place to call home.

SJP: It's interesting to me too, that the women in this novel didn't really have the privilege that a white man, like Hearn, did, to willingly travel.

MT: That's right. But I think, as I was writing this novel, I was trying to think through what agency they did have. You have Rosa, his mother, who [was] living this very constrained life under the patriarchy of her father and her brothers, and it seemed like [her] family was going to dictate her entire life. But we know that she did end up marrying not only a foreigner, but a military occupier of her island. According to the biographies that I read about Hearn, it was [Lafcadio's] father who sought her out and made the introduction. Given the research that I then did about women of her class and time on the island where she was from, that wouldn't have been possible... There would've been no opportunity for this British officer to have [made] contact with her. Given that, I tried to imagine, what if — and I think, most likely — it was Rosa who made the first move to meet this man, to look at him and think “This is a possible way out.” And *that* is agency. Limited, but it *is* agency. It takes a strong sense of will and a strong sense of knowing what is possible, and how to make the most of what is available to you... All three narrators are historical figures [with] limited agency because they were women. Alethea was formerly enslaved, living in a racist country... and she also made the decision to join her life with Hearn, with all of the consequences that she was well aware of... [That] shows will and strength and the same sort of intrepid spirit that history has assigned men like Hearn because they were physically able to travel and cross boundaries. The women could not, per se, but they did it in their own ways.

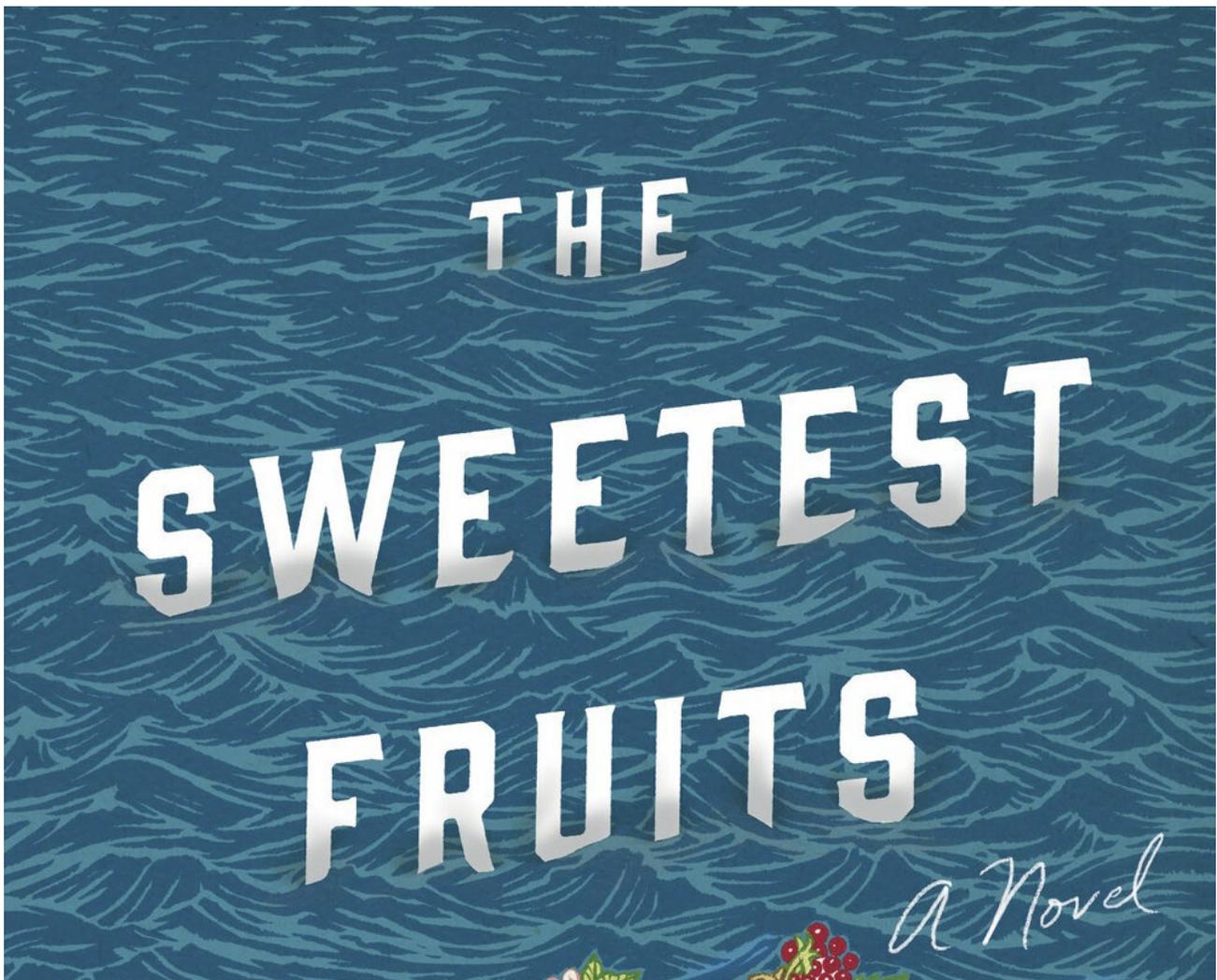
SJP: Something I'm really curious about in the literary world is authenticity and what it means to embody another identity's voice, whether it's gender, race, sexuality, nationality, etc. I think, especially as writers of color, and especially as women of color, we can get pressured or pigeonholed into telling very specific stories that we're expected to tell. Your previous books are centered around Vietnamese and Vietnamese characters, but “The Sweetest Fruits” explores various identities very different from yours. What was that experience like?

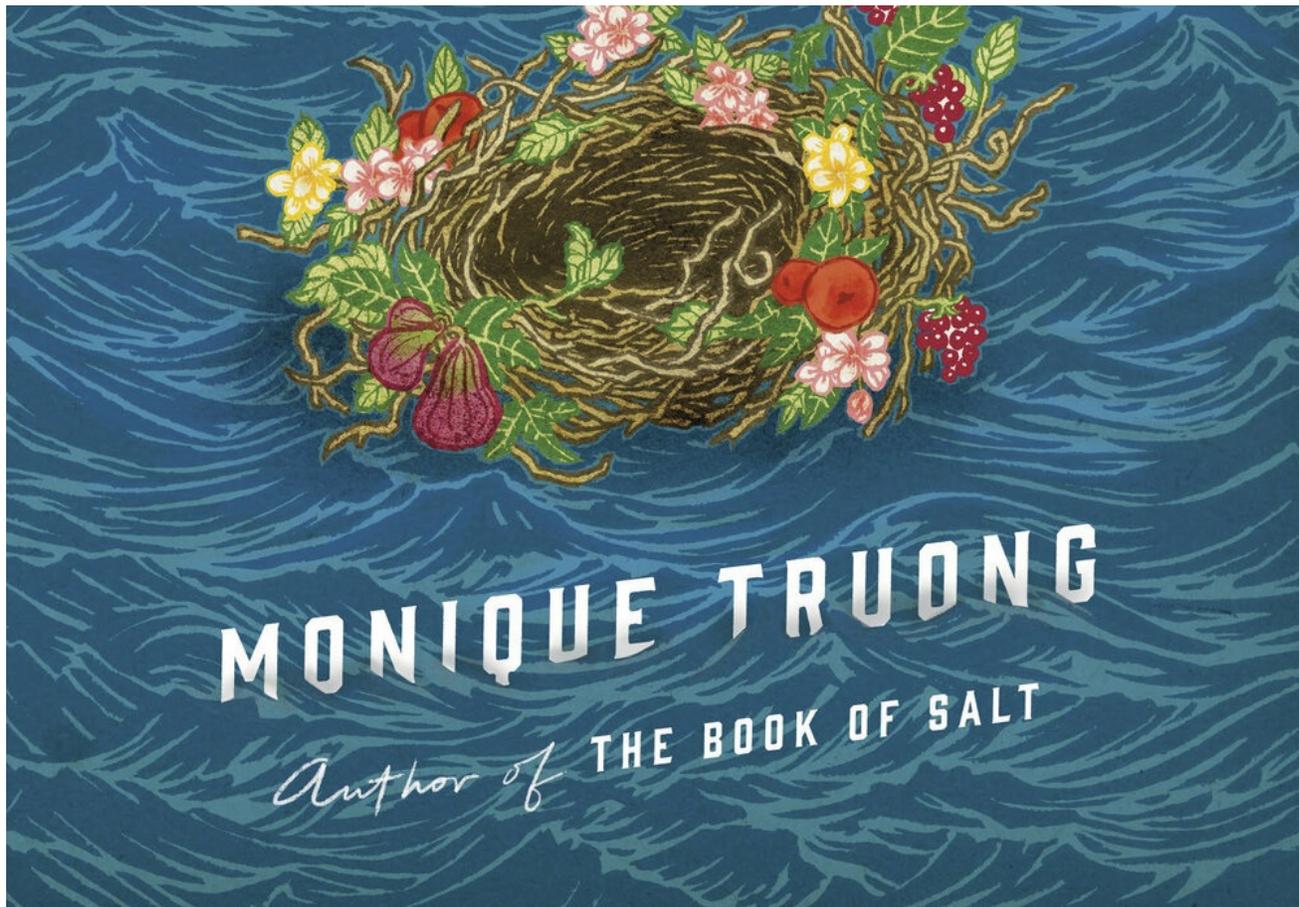
MT: First, I want to point out that “The Book of Salt” is written from the perspective of a gay man's point of view... And “Bitter in the Mouth” is written in the first-person voice of a Vietnamese adoptee within a white family, but the first half of that book, she doesn't reveal her ethnicity and race. I think, oddly, that [“Bitter in the Mouth”] was the book that made people nervous. *laughs* ... My publisher was nervous that readers would open up the pages and encounter the first few chapters and be confused. Here was this Vietnamese American author writing a white, Southern character. So those perspective boundaries that I've been pushing against have been a constant part of, what I consider to be interesting and engaging subject matters.

To go back, or to go forward to “The Sweetest Fruits,” I'll tell you something that happened when I first had the idea of writing from the voice[s] of Rosa, Alethea and Setsu. My agent at the time, who was a fantastic human being and who always believed in my work, said to

at the time, who was a fantastic human being and who always believed in my work, said to me, “I don’t think I can sell that book, Monique. It’s because you don’t have a Vietnamese person in the book.” And this is someone who believed in me as a writer! She was acknowledging what she saw as the constraints of the publishing marketplace. Uhm, it didn’t stop me. Clearly!

But all those things, I was aware of — and I was particularly aware of what it meant to write in the voice of an African American woman — but I wanted to tell Hearn’s story from the points of view that meant the most to Hearn: his mother [and] his two wives. And if I encountered Alethea Foley in history and stepped back and said, “I can’t write Alethea Foley” or “I can’t risk Alethea Foley” or “I’ll fail if I try,” then I would succeed in doing what all the biographers for so many decades have done to Alethea Foley, which was [to] write her out of his story. And I didn’t want to do that. Was I apprehensive? Yes. Did I feel like I could fail terribly? Yes. The one thing that I knew that I was going to do was my research and then to take responsibility for what I put out into the world. And if, and when, the criticism comes... I will not say, “Oh, it’s fiction. It’s my right to go into this territory. I can do what I like because I’m a fiction writer.” The whole “fiction shield” is a travesty... I will take responsibility for what comes, and I can only hope that I have imagined her fully.





SJP: What are your ethics regarding writing about historical figures while also telling a good story?

MT: My approach to historical fiction is that I, with rare exceptions, will not change the facts: where they were born, their race, where they traveled to, all the things that historians have documented or are located within archives. That is not my project. My project is to write in the spaces in between the facts. When it comes to writing about women and women of color, the space in between the facts is a vast territory... [Professor Saidiya Hartman writes that] if you approach these voices of the subaltern and marginalized, of the enslaved, then you must acknowledge that there is an inherent failure to your project [because there is so rarely anything in the archives about them]... I think if you're clear-eyed about [that failure], you're better off than thinking that you're some sort of savior or reclaimer of something lost.

SJP: Speaking of writing between the spaces, I wanted to ask about that haunting, gorgeous scene where Lafcadio and Setsu visit the ghost caves and meet with some hostility from the Japanese locals. For me, that scene explores the idea of the sacred and what should remain untouched or unsullied. On the other hand, there are stories, such as Rosa's or Alethea's, that need to be unearthed. Can you shed some light on that and how it relates to storytelling?

MT: I'm a little apprehensive about the word "sacred" because it signals borders and prohibition. I think all stories belong to all of us. With that said, not all of us can tell stories

and be authorities in stories, given the marketplace of publishing, given societal privileges, [and] given reality... Ideally, what we would like and want to happen is that the boatman and the boatwoman [the Japanese locals] tell us the story of that cave... [Instead], it was Hearn, with Setsu's help, who became the authority about that set of Japanese narratives and beliefs. And Hearn went on and made a name for himself, money for himself and his family, and is remembered to this day for finding "Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan" [the title of Hearn's first collection of essays about Japan]. Japan is pretty damn familiar to that boatman and that boatwoman! *laughs* So already, we see the perspective and how the boatman and the boatwoman have been totally ignored. It's their story, it's the story of their place, and yet, we know, it's not *for* them anymore. Even though I will stand by the statement that stories belong to all of us, I fully acknowledge that for too long in history and certainly during Hearn's time, it was white men who were the authority. The world had to go through them in order to be seen and to matter.

SJP: As we see more and more Asian American authorities in the literary world and film/TV, how has that affected your career?

MT: It gives me great joy! I think that it's a really long and difficult road for all of us, no matter what it is we choose to do... So when I see a film like "The Farewell" or "Always be My Maybe," it actually brings me joy. It makes me feel like we are in community with one another. That gives me reason to hope, which is what we all need right now.

SJP: Yeah, I think it's a really exciting time. It allows for different kinds of stories, like "The Sweetest Fruits," where we get to tell the stories of our choosing. It's really cool. Is there a book or film that you've read or seen recently that got you excited?

MT: I have a weird impediment where I cannot read fiction while I'm writing. But there are exceptions, and two of them are novels by Yoko Tawada, a Japanese author, living and writing in Germany. One is called "Memoirs of a Polar Bear"... Tawada's novel, in my opinion, is a Japanese immigrant narrative, but with polar bears. "The Sweetest Fruits," to me, is a Vietnamese refugee narrative, but with no Vietnamese in it. But the sensibility and the lenses through which we each wrote our works are very, very specific to our relationship to the world and to being displaced.

SJP: Finally, if someone were to write a book about you from the perspective of others, who would you like them to choose?

MT: [It] would be really interesting to have my younger sister's point of view... We are cut from the same piece of cloth, but our experience is so different with this country and with being Vietnamese American. She's 11 years younger than I am, and she was born in Ohio. The rest of the world may see us going into our day-to-day life in an analogous body, right? An Asian American woman, a Vietnamese American woman. And yet, her relationship to her body is so different than mine because of her experiences in this country. And I would love to know the ways that she looks at me and is perplexed or frustrated. I would want to read that!

Monique Truong's novel *"The Sweetest Fruits"* is out now in bookstores. (304 pp. Viking Books. \$26.)

Sarah Jinee Park is a Korean American writer and editor from Queens, NY. She has work forthcoming in *Polychrome Magazine* and *Truancy Magazine* this winter. Currently, she is working on a surrealist novel, volunteering as Copy Chief for *Mochi* magazine, and learning how to live a greener lifestyle.