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Monique Truong. Photo credit: Marion Ettlinger.

To be honest, Monique Truong's long-awaited second novel "Bitter In The Mouth" is so full of surprises that it's difficult to review without spoilers. This novel of a young girl growing up in Boiling Springs, North Carolina in the 1970s and 80s offers much more than a plot synopsis can reveal. But let's start by saying that Truong offers something for a wide swath of readers across genres, and she ties all of these genres together in ways that are both surprising and satisfactory.

Want a coming-of-age novel? This novel's got first kisses, unrequited crushes, painful secrets, and best friendships, all the way through college graduations. Through all of it, the narrator's voice recalls that of Scout Finch, the young narrator of Harper Lee's famous American coming-of-age novel, "To Kill A Mockingbird." Indeed, the novel's epigraph comes from Lee's book, concluding with the lawyer Atticus Finch's famous admonition to his daughter: "Most people are [real nice], Scout, when you finally see them." The marginal and magical Boo Radley figure in Lee's novel takes center stage as "Baby" Harper, Linda's great-uncle, in Truong's novel. And like Scout's voice, Linda's voice resonates with youthful innocence and retrospective wisdom.

Want a saga about family and history? The dying words of Linda's grandmother, addressed to Linda, echo through the novel: "What I know about you, little girl, would break you in two." Many of the novel's chapters begin with a reference or allusion to historical figures, from the elementary textbook "North Carolina Parade: Stories of History and People," to the Wright brothers and their famous airplane flights. A number of the novel's chapters trace the connections between family histories and larger narratives. And as the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that the rules Linda observes about her historical textbook also ring true for her own story: "History always had a point of view ... history was what you wanted to remember ... [and] history was in the missing details."

Want magical realism? The narrator, Linda, experiences a form of synesthesia: every word that she said or heard is accompanied by a taste, "unique, consistent, and most often unrelated to the

meaning of the word [itself].” Hence, the narrator calls her best friend, Kelly: “Kellycannedpeaches.” Readers familiar with the work of Gabriel García Marquez, Haruki Murakami, and Aimee Bender will appreciate this touch, which seems to color almost every interaction Linda has. The protagonist of Bender’s recent novel, “The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake” had similar symptoms: she can taste emotions in every bite she takes. But Truong’s treatment of the origin of her narrator’s synesthesia (unrevealed until the end of the book), combined with the ultimate explanation for the novel’s title, left this reviewer in awe.

Finally, for readers of this publication: want Asian American literature, with an emphasis on racial and ethnic identity and often overlooked histories? That’s something you’ll have to read the book in order to find. But it is there, and the way that Truong reveals this particular emphasis is magical and game-changing. I’m already looking forward to her third book.

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