

Monique Truong: Bitter In The Mouth (Chatto & Windus)

web.archive.org/web/20100906030716/http://www.heraldsotland.com:80/arts-ents/fiction-reviews/monique-truong-bitter-in-the-mouth-chatto-windus-1.1047096

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9 Aug 2010

The setting of *To Kill A Mockingbird* merges with secrets from the deep and distant past.

'It was always Easter Sunday in the South,' muses teenage Linda Hammerick, searching in vain for black clothing amid the 'Peach-blossom pink, forsythia yellow, spearmint green' stocked by her local department store. Taste in clothing is only one of the reasons why Linda doesn't fit in to the small town of Boiling Springs, North Carolina. On her deathbed, Linda's grandmother Iris, who hides her bourbon in Dr Pepper and prides herself on always telling the truth, utters the prophecy that will shape the rest of the novel: "What I know about you, little girl, would break you in two."

In *The Mouth* reads like a memoir, as Linda follows the looping curves of her memory towards the various secrets that wrap their tendrils around her family, binding its members together and pulling them apart, especially Linda and her ambivalent adoptive mother DeAnne. Linda's slow excavation of the past is aided by her beloved great uncle Baby Harper's passion for photography and complicated by her 'secret sense', a form of synaesthesia that causes her to experience tastes when she hears words. Where the ancient Greeks made mnemonic paths through the streets of familiar cities, Linda finds herself with "a multicourse meal prepared by a mad scientist who knew and cared nothing about food"; revisiting the "chaotic juxtaposition of flavours" allows her to recall facts, significant or trivial. The bitter taste of the title is a mystery though, conjuring "flames cutting through the seams of a trailer home, the sound of footsteps on gravel, then darkness".

Synaesthesia illuminates the beginning of the novel, but in time its appeal fades in comparison with the evocation of coming of age. The repetition of Linda's associations – "Tellbrownsugar me why youcannedgreenbeans were ashamedcannedchickenoodlesoup?" – is effective but frustrating, and the time it takes her to discover that her condition is well-documented perhaps stretches credulity.

But this is a churlish gripe, as Linda's experience of words facilitates some of the more elaborate metaphors Truong likes to employ. When Linda tells her friend Kelly in letter #427 of their lifelong correspondence that she has been raped, Kelly's reply in letter #428 consists

of three words: "Don't tell anyone". For Linda, "That was when I understood that anyone was a big movie theater of a word with the lights turned down low. You never knew who was sitting inside".

Linda's role at Boiling Springs High School is simple, 'to earn straight A's'. Kelly, having transformed into a popular girl, is expected to be on show, "to be chased like prey, to flirt and to tease, and to give in and be touched but never penetrated. Kelly was too smart to play her role successfully. She was too curious. How does this feel? She was too egalitarian. Now you do it to me. She was too truthful. I don't want you to stop."

Gender and sexuality are wonderfully observed, as Linda's excavations allow her to question what it means to be a Southern female or an older, gay male (Great Uncle Harper is a "confirmed bachelor" and "a book that found itself inside the wrong cover"; he's also one of the very few characters in the novel who forges a successful relationship).

Boiling Springs is a palpable presence, even after Linda flies to Yale to study. It's a sweaty Southern Baptist town where "the former Miss Feldmann² tops the list of local religious nonconformists. Miss Cora's Beauty Emporium is ²the town's main switchboard" where the intimate details of people's lives are distributed through perms and updos.

Characters of the South creep in too, familiar names from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the ghost of Virginia Dare, the Wright brothers, and George Moses Horton, author of *The Hope of Liberty*. Race is deftly handled. We're more than half way through before we discover that Linda's full name is Linh-Dao Nguyen Hammerick; "I was never Scout. I was Boo Radley, not hidden away but in plain sight."

Southern cadences resonate, imbuing *Bitter In The Mouth* with a warmth and wit that form a perfect foil for the Southern gothic undercurrents that propel it towards its gorgeous, heart-warming resolution. Just as the heavy summer of Boiling Springs is refreshed by the fresh September air, there's enough sharpness here to cut through a happy ending that might otherwise have been as sweet as the "end-of-the season peach pie" that heralds it.