



Monique Truong **The Sweetest Fruits**

Monique Truong often stumbles upon her characters in the margins of other books, appearing at the edges of another's story. The protagonist of her award-winning debut novel, *The Book of Salt* (2003), appeared first in *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook*; Truong reimagined Toklas's orientalisering descriptions of her rotating cast of "Indo-Chinese" chefs into Binh, a queer Vietnamese immigrant living in 1930s Paris. Shifting between his life in Gertrude Stein's Paris kitchen and his memories of Vietnam, the novel is replete with searing lines – "Truth is something strapped to a man's body before he is led to the water's edge and pushed." Truong twists her expansive imagination around meticulous research to think through colonialism, language and class.

The Sweetest Fruits, Truong's third and latest novel, extends this care and sharp curiosity. Excavating her characters from the accidental and measured silences of history, the book circles around "actual events", occasionally interrupted by excerpts from Elizabeth Bisland's 1906 biography of writer Patrick Lafcadio Hearn.

Truong opens *The Sweetest Fruits* with a well-worn warning: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant —." Following Emily Dickinson's dictum, the conflicting truths of Patrick Lafcadio Hearn are revealed by the women who loved him. Split into three, the book is narrated by Hearn's mother and two wives. We first meet Hearn as "Patricio", narrated by Rosa, his mother; he appears next as "Pat" to Alethea, a former slave whom he marries illegally in Cincinnati; finally, he becomes "Yakumo" to his second wife, Setsu, in Japan. As Alethea explains to her impatient interviewer, "There's more than one way to arrive at the truth, Miss."

Truong's expansive imaginary, bruised with loss, puts the novel in the company of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*. Following the tradition of such postcolonial novels, the character of Hearn is mostly absent, each woman speaking after his departure. Their collective, seemingly indefatigable, love for the man does at times become tiresome,

but perhaps my irritation is only because Rosa, Alethea and Setsu are written as such full, nuanced and compelling lives. The last two lines of Dickinson's poem dictate, "The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind —."

A slow burn, *The Sweetest Fruits* is a thoughtful layering of fictions and truths, a novel that will most certainly dazzle.

Leah Jing McIntosh

Upswell, 310pp, \$29.99