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Southern girl, Twice over

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Monique Truong's (author of *The Book of Salt*) new book, *Bitter in the Mouth* comes out at the end of the month! We exchanged e-mails on her writing process and the formulation of *Bitter in the Mouth*, which is a uniquely creative and captivating account of young woman discovering herself, with the special ability to "taste" words. Below, Truong discusses the questions she hopes the novel will raise, particularly about how our differences define how we see ourselves and each other.

Is there a specific audience you are targeting with *Bitter in the Mouth*? Is there a specific message you hoped to convey?

When I'm writing, the only audience that I allow myself to think about is me. I want to write a book that I would want to read. The irony, of course, is that by the time I finish a novel I've read it at least twenty, if not thirty times over. It's punishment for the hubris of thinking that I can write a book! I don't think of my books as the means to convey a message(s). I think of them as the means of asking questions of the readers and provoking a dialogue between the readers and my characters. With *Bitter in the Mouth*, I hope that some of the questions that will be raised are: What defines a family? Is a family fate or choice? And how do our differences—internal and external—define how we see ourselves and how others see us?

Tell me about your writing process. Where did the idea for *Bitter in the Mouth* come

from? How much did this idea change during the course of writing the novel?

In 2003, very soon after *The Book of Salt* was published, I saw a television show about people who have different forms of synesthesia. I saw an interview with a man who has auditory-gustatory synesthesia: words that he spoke or heard triggered flavors. I knew immediately that this neurological condition could be a rich metaphor for the subjectivity of our experiences, about the differences—detectable and undetectable—that set us apart from one another, and also that the condition would allow me to write about food again but from a very different angle.

I set *Bitter in the Mouth* in Boiling Springs, NC, the small town where my family first lived in the U.S., because I wanted to revisit those first three years that have defined me in so many ways. I like to say that I am a Southern girl, twice over: South Vietnam and the American South. It's, of course, only the former that defines me in most people's eyes. But Boiling Springs is where I learned how to speak English. Boiling Springs was where I became—in a blink of an eye—not just a little girl but a Chink, a Jap, and a Gook (all the names that my classmates called me). Boiling Springs was where I learned that I was physically different, ugly, and a target. So, yes, I wanted to revisit this small town that I have carried with me with so much anger, and I wanted to make it mine. I wanted to tell my version of its story.

What changed during the course of writing the novel—seven years, in fact—was that, by the end, I was no longer angry. Allowing myself to revisit Boiling Springs (I actually returned to Boiling Springs for a brief visit during the writing of the novel) made some things clearer for me: I'm no longer a little girl with no understanding of what was happening around me and no tools with which I could defend myself. I'm a grown woman who has lived most of my years in other towns and cities and who can define herself with words that are not hurtful, hateful, and harmful. It may sound like the outcome of therapy—and maybe writing for me is simply that: years of therapy—but by the end of writing *Bitter in the Mouth* I knew I was finally leaving that painful place behind, and of equal importance was that I was finally seeing many of the other stories within Boiling Springs, not only my own.

Was the writing process different for your first book compared to this one? Did the acclaim you received for *The Book of Salt*, impact the way in which you wrote or approached the novel?

I had heard, of course, that the second novel is a notoriously difficult one to write. I also believed and still do that just because you wrote one novel does not mean that you'll ever write another. It's not like making widgets. It's more like a visitation. (Is that dramatic enough for you?) In *The Book of Salt*, I employed a kind of heightened poeticism for the internal voice of Binh, the novel's main character. I wanted to stretch different writing muscles with *Bitter in the Mouth*. In the first half of the novel, the main character, Linda, is looking back at her childhood in Boiling Springs, and that allowed me to be spare in my language in the same way that most young children talk. Linda is now a thirty year old

woman though, so often her voice will slip back and forth between the voice of an adult and a child. I liked the challenge of conveying those moments of slippage, that fluidity that I think exists in our emotional being as well as our language.

What of your personal experiences lead to writing about this ability to “taste” words?

I do not have auditory-gustatory synesthesia, but I do, like many people who cook a lot, have a vivid and rather extensive catalog of memorized tastes. For example, given a list of ingredients, I can think about and recall their tastes and therefore understand what combination would taste best together.

What is your process when developing characters? Do you have any tricks, methods or exercises you like to use in character development?

I begin with a character who fascinates me. I focus first on that character’s voice. Reading aloud is a large part of my writing process because I want to “hear” my characters. So far, I’ve written novels only in the first person voice. I don’t see that changing. I like the limitations of the first person voice. I like working within the restrictions of a particular character’s vocabulary and emotional range or lack thereof. I’m also a firm believer that for every story there are many other versions of that story that are not being told. The first person voice, for me, is all about highlighting that sharing and withholding.

Sarah Schulman, in *Ties That Bind*, asserts that it is difficult to get lesbian content published with big publishing houses. Being that you’ve been published by Random House, what is your opinion? Do you agree or disagree?

I’ve no reason to doubt Sarah’s assertion. I think that big publishing houses do shy away from content that they believe to have a limited readership. They, like many corporations, are looking for the next sure thing. Vampires. Jane Austin-redux. Wizards. Stories of friendship between attractive women, but only friendship. I think there are exceptions though. I think, like in any corporations, there are individuals within the large houses who are great champions of a good book, no matter the subject matter.

What role does your educational background play in your writing?

I have a B.A. in Literature and a J.D. I think both have helped to shape my writing. Majoring in literature was an opportunity to read and to read widely. I think one of the best “training” for a writer is to read good books from as many cultures and countries as possible. Here’s another irony: when I am writing my own books, I rarely can read fiction. I’m glad that I’ve had many years beforehand to “load up” as it were. As for the J.D., I think that legal writing taught me to respect precision. Legal writing, at its best, is not formulaic. It’s precise and economical.

What projects do you have in store next?

I can't really go into details just yet, but I think the next book will take me to Greece, Ireland, the U.S. (Cincinnati and New Orleans), and Japan. Hello, world!

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