

**“Bitter in the Mouth” by Monique Truong.**  
**Copyright 2010. Random House Publishers. \$25.00 282 pages.**

“Bitter in the Mouth” is the fictional story of a Vietnamese-born child’s formative years as an adoptee in Boiling Springs, North Carolina during the 1970s and 80s. Little “Linda”, born Linh-Dao, is adopted by middle-aged lawyer Thomas Hammerick and his wife Deanne and thrust into very insular, small-town southern life as a 6-year old after the fall of the Saigon. The title refers to Linda’s curious ability to associate all words with tastes, a phenomenon known in the medical world as synesthesia.

Linda’s first memory is a taste, and she experiences the world of words as a curious collection of taste associations. Her best friend from grade school becomes “canned-peaches” Kelly. A disappointing adult love relationship becomes “parsnip” Leo. Young love reminds her of orange sherbet and her fractious relationship with adoptive mother Deanne is described with the observation that Deanne exemplifies a homogenized blandness that can make any meal or conversation taste of canned soup casserole or dry-as-dust baking mix.

Linda has trouble relating to her Anglo classmates who taunt her and she becomes a black-clad teenaged chain-smoking rebel who finds her high school niche as the class “brain”. An early incident of sexual victimization by the young boy hired by her parents to mow the yard accentuates her emotional distance from her adoptive parents when they fail to pursue clues that she has been molested.

Linda’s one adult confidante is her great-uncle “Baby” Harper, a librarian known in the community by the polite Southern euphemism “light in his loafers.” Linda recounts how the two would bond while watching an old movie together when both would lust after the same charismatic male lead. “Baby” becomes Linda’s tie with her hometown after she leaves Boiling Springs for Yale at age 17 after her father’s sudden death in a compromising situation and an estrangement with her mother.

When Linda graduates from Yale, Baby is the only relative to attend her ceremony. Linda later becomes an attorney with a New York law firm and is only reunited with the remaining adoptive family several years later after Baby dies in accident while on a world tour with his “significant other”.

In many ways, Truong’s coming-of-age novel is semi-autobiographical in that she arrived in the United States from Vietnam as a young child and later went on to get an English degree from Yale. Although never an adoptee, Truong uses her alter-ego Linda to embody the anguish of an inventive child thrust into a strange environment who strives to make sense of her world with a love of words. The only jarring element of Truong’s narrative is that sometimes too much North Carolina history is injected into the story without any real sense of direction. The reader learns about Virginia Dare, the Wright Brothers, and George Moses Horton in overly long asides that don’t further the plot and seem contrived.

I would recommend “Bitter in the Mouth” for its clever use of language via word associations and for its penetrating assessments of southern small-town life by a child narrator.

Truong’s first novel, “The Book of Salt”, was acclaimed historical fiction set in Paris in the 1930s about the relationship between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas through the eyes of their Vietnamese chef BINh.

