About the Book

Monique Truong's debut novel, *The Book of Salt* (Houghton Mifflin, April 2003), is a true literary feast. The starred advance reviews and enthusiasm from top booksellers confirm the impact, richness, and beauty of this work told from the perspective of the Vietnamese cook for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas.

"[He] came to us through an advertisement that I had in desperation put in a newspaper. It began captivatingly for those days: 'Two American ladies wish . . . " It was these lines in *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* that inspired *The Book of Salt*.

"That line was such a shocker to me," says Truong. "It was unbelievable to think that someone like me was in their lives."

*The Book of Salt* opens in Paris in 1934. Bình has accompanied his employers, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, to the train station. His own destination is unclear: will he go with "the Steins" to America, stay in France, or return to his family in Vietnam? Before Bình's choice is revealed he takes us back to his youth in French-colonized Vietnam, his years as a galley hand at sea, his late-night meanderings among the Paris demimonde. His
memories and musings continually play against one another in an internal monologue that is far more eloquent than anything he can express with the words that he struggles to master in everyday life.

Truong's sensual prose captures the sights and sounds of Paris in the thirties, the sensuous aromas and flavors of the exotic meals Bình prepares, and, of course, an intimately rueful view from the servants' quarters into the domestic life of the women he calls "my Mesdames." Historical figures weave in and out of The Book of Salt, from the Steins themselves to Paul Robeson and even Ho Chi Minh.

Flavors, sweat, tears, and "the pure sea-salt sadness of the outcast" make The Book of Salt an inspired feast of storytelling riches.

About the Author

Monique Truong was born in Saigon in 1968 and moved to the United States at age six. She graduated from Yale University and the Columbia University School of Law, going on to specialize in intellectual property. Truong coedited the anthology Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose, and her essay "Welcome to America" was featured on National Public Radio. Granting her an Award of Excellence, the Vietnamese American Studies Center at San Francisco State University called her "a pioneer in the field, as an academic, an advocate, and an artist." She was awarded a prestigious Lannan Foundation Writing Residency in 2001. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

An Interview with Monique Truong

Q) The main character of The Book of Salt is a cook. What's your relationship to the preparation of food?

A) I cook for pleasure. I cook to experience something new. I cook, like the characters in my novel, to remind me of where I have been. I always cook, or rather I always "taste," the food first in my mind. I approach a recipe like a story. I imagine it, sometimes I have a dream about it, then I go about crafting it.

Q) Tell us about the novel's structure.

A) The Book of Salt opens in Paris in October of 1934. Bình, the cook, has
accompanied his employers Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas to the train station. He seems to be faced with a decision. Will he go to the United States with his Mesdames? Will he return to his family in Vietnam, or will he continue his life in France, or will he travel to some other place of his choosing? Before Bình's choice is revealed, the reader is brought back in time and made privy to the stories of the Vietnamese cook and of his American employers. What led each of them to live far from the land of their birth? What, if anything, could bring them back home again? The answers to these questions are found in Bình's memories, musings, observations, and possibly lies—all of which are continuously asserting and interrupting one another. Bình's stories are told via his internal voice, one which is far richer, far more agile—in fact, it is a stark contrast to the voice that comes out of his mouth. Bình is a man living in a land, working for employers whose languages are foreign to him. He struggles with their words, and they win the confrontation every time. Limited and silenced, Bình has only his memory and his imagination to keep him company. In the last chapter of the novel, the story returns to the train station where the reader is in essence asked to make the same decision as Bình: whether they would emerge from Bình's life triumphant or in despair; whether they would be pulled together or asunder by the competing stories of Bình's past, present, and future.

Q) How did you get the idea for your book?

A) When I was in college, I bought a copy of the Alice B. Toklas Cook Book because I was curious about Toklas's hash brownie recipe. It turned out that the famous recipe was not a Toklas recipe at all, but one submitted by the artist Brion Gysin in a chapter called "Recipes from Friends." Gysin's recipe was actually for a "haschich fudge" and was for a sort of dried fruit bar concoction dusted with a bunch of pulverized Cannabis sativa. It didn't sound tasty to me, but I read the rest of the book anyway and found that it was less of a cookbook and more of a memoir. In a chapter called "Servants in France," Toklas wrote about two Indochinese men who cooked for Toklas and Stein at 27 rue de Fleurus and at their summer house in Bilignin. One of these cooks responded to an ad placed by Toklas in the newspaper that began "Two Americans ladies wish . . . " By this point in the cookbook, I had already fallen for these two women and for their ability to create an idiosyncratic, idyllic life for one another. When I got to the pages about these cooks, I was, to say the least, surprised and touched to see a Vietnamese presence—and such an intimate one at that—in the lives of these two women. These cooks must have seen everything, I thought. But in the official history of the Lost Generation, the Paris of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, these
Indochinese cooks were just a minor footnote. There could be a personal epic embedded inside that footnote, I thought. *The Book of Salt* is that story, as told from the perspective of Binh, a twenty-six-year-old Vietnamese man living in Paris in the late 1920s. I have imagined him as one of the candidates who answered Stein and Toklas's classified ad.

Q) When did you begin writing the novel?

A) The novel began as a short story called "Seeds," which I wrote in 1997. I had graduated from college, worked for two years as a paralegal, gone to law school, and was practicing intellectual property law in New York City by then. I was still calling myself a writer, even though I had not written any fiction since graduating from college in 1990. I began to write again because I was coediting *Watermark*, an anthology of Vietnamese American poetry and prose, and I had submitted a piece that I had written early on in college to my coeditors for consideration. They rejected it. I was mortified. I took four days off from work in order to prove to myself and to my fellow editors that I was a writer. When I sat myself down to write, I knew the story that I wanted to tell. I had never forgotten about the Vietnamese cooks who worked in the Toklas and Stein household. "Seeds" was the beginning of *The Book of Salt*.

Q) Are you still practicing law?

A) Thankfully, no.

Q) Why did you go to law school and practice if you considered yourself a writer?

A) I was a coward. My grandfather was a writer back in Vietnam, but besides him I didn't know of any other writers. I didn't know how to go about creating a writing life for myself. I had no roadmaps, and I had a bad sense of direction to begin with. I thought that if I went down that path I would end up at the welfare office.

Q) How did you make the transition from being a lawyer to a full-time writer?

A) I quit my job at the law firm. Actually, I wasn't so immediately bold. After I wrote "Seeds," I knew that there was more that I could write about Binh, the cook, but I found it impossible to work as a lawyer and to write at the same time. I didn't have the physical or emotional energy to do it. One of my
Watermark coeditors suggested that I apply for a Van Lier fellowship for writers under the age of thirty. Luckily, they gave me the fellowship, because I was twenty-nine when I applied. The fellowship came with a cash grant that allowed me to pay my rent and school loans for about two months. I asked for and received a leave of absence from the law firm that I was with at the time, and my career as a lawyer has never been the same.

Q) Why did you choose the title The Book of Salt?

A) Salt—in food, sweat, tears, and the sea—is found throughout the novel. The word salary comes from the word salt, so salt is another way of saying labor, worth, value. For me, the title is also a nod toward the Biblical connotation of salt, in particular to the turning of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt for looking back at her home, to the city of Sodom. That story says to me that the Catholic God, whom the cook is so wary of, disapproves not only of the activities of the Sodomites but also of nostalgia. Bình is a practitioner of both. In the novel, there is an unpublished manuscript by Gertrude Stein with the same name, which plays a significant role in Bình's relationship with his American lover, Sweet Sunday Man.

Q) Is there really a manuscript by Stein entitled The Book of Salt?

A) No, I made that manuscript up. In the novel, Bình claims that Stein's The Book of Salt is about him. Stein has certainly written about cooks and servants. In Portraits and Prayers, for instance, there is a piece called "B. B. or the Birthplace of Bonnes" about all the women from Brittany who had worked in the Stein and Toklas' household. Also, two of the "lives" in Stein's Three Lives were servants. So, it does not seem improbable to me that Stein could have devoted a few words to a cook like Bình.

Q) There is a character in the novel that Bình refers to as "the man on the bridge" until he finds out that his name is Nguyen Ai Quoc. Isn't that one of Ho Chi Minh's pseudonyms?

A) Yes, when Ho Chi Minh was living in Paris he called himself Nguyen Ai Quoc. A fictionalized Nguyen Ai Quoc appears in the novel as a man whom Bình meets on a bridge over the Seine. They share a meal, their longing for a home, their thoughts about the French, among a number of other significant things, all in the course of a few short hours. But a question that the man on the bridge asks of Bình stays with him for much longer: "What keeps you here?"
Q) You have Bình meeting the man on the bridge in 1927. Wasn't the real Ho Chi Minh living elsewhere by then?

A) Yes, Nguyen Ai Quoc was living and organizing in southern China by then, but he was forced to flee the region for a time in 1927. He went to Moscow and from there he traveled around Europe as a tourist visiting castles and cathedrals. According to the historian Stanley Karnow, a French communist friend of his actually recalled meeting Nguyen Ai Quoc on a bridge in Paris in 1927 during the course of that pleasure trip.

Q) What inspired you to include a fictionalized Ho Chi Minh in the novel?

A) Actually, I think of the character in The Book of Salt as a fictionalized Nguyen Ai Quoc as opposed to a fictionalized Ho Chi Minh. From what I have read about him, his name changes often signaled or accompanied a significant change in the man as well. When he was in Paris, he was literally "a man on the bridge" between democracy and socialism. He eventually felt rejected by both and turned towards communism to reach his goal of independence and self-determination for Vietnam. By that time, he was well on his way to becoming Ho Chi Minh. The man that interested me was Nguyen Ai Quoc, the young man living in Paris who read Shakespeare and Dickens in the original English, who wrote plays and newspaper articles, who earned money as a painter of fake Chinese souvenirs, a photographer's assistant.

Q) In the novel, the man on the bridge tells Bình that he also worked as a cook. Is this based on fact?

A) Yes, I had done some research on Nguyen Ai Quoc because someone told me that he had been a cook in France. It turned out that he was an assistant cook at the pie bakery of the Carlton Hotel in London, whose kitchen at that time was under the supervision of the legendary French chef Auguste Escoffier. As a young man, he had left Vietnam by working as a mess boy on a French ocean liner going from Saigon to Marseilles. I decided that my cook, Bình, would take a similar route. Many of Bình's experiences on the fictional freighter Niobe were based on or inspired by the more well-documented experiences of Ba, as he called himself then, on the Latouche Treville. Nguyen Ai Quoc's travels out of Vietnam began in 1911, and they took him to Dakar, Brooklyn, London, Paris, and many other port cities around the world.
From 1917 to 1923 he lived in Paris. Sometime in the summer of 1923, he left Paris for Moscow to begin his full-time education and activity as a revolutionary.

Q) You were born in Vietnam and came to the United States in 1975 as a refugee. Did that experience play a role in shaping this novel?

A) I was six years old when my mother and I left Vietnam in April of 1975. It was supposed to be just a precautionary measure, a temporary solution to keep us safe from the nightly bombings. My father, who was a high-level executive for an international oil company, stayed behind at their bequest. Later that month, when Saigon fell to the communist forces, my father left on a boat for the South China Sea, the same sea that my mother and I were lucky enough to have flown over in an airplane just weeks before. The departure, the loss of home, that act of refuge-seeking, have everything to do with the themes playing themselves out in *The Book of Salt*. There are no military conflicts in my novel, there are no soldiers, there are no weapons. I suppose it is no coincidence that the first long-distance flight of my imagination as a writer would take me to a time in history when Vietnam was more or less at peace. When you are a child of wartime, peace is the all-consuming fantasy. Also I think as a child of wartime, one of the questions that stays with me and that I've tried to answer for myself by writing this novel is what if there was not a war, what then would make a person leave the land of their birth behind?