A Reader's Guide

The Book of Salt
by Monique Truong

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About The Book of Salt

"A lush, fascinating, expansive first novel about exile." — New York Times

"An irresistible, scrupulously engineered confection that weaves together history, art and human nature . . . Truong has, after much deliberation, cultivated a veritable feast." — Los Angeles Times

"[He] came to us through an advertisement that I had in desperation put in the 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, a brilliant first novel by acclaimed Vietnamese American writer Monique Truong.

In Paris, in 1934, Bính has accompanied his employers, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, to the train station for their departure to America. His own destination is unclear: will he go with "the Steins," stay in France, or return to his native Vietnam? Bính has fled his homeland in disgrace, leaving behind his malevolent charlatan of a father and his self-sacrificing mother. For five years, he has been the live-in cook at the famous apartment at 27 rue de Fleurus. Before Bính's decision is revealed, his mesmerizing narrative catapults us back to his youth in French-colonized Vietnam, his years as a galley hand at sea, and his days turning out fragrant repasts for the doyennes of the Lost Generation.

Bính knows far more than the contents of the Steins' pantry: he knows their routines and intimacies, their manipulations and follies. With wry insight, he views Stein and Toklas ensconced in blissful domesticity. But is Bính's account reliable? A lost soul, he is a latenight habitué of the Paris demimonde, an exile and an alien, a man of musings and memories, and, possibly, lies. Love is the prize that has eluded him, from his family to the men he has sought out in his far-flung journeys, often at his peril. Intricate, compelling, and witty, the novel weaves in historical characters, from Stein and Toklas to Paul Robeson and
Ho Chi Minh, with remarkable originality. Flavors, seas, sweat, tears — *The Book of Salt* is an inspired feast of storytelling riches.

**About Monique Truong**

Monique Truong is coeditor of the anthology *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose*. *The Book of Salt*, her first novel, was inspired by a brief mention of an Indochinese cook in *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*. Born in Saigon, Truong now lives in New York City. *The Book of Salt* won the Bard Fiction Prize and the Barbara Gittings Award in Literature, and was a finalist for Britain's Guardian First Book Award in 2003. Monique is currently a finalist for the New York Public Library's Young Lions Award and the Lambda Literary Award.

**Questions for Discussion**

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *The Book of Salt* for every reader.

1. "Gertrude Stein thinks it is unfathomably erotic that the food she is about to eat has been washed, pared, kneaded, touched, by the hands of her lover." How is food — and cooking — used as seduction in *The Book of Salt*? Compare the meals between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas with the meals Bình shares with Sweet Sunday Man and the man on the bridge. How is the reader also seduced or persuaded by these meals? Have you ever wooed someone with what you fed them?

2. Bình says, "All my employers provide me with a new moniker, whether they know it or not . . . Their mispronunciations are endless, an epic poem all their own." How is Bình "lost in translation" in *The Book of Salt*? His interior monologue is lush and eloquent, but he can speak only a few words in French and English — what is the reader privy to that the other characters are not? Have you ever lived in a place where you weren't able to fully speak your mind?

3. *O Magazine* said, "Salt, whether from 'kitchen, sweat, tears, or the sea' — is the secret of this perfectly rendered book." How is salt used as an ingredient in Bình’s story?

4. What does Gertrude Stein’s (invented) manuscript, "The Book of Salt," have to do with *The Book of Salt*? Sweet Sunday Man tells Bình that Gertrude Stein's version "captured you perfectly." Could that be true? How do you imagine it reads?

5. *The Book of Salt* begins with Bình waiting for the train that will lead the Steins to America. He seems to be facing a choice: "I thought that fate might have been listening in . . ." How did you expect the story to end? Did you think that Bình would leave Paris? Where would he go? How did the ending of the novel surprise you?

6. Bình says, "Love is not a bowl of quinces yellowing in a blue and white china bowl, seen but untouched." Is love what Bình is looking for in Paris? He does finally get his much-desired photograph of Sweet Sunday Man, and Sweet Sunday Man also takes a rare item. How is love given and taken throughout the story? What are the characters left with?
you kept (or stolen) artifacts of a past love?

7. Bính says, "When I am telling the truth, why does it so often sound like a lie?" Do you believe Bính’s stories? What is the importance of truth in The Book of Salt, and what are the consequences of lies? Do you ever tell stories differently than others remember them?

8. When the Steins vacation outside Paris with Bính, he says, "What you probably do not know, Gertrude Stein, is that in Bilignin you and Miss Toklas are the only circus act in town. And me, I am the asiatique, the sideshow freak." How are the Steins and Bính aligned as outsiders? And how are they not? What is revealed in the Steins' response to Lattimore and Paul Robeson — how is it different from the Bilignin villagers' response to Bính?

9. "... the Old Man's anger has no respect for geography...even here, he finds me." Does Bính seem "shamed" by his exile? Does he seem freed? How do we carry the judgment of our parents? What "voices" followed you when you first left your family home?

10. Bính uses the color red often when describing his mother: "Red is luck that she had somehow saved, stored, and squandered on her youngest son." What other meanings does he give to red? Why does he cut his fingertips? Did Bính's vision of the gray pigeon in the park change your understanding of his mother, and of what Bính left behind in Vietnam?

11. Bính says of the Steins' apartment, "This is a temple, not a home." Do you agree? Are you familiar with the works of Gertrude Stein or Alice B. Toklas? Has The Book of Salt changed the way you think of them?

12. Who is the scholar-prince? Do you think Bính ever finds his? Did his mother find hers? How much do folk and fairy tales shape what we expect from romantic love? Do you have a certain myth in mind when you think of "ever after"?

A Conversation with Monique Truong

Q) How did you get the idea to write about the Vietnamese cook who worked for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in Paris?

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 book, I had already fallen for these two women and for their ability to create an idiosyncratic, idyllic life. 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 "Indo-Chinese" cooks were just a minor footnote. There could be a personal epic embedded in that footnote.

Q) Food and flavors and recipes play an important role in *The Book of Salt*. Do you like to cook yourself?

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) Like a dream, Bính's story isn't revealed chronologically. Tell us about the novel's structure, which has a kind of fractured "cubist" quality.

A) *The Book of Salt* opens in Paris in October of 1934. Bính, the Vietnamese 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 Bính discloses his current "choice," he takes the reader back in time to his own past choices and those of the women he works for. 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 Bính's memories, musings, observations, and possibly lies — all of which are continuously asserting and interrupting one another.

Q) What role does language play in this novel of Americans and Asians in France?

A) Bính'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. Bính 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, Bính 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 Bính. Whether they would emerge from Bính's life triumphant or in despair; whether they would be pulled together or asunder by the competing stories of Bính's past, present, and future?

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 behest. 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?

Q) You have a degree from Columbia Law School and you practiced at a big New York firm, specializing in intellectual property. Are you still practicing law?

A) Thankfully, no.

Q) What made you decide to write full-time?

A) *The Book of Salt* 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 had written fiction in college and still thought of myself as a writer, even though I hadn't written any fiction since graduating in 1990. I began to write again because I was coediting *Watermark: An Anthology of Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose*.

Q) Why had you gone into law when you always thought of yourself as a writer?

A) I was a coward. My grandfather was a writer back in Vietnam, but besides him I didn't know any other writers. I didn't know how to go about creating a writing life for myself. I had no road maps, 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) 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, the city of Sodom. That story says to me that the Catholic God, whom the cook is so wary of, not only disapproves of the activities of the Sodomites but also of nostalgia. Bính 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 Bính'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 up. In the novel, Bính 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 servant's. So, it does not seem improbable to me that Stein could have devoted a few words to a cook like Bính.
Q) There is a character in the novel that Bính 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. 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 London's Carlton Hotel, 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, Bính, would take a similar route. Many of Bính'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) Why include Ho Chi Minh in your novel?

A) I think of the character in The Book of Salt as a fictional Nguyen Ai Quoc as opposed to a fictional Ho Chi Minh. As Nguyen Ai Quoc, he was a 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.

Bính meets him 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 Bính stays with him for much longer: "What keeps you here?"

For Further Reading

The following titles may be of interest to readers who enjoyed The Book of Salt.

Becoming Madame Mao by Anchee Min
The Woman Who Knew Gandhi by Keith Heller
La Tour Dreams of the Wolf Girl by David Huddle
Grass Roof, Tin Roof by Dao Strom