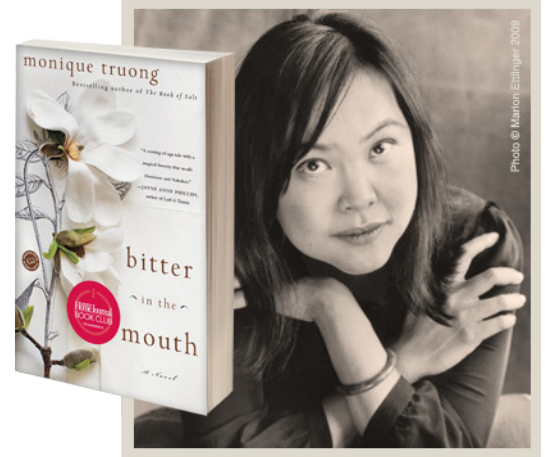


Random House Reader's Guide Discussion Questions

Bitter in the Mouth, a novel by Monique Truong



- 1** Bitter in the Mouth is a novel that invites us to consider what it means to be a family. How are families defined and constructed within its pages?

- 2** Linda Hammerick begins her story with her great-uncle Harper because she believes that "a family narrative should begin with love." How does her great-uncle, a.k.a. Baby Harper, help her to understand what it means to be loved?

- 3** Linda's "secret sense," auditory-gustatory synesthesia, causes her to taste words. How does her unusual relationship with "the word" shape Linda's personality and life? What other characters in the novel have a unique relationship to "the word"?

- 4** According to Linda, "[w]e keep secrets to protect, but the ones most shielded—from shame, from judgment, from the slap in the face—are ourselves. We are selfish in our secret keeping and rarely altruistic. We act out of instinct and survival and only when we feel safest will we let our set of facts be known." Consider the secrets that are kept in the novel and by whom. Do these instances prove Linda's assertion or disprove it?

- 5** Linda's grandmother Iris is the "family truth teller." What are the examples in the first half of the novel of Iris telling us the truth? Did you understand them to be "truths" or were they, in a way, hidden in plain sight?

- 6** Linda Hammerick and Kelly Powell have been best friends since the age of seven. What did they have in common that brought them together?

7

"Fat is not fate." This is one of the ways that Linda distinguishes herself from her best friend Kelly. What is fate then? What are the examples of fate in *Bitter in the Mouth*?

8

Author Monique Truong states that "while my first novel, *The Book of Salt*, features an unreliable narrator, *Bitter in the Mouth* is a novel that plays with the idea of the unreliable reader." She goes on to say that "the first half of *Bitter* is constructed as an invitation to the reader to fill in the blanks." What do you think Truong means by this? What were the blanks in Linda's story, and how did you fill them in? Was your "fill in" based on the stories that Linda tells about her immediate family, your own life experiences, or perhaps on what you know about the author of the novel?

9

In the second half of the novel, Linda reveals a significant part of her life story to us. Did the revelation of this fact change the way that you understand her and her story? Did you go back and re-read the first half of the novel? If yes, what did you "see" that you did not see upon the first reading?

10

Consider your first impression of Linda. Although her synesthesia is a rare neurological condition, were there still ways in which you found yourself relating to her sense (pun intended) of being different and disconnected from her family and from the other children in Boiling Springs?

11

What if the author had switched the order of how she told you Linda's story? In other words, what if "Revelation" came before "Confession," and you were presented with the opportunity to identify and to relate to Linda based on her "outer" difference first, as opposed to her "internal" difference. Consider how your own identification with Linda would have been different. Would it have been lessened or heightened or unaffected?

12

Linda tells us that her first memory was a word that triggered a bitter taste. What word do you think it was and who spoke it? What are the clues that lead you to the word?

13

Is Linda Hammerick a southerner? Is *Bitter in the Mouth* a southern novel? Why or why not?
