

BOTH SOUTHS THAT I'VE KNOWN:

AN INTERVIEW WITH MONIQUE TRUONG

BY KIRSTIN SQUINT, WITH NAHEM YOUSAF
INTRODUCED BY KIRSTIN SQUINT

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARION EITTLINGER



Seven-year-old Monique Truong arrived in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, in 1975. She and her parents were South Vietnamese refugees who had lost their home to war. During the four years her family lived in Boiling Springs, Truong learned to speak English and to endure racism. As part of the only Vietnamese American family in her community, Truong felt the sting of epithets such as “Jap” and “Chink,” and she realized that for some people, she was defined only by her appearance: “I was born in a country where everyone looked like me. . . . Moving to Boiling Springs meant that I was no longer the same person to the rest of the world.”¹ Truong’s family eventually settled in Houston, where she graduated from high school. She received a degree in literature from Yale and a law degree from Columbia Law School. Before becoming a full-time writer, she practiced commercial litigation and intellectual property law for private firms. Truong explains in the interview that follows how her experience as an Asian American in North Carolina formed her identity as an author: “I had a new language, but I also was so ostracized and had become so emotionally awkward and shy that I had few reasons to use it. Language and silence, those two things I think, in one form or another, are at the core of my writing.”²

Truong’s talent as a writer is irrefutable. Her 2003 novel, *The Book of Salt*, was a national bestseller, winner of numerous awards, and described by *Kirkus Reviews* as a “tour de force.”³ The author’s law background clearly undergirds her 2010 novel, *Bitter in the Mouth*, winner of the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, an Honor Book from the Asian Pacific American Libraries Association,

¹ Renee H. Shea, “The Taste of Memory: A Profile of Monique Truong,” *Poets and Writers* Sept–Oct 2010: web; subsequently cited parenthetically.

² After collaborating with Nahem Yousaf on the questions to be asked, Kirstin Squint conducted this interview at the biennial conference of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature, 27 March 2014. The interview was transcribed by NCLR interns Emma Helen Calow and Stephen Aaron Smith, then edited for publication by Kirstin Squint. To avoid distraction, changes for clarity and formatting are not noted in the text.

³ Rev. of *The Book of Salt*, *Kirkus Reviews* 7 Apr. 2003: web.

ABOVE Monique Truong

ABOVE RIGHT 2011 trade paperback edition of Truong’s novel