Skull Valley, Arizona. With no refrigeration or indoor plumbing, a leaky roof, and a well that ran dry every summer, it was not an auspicious beginning for a culinary life. His plucky, non-self-pitying mother, Eloine, like so many women during the Depression, coaxed versatility out of any foodstuffs available. “Her strength lay in a practical and poverty-born sense that there must be more edible food in the world than most people realized” (p.67).

The strongest part of Weston’s book is an ode to this southern-born woman. When his father, a murky, distant figure referred to as “the Dad,” brings home a deer shot out of season, Eloine makes jerky, drying the meat on the tin roof while “the national wolf of starvation scratched at our door” (p.27). When the mile-away grocer will no longer carry the family’s account, Eloine urges them to “scratch around” (p.58). They bring back wild garlic and grapes, black walnuts, elderberries, and crawdads. These gleanings are supplemented by handouts, raids on neighboring farms, government allotments of beans, flour, and rice, and “cheap meat” (offal disguised with gravy) (p.83). “If I recall a boiling pig’s head now and then,” Weston writes, it is simply a “recurring flicker of food memory” (p.23). These foods and foraging are not so unusual in this part of the country, enriched as it is by Native American and Mexican heritage. Eloine’s menus were heavy on biscuits, white gravy, fried chicken, cornbread, oxtail stew—everything drenched in lard. One of her more inventive dishes was “spaghetti and standing egg”—an individual pasta nest, topped with the ubiquitous white gravy, and crowned with a raw egg on the half shell. The challenge was to stir the egg into the spaghetti while still hot so that the egg would scramble.

The family never went without meals, though Eloine scoured some foods that were available in abundance, such as piton nuts, prickly pear fruit, and cactus paddles (reminded her of Indians), squirrel, possum, and catfish (“Nigra foods”) (p.77). Even in poverty there is a hierarchy of acceptable foods. Every midsummer the community-wide Goat Picnic, an оргiastic day- and night-long event featuring pit-roasted cabrito, allowed gorging on all manner of food and drink.

Shortly after Weston’s father died, the family moved to Prescott, where they occupied an upgraded shack with plumbing and refrigeration, and Eloine began experimenting with Mexican dishes. Later, she cooked for long hours in the school lunch program and then at a local café. As compelling as Eloine’s story is, Weston includes only a few of her original recipes, many more of his updated versions, and those he acquired much later in his travels. Toward the end we lose the thread of Eloine’s life entirely as the author recounts coming-of-age stories, sexual-identity conflict, and fictional vignettes that disrupt the heart of his memoir. We gain no sense of closure to Eloine’s life, as if the author couldn’t bear to go there.

By the time The Palace Saloon reopens in Prescott after World War II and serves barbecued mountain lion, we’re a long way from the lineman’s shack. As Weston observes, “Forgotten tastes, like smells, sometimes cross back over the brink of introspection and enliven a buried scene” (p.85). This perhaps explains why the quintessential meal for Weston remains homemade hot biscuits spread with Nucoa and a thick slice of ripe tomato—a lifeline to earlier innocence, youth, and maternal love.

—Linda Murray Berzok, Stephentown, NY

The Marriage of the Sea
Jane Alison
262 pp. $24.00 (cloth)

Two sets of characters contend for our attention in Jane Alison’s second novel, The Marriage of the Sea. Seven people, all artists of one sort or another, interlock to form one set; their lives oscillate between the two cities that constitute the second set. The human characters connect in patterns far more elusive than those that link the places, Venice and New Orleans. Alison’s sensuous prose beautifully evokes two watery worlds, once enriched by water and now at its mercy. Along with her characters we sniff New Orleans’s drenched air, trip on its buckling streets, and shudder at its termite-laden walls, and we wander the calles and squares of Venice’s glorious mud and water, reminded of its transcendent and transient beauty. The sulfurous humidity of the one, the lapping waves and salt-tangy taste of the other, pervade *Marriage of the Sea.*

Impermanence unites the architectural motifs of these threatened cities with the fates of the characters. Most seek their permanence via love. Max, a historian of food, accepts an invitation to teach in New Orleans in order to woo Lucinde, the film location scout who enthralls him. She in turn hides from him, running away to Biloxi and flying off to Venice. Anton, an architect with no permanent job in New Orleans, accepts a teaching stint in Venice, leaving his wife, Josephine, at home to undergo repeated, painful fertility attempts. Lucinde’s friend Vera, a painter, wins a fellowship to Venice and takes up residence in a house owned by Lach, the lover who just dumped her and who is
also in Venice with his new love. Oswaldo, a generation or more older than the others and the only unpaired character, created the foundation that funds Vera's stay and hosts his quasi-adoptive daughter Lucinde in Venice. Too old to believe in the permanence of love, he wants to create memorials of and for himself in a building, which he hires Anton to design, and in a portrait he hires Vera to paint.

_Marriage of the Sea_ constructs its _La Ronde_ of coupling and decoupling between a prologue introducing the cast of characters and a final chapter, appropriately entitled “Carnival,” in which masks slip to reveal new possibilities. Each of the many very brief chapters focuses on the actions and/or thoughts of one individual: Lach’s complacent memories, Max’s delighted exploration of New Orleans, Lucinde’s mirror-gazing self-absorption, Oswaldo’s ruminations on Venice. This includes some wonderfully satisfying passages. With the precision of a master draftsman, Alison limns Josephine’s visits to her fertility specialist—a man unemittingly, almost hatefully, optimistic—and brilliantly evokes the time-warping, bitter blend of hope and fear that follows each attempt. Max creates a Futurist banquet meant to seduce Lucinde’s senses, replete with extravaganzas like Love on the Nile, “a pyramid of sticky dates in a pool of wine [surrounded by] little cubes of mozzarella stuffed with coffee beans and pistachios” and dusted with aphrodisiacal coriander. She doesn’t eat a thing.

But though Jane Alison’s prose yields much pleasure, her approach frustrates as well. Because she chooses not to flesh out her characters’ backgrounds, much remains puzzling, sometimes annoyingly so. What are we to make, for instance, of the barely mentioned drowning of Anton’s father—perhaps an accident, perhaps a suicide—and its impact on him? What about Lucinde’s terror of emotional involvement? It appears to stem from her parents’ having married her off as a child bride to her bankrupted father’s business partner. But that’s our inference, and in any event it does not adequately explain her behavior. Max-the-food-scholar and Anton-the-architect blur into each other; Vera, who is presented almost entirely via Lach’s monstrous selfishness, simply blurs. We are meant to take all of them as gifted and creative people with exceptionally, indeed enviably, interestings themselves. The novel, like some of the unnecessarily elaborate dishes at Max’s Futurist banquet, may be just a bit too self-consciously and artfully inventive, at least for my taste.

—Josephine Woll, Howard University

_The Book of Salt_
Monique Truong
261 pp. $24.00 (cloth)

_Trac 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”— (p.186)_

So notes Alice B. Toklas in her chapter on servants in her eponymous cookbook, _The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook_. Lodged amid recipes imparted to her by servants during her sojourn in Paris at 27 rue de Fleurus with her partner Gertrude Stein are tales about the various cooks who passed through her home in the 1930s. Drawing its inspiration from Toklas’s words is _The Book of Salt_, a first novel by Vietnamese American writer Monique Truong. Thin Binh, Truong’s protagonist, is a composite of two former cooks, Nguyen and Trac, to whom Toklas fleetingly alludes in her chapter on servants. Within and through Toklas’s slippages, Truong paints a portrait of the life of the partly historical, partly fictive Thin Binh, a gay Vietnamese cook who is employed for five years as the live-in cook for Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas.

For Toklas, Trac and Nguyen are merely part of a cast of characters that add color to her recipes. The specifics of their cultural histories, for instance, are frequently contradictory: Trac is referred to interchangeably as Indochinese and Chinese, or Asiatic. Truong works productively within these narratival elisions and with the public’s fascination with the “Steins” to imagine what the life of the live-in cook might be like were he able to describe his intimacy with the goings-on at 27 rue de Fleurus.

The novel begins in Paris’s Gare du Nord with Binh bidding farewell to his employers as they embark on their return to the United States. Through a series of flashbacks to Binh’s days as a young cook in a Vietnam, still under the throes of French colonialism, to his time as a galley hand aboard the Niobe, a freighter that runs between Saigon and Marseilles, through the five years that he spends as the live-in cook for the “Steins,” Monique Truong poignantly evokes the vicissitudes of exile and displacement. Despite its evocative descriptions of food, _The Book of Salt_ is not a work of gastropornography.