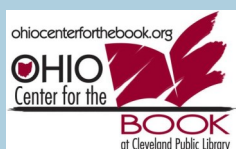


This toolkit is one of the many resources offered by *Get Graphic! with the Ohio Center for the Book at Cleveland Public Library*.

We aim to promote the study of comics in spaces from public libraries to academic institutions and all outside and between.

Toolkit created by the Ohio Center for the Book Scholar-in-Residence, Valentino L. Zullo, Ph.D.



# Get Graphic! Toolkit

## *The Best We Could Do*

### by Thi Bui

## About the Comic

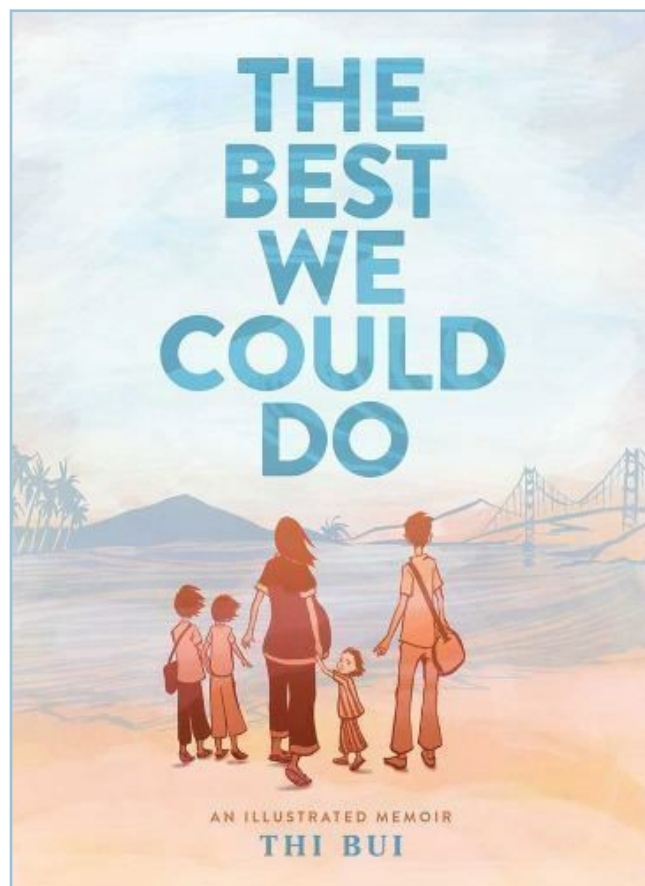
*The Best We Could Do* tells the story of Thi Bui and her family and their experience as refugees in the United States following the end of the Vietnam War and three years in a refugee camp in Malaysia.

Impacted by the violence of war and by identification as “other” because of their refugee status in the US, Bui’s family story became defined by the Vietnam War and its aftermath.

Thi Bui’s graphic memoir documents the trauma of the family living through violence during the Vietnam War which would carry over to their new lives in the United States.

The book explores trauma as a historical experience which can be passed down through family members and then deposited into the next generation.

Aptly titled, *The Best We Could Do* illustrates Bui’s acceptance of her parents’ traumatic origins and the effects it had on her. She confronts feeling the pain of the war, leaving Vietnam and finding new life in a society that did not accept her and her family. Bui’s life began as her parent’s old life was ending. Her memoir documents their pain and her journey to understand and empathize with it as she looks toward her own personal work of stemming the passing down of trauma onto her own child.



# Who is Thi Bui?

Thi Bui was born in Vietnam in 1975 and today is a celebrated Asian-American comics and children's book creator. She is best known for her comic *The Best We Could Do* and her children's books include *A Different Pond* with Bao Phi and *Chicken of the Sea* with Viet Thanh Nguyen. Bui was born in what was then Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City today) three months before the city fell during the Vietnam War. She is part of a group of refugees from Southeast Asia

known as the "Boat People." She initially left Vietnam for Malaysia where she lived in a refugee camp. She was later granted asylum in the United States to where she emigrated in 1978. She currently lives in California.



Figure 1 - *The Best We Could Do*, p. 130

## Context: The Vietnam War

Lasting from November 1, 1955, to the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, the Vietnam War was a conflict that took place in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia and is also known as the *Second Indochina War*, or, in Vietnam, as the *Resistance War Against America* or simply the *American War*. The First Indochina War (or the "French War" in Vietnam) began after the Second World War when France attempted to reoccupy Vietnam after Japan had declared Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos as free. In 1955, war began with the United States although officially the two combatants were North Vietnam and South Vietnam with the United States supporting the latter. While the Vietnam War serves as the backdrop for Bui's story, it is primarily about the dislocation of her family, their resettlement, the lasting effects of trauma, and their new life in the United States. *The Best We Could Do* details the effects of the Vietnam War and the resettlement of refugees after the war. Bui and her family are part of the movement of "Boat People" whose migration was at its highest in 1978 and 1979 but continued through the early 1990s. The significance of Bui's story cannot be overstated. While there are countless films on the subject of the Vietnam War, its aftermath is less represented and, until recently, too often considered from the perspective of those that are not Vietnamese.

# Questions for Discussion

1. *The Best We Could Do* illustrates how trauma is passed down from one generation to the next as evident in Bui's relationship with her father (Fig. 1). How does Bui use the comics form to capture how the shadow of the suffering from the Vietnam War was deposited into her psyche as a child? How does she use the comic to illustrate this psychological experience?
2. Bui only uses one color throughout her book besides black and white. How does color (and shadow) often convey the unspoken feelings of family members or others in the comics? How does Bui use color to express feeling and shared history in her comic?
3. Thi Bui bookends her story with birth of her child and a reflection on his future. Consider the significance of bookending this story about her parents with the story of her child. As Bui says, the birth of her child creates an empathic connection with her mother. How does the comic also succeed in cultivating empathy in the reader?
4. Bui uses chess as a metaphor for war in her story. Chess, like comics, is interested in space and how we occupy space. What parallels can we gather from the game and the comics form that help us to understand her use of this metaphor? How does Bui also utilize this and other games to illustrate the Vietnam War?
5. *The Best We Could Do* is a story about Vietnamese refugees, but Bui's story also asks us to reflect on more current stories of refugees from countries outside of Southeast Asia. How does the comic offer a path for thinking with others about the future of refugees and resettlement?
6. Bui contends with the ways her father's emotional life affected her, but she also explores the ways that her mother's identity which as she says is "too tied up with my opinion of myself" (p. 131). How does the comics form allow Bui to capture these distinct identifications with her parents?
7. Bui's story centers on the discussion of perception—how our perspectives inform how we see. She offers examples as she looks at pictures of her mother alongside an image she drew of her mother at a young age, and then her memory (Fig. 2). She invokes a similar idea when she states "there is no single story of that day, April 30, 1975" (p. 211). How does the comics form ask us to think about differing perceptions and understanding historical events from distinct perspectives?
8. Bui identifies her book as an "illustrated memoir" though it is published by Abrams Comicarts. How does Bui's language ask us to think about the medium of comics? How do we define a book like this which is made up of memoir, documentary, and illustrations of oral history?

# Interviews & Additional Questions

If you want to take this book discussion a step further, you can pair the book with one of the recommended interviews and suggested supplemental questions.

- *Book Dragon: Books for the Diverse Reader*, Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, “The Best We Could Do by Thi Bui + Author Interview [In Bloom],” 2017.  
<http://smithsonianapa.org/bookdragon/best-we-could-do-thi-bui-author-interview-bloom/>
  - In an interview with the Smithsonian, Bui reflects on her family members reading her book. She finally states, “My oldest sister is a psychiatrist, and we talk about the book a lot as a form of therapy.” In response, the interviewer says, “Must be therapeutic for many of your readers, too.”
  - How might the act of creating a story like this be therapeutic? In what ways might the reading experience be therapeutic for readers?
- Sam Inshassi, “Interview with 2018 NBCC Autobiography Finalist Thi Bui,” *The New School Creative Writing*, March 14, 2018.  
<https://newschoolwriting.org/interview-with-2018-nbcc-autobiography-finalist-thi-bui/>
  - Bui reflects on how her comic connects to our current refugee crises: “The refugee camp photo is a thing that a lot of people have, still, like it’s a memento of that time. And it’s very, very real. The thing is, I didn’t want to introduce us with those photos. It was important for me to figure out the exact moment to reveal it. And I think that’s actually what makes it emotional for people—they spent the greater part of the book not seeing refugee photos. That was me thinking about how we encounter refugees today. We see the refugee photos first. We see them on a boat escaping from Syria or looking very impoverished in a refugee camp, and I think while those photos are meant to pull at our heartstrings, they also can divorce the person from their entire history. So you only see that person as a refugee and not the person that they were their whole lives up until that moment.”
  - How does Bui utilize the refugee camp photo to facilitate empathy for her characters and stimulate discussion about refugees?
- Michael Tisserand, “Sweet Revenge: An Interview with Thi Bui,” *The Comics Journal*, October 11, 2017. <http://www.tcj.com/sweet-revenge-an-interview-with-thi-bui/>
  - Thi Bui is critical of the ways that Americans control the story of the Vietnam war. She states, “The primary problem with American narratives about the war is the need to center American experiences in a conflict that was not all about America. So even when Americans go in with the intention of critically examining the United States’ involvement in Viet Nam, they continue to keep the focus on themselves — look how bad we were, the damage we did — not realizing that in continuing to talk over the voices of those who have been heard from less, they continue the damage and prevent people from healing. I was surprised and sad at how easily the Ken Burns documentary overshadowed the work of so many Vietnamese and Vietnamese American writers, filmmakers, and scholars.”
  - How does this story de-center the “American” perspective and allow for a “moving on”?



Figure 2 *The Best We Could Do*, p. 133.

# Scholarship & Additional Questions

If you want to advance your discussion even further, consider pairing the comic with one of following scholarly articles and supplemental questions.

- Sally McWilliams, "Precarious Memories and Affective Relationships in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 22, no. 3 (2019): 315-48.
  - Sally McWilliams discusses how Bui creates a nuanced story, which documents many versions of the Vietnamese experience during the war and after. She argues, "Rather than merely echoing her parents' versions of their lives in Việt Nam and their journey to the United States or projecting her own interpretation of her father's unease and her mother's dissatisfaction in the United States, Thi Bui instead uses the graphic memoir to bridge the affective gaps between her parents and herself, necessitating an empathetic exercise of seeing and apprehending—and viscerally sharing in—their losses of home, comfort, family cohesion, and culture" (p. 318).
  - How does the comics form, and particularly Thi Bui's work, allow for various competing perspectives to be told without contradicting one another? What opportunities does this offer in telling stories of personal experience?
- Harriet, Earle, "A New Face for an Old Fight: Reimagining Vietnam in Vietnamese-American Graphic Memoirs," *Studies in Comics* 9, no. 1 (2018): 87-105.
  - In this essay, Earle discusses how Thi Bui "brings together the landmarks of international and of familial history. But Bui does not shy away from challenging the classic view of the Vietnam War and of the Vietnamese. Her father speaks of General Loan, made infamous in Eddie Adams' 1968 photograph *Saigon Execution*, with ambiguity, leaving Thi trying to decide whether or not her father supported the General's actions. These contradictions trouble her but "so did the oversimplifications and stereotypes in American versions of the war" (p. 96).
  - How does Bui's story offer a nuanced challenge to the story of the Vietnam War, asking us to contend with the contradictory feelings of the Vietnamese who experienced the war?
- Layli Maria Miron, "No Reclaimed Homeland: Thi Bui's Postcolonial Historiography in *The Best We Could Do*," *INKS: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society* 4, no. 1 (2020): 44-65.
  - Miron points to the ways that Bui's comic gives readers an accessible story: "By packaging trauma into a digestible form, these works attract mainstream readers, especially since "minority" memoirs are a hot commodity. The problem is that, even as they humanize, such texts also simplify; readers might mistakenly believe they understand an entire diaspora based on one member's experience." However, "Bui manages both to attract mainstream readers and to explicitly warn them against simplifying a diaspora into a single story. This critical message comes into focus through a lens combining postcolonialism and comics theory" (pp. 47-48).
  - How does Bui use the comic form and its strength in challenging perception to circulate her ideas and critique previous depictions of Vietnamese people, their relationship to the war, and refugees?





Figure 3 *The Best We Could Do*, p. 129.

# Further Supplemental Materials

## Additional resources to supplement this toolkit:

- Asian American Writers' Workshop, June 29, 2017
  - ["The Best We Can Do - Interactive Reading with Thi Bui."](#)
  - ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUb\\_yyAng5M&t](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUb_yyAng5M&t))
- San Francisco Public Library, June 15, 2018
  - ["Thi Bui The Best We Could Do at the San Francisco Public Library."](#)
  - (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuFET6XqaqU&t>)
- California College of the Arts, October 6, 2017
  - ["Raina Telgemeier in Conversation with Thi Bui."](#)
  - ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rV8J7G\\_hzKk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rV8J7G_hzKk))
- NPR, August 1, 2018
  - Mallory Yu, ["Cartoonist Thi Bui Weaves Together Personal and Political History."](#)
  - (<https://www.npr.org/2018/08/01/634606313/cartoonist-thi-bui-weaves-together-personal-and-political-history>)

## Further Reading

### If you are interested in stories about South and Southeast Asian history:

- *Year of the Rabbit* by Tian Veasna (Drawn & Quarterly, 2020).
- *Burmese Moons* by Sophie Ansel and Sam Garcia (IDW Publishing, 2019).
- *Grass* by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim (Drawn & Quarterly, 2019).

### If you are interested in other stories documenting the refugee experience:

- *Vietnamerica* by GB Tran (Villard, 2011).
- *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* by Kate Evans (Verso, 2017).
- *Illegal* by Eoin Colfer, Andrew Donkin and Giovanni Rigano (Sourcebooks, Inc., 2018).

### If you are interested in other autobiographical stories about young women and revolution:

- *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (Pantheon, 2007).
- *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* by Nora Krug (Scribner, 2019).
- *We are On Our Own* by Miriam Katin (Drawn & Quarterly, 2006).