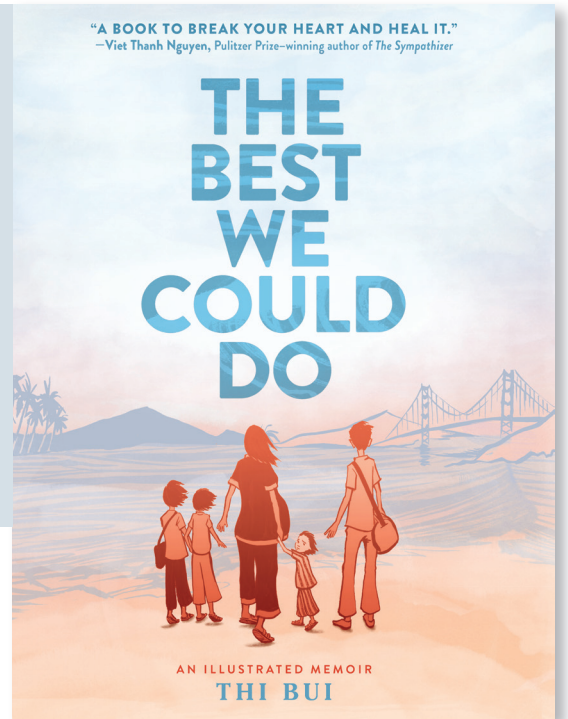


TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE BEST WE COULD DO

BY THI BUI



CURRICULAR RATIONALE

The Best We Could Do addresses identity, displacement and assimilation, race, decolonization, and political and historical movements and their impact on people, with advanced vocabulary, similes, idioms, and historical context and culture. While blending the written word with images, it promotes critical thinking through a coming-of-age memoir laden with issues of cultural and self-identity, and intergenerational trauma and endless sacrifice within a family. Using the graphic novel format, this book serves readers through verbal and visual storytelling that supports multimodal teaching. Primarily told as a memoir, *The Best We Could Do* also includes major historical events. This text is ideal in reading lists in both college and college-preparatory history or English classes. The intent of this brief guide is to provide flexible teaching options that educators can adapt to their needs and those of their students.

About the Author

Thi Bui was born in Việt Nam and came to the United States as a child with her family. They were part of the “boat people” wave of Southeast Asian refugees. She studied art and legal studies and thought about becoming a civil rights lawyer, but became a public school teacher instead. Bui lives in Berkeley, California, with her son, her husband, and her mother. *The Best We Could Do* is her debut graphic novel.



As you Read: A Pronunciation Guide

Some of the names and words that appear in this story may be unfamiliar to students. Please visit www.abramsbooks.com/thebestwecoulddo for a list of approximately 100 names and terms in Vietnamese, French, and Malay, along with recordings of their appropriate pronunciations.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Good, Better, Best

What is the difference between these three words: good, better, and best? Why might the author have chosen the latter word as part of the title? What is the significance of the verb tense? Who do you think is implied by “we” in the title, *The Best We Could Do*?

Family

How do you define a family? What are the bonds that make up your family? Who are the people you would go to for help if you were ever in trouble?

Historical Events

The author references events in the world as she describes her family members’ lives: France surrendering to Nazi Germany (p. 102), U.S. dropping atomic bombs (p. 115), First Indochina War (p. 157), Geneva Accords (p. 167), Vietnam War (p. 200), Fall of Sài Gòn/Liberation Day (p. 211), and Vietnamese boat people exodus (p. 267) are a few examples. In groups or individually, research these topics and make a rough timeline; include a short description of each event.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

On Family

“Family is now something I have created and not just something I was born into” (p. 21). What does the author mean by this statement? What is the difference between “created” and “born into”? What is similar?

Bô’ states, “You don’t have a sister named Bích anymore. She is dead to us” (p. 27). What events caused Bô’ to say this about his daughter? If you were Thi or Tâm, how would you interpret this statement?

In the set of panels on page 28, the family avoided ever talking about the incident to the point that Má thought that Thi didn’t remember. Thi exclaims, “I was there! How do you think I could forget something like that? Almost thirty years later, I didn’t know I was still angry.” Why would this memory still make Thi angry? How would you feel if you were Thi? What might cause a family to avoid discussing a difficult situation?

On page 29, the author draws portraits of her parents and siblings. In the second panel, Quỳn and Tha’ are shadows. What was the artist’s purpose for blurring these two siblings? Was it effective to use an image instead of words? Explain.

The author desires to be closer to her parents as an adult and realizes “proximity and closeness are not the same” (p. 31). What is your definition of proximity? Closeness? How do these two words differ? Which of the two words would you rather use to describe your relationship with your parents?

The births of the six siblings are told in reverse chronological order (pp. 42, 46, 47, 48, 50, and 52). What was the author’s purpose in using this storytelling element? Is it effective?

“Home became the holding pen for the frustrations and the unexorcised demons that had nowhere to go in America’s finest city” (p. 68). “In my sleep, I dreamt of how terrible it would be to not find my way home” (p. 83). “And then I came home to a tiny hovel” (p. 186). “My parents built their bubble around us—our home in America” (p. 294). What does home mean to Thi and her family members? Does her definition of home change as the story progresses? How? What does home mean to you? What is the difference between a home and a house?

On Culture and Identity

“And imagine each block, each day turned us a little more American” (pp. 65). “I learned about America mostly through books and TV, and from what my sisters learned in school” (p. 67). If you were going to mentor a new classmate from another country, how would you share and explain what it means to be “a little more American” to your new classmate? What books, television shows, or other media would you use to demonstrate your ideas? What elements in your everyday environment shape your national or cultural identity?

Examine the panels where someone spits on Bô’ on page 67. What is meant by “there were reasons to not want to be anything other?” How would you have reacted if you were Bô’? How would you react if you saw someone spit on another person? What might motivate one person to react to another in that way? Can you think of similar hateful actions and tensions you’ve seen or read about throughout history or on the news?

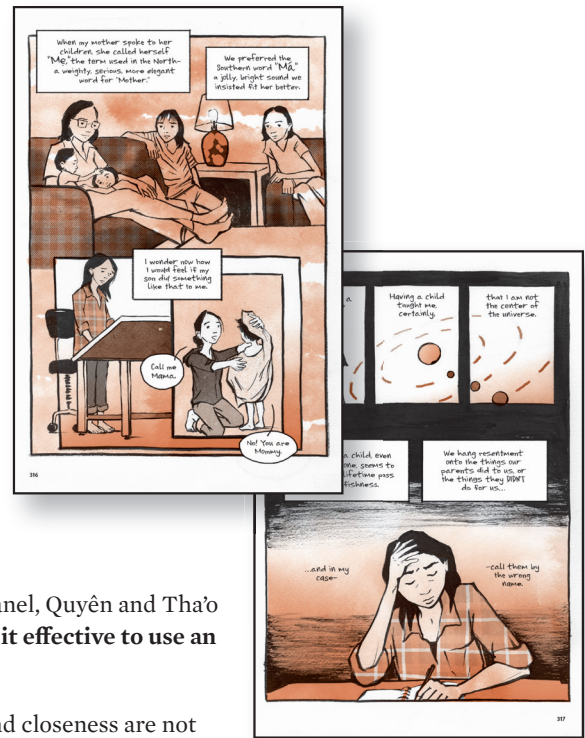
On page 187, Bô’ reminisces about the books, music, and movies that influenced him as a teenager. Compare his influences with your own. How have your tastes shaped you as a person?

“Don’t be such a REFUGEE!” (p. 285). What is meant by this comment? When you hear the word “refugee,” what do you think of? How do perceptions of refugees affect their experience?

What is the difference between leaving a country voluntarily and being forced to leave your homeland? What are some positive and negative effects of a dislocation?

When Thi and her siblings go to school (day care, elementary and middle schools), all three are treated differently (p. 287). Explore how Bích, Lan, and Thi could have been more supported by their peers and teachers.

How did French colonialism influence Thi’s parents while they were growing up? Cite specific examples from the book that show that impact. How might a French colonist’s description of this influence differ from a Vietnamese nationalist’s?



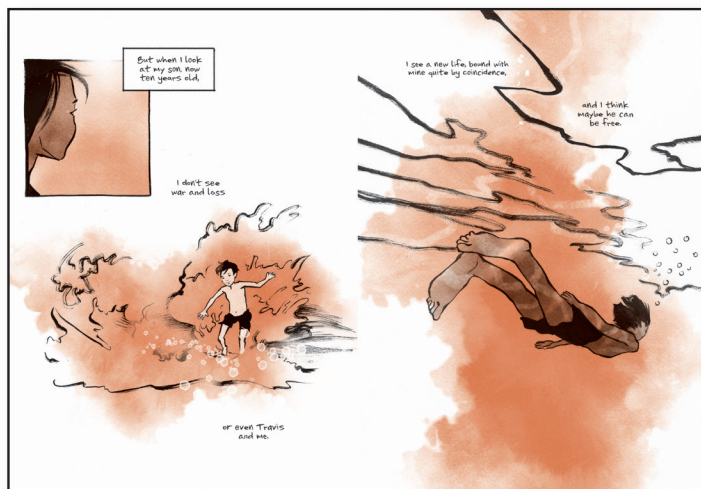
On **page 41**, Bui states that she was seeking “an origin story . . . that will set everything right.” **Does she find what she was looking for in the pages of this book? Why or why not?**

On War and Conflict

Using specific examples from the book, how did class differences affect people’s experience of war and their decisions about which side to take?

How did certain features of geographic location affect people’s experience of war? Cite specific examples from the book.

As explored throughout the book, war can have immediate and lasting impacts on the people experiencing it. Find specific examples in the book that show the direct or implied impact of war on children and families.



What factors contributed to Thi’s parents’ decision to leave Việt Nam after the war ended? What would you have done in their place?

Describe the various authorities that the Buis encounter during their refugee experience. **Who are they and from where do they derive their power to make decisions about refugees? Consider our national discussion on refugees today. How is it similar to the Buis’ experience? How does it differ?**

On History

Page 66 refers to California’s Proposition 187, which voters passed in 1994 but was subsequently struck down in a federal court. **What were the arguments for and against this law? What similarities do you see to debates today on immigration?**

“I had never, before researching the background of my father’s stories, imagined that these horrible events were connected to my family history” (p. 116). **How would you feel if you were Thi? What historical events are tied to your own family history? How and when did you learn about them?**

What factors contributed to Bô’s decision to leave North Việt Nam in 1954? Cite specific events and context clues from the book. What would you have done if you were in his position?

Examine the four panels on **pages 128 and 129**, and the quote “I had no idea that the terror I felt was only the long shadow of his own” (p. 129). Compare Bô’s upbringing in Việt Nam to Thi’s upbringing in San Diego. **How are they similar? Different? What is meant by Thi’s quote? How is trauma passed down between generations?**

Thi’s family escapes to Việt Nam on a boat bound for Malaysia. They face many hardships—little food (p. 235), tight sleeping arrangements (p. 236), possible pirates (p. 242), bad potable water (p. 244), etc. **If you were aboard a boat headed toward freedom, what five items would you want to bring on the boat to survive? What would you have to leave behind?** Share your list of items with a partner, and then narrow your list to three items for the two of you. **What similar stories of escape have you read about throughout history or on the news?**

On **page 267**, Bui incorporates her family’s real refugee camp identification photographs into the graphics. **What was Bui’s intention in doing so? Was it effective?** Find another page where real photographs could enhance the storyline.

In **Chapter 6**, Bui suggests that she is making up for not having memories of her own by doing a lot of research. **What is the difference between personal knowledge and relying on secondary sources? What can be gained from interviewing primary sources? What could be tricky about interviewing primary sources?**

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES AND RESOURCES

Family History

“I began to record our family history . . . thinking that if I bridged the gap between the past and the present, I could fill the void between my parents and me” (p. 36). Explore your family history. Find out about your ancestry by interviewing family members. Ask your parents or other family members about their courtship stories. How did they meet? Where did previous generations come from or move to? What did they hope for? What challenges did they encounter in raising a new generation? List family members and important dates.

Gender Roles

Consider the perspectives of the women in the stories of Thi's parents and grandparents. Retell a story from their point of view. Cite specific examples from the book to support your retelling.

Graphic Novels

Have you read other graphic novels? How did those graphic novels compare to *The Best We Could Do* in how they told a story? Visually speaking, what elements appealed to you in this graphic memoir? Share a particular layout or panel that best demonstrated these features. How do you think the graphic novel format of this memoir affected its message and potency?

Literary Scavenger Hunt

Throughout *The Best We Could Do*, Bui infuses her story with rich, figurative language and beautiful panels. Embark on a literary scavenger hunt to locate your favorite phrases or quotes. Create a shareable quote card image to be published on the social media site of your choice (remember to attribute appropriately).

Finding and Using Related Sources

Compare and contrast the ways in which Vietnamese people are represented in different accounts, fiction and nonfiction, of the Việt Nam War. What factors could affect these differences?

Create a timeline of Việt Nam's transition from feudalism to colonialism to nationalism to full independence. Use online research to find dates. Select key moments from the book and plot them on your timeline. How does your relationship with the characters affect your understanding of the history?

Pages 205-209 discuss Nguyễn Ngọc Loan, the former chief of National Police in South Việt Nam, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of him, titled, "Saigon Execution." Why is Thi confused about what her father thinks of him? Compare the accounts in this book with other descriptions of the photograph or the incident. How does one's perspective influence one's opinion about what the photograph represents?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Below are the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards that can be met by extending *The Best We Could Do* with these questions, prompts, and activities.



CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.3

Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9

Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3

Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.6

Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8

Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1, 9-10.2, 9-10.3 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1, 11-12.2, 11-12.3

Key ideas and details: Citing textual evidence, determining a theme or central idea, describing how a plot unfolds, analyzing how particular elements of the story interact; analyzing how particular lines of dialogue or incidents of a text reveal aspects of a character or provoke a decision; and analyzing how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4, 9-10.5, 9-10.6 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4, 11-12.5, 11-12.6

Craft and structure: Determining the meaning of words and phrases including figurative and connotative meaning; analyzing how particular sentences, chapters, scenes, or stanzas fit into the overall structure of a text; explaining how a point of view is developed; analyzing how a text's structure or form contributes to its meaning; analyzing a particular point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.9 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9

Integration of knowledge and ideas: Comparing and contrasting texts; distinguishing among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text; analyzing how a modern work of fiction draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, or religious works describing how the material is rendered new; analyzing how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific way.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.10 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.10

Range of reading and level of text complexity: Reading and comprehending literature, including stories, dramas, and poems; in the grades 6-8 and in the grades 9-10, text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range, with independence and proficiency.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.3 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.3

Knowledge of language: Using knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening; applying knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.4, 9-10.5, 9-10.6 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.4, 11-12.5, 11-12.6

Vocabulary acquisition and use: Determining the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases; demonstrating understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings; and acquiring and using accurately grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific words and phrases.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1

Comprehension and collaboration: Engaging effectively in a range of collaborative discussions building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4 / CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4

Presentation of knowledge and ideas: Presenting claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details to accentuate main ideas or themes.

This guide was created by Gregory Lum, Library Director at Jesuit High School in Portland, Oregon, and an adjunct instructor at Portland State University, along with author Thi Bui.

Instructors: Enjoyed using this guide, or have feedback for us? Please take our brief 5-minute survey to help us improve our guides: <http://bit.ly/ABRAMSTeachingGuides>