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## Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

### **The Best We Could Do** by Thi Bui

#### Summary

*The Best We Could Do*, the debut graphic novel memoir by Thi Bui, is an intimate look at one family's journey from their war-torn home in Vietnam to their new lives in America. Exploring the anguish of immigration and the lasting effects that displacement has on a child and her family, Bui documents the story of her family's daring escape after the fall of South Vietnam in the 1970s and the difficulties they faced building new lives for themselves. At the heart of Bui's story is a universal struggle: While adjusting to life as a first-time mother, she ultimately discovers what it means to be a parent — the endless sacrifices, the unnoticed gestures, and the depths of unspoken love. Despite how impossible it seems to take on the simultaneous roles of both parent and child, Bui pushes through.

With haunting, poetic writing and breathtaking art, she examines the strength of family, the importance of identity, and the meaning of home. *The Best We Could Do* brings to life her journey of understanding and provides inspiration to all who search for a better future while longing for a simpler past.

#### Discussion Questions

1. In the preface to the book, Bui notes that *The Best We Could Do* originally began as a project of transcribing her family's "oral histories." What is lost and what is gained by transforming an oral history into a written one? If you were to begin a record of your own family's histories, how might you choose to begin?
2. The title of the book first appears in the narrative on p. 55, a page titled "Hôpital Grall, September 1965." What is the impact of its placement there? Does this context change your reading of the title? How does the phrase resonate with new or different meanings throughout the book? Who do you think is included in the "We"?
3. Bui uses a variety of visual techniques throughout the book to emphasize dialogue, to switch perspectives, to move from place to place or to convey a sense of emotion. Can you think of a page in the book that you found particularly compelling? Why did this page appeal to you? What visual elements stand out? How do they shape your understanding of what's happening?
4. Throughout the book, time moves fluidly between past and present, often changing in the space between panels or pages. Choose a page in the book and consider the composition of the page.

How much time is passing between panels? Does that passage of time stay constant across the page? What might change about this page if it was told as an oral history? As a written one?

5. *The Best We Could Do* spans several decades and three generations. How does Bui convey the passing of time? How does she convey memory? How does she identify speakers or storytellers?
6. In an interview with *The Mary Sue*, Bui spoke about her choices of color in the book. “I tried out blue, but I felt like there’s a certain kind of blue that just reads as graphic novel blue. Also, it didn’t work with the way the story felt with me so I tried a few different shades of brown and I finally found just the right shade.” What did you think of Bui’s choice of brown? How do you think it affected your reading experience? Did you notice anything about the ways Bui used color or shading to evoke a scene? Can you think of any colors in your own life that evoke clear associations or emotions?
7. When visiting her family's old apartment in Sài Gòn as an adult, the author finds herself “documenting in lieu of remembering” (p. 180). What do you think is the difference between “documenting” and “remembering”? Which do you think the book is doing?
8. Throughout the book, language plays a major role: whether the colonial French language taught to Bui’s parents in school, the Vietnamese language of her birth, the Malay language spoken at the refugee camp in Pulau Besar, or the English language in which the book is primarily written. In what ways does this multilingualism affect your experience as a reader? Why do you think Bui chose to translate certain moments in the text to English, while leaving others untranslated? How would you describe your own relationship to the language or languages that you speak?
9. Bui presents the births of the six siblings in reverse chronological order (p. 42, 46, 47, 48, 50, and 52). Why do you think she did this? As a storytelling technique, do you think it was effective?
10. *The Best We Could Do* opens with a timeline of the history of Việt Nam, focusing on the period of war from 1945 to 1975. Why do you think the author chose to preface the book with a timeline? Are there any dates on the timeline that are referenced in the book? Can you point to those moments?
11. Birth and pregnancy play a prominent role throughout the book, which begins and ends with the birth of Bui’s son. “It was important for me to bookend this story with a very typical experience, a pretty universal and archetypal entryway,” Bui shared in an interview with *Brooklyn Magazine*. “Physical experiences have always been humbling experiences because they put you back in your body and help you connect with other people.” Did you find the opening scenes to be effective in this way? Can you point to any other moments of the book where physical experiences are used to “put you back in your body,” or to ground the reader? Were they effective?
12. Over the course of the book, there is only one moment when Bui incorporates real photos (of her family at a UN refugee camp in Malaysia, p. 267). Why do you think she chose to use real

photos here? After spending the greater part of the book without the incorporation of photos or found documents, what is their effect?

13. At the end of the book, Bui writes: “But when I look at my son, now ten years old, I don’t see war and loss...or even Travis and me. I see a new life, bound with mine, quite by coincidence, and I think maybe he can be free” (328-329). How does Bui’s relationship with her son change over the course of the book? What about her relationship with her parents? How does her understanding of parenthood change? Her understanding of childhood?

Summary from [www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com).

Discussion Questions from National Endowment for the Arts