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THE BEST WE COULD DO

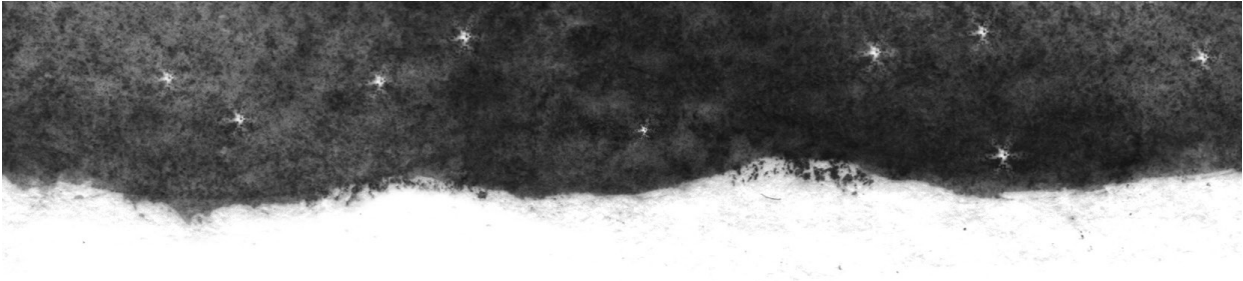
by Thi Bui





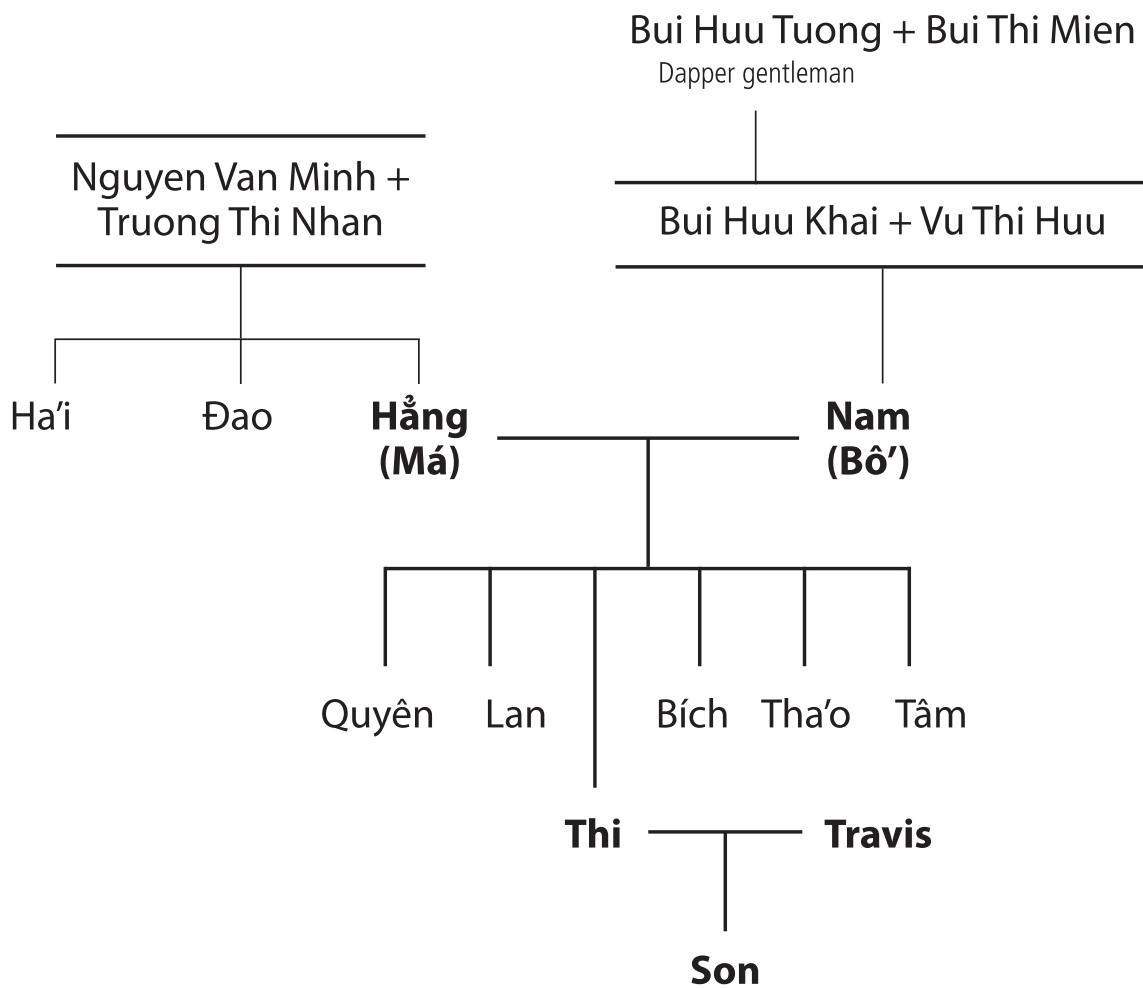
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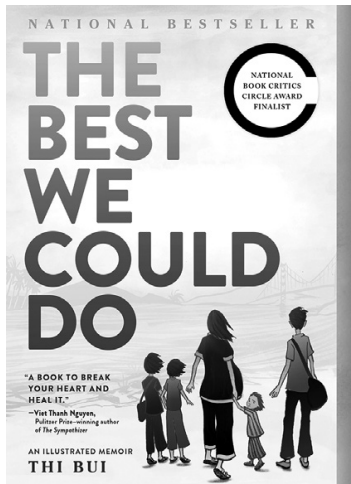


Bui Family Tree

Mentioned in *The Best We Could Do*



about **the book**



***The Best We Could Do*, by Thi Bui (Abrams ComicArts)**

The Best We Could Do is a haunting memoir about the search for a better future and a longing for a simpler past. Thi Bui documents her family's daring escape after the fall of South Vietnam in the 1970s and the difficulties they faced building new lives for themselves in America.

As the child of a country and a war she can't remember, Bui's dreamlike artwork brings to life her journey to understanding her own identity in a way that only comics can.

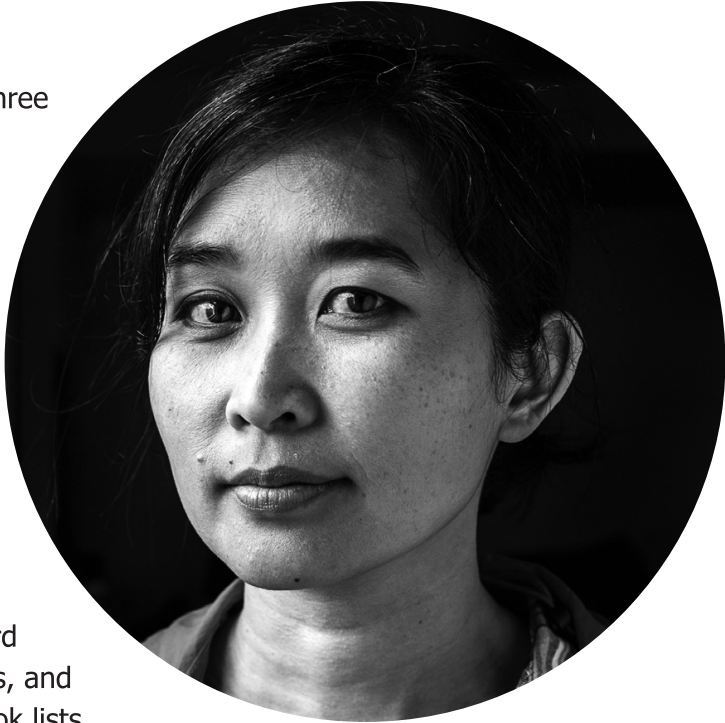
The Best We Could Do has made a place for itself in the graphic novel canon and has received five star reviews from Publishers Weekly, Booklist, Library Journal, School Library Journal, and Shelf Awareness. It was also nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award in the autobiography category and made it onto over thirty "Best of 2017" lists everywhere from the *Washington Post* to *Entertainment Weekly*.



about **the author**

About Thi Bui:

Thi Bui was born in Vietnam three months before the end of the Vietnam War, and came to the United States in 1978 as part of the “boat people” wave of refugees from Southeast Asia. Her debut graphic memoir, ***The Best We Could Do*** (Abrams ComicArts, 2017), has been selected as UCLA’s Common Book for 2017, a National Book Critics Circle finalist in autobiography, an Eisner Award finalist in Reality Based Comics, and made several Best of 2017 book lists, including Bill Gates’s top five picks. Bui is also the Caldecott Honor-winning illustrator of *A Different Pond*, a picture book by the poet Bao Phi (Capstone, 2017). Her short comics can be found online at the Nib, PEN America, and BOOM California.



Bui taught high school in New York City and was a founding teacher of Oakland International High School, the first public high school in California for recent immigrants and English learners. Since 2015, she has been a faculty member of the MFA in Comics program at the California College of the Arts. Thi Bui lives in the Bay Area.

You can find a pronunciation guide at www.abramsbooks.com/thebestwecoulddo

schedule of **events**

Thi Bui will visit Seattle April 13-16, 2019.

Thi Bui discusses *The Best We Could Do*

7:30 p.m. Saturday, April 13

Central Library
1000 Fourth Ave.

1:30 p.m. Sunday, April 14

Northgate Community Center
10510 5th Ave N.E.

7 p.m. Sunday, April 14

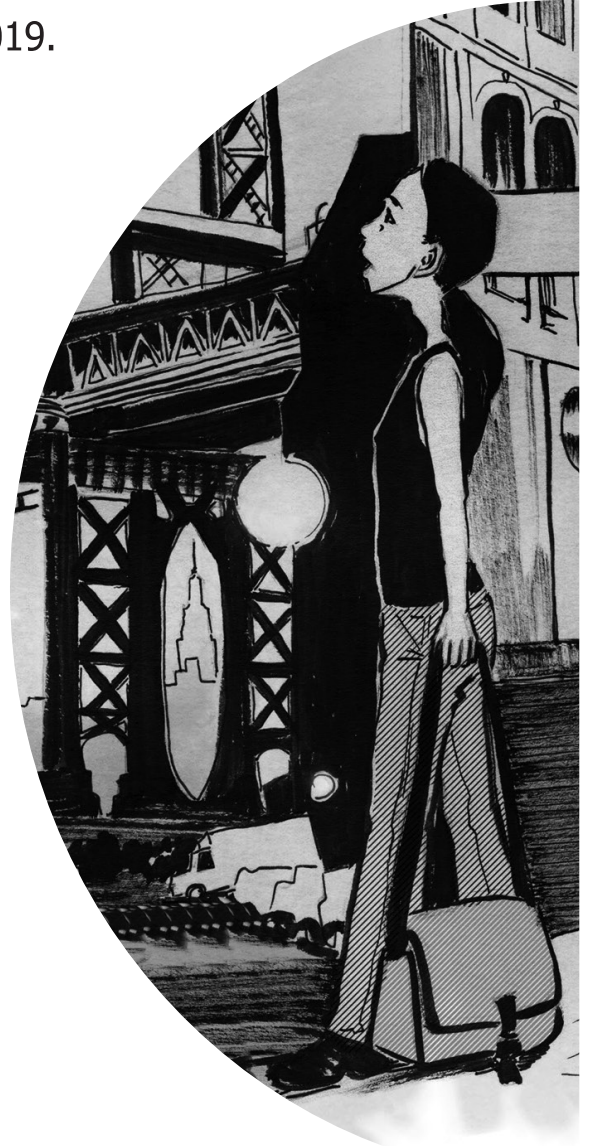
Centilia Cultural Center
1660 S. Roberto Maestas Festival St.

7 p.m. Monday, April 15

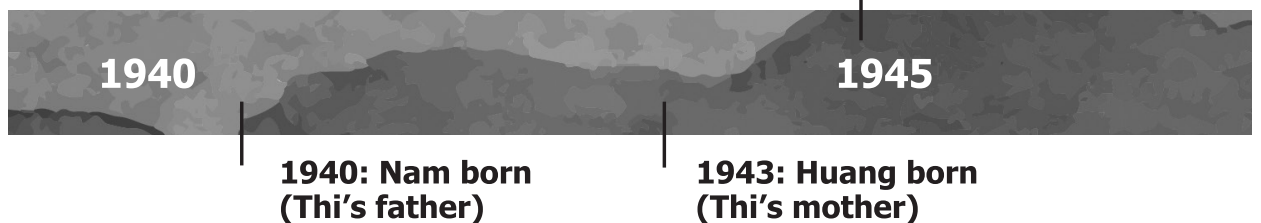
Greenwood Branch
8016 Greenwood Ave N.

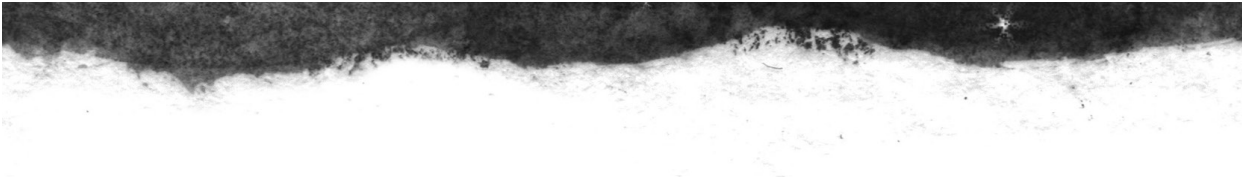
6:30 p.m. Tuesday, April 16

Asian Counseling and Referral Service
3639 Martin Luther King Jr. Way S.



The Best We Could Do **Historical Timeline**





**Reading Group with
Vietnamese Friendship Association**

6:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 10
Columbia Branch
4721 Rainier Ave. S.

**Reading Group with
Northwest African American Museum**

6 p.m. Thursday, April 7
Northwest African American Museum
2300 S. Massachusetts St.

1945: Hồ Chí Minh proclaims
a free Republic of Vietnam

1946: First Indochina
War begins



**1945: Nam's mother
disappears**

book groups



2019 Book Groups at The Seattle Public Library

Join us for a discussion of
The Best We Could Do. Books
and program guides are available at the
hosting Library.

Central Library Low Vision Readers Group

Noon Tuesday, April 9
Level 4, Meeting Room 5

Ballard Morning Group

10:30 a.m. Friday, April 19

Ballard Evening Group

6:45 p.m. Tuesday, April 16

Beacon Hill

6:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 17

Broadview Afternoon Group

3:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 17

Broadview Evening Group

6:30 p.m. Monday, March 11

Capitol Hill

6:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 17

Columbia

6:30 p.m. Wednesday, April 10

Fremont

6:30 p.m. Tuesday, April 9

Green Lake

3:30 p.m. Wednesday, March 13

Greenwood Afternoon Book Group

2 p.m. Friday, June 28

Greenwood Evening Book Group

6:30 p.m. Tuesday, April 9

High Point

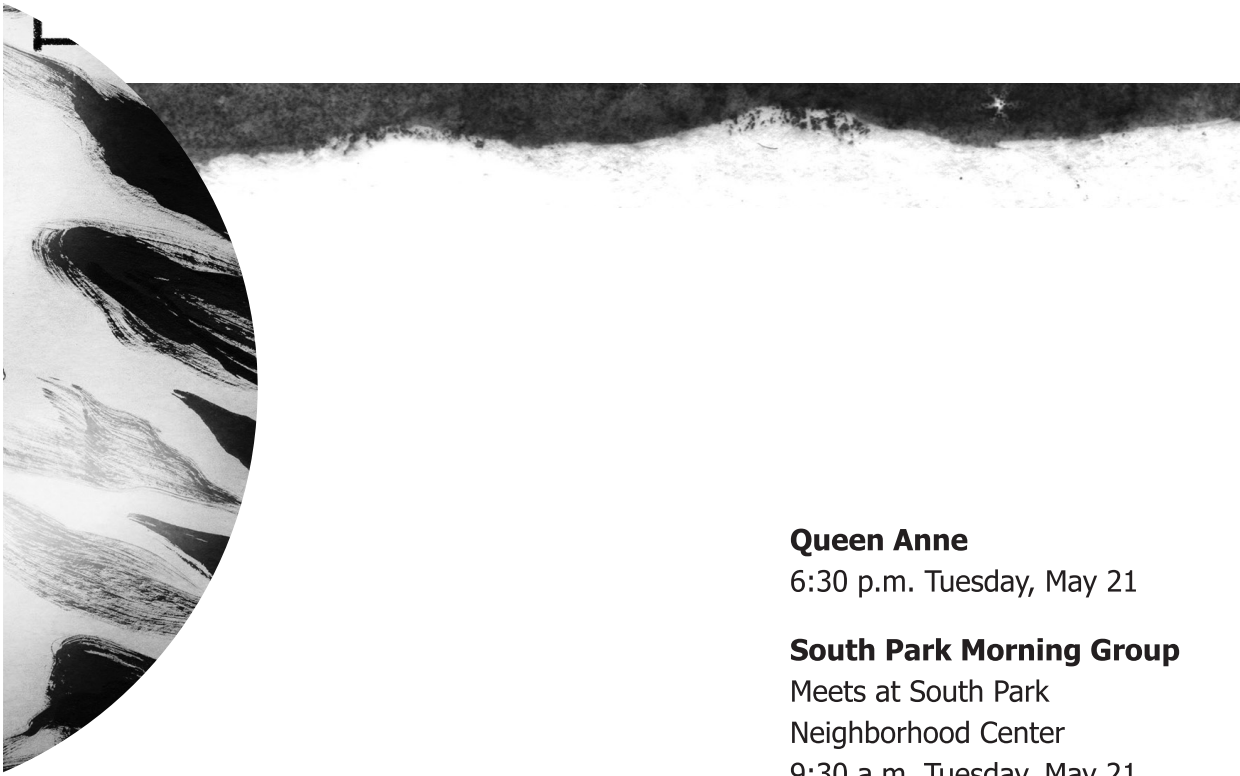
6:30 p.m. Tuesday, April 16

1954: Battle of Điện Biên Phủ
(March – May) [ends First
Indochina War]

1954: Geneva Accords and
the partitioning of Vietnam

1956: South Vietnamese
President Ngô Đình Diệm
cancels national elections

1954



Lake City

1 p.m. Wednesday, April 17

Magnolia Afternoon Group

2 p.m. Thursday, April 18

Magnolia Evening Group

6:30 p.m. Monday, April 8

Montlake

6:30 p.m. Tuesday, April 16

Northeast Evening Group

6:30 p.m. Tuesday, April 9

Northeast Seniors Group

10 a.m. Friday, April 19

Queen Anne

6:30 p.m. Tuesday, May 21

South Park Morning Group

Meets at South Park
Neighborhood Center

9:30 a.m. Tuesday, May 21

South Park Evening Group

Meets at South Park
Neighborhood Center

6:30 p.m. Wednesday, May 15

**Southwest Hot Topics
for Seniors Group**

Noon Wednesday, April 3

University

6:30 p.m. Monday, April 15

Wallingford

6:45 p.m. Tuesday, April 9

West Seattle

6:45 p.m. Monday, April 8

1961: U.S. sends 400 military
advisors to South Vietnam

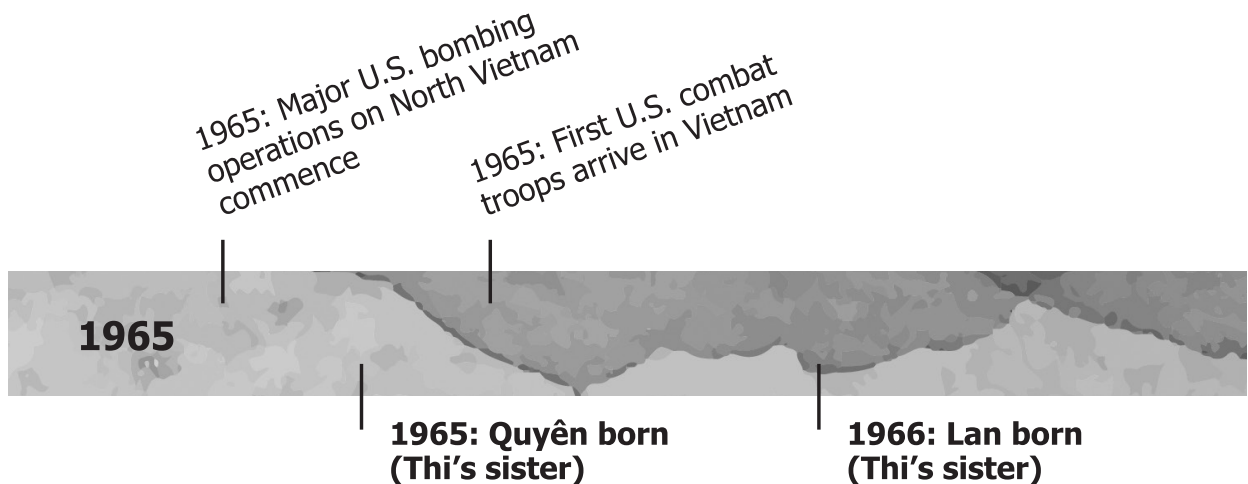
1964: Gulf of
Tonkin Resolution

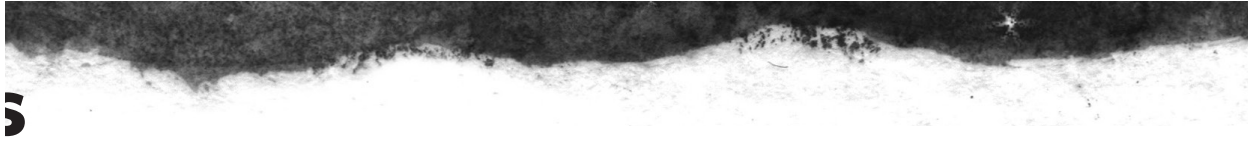
1960

1962: Nam and Huang
meet at Teachers College

suggested **discussion questions**

1. How do Bui's art and the graphic memoir format frame your reading experience?
2. Why do you think Bui chose to mostly limit color to red-orange ink washes? What work does the color perform in setting the scene and telling the story Bui wants to tell? How does Bui's use of limited color guide the reader through the narrative? What themes arise and are reinforced through Bui's use of color?
3. Early in the book, Bui says, "Family is now something I have created and not just something I was born into." (p. 21) What about being a parent and creating her own family makes Bui see her parents in a different light? How do family dynamics change when new family members enter the fold? Why, for instance, do you think Má speaks more openly about her past with Bui's husband?
4. In moving back to California to be closer to her parents, Bui realizes "proximity and closeness are not the same" (p. 31). How is a feeling of closeness cultivated? Why can it be so hard for family relationships to change?
5. This memoir explores themes of belonging and otherness. What creates a sense of belonging in a culture? What are the ways in which members of the Bui family were made to feel "other" in America? How do they adjust to their new home? What obstacles do they face?
6. How does the Bui family's experiences as refugees illuminate your understanding of the refugee experience?
7. Four siblings in the Bui family survived, but Má lost two children. Bui writes: "Lan, like me, was a replacement" (pg. 50). How does this memoir explore the effects of grief and loss?





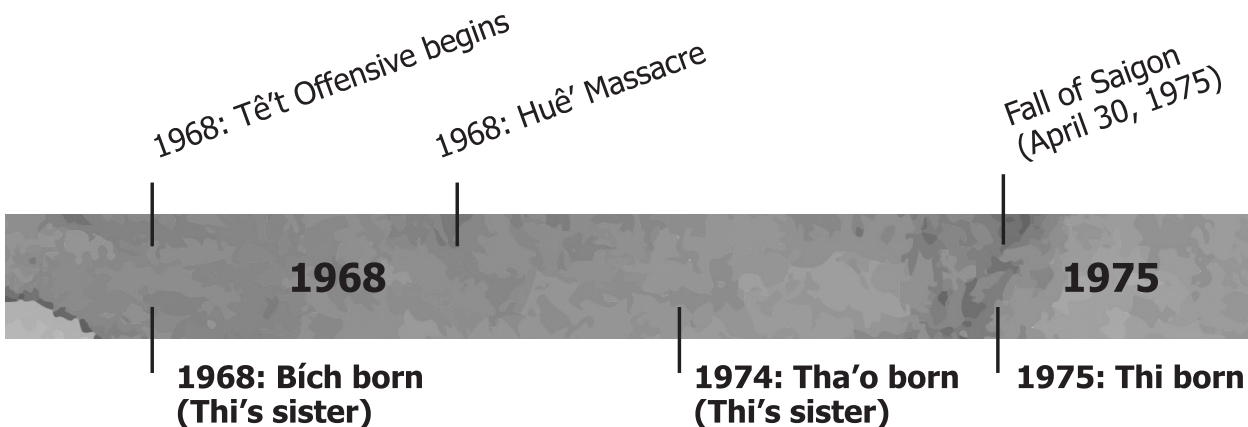
8. Bui describes her father’s moodiness and frightening stories, and the terror she felt “was only the long shadow of his own” (pg. 129). Do you think Bô’ was aware of the emotional worlds of his children or that his stories scared them? How did grief and loss affect him?

9. Bui is determined to learn more about her family’s history and her parents’ pasts. Why do you think her parents did not share their histories in Vietnam with their children? How do trauma and the effects of war and displacement affect families? How does Bui break through the silence to uncover these stories?

10. How did reading *The Best We Could Do* change your knowledge and understanding of the Vietnam War? Has it changed your view of French and American involvement?

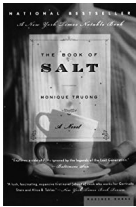
11. How does media representation shape your understanding of conflict? (For reference, see p. 206).

12. How does the use of photographs affect your understanding of the characters? Do the photographs read as a more real reproduction of these individuals than drawings? Considering how many material objects Bui’s family has lost, and the importance the family places on official documents, does the fact that these photographs are official documents the family has saved influence how we interpret their use on the page?



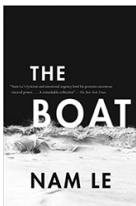
suggested **further reading**

SUGGESTED READING FROM THE VIETNAMESE FRIENDSHIP ASSOCIATION



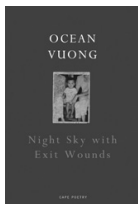
The Book of Salt by Monique Truong

While searching for his own place in the world, Binh, the cook employed by Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas glimpses the dark nightlife of 1930s Paris.



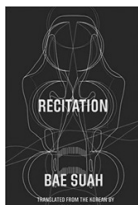
The Boat: Stories by Nam Le

A collection of seven stories that explore the world from Colombia to Iowa City to Tehran, and examine what it means to be human.



Night Sky With Exit Wounds by Ocean Vuong

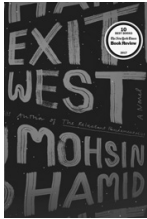
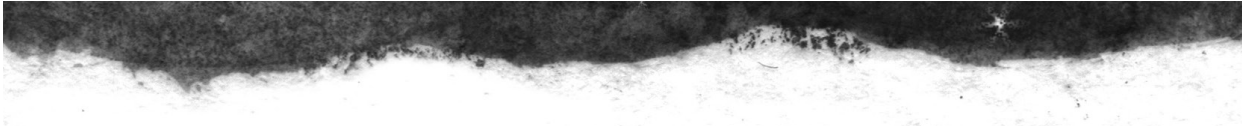
Winner of the 2017 T.S. Eliot Prize, this debut poetry collection was said to “capture specific moments in time with both photographic clarity and a sense of the evanescence of all earthly things.” (Michiko Kakutani, The New York Times)



Recitation by ***Bae Suah***, translated by Deborah Smith

A meeting between a group of emigrants and a mysterious, wandering actress in an empty train station sets the stage for this fragmentary yet lyrical meditation on language, travel, and memory by South Korea’s most prominent contemporary female author.

1978



Exit West by Mohsin Hamid

Winner of 2018 Los Angeles Times Book Prize (Fiction) and The Aspen Words Literary Prize, this astonishingly visionary love story imagines the forces that drive ordinary people from their homes into the uncertain embrace of new lands.

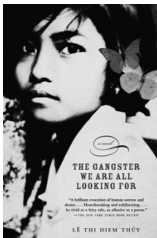
About the Vietnamese Friendship Association:

The Vietnamese Friendship Association (VFA) was born in the 1970s in the wake of the war in Vietnam. As the Vietnamese community grew, so did VFA. Today, VFA works to whole-heartedly serve the immigrant and refugee community who continue to bring new waves of hope and resilience. Their mission is to work with refugee and immigrant communities experiencing educational inequities. For more information please visit vfaseattle.org



suggested **further reading**

SUGGESTED READING FROM THE SEATTLE PUBLIC LIBRARY



The Gangster We Are All Looking For

by Thi Diem Thuy Le

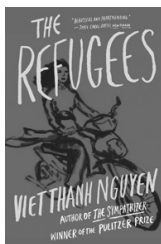
A debut novel that captures a Vietnamese refugee family's acculturation in San Diego through the eyes of a girl who arrives at the age of six and navigates a new culture and parents haunted by war and loss.



The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears

by Dinaw Mengestu

Sepha Stephano, who fled the Ethiopian Revolution for a new start in the U.S., runs a failing grocery, his only companions two fellow African immigrants who share his bitter nostalgia and longing for home. This was the 2008 Seattle Reads selection.



The Refugees by Viet Thanh Nguyen

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his debut novel, *The Sympathizer*, this collection of stories delves into the lives of Vietnamese Americans in California with deft nuance and insight and explores themes of immigration, memory and connection.

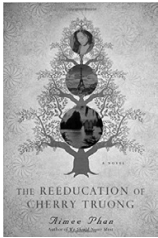
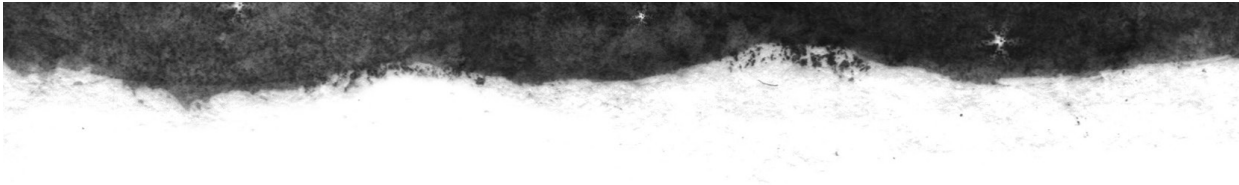
2000

1999: Thi and Travis
move to NYC

2005

2001: Thi and family
visit Vietnam

2005: Thi's son
born (November)



The Reeducation of Cherry Truong by Aimee Phan
After her brother is sent to live with relatives in Vietnam, Cherry is intent to bring him back to the U.S. in a journey that uncovers hidden relationships, desperate choices, and the human consequences of war for three generations of their family.



Ru by Kim Thúy, translated by Nigel Spencer
In spare and beautiful writing, Thuy reveals the story of a woman, born in Saigon, who survived the war and emigrates to Quebec. Winner of Canada's Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction and the Canada Reads Prize. Translated from French.

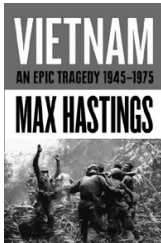
2017

2006: Thi and Travis move
back to California

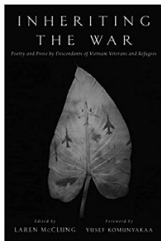
2017: Thi publishes
The Best We Could Do

suggested **further reading**

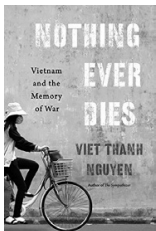
SUGGESTED NONFICTION READING FROM THE SEATTLE PUBLIC LIBRARY



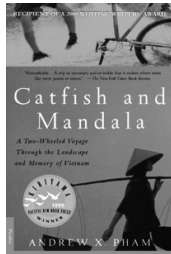
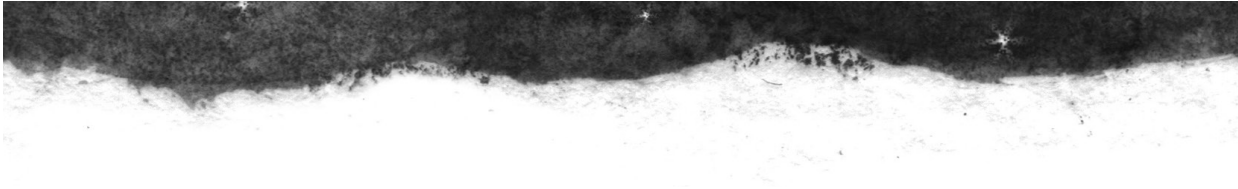
Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975 by Max Hastings
Weaving political and military history with interviews and personal accounts from all sides, this new history by a British historian who also served as foreign correspondent during the war emphasizes the tragic Vietnamese perspectives in the three-decade struggle for the country.



Inheriting the War: Poetry and Prose
by Descendants of Vietnam Veterans and Refugees
Fifty years later, the Vietnam War continues to haunt the next generation. Written by the children of refugees and veterans, the pieces in this anthology confront the complicated aftermath and intercultural and generational effects of the war.



Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War
by Viet Thanh Nguyen
The author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Sympathizer* explores the differing ways in which Americans and Vietnamese—as well as Laotians, Cambodians, Hmong, and Koreans—have collectively remembered the Vietnam War, especially in the arts, and considers the ethical implications of how we remember.



Catfish and Mandala: A Two-wheeled Voyage through the Landscape and Memory of Vietnam

by Andrew X. Pham

In this richly detailed travelogue and memoir, the author, whose family escaped Vietnam in 1977 and settled in California, returns to his homeland, bicycling the length of Vietnam from Saigon to Hanoi in a search for identity and healing.



Boat People: Personal Stories from the Vietnamese Exodus

1975-1996 edited by Carina Hoang (2013)

More than a million people were forced to leave Vietnam in search of safety after the war ended. These refugees fled by boat over dangerous open sea, the only route available to them, becoming known as "boat people." Editor Carina Hoang brings together dozens of moving first-person accounts, heavily illustrated with personal photographs and documents. Winner of the Independent Publisher Book Awards.

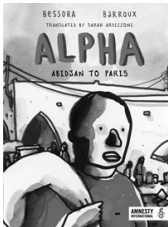


suggested **further reading**

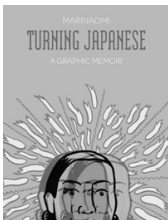
SUGGESTED GRAPHIC FORMAT READING FROM THE SEATTLE PUBLIC LIBRARY



Vietnamese Memories: Leaving Saigon by Clément Baloup
Vietnamese-French cartoonist Baloup recounts the stories of five emigres (including his father) who left Vietnam at different times and under different conditions. Clement also documents a time when France took thousands of Vietnamese people from their country and forced them into labor during WWII.



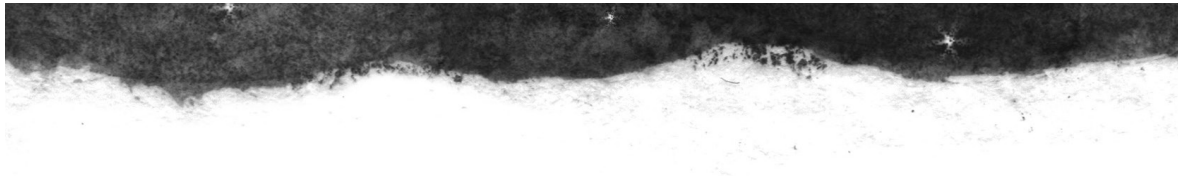
Alpha: Abidjan to Paris by Bessora and Barroux
A harrowing and poetic depiction of a modern migration crisis. Alpha attempts to flee Côte d'Ivoire for Paris to reunite with his wife and child. During his months-long journey, Alpha and his fellow migrants navigate smugglers, poverty, illness, and life threatening danger.



Turning Japanese by MariNaomi
As a 20-something in the 1990s, MariNaomi took jobs in hostess bars in San Francisco and Japan. In funny and often touching anecdotes, she describes her attempts to learn Japanese and connect with her heritage in an unlikely setting.



Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey by G.B. Tran
Born in the US after his parents fled Vietnam, Tran grew up disengaged from his family's history. After visiting Vietnam for the first time, Tran begins to learn his family's story and seeks to uncover and document their complex, multi-generational history and long-held secrets.



***Such A Lovely Little War: Saigon, 1961-63 and Saigon Calling: London 1963-75* by Marcelino Truong**

In this two-volume graphic memoir, Truong, the son of a Vietnamese diplomat and a French housewife, describes his childhood in Vietnam and the family's uneasy adjustment to life in London when they are forced to flee the country after the onset of civil war.

ZINES AT THE LIBRARY

In 2017, the Library acquired the Zine Archive & Publishing Project (ZAPP) zine collection, a non-circulating collection which contains over 30,000 zines, minicomics and other self-published and small press titles. Zines are small, hand-made magazines that are created out of passion and not profit. These zines relate to themes and issues in *The Best We Could Do* for *Slant* (Issue #6, 1998) – Mimi Nguyen. Like Bui, Nguyen came to the United States with her family as a very young child and post-war refugee from Vietnam. In this travel-themed issue, she incisively critiques racism in the punk scene, colonialism in middle-class tourist narratives of Vietnam, and explores the contradictions in her relationship to her cultural identity.

Bamboo Girl (Issues #8-10, 1999-2000) – Sabrina Margarita Alcantara-Tan. In *Bamboo Girl*, Alcantara-Tan "confront[s] racism, sexism, and homophobia from the Filipina/API/Asian mutt feminist point of view."

Visit www.spl.org/zines or email zines@spl.org for more information about the ZAPP collection.





Twenty-one years of Seattle Reads 1998-2019

- 2019:** *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui (Abrams Books, 2017)
- 2018:** *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi (Vintage Books, 2017)
- 2017:** *The Turner House* by Angela Flournoy (Mariner Books, 2016)
- 2016:** *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* by Karen Joy Fowler (Plume Books, 2013)
- 2015:** *The Painter* by Peter Heller (Vintage Books, 2015)
- 2014:** *For All of Us, One Today: An Inaugural Poet's Journey* by Richard Blanco (Beacon Press, 2013)
- 2013:** *Stories for Boys* by Gregory Martin (Hawthorne Books, 2012)
- 2012:** *The Submission* by Amy Waldman (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011)
- 2011:** *Little Bee* by Chris Cleave (Simon and Schuster, 2009)
- 2010:** *Secret Son* by Laila Lalami (Algonquin Books, 2009)
- 2009:** *My Jim* by Nancy Rawles (Three Rivers Press, 2005)
- 2008:** *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* by Dinaw Mengestu (Riverhead Books, 2007)
- 2007:** *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri (Mariner Books, 2003)
- 2006:** *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (Pantheon Books, 2003)
- 2005:** *When the Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka (Anchor Books, 2002)
- 2004:** Seattle Reads Isabel Allende
- 2003:** *A Gesture Life* by Chang-rae Lee (Riverhead Books, 1999)
- 2002:** *Wild Life* by Molly Gloss (Mariner Books, 2001)
- 2001:** *Fooling with Words: A Celebration of Poets and Their Craft* by Bill Moyers (Morrow, 1999)
- 1999:** *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines (Vintage Books, 1994)
- 1998:** *The Sweet Hereafter* by Russell Banks (HarperCollins, 1991)

Seattle Reads is a "one book, one city" program, where people are encouraged to read and discuss the same book. It's designed to deepen engagement in literature through reading and discussion.

Everyone is invited to participate in Seattle Reads by reading the featured book, joining in a book discussion, and/or attending programs with the featured writer. Seattle Reads *The Best We Could Do* is made possible by The Seattle Public Library Foundation and The Wallace Foundation, with additional support from media sponsors The Seattle Times and KUOW 94.9 Public Radio, and Abrams Books.

Contributors to this guide include Abigail Bass, Stesha Brandon, Jess Boyd, Molly Humphrie, Linda Johns, Heather Marker, Huong Nguyen, Danny Ramirez, Misha Stone, Annie Vasquez, and Richard Visick.

