



Exploring Senior Cycle Texts

The Best We Could Do by Thi Bui

Please note: *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui is a graphic novel included as part of the Prescribed Material for the Leaving Certificate English Examination in 2026 and 2027.

This extract and accompanying activities may be used to explore General Vision and Viewpoint, Literary Genre and Cultural Context at Higher Level or Social Setting, Relationships, and Hero, Heroine, Villain at Ordinary Level.

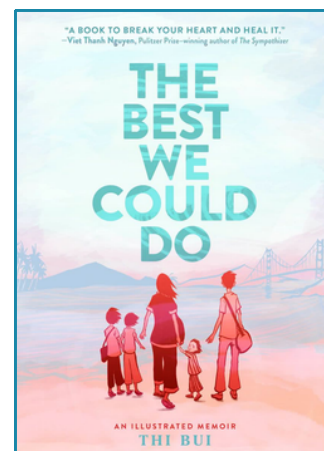


Image courtesy of
Abrams ComicArts

Background to the graphic novel:

The Best We Could Do addresses identity, displacement and assimilation, race, decolonisation, 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, intergenerational trauma and endless sacrifice within a family. Using the graphic novel format, this book serves readers through verbal and visual storytelling that supports multi-modal teaching. Primarily told as a memoir, *The Best We Could Do* also includes major historical events. **Please be advised that this text and the activities below contain adult and contentious themes.**

Pre-reading Activity:

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.



Click here for a pronunciation guide





Group Reading 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?
- Bó states, “*You don’t have a sister named Bích anymore. She is dead to us*” (p. 27). What events caused Bó 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 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*” or Irish, 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?
- “*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?

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.



Group Reading Discussion Questions:

On History:

- 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 Bó's upbringing in Vietnam 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 Vietnam 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 story line.

Post Reading - Reacting

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).