

Additional Resources:

The Best We Could Do
by Thi Bui



The Vietnam War

The period known in America as the "Vietnam War" and in Việt Nam as the "American war in Việt Nam" refers to the United States military intervention in Việt Nam from 1965 to 1973. The Vietnam War arose in the aftermath of the Second World War, when anti-colonial conflicts pitted French forces against the Việt Minh, a nationalist group inspired by Chinese and Soviet Communism and opposed to the French occupation of Việt Nam. At the end of a bloody eight-year war, the Geneva Accords were signed, marking the end of French rule in Southeast Asia. The accords established a temporary border between North and South Việt Nam at the 17th parallel, partitioned until elections could be held to establish a unified government.

In the years following the withdrawal of France, a civil war erupted for control of South Việt Nam. North Việt Nam (the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam) and the National Liberation Front, commonly known as the Viet Cong, sought to unify the country under Communist rule. South Việt Nam (the Republic of Việt Nam), with its capital at Sài Gòn, struggled to remain non-Communist. Driven by Cold War concerns about the spread of Communism, the United States based their foreign policy around "domino theory:" an idea first proposed by the Truman administration in the 1940s and popularized by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, describing the idea that a Communist government in one nation would quickly lead to Communist takeovers in neighboring states—like falling dominoes. Concerned about Communist expansion, the Eisenhower administration threw military and economic aid behind the establishment of a military government in South Việt Nam, supporting the decision of its leader, Ngô Đình Diệm, to *prevent* free elections which might result in the unification of the country under the control of the Communists.

In spring 1961, Eisenhower's successor, President John F. Kennedy, expanded U.S. involvement in South Việt Nam, including the expansion of military assistance and authorization of the use of napalm, herbicides, and defoliants. A few years later, the U.S. Congress would authorize President Lyndon B. Johnson to take steps "to prevent further aggression" and keep the South Vietnamese government from collapsing. Johnson would dramatically escalate U.S. involvement in the conflict, deploying hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers and authorizing bombing campaigns that were unprecedented in scale. By the end of 1966, the U.S. had nearly 400,000 troops fighting in Vietnam; by the start of 1969, the draft was in full force and that number had increased to 540,000.

The rising conflicts in the 1960s and 1970s also had devastating effects on civilian life: not only in Việt Nam, but in neighboring nations. While officially neutral, Laos and Cambodia experienced the escalation of American bombing campaigns and the aggressive use of defoliants. The North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong soldiers established bases of operations in both countries, and U.S. military personnel used Laotian and Cambodian borders as staging grounds for attacks at the border of South Vietnam.

The Vietnam War would become one of the longest military conflicts in U.S. history, claiming the lives of more than 58,000 Americans and wounding more than 300,000. Estimates place the number of killed or wounded North and South Vietnamese at roughly four million soldiers and civilians—roughly ten

percent of the population. In January 1973, the United States and the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam signed a peace settlement enabling the United States to begin withdrawing from Việt Nam. The war, however, continued. Having rebuilt their forces and upgraded their logistics system, North Vietnamese forces triggered a major offensive in the Central Highlands in March 1975. On April 30, 1975, Sài Gòn, the capital of South Việt Nam, fell to North Vietnamese forces, effectively ending the war.

1980 Refugee Act

Large-scale immigration from Vietnam to the United States began at the end of the U.S. war in Southeast Asia, when the fall of Sài Gòn in 1975 led to the U.S.-sponsored evacuation of an estimated 125,000 Vietnamese refugees. Laws at the time restricted refugee admissions, and as the humanitarian crisis and displacement of people in the Indochina region (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) intensified in 1975-1979, more than 300,000 refugees and their families were admitted to the United States through presidential action. The U.S. Refugee Act was aimed towards establishing a more regular system of immigration and resettlement, and was passed unanimously by the Senate in late 1979 and signed into law by President Jimmy Carter in 1980, when modern waves of refugees arriving in the U.S. reached their peak.

The law amended the earlier Immigration and Nationality Act and the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, raising overall refugee quotas and providing a provision to deal with special humanitarian concerns. It changed the definition of “refugee” to align with a standard established by United Nations conventions and protocols, adjusting it to a person with a “well-founded fear of persecution;” established a new Office of U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs and an Office of Refugee Resettlement; and built on existing public-private partnerships aimed towards helping refugees settle and adjust to life in the United States. The act was a landmark piece of legislation, establishing the contemporary U.S. refugee resettlement program and asylum system that we know today.

The Graphic Novel Form

At first glance, comics may seem like a natural stepping stone between children's picture books and the dense walls of text of most novels and nonfiction. This reputation is, in fact, the origin of descriptors like "graphic novel" or, in the case of *The Best We Could Do*, "illustrated memoir." People who make them know that comics are entirely capable of telling complicated, thoughtful, and emotional stories just as well as (and sometimes even better than) their un-illustrated shelf mates. Specific labels set expectations, distinguishing between deliberate attempts at literary storytelling and the easy-to-digest, serialized works that many people associate with the word "comics"—the kind that show up in newspapers or that feature spandexed heroes testing their various powers (though even many of those are more involved than a first impression suggests!).

Still: if you sniff out the Graphic Novel section of your local bookstore and open the high-brow books there, you'll probably recognize the *form*.

Graphic novels, illustrated memoirs, and superhero comics all tell their stories with a synthesis of words and images laid out in a series of panels. Characters will speak, whisper, or shout—or sometimes think to themselves—in speech bubbles of different shapes, while blocks of text are home to narration and exposition. The balance of words and images in each panel can contain an immense depth of information and nuance while still allowing readers to stretch and flex their imaginations in the way that great art encourages. But though panels contain almost all the content of a comic, the magic happens in the borders *between* panels.

Our minds assume that adjacent images occur in sequence. From one still image to the next, our brains create the motion of people, boats, rockets, pens, frowns, and everything else. Depending on the comic, this can make for a lot of imaginative exercise! Some authors will even take advantage of our minds' assumption that images in adjacent panels are related to suggest comparisons, similes, or even visual puns.

The borders between panels also contract and dilate time. Whether by manipulating the layout of their panels or by changing the amount of time that passes between panels, an author can speed the years past with a montage effect or slow a moment to bullet-time intensity. Because of this, comics require significant attention—did a half-second pass in that one-centimeter border, or was it half a century?—and significant imagination.

For Bui, who is telling a story that takes place across three time periods (her parents' lives, her childhood, and her adult life), this is especially useful: she can snap her readers between past and present like we're bungee jumping through time. After establishing a "normal" rhythm of panels, Bui has the opportunity to disrupt and subvert our expectations, engaging us and infusing the experience of *The Best We Could Do* with vitality.

The layout of a comic page can change a reader's perception of time in much the same way that it affects time in the story. Many small, kinetic panels send our eyes zooming across the page as frenetic action builds, while a *splash page*—with one image taking up an entire page (or two, called a *spread*)—forces us to slow down and process the emotion and import of a single moment.

It's worth paying close attention to how variation on form helps *The Best We Could Do* "work." Bui is a master at representing both physical disorientation and emotional malaise in her art, but there are subtler tools at work, too. See how loud noises—babies crying, explosives—disrupt a steady march of images? Or how smoke winds its way between panels, sometimes crossing borders entirely? What effect does it have when Bui turns a speech bubble into a placid pond—or does away with panel borders entirely?

"I know that if I do my work well, it will read seamlessly and quickly, so the danger is that a reader might breeze through it and take for granted much of what is there," says Bui. "But if my book took you less than two hours to finish, please read it again and let yourself notice different elements the second time—maybe the feeling of a two-page spread, or the cultural details in the backgrounds, or the structure of the narrative" (*Reading Women*). Though we've only just started investigating their inner workings—the *how* behind the impact of works like Bui's—it should be clear that comics are as deserving of our serious attention as any other art form.

Related Reading

The National Endowment for the Arts offers this list as a courtesy resource for those interested in furthering their knowledge. By inclusion on this list, the National Endowment for the Arts does not fund or endorse any of the listed works or any perspectives or opinions contained therein.

The Best We Could Do defies a single category or definition, spanning myriad storytelling traditions and genres: from oral history to illustration, memoir to ephemera, nation and homeland to family and the ties that bind. This reading list touches on just a few of the many books related to those themes, as well as other works from Thi Bui. For space and clarity, books will only appear once on the list. Many titles, however, bridge genres and themes, and we encourage readers to consider the categories listed here as flexible and open to many possibilities. Lastly, this list is not comprehensive, or even complete. Much like the process of reading, this list is intended to provide readers with opportunities for exploration, connection, and interpretation. These are just a few paths to new adventures: we hope they inspire you to pave your own.

<p>Other works from Thi Bui:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Chicken of the Sea</i> by Viet Thanh Nguyen, illus. by Thi Bui ● <i>A Different Pond</i> by Bao Phi, illus. by Thi Bui 	<p>Books that influenced Thi Bui:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Persepolis</i> by Marjane Satrapi ● <i>Maus</i> by Art Spiegelman ● <i>Blankets</i> by Craig Thompson
<p>Books for children (illustrated):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>The Most Beautiful Thing</i> by Kao Kalia Yang, illus. by Khoa Le ● <i>Ocean Meets Sky</i> by Eric Fan and Terry Fan ● <i>Grandfather's Journey</i> by Allen Say 	<p>Books for young adults (illustrated):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Almost American Girl</i> by Robin Ha ● <i>In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson</i> by Bette Bao Lord, illus. by Marc Simont ● <i>The Magic Fish</i> by Trung Le Nguyen ● <i>American Born Chinese</i> by Gene Luen Yang
<p>Other books for young adults:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Bestiary</i> by K-Ming Chang ● <i>The Last Story of Mina Lee</i> by Nancy Jooyoun Kim ● <i>Free Food for Millionaires</i> by Min Jin Lee ● <i>The Astonishing Color of After</i> by Emily X.R. Pan 	<p>Books for adults (illustrated):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Good Talk</i> by Mira Jacob ● <i>The Arrival</i> by Shaun Tan ● <i>Such a Lovely Little War</i> by Marcelino Truong, trans. by David Homel ● <i>Year of the Rabbit</i> by Tian Veasna

<p>Other books for adults:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● <i>The Sympathizer</i> by Viet Thanh Nguyen● <i>Catfish and Mandala</i> by Andrew X. Pham● <i>On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous</i> by Ocean Vuong● <i>Interior Chinatown</i> by Charles Yu	<p>Poetry:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● <i>When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities</i> by Chen Chen● <i>Deaf Republic</i> by Ilya Kaminsky● <i>Ghost Of</i> by Diana Khoi Nguyen● <i>Oculus</i> by Sally Wen Mao● <i>Eye Level</i> by Jenny Xie
--	---