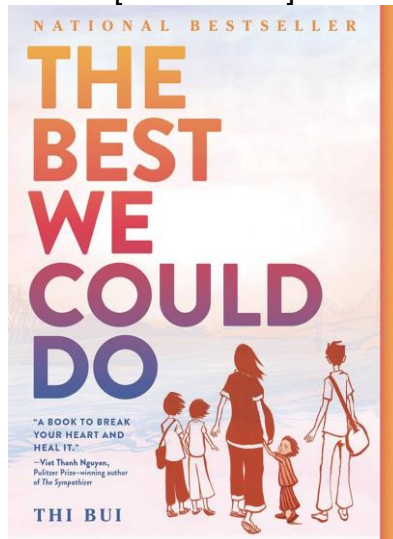


The Best We Could Do by Thi Bui

[Non-Fiction]



"My father always said he had no parents."

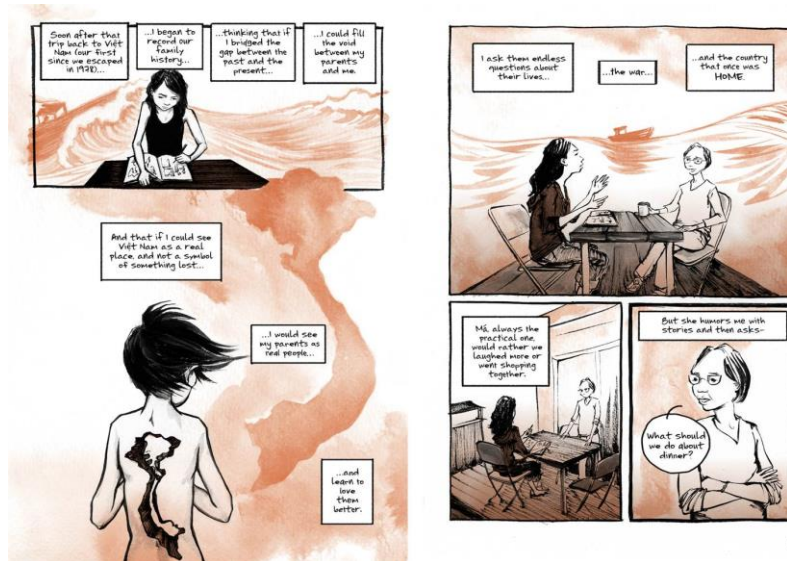
He lied. In Thi Bui's twenties she discovers that her grandfather was very much alive in Vietnam and wanted to be reunited with his family. Her father refuses but he won't explain why. You'll find out why.

Often the best route to understanding lies in the lives of others. Each individual is coloured by their experiences and the decisions which have brought them to their present, but rarely are we privy to either in enough context to truly comprehend. This is as true from the outside as it is within families.



"Proximity and closeness are not the same... How did we get to such a lonely place? We live so close to each other and yet feel so far apart. I keep looking toward the past, tracing out journey in reverse, over the ocean, through the war... seeking an origin story that will set everything right."

This, then, is a story of the childhoods and parenthood behind a generation gap which seemed to Bui like a chasm. It's an engrossing account of her parents separate lives in Vietnam which improbably converge before their terrifying and equally unlikely escape (with children!) via Malaysia to America in 1978. It is rich in detail and extraordinarily articulate, partly because it is so unusually structured.



Her mother's six births are related first in reverse. None of them are easy, the most recent in the coastal Malaysian refugee camp; her mother's firstborn wasn't stillborn but she didn't last long, the first parental shadow falling over the proceedings in the form of her own aloof, affluent mother's advice not to breastfeed. Is that where it all began? "How does one recover from the loss of a child?" Bui asks as we stroll down a leafy lane. "How do the others compare to the memory of the lost one?"

Unlike her mother's exotic, educated upbringing, her father's childhood involved covering on an unimaginably dark scale. In the first of many history lessons, post WWII, a recently occupied France returns to Vietnam to take back what they saw as colonially theirs after Ho Chi Minh declared independence on behalf of the Viet Minh. So begins the geographical divide and the first atrocities.



"And in the dark apartment in San Diego, I grew up with the terrified boy who became my father."

The art is tender, full of lyrical flourishes like a boat on the sea behind a quiet conversation or swirling water doubling as a birth. There's a tumultuous oceanic crossing beneath which a younger Bui stands with her back to us, a map of Vietnam carved out of where her heart and so understanding should be.

That comprehension grows through investigation: the First Indochina War, Land Reforms, then the Americans destruction of Vietnam's agriculture with their defoliants and its economy with their imports; the descent of cities into police states, and 13 more years fully fleshed out for us to see how unlikely it was they escaped, and the toll which mere survival took on both parents. You can spot almost the exact moment when Bui's father's collapsed from provider to withdrawn brooder while her mother desperately, indefatigably soldiers on. But what other choice is there for a mother?

Equally impressive is the sheer hard graft of Bui's mother after landing in America – provision, assimilation, accumulation of fresh documentation and re-education after Vietnamese degrees aren't recognised – starting over again from scratch to build something new and set her children up to be educated at length then thrive in peace, so that one of them could be in a position to create this extraordinary graphic memoir to give us all a greater understanding of the lives of others

It is so very impressive, yet humbly titled THE BEST WE COULD DO.

