Discussion Guidelines for Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do*

**General Discussion Tips**

- Make space for every person to see and hear each other by sitting in a circle/roundtable

- Make the space accessible to as many people as possible:
  - Make sure everyone speaks up and clearly
  - Ask folks to print names and pronouns on nametags in large, all CAPS letters
  - Let everyone know where the restrooms are located
  - If you choose to use slides, bring printed copies
  - Check with all participants about their accessibility needs and make adjustments
  - Finally, this is a safe environment for you to be you. If you need to sit out or step out of the room at any time or take care of yourself, please do.

- Move from easy opinions or yes/no questions to more difficult and interpretive questions. This allows everyone to get used to sharing and speaking their mind.

- Remember that your participants approached the text from various viewpoints, backgrounds, and abilities. Allow many voices to emerge by
  - Giving time for responses. Pause, wait, allow more than one person to respond.
  - Gently drawing out quieter voices. Perhaps ask, “I wonder what other reactions or ideas are out there.” Or “I wonder what other people think.” Do not single out anyone.
  - Making sure everyone has equal space in the conversation. Do not let individuals dominate.
  - Honoring a range of reactions. Even if you do not agree with all of the reactions, honor them.

- Provide basic community guidelines for dialogue. For example, you might post these:
  - We recognize that our primary commitment is to learn from and listen to each other through our discussion of The Best We Could Do.
  - Move up, Move back - We will contribute to the conversation and allow others to do the same.
  - We will challenge ideas and things that have been said and not the person.
  - One voice at a time— We will work to make sure that when people are speaking, they have a chance to be heard.
  - Confidentiality – What we share will stay here but the lessons learned can be shared.
Structure for a Reading Group Session

I. Introduction

- Introduce facilitator(s) and provide pronouns
- Welcome everyone
- Remind folks what we are here to do - discuss The Best We Could Do
- Let people know where restroom facilities are located (which ones are gender neutral?)
- Have participants introduce selves
- Review community guidelines

II. Provide Background

- The Common Book initiative and its goals - As part of the University of Chicago's commitment to diversity and inclusion, the UChicago Common Book Initiative strives to enhance campus climate and build community through a shared experience, bringing together undergraduate students, graduate/professional students, faculty, staff, alumni and local community members to read the same book and engage in dialogues across campus. Such experiences foster full participation of community members and encourage understanding diverse perspectives and experiences within UChicago.
- The Common Book Initiative aims to:
  - Foster a sense of community by providing a common reading experience.
  - Examine current events and highlight diversity of lived experiences through discussions of the book and the major topics it addresses.
  - Engage all members of the campus community through a variety of academic and social programming.

- Background on the book
  - Bookrags Summary and Study Guide
  - Scribd Teaching Guide
  - Abrams’ Information and Resources on The Best We Could Do

The Best We Could Do addresses identity, displacement and assimilation, race, decolonization, 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, and intergenerational trauma and endless sacrifice within a family. Using the graphic novel format, this book serves readers through verbal and
visual storytelling that supports multimodal teaching. Primarily told as a memoir, *The Best We Could Do* also includes major historical events. This text is ideal in reading lists in both college and college-preparatory history or English classes.

III. Stimulate conversation and contributions from everyone
   - What did you like best about this book?
   - What did you like least?

IV. Discuss memoirs
   - What memories looks like may differ cross-culturally and for each individual, yet all people have some accounting of their own lives. What does it mean to write a memoir, to tell a life story?
   - What aspects of the author’s story could you most relate to?
   - Which parts of the memoir stood out to you? Are there quotes, passages, images, or scenes you found particularly compelling or disturbing?
   - Why do you think the author chose to tell this story?
   - How can we go beyond reading this simply as a story and contextualized the many voices of Vietnamese refugees and their children in the U.S. today?

V. Discuss format
   - What did you think of the graphic-novel format?
   - In her preface, Bui explains that she was drawn to the graphic novel in an effort to solve “the storytelling problem of how to present history in a way that is human and relatable and not oversimplified.” Did she accomplish this? What examples stick out to you? Why or why not?

VI. Discuss themes
   - Think about your objectives for your reading group
   - Create questions that ensure that you touch upon all of the topics you determine are important
   - Select specific quote and page numbers for reference. When you pose a question, begin with this, and allow participants to find the page and read along with you.
   - What were the main points about ______ (eg. family, culture & identity, war & conflict, trauma, history, gender roles, migration/immigration, refugee experiences, etc.) do you think the author was trying to make?
   - How did she do this?
   - How did the images play a role in developing/reinforcing these themes?

   - **On Family**
     - How do you define a family? What are the bonds that make up your family? Who are the people you would go to for help if you were ever in trouble?
“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?

Bô´ states, “You don’t have a sister named Bích anymore. She is dead to us” (p. 27). What events caused Bô´ 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 page 29, the author draws portraits of her parents and siblings. In the second panel, Quyên and Tha’o are shadows. What was the artist’s purpose for blurring these two siblings? Was it effective to use an image instead of words? Explain.

The author desires to be closer to her parents as an adult and realizes “proximity and closeness are not the same” (p. 31). What is your definition of proximity? Closeness? How do these two words differ? Which of the two words would you rather use to describe your relationship with your parents?

The births of the six siblings are told in reverse chronological order (pp. 42, 46, 47, 48, 50, and 52). What was the author’s purpose in using this storytelling element? Is it elective?

“Home became the holding pen for the frustrations and the unexorcised demons that had nowhere to go in America’s finest city” (p. 68). “In my sleep, I dreamt of how terrible it would be to not find my way home” (p. 83). “And then I came home to a tiny hovel” (p. 186). “My parents built their bubble around us—our home in America” (p. 294). What does home mean to Thi and her family members? Does her definition of home change as the story progresses? How? What does home mean to you? What is the difference between a home and a house?

On Culture and Identity

How might such a journey impact one’s sense of self and identity while coming to the U.S. as a refugee or growing up as children of refugees here?

“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” 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?

- Examine the panels where someone spits on Bô´ on page 67. What is meant by “there were reasons to not want to be anything other?” How would you have reacted if you were Bô´? How would you react if you saw someone spit on another person? What might motivate one person to react to another in that way? Can you think of similar hateful actions and tensions you’ve seen or read about throughout history or on the news?

- On page 187, Bô´ reminisces about the books, music, and movies that influenced him as a teenager. Compare his influences with your own. How have your tastes shaped you as a person?

- “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?

- When Thi and her siblings go to school (day care, elementary and middle schools), all three are treated differently (p. 287). Explore how Bích, Lan, and Thi could have been more supported by their peers and teachers.

- How did French colonialism influence Thi’s parents while they were growing up? Cite specific examples from the book that show that impact. How might a French colonist’s description of this influence differ from a Vietnamese nationalist’s?

- **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.

What factors contributed to Thi’s parents’ decision to leave Viêt Nam after the war ended? What would you have done in their place?

Describe the various authorities that the Buis encounter during their refugee experience. Who are they and from where do they derive their power to make decisions about refugees? Consider our national discussion on refugees today. How is it similar to the Buis’ experience? How does it differ?

**On History**

Page 66 refers to California’s Proposition 187, which voters passed in 1994 but was subsequently struck down in a federal court. What were the arguments for and against this law? What similarities do you see to debates today on immigration?

“I had never, before researching the background of my father’s stories, imagined that these horrible events were connected to my family history” (p. 116). How would you feel if you were Thi? What historical events are tied to your own family history? How and when did you learn about them?

What factors contributed to Bô’s decision to leave North Viêt Nam in 1954? Cite specific events and context clues from the book. What would you have done if you were in his position?

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 Bô’s upbringing in Viêt Nam 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 Viêt Nam 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 storyline.

In Chapter 6, Bui suggests that she is making up for not having memories of her own by doing a lot of research. What is the difference between personal knowledge and relying on secondary sources? What can be gained from interviewing primary sources? What could be tricky about interviewing primary sources?

**Relating back to our campus**
- Why do you think this book was chosen as our inaugural UChicago Common Book?
- What lessons can we learn from Bui’s story?
- What does it mean to be “American” in our current context?
- Specifically, how can this book enlighten the experiences of South East Asian communities, especially those that came to the U.S. as refugees? Why are such voices important to our academic experience at the University of Chicago?
- What does it mean to belong or be welcome? Where do you feel like you belong on campus?
- What can we all do to make campus more welcoming?

**VII. Encourage reflection**
- If you could ask the author one question, what would it be?
- Do you have a new perspective or attitude as a result of reading this book?
- Did you learn something you didn’t know before? If so, what?

**VIII. Wrap up the discussion**
- Thank participants
- Give them resources
- Ask that they fill out a survey