

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Girl, Illustrated

What Thi Bui first set out to do was to turn a graduate school oral history project into something more accessible outside academia. Safe to say: she succeeded wildly.

That oral history became the basis for “The Best We Could Do,” Bui’s illustrated memoir documenting her family’s escape from Vietnam in the 1970s and the difficulties they faced building new lives in America. It received widespread critical and popular acclaim, winning a 2018 American Book Award, named a finalist for 2017 National Book Critics Circle and Eisner awards and landing on a host of “Best Of” lists.

“The material was so amazing, I wanted to find a medium to share it with the general public. I started reading graphic novels and thought, ‘Whoa, this could be it,’” said Bui, who taught herself to draw comics expressly for this book. “I learned on my own and I did it on the side while I was a high school teacher and raising my son. He was a newborn when I started drawing it, and he was 10 or 11 when I finished.”

Bui will give a free, public talk Thursday, April 25, at UC Santa Barbara, where “The Best We Could Do” is the current selection for UCSB Reads, a community-wide initiative featuring myriad events and activities each year focused on one book. Her appearance, at 7:30 p.m. in the campus’s Campbell Hall, culminates the 2019 program.

Born in Vietnam only three months before the end of the Vietnam War, Bui immigrated to the United States with her family in 1978. Her experience — and that of her parents — has informed her entire life.

“The Best We Could Do” chronicles generations of her family history in Vietnam, including her birth during the final months of the Vietnam War and her family’s early years in the U.S. The story is rendered in flashbacks from Bui’s current life as a mother in California.

The search for a better future and a longing for the past. The anguish of immigration and the lasting effects of displacement on a child and her family. Adjusting to life as a mom and discovering what it means to be a parent.

With poetic writing and breathtaking art, Bui evokes these themes in her book and, in so doing, she examines the strength of family, the importance of identity and the meaning of home.

“It went from being a story about refugees in the Vietnam war to being about parents and children,” Bui said of how her book evolved over time. “My parents were getting older, so I was dealing with that, and having them live near me, and raising my own child at the same time. For me this was really about figuring out how do we heal from bad stuff that’s happened in the past to pass on something simpler to our kids.”

While working on her book, Bui estimates, she spent “easily hundreds of hours” with her parents — priceless time she wouldn’t trade for anything.

“Even if I’d made a bad book we’d still have those hundreds of hours,” Bui said. “For young people who read my book, I definitely love hearing that they felt empowered to ask their parents questions about themselves and to learn more about their parents. I love the idea of normalizing talking to your parents and taking an interest in the past.

“For everyone else I love being able to give a sort of corrective history that takes into account perspectives that haven’t been listened to as much [about the Vietnam War and the experience of Vietnamese people],” Bui added of her book and what she may discuss in her talk. “These are pretty divisive times, and we hear a lot about immigrants and refugees and borders. I hope for people to think about who refugees and immigrants are before they make decisions about policies that affect

people's lives today."

A Caldecott Honor-winning illustrator, Bui teaches in the MFA in Comics Program at the California College of the Arts. She is currently researching and drawing a work of graphic nonfiction about how Asian American Pacific Islanders are impacted by detention and deportation, and collaborating on a children's book with Pulitzer-winning novelist Viet Than Nguyen.

An advisory committee made up of faculty, staff, students and community representatives selected "The Best We Could Do" for 2019 UCSB Reads, citing its creative and intimate portrayal of struggles of identity, family relations, immigration and displacement.

Public lectures, panel discussions, exhibitions and other events focused on or inspired by Bui's book were featured over the 2019 winter and spring academic quarters. Thousands of UC Santa Barbara students received free copies of the book, which also was incorporated into more than two dozen courses over that time.

Since the program began in 2007, UCSB Reads has brought the campus and Santa Barbara communities together to read a common book that explores important issues of our time.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.