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Professor Franklin's Study Guide for "The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir" by Thi Bui

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Professor Franklin's Study Guide for
The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir
by Thi Bui

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Introduction

This guide is designed to be used by discussion leaders in conjunction with a read-aloud approach to analyzing *The Best We Could Do*, a graphic novel by Thi Bui.

The first draft of this guide was composed during the Pittsburg State University Tilford READ activity in the Fall of 2020.

This guide is designed to be used by both English Education students who will teach the book in middle and secondary school; and, by Tilford members who desire to lead discussion groups.

PF=Professor Franklin's comment or a suggested answer to a question

IMAGE=commentary or questions provoked by drawings

QUOTE=commentary or questions provoked by words

Advice for Discussion Leaders

Here are five steps for leading discussion:

1. Listen to your group members; let them react first to the read-aloud session.
2. Share images from the book.
3. Share quotes from the book.
4. Share comments and observations.
5. Provide global, overarching questions that enable readers to consider themes throughout the ten chapters (see page 3 for 12 of mine).
6. Slow things down to one chapter per week. We discovered that covering two chapters was taxing for first-time readers.

Advice for Read-Aloud Leaders

Here are two bits of advice for those of you leading the read-aloud activity:

1. If you assign parts, then prompt readers when their character speaks
2. Provide exposition for graphics that have no narration or dialogue.

As a printer-friendly courtesy, I have edited this document so that it is reader friendly: the bottom of a page indicates that a chapter is complete. While it increases the number of pages, my hope is that it decreases confusion.

GENERAL QUESTIONS for the book:

1. What do you notice about gender roles in culture and society?
2. What roles do Bo and Ma play in Vietnamese society?
3. What roles do Bo and Ma play in American society?

4. Consider the role of food in the book. What does it reveal about certain times in a character's life?
5. What roles does food play in other—perhaps your—culture(s)?
6. What are some of your comfort foods?
7. Do you have a memory associated with this food?
8. What anxiety/stress does this food relieve?
9. How do parents use food to control children?
10. Regarding parental roles: how do you know when you're a grown up?
PF: when you can take care of your children (+ see the QUOTE from Chapter 10, page 307)
11. What is your concept/idea of PARADISE? What are some of the IMAGES of PARADISE found in this book?
12. What memorabilia has your family collected for you: clothes, photos, recognition, souvenirs? How do these objects tell your story? What is your story? How do you share your story with other people (+ see Chapter 9, pages 296 & 297 with the brown folder)?

Preface:

1. What do you think of the book's title? Who are "we"? What are "we" trying to "do"?
2. If you were the editor of this book, then what other titles might you suggest to the author? [THIS WOULD BE A GREAT QUESTION TO RETURN TO AT THE END OF OUR DISCUSSION!]
PF: Look at this QUOTE: "Outside the margins, you have to get your power from somewhere." What are the margins? Where does the power come from? Why do we want power?
PF: to help us recover from loss + understand our past
3. What did Thi lose?
PF: her culture, her parents
4. How is this book an effort to recover that loss?
5. PF: IMAGE: between the Preface and Chapter 1 is a 2-page graphic illustration of the history of Vietnam from 111 BC to April 30, 1975
6. IMAGES: How does Thi depict simultaneous events such as the 1940 weakening of French presence with World War II and the Cold War
7. IMAGES: How does Thi's depiction enhance the sense of cultural and historical confusion?
PF: notice the ebb and flow of Western influence
How does this cultural and historical confusion help establish Thi's personal confusion?

Chapter 1: Labor (page 1—22)

- PF: the birth of Thi's baby is analogous to the composition of this book which is an effort to begin the process of understanding her losses
1. Look at the top panel. Read the story of Bo as Ma went into labor. Compare and contrast Bo's actions as an expectant father with Thi's husband Travis, who remains in the delivery room with his wife. How do their differences highlight masculine roles in each culture? What are masculine roles in your culture?

2. Look at page 19 for this QUOTE: "It took Ma twenty-eight years to leave Bo." Now ask: Is the story of Ma's independence (leaving Bo) also the story of Vietnam's independence?
3. Look at this QUOTE from page 21: "Family is now something that I have created—not just something I was born into." How do these words exemplify the difference between being a parent and being a child?

Chapter 2: Rewind, Reverse (page 23—60)

1. How do Bo and Ma's attitudes change from oldest daughter Lan to Thi?
2. Notice pages 26—27. See how Bich's disobedience affects each of her parents. How does her disobedience reflect American values of independence?
3. What is Ma's reaction to Bich's disobedience of Vietnamese cultural values?
4. What is Bo's reaction to Bich's disobedience of these values?
PF: Bo says "She is DEAD to us." (page 27).
5. QUOTE: from page 29: Why does Thi question her role as an adult when confronted with "being both a parent and a child without acting like a child"?
6. IMAGE: Look at the bottom panel on page 30. What are the two sides of the chasm?
PF: Bo is the past while Ma is the present: this reflects a generation gap with the implication that it exists for all cultures
7. From page 31: look at this QUOTE from the bottom panel: "proximity and closeness are not the same."
PF: proximity is physical distance while closeness is emotional distance: Ma and Bo may live in the same house but the house is not a home: it lacks emotional cohesion/togetherness
8. PF: IMAGES: pages 36—55 depict the births and deaths of Ma and Bo's babies. Do you think the deaths of two babies (p. 46: Thao; p. 51, Quyen) affected Thi's parents' relationship with their surviving children?
9. IMAGE: Look at the two panels on page 56.
PF: IMAGE: Look at how the tree connects the two panels, the left one of California and the right one of Vietnam. If you like, then you can look ahead to pages 323 and 324 to see the culmination of the IMAGE of the tree.

Chapter 3: Home, The Holding Pen (page 61—90)

- PF: Read this QUOTE from page 68: "For my parents, already fully formed in another time and place to which they could never go back. . .home became the holding pen for the frustrations and the unexorcised demons that had nowhere to go in America's finest city."
1. What does unexorcised mean?
 2. How could the demons be exorcised?
PF: Notice the word "pen." Notice that Thi uses a pen as an instrument of writing. How does her writing exorcise the demons?
 3. From page 69: What kind of job does Bo seek?
PF: he wants to be what he was in Vietnam: a teacher.

4. Who takes the job?
5. What is the job?
6. What does Bo do while Ma works?
7. How does Bo frighten Thi and Tam into obedience? What demons does he bring into their holding pen?
8. When do Thi and Tam escape the apartment?
9. How does Thi use her imagination to escape the holding pen?
 - PF: she applies Bo's stories of astral projection
 - PF: Look at the QUOTE from page 87—88: "If we can open a door between worlds. . . [then] we can also shut it. And if I could sleep [then] I could dream."
 - PF: IMAGE: See the way Thi looks down upon the holding pen, as if she is above it.

Chapter 4: Blood and Rice (page 91—130)

PF: this is the story of Bo's life

→see the relationship between family and food

→this chapter is filled with deception and duplicity used by men who were scoundrels and con artists who manipulated children as strategies for survival

PF: Pages 92—99 is the Garden of Eden, of PARADISE

→Bo's grandfather builds a Garden of Eden

→pond: fish, shrimp, water, hyacinth, water spinach, morning glories

→the clay and dirt dug up to create the pond is used to build houses

→people who live in the houses bring commercial enterprises that create pollution and kill the pond life

1. Page 97: IMAGE: Look at the panels showing Bo learning to swim. Compare them to Ma learning to swim (page 139) and Thi's son swimming (page 329).
2. Who killed the pond life?

- PF: the dyer who used the pond as a cesspool for his chemicals (page 99)
3. Look at this QUOTE from page 100: "Each of Bo's stories about childhood has a different shape but the same ending." Do you think Bo considers himself a victim of circumstances?
 4. How much responsibility do you think he should accept for his children's development?
 5. QUOTE + IMAGE: Look at page 110: after watching his dad beat his mom, this was the "last time Bo ever saw his mother." Do you think this creates one of Bo's demons? How does Thi depict her father's grief?
 6. Who saves Bo's father from starving?
PF: the Viet Minh
 7. Who saves Bo and his grandfather from starving?
PF: Bo's grandmother
 8. Look at page 115. See how Bo renounces his father. How does this predict Bo's attitude on page 35?
 9. Page 117: What happened to Bo's mom?
 10. IMAGE: Look at page 130. How do these three panels illustrate Bo's acknowledgement of Thi's understanding and expression of his demons?

Chapter 5: Either, Or (page 131—172)

1. PF: Look at the QUOTE on page 131: "Writing about my mother is harder for me—". Why is it harder for Thi to write about her mother than it is to write about her father? Is it because of they shared gender and parental roles?
2. PF: Look at the QUOTE on page 132: "People always say I look just like her."
3. PF: Pages 133-134 show Ma at home in America. Pages 135—150 show Ma in Vietnam. Look at the IMAGES on page 135. How does the author make the transition from Ma's life in American to her life in Vietnam?
4. IMAGES: Page 139 shows Ma learning to swim. How is her experience different from and the same as Bo's experience, depicted on page 97? Compare and contrast it with the IMAGE of Thi's son swimming on page 329.
5. IMAGES: page 142 shows Ma being terrified of her mother. How might her mother affect her self-perception as verbalized on page 316 (Me v. Ma)?
PF: Pages 143—150 are devoted to Ma's raised social consciousness.
6. Page 145: QUOTE: At night, the moon on the fields was like magic."
7. Page 149: Ma's father has a nervous breakdown
PF: this exemplifies French oppression

8. Page 150: IMAGE + QUOTE: Marriage = Trap/Education = Freedom.”
PF: Ma is becoming an advocate for women's rights. Her education includes an understanding of Simone de Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex*, the partner of Jean-Paul Sartre who we discover on page 187 is being read by Bo. Where Ma's father was oppressed by a French bureaucratic, she and Bo are being liberated by French intellectuals.
 9. Page 152: Bo's story interrupts Ma's story. How is this reflective of their relationship?
 10. Page 152: QUOTE: “they sent Bo to school.” How is this similar to Ma's story?
 11. Page 154: QUOTE: Bo: “I studied literature. I read French books. It was compared to my earlier life, a PARADISE.”
PF: Compare and contrast this time in Bo's life to his life on page 97.
 12. Page 157 is a historical interlude. QUOTE: “Every casualty in war is someone's grandmother, grandfather, mother, father, brother, sister, child, lover.”
 13. Pages 159—171 are about Bo, when—at the age of 14--he spent a month visiting with his father, witnessing the influence of the Viet Minh on Vietnam. What does Bo's father expect that his son will do?
PF: stay and recreate their family
 14. How does Bo's father treat his new wife?
PF: he oppresses her, an action reminiscent of the French
 15. Page 168: QUOTE: After his experience with his father and the Viet Minh, Bo asks: “Who would choose a world that had become so narrow, so poor and gray?” How would you answer this question?
- Chapter 6: The Chessboard (Page 173—210)
1. PF: the IMAGE on page 173 reminds me of the image on page 56. How does the author manage to connect America with Vietnam as well as the past with the present?
 2. Pages 179—184 are IMAGES of Thi and her family visiting their Vietnamese neighborhood, where she spent some of her childhood.
 3. Page 185 is an IMAGE of a chessboard. It explains how her neighborhood got its name. How is the chessboard like the holding pen (page 61)?
 4. Page 189: After attending Teachers College to evade the draft, Bo meets Ma.
 5. Page 191: QUOTE: As Ma speaks to Thi's husband Travis, Thi thinks: “I understand why it was easier for her to not tell me these things directly, and I DID want to know. But it still wasn't EASY for me to swallow that my mother had been at her happiest without us.” Why can't Ma say these things to her children? Why is it easier for her to say them to her son-in-law?
 6. Page 196: PF: Ma married BO for two reasons: 1st: she was pregnant; 2nd, she thought that he was going to die and that she would be a young widow (like Bo's grandmother) with a legitimate child.
 7. Page 199 presents more IMAGES of PARADISE: Bo and Ma are two well-respected, well-loved teachers with no parents, no kids, two incomes
 8. Page 200: PARADISE is invaded by the American military
 9. Pages 206, 208 and 209: IMAGES: “Saigon Execution,” a Pulitzer-prize winning photograph with the fate of the executioner on page 208. What kind of power did this IMAGE exert on America?

10. Page 207: QUOTE: "The contradiction in my father's stories troubled me for a long time." Why can't Thi live with this contradiction? Or, can she learn to live with it?

Chapter 7: Heroes and Losers (page 211—262)

PF: much of this chapter is narrated visually.

1. Why is it hard for Thi to put this chapter into words?
PF: some of the emotions are too powerful for words + when they arrive at the refugee camp there are different languages
2. Page 211: IMAGE and QUOTE: "This is the image that most people know of the fall of Saigon."
3. Pages 217—225: PF: With the new regime, you don't want to stand out; to survive you must accept and obey; parents are monitored and children are encouraged to report their parents for disobedient behavior. How is this like *The Diary of Anne Frank*?
4. Page 222: QUOTE: I think Ma felt left alone to provide for our family. . . while Bo retreated into a deep depression for which Ma had no sympathy.
How is this like Ma and Bo's relationship in Chapter 3: "The Holding Pen"?
PF: IMAGE: Note how the author's narrative intertwines with Bo's thoughts in the last panel on the page. This reflects her efforts to understand her parents' relationship as well as the relationship between the present and the past.
5. Page 224: Bo's dad reunites with his son after more than twenty years, bringing news of Bo's mother (her story is on page 117).
6. Page 227—257: escape on boat
7. PF: Pages 234—235 with the introduction of the people on the boat reminds me of the annex where Anne Frank and her family lived with the van Dannels and Mr. Dussell
8. Page 240: Bo saves the day: he navigates (see the IMAGE of the map he has in his head) and guides the boat: he's a hero.
9. Page 247—249: IMAGE: Belt of Orion at night

10. Page 252: PF: when life gives you lemons, . . .
11. Pages 260—261: PARADISE. How do the images illustrate linguistic differences while also illustrating universal similarities?
PF: the boy's dialogue in the top left panel on page 261, body/sign language, the joy of a refreshing drink

Chapter 8: The Shore (page 263—292)

PF: This is the story of Thi and her family leaving a refugee camp and relocating to America.

1. Page 267: IMAGES: One of the few pages with photographic images.
2. Page 269: QUOTE: The refugee camp was also a place where many people reinvented themselves. Why would people want to reinvent themselves? If you could reinvent yourself then who would you become? If you could reinvent your family then who would they become?
3. Page 270: PARADISE is invaded by the past when a schoolmate of Bich's shows up
4. Page 273: birth of Tam
PF: Thi and Ma are connected by childbirth
5. Page 274—284: family leaves the refugee camp for Indiana, where they have relatives
6. Page 274: IMAGE: notice the bottom two panels. Who helps Thi's family? How?
PF: Ma's older sister Dao and her husband sponsored Thi's family
7. Page 275: Bo is separated: he has to pass a TB test
PF: this is another invader from the past: the scars on Bo's lungs are from the illness that Ma thought would kill him
8. Page 284: QUOTE + IMAGE: "that night we slept reunited under the same roof in a new country." Notice the cutaway of the house, showing where the family slept.
9. Page 285: IMAGES: In the top two panels: How do the graphics depict the differences between the family members who have lived in America for three years and those who are newly arrived?
10. Pages 286—289 Compare and contrast the educational experiences of the children and their parents.
11. Page 289: Ma's younger brother and his family arrive. QUOTE: "We were now seventeen people in one house!" How is this arrangement a good thing (compared to life in Vietnam)? How is this arrangement a bad thing (compared to life in America)?
12. Page 289: IMAGE: the first time Thi sees snow

PF: snow = cold → pneumonia (fear of Bo's illness returning) → desire for warmth (a meteorological return to Vietnam) → decision to move to California (once again, Ma is a rebel in her family)

13. Page 292: IMAGE: see the red steps on the house. Can you imagine living next door to 17 immigrants in one house? How might you make them feel welcome?

Chapter 9: Fire and Ash (page 293—306)

1. Page 294: IMAGE: Look at the bottom panel. How is Thi's home in America physically different from her home in the Chessboard (Chapter 6) How is Thi's home in California different from her aunt's home in Indiana (Chapter 8)?
2. Page 296: QUOTE: My family kept sparse records of our existence. What records did they not keep (+ see GENERAL QUESTION # 10) ? What records did they keep?
PF: they did not keep memories; they kept official documents
3. Page 297: IMAGE: Look at the brown folder in the middle panel at the top. How is it like the photos on page 267?
PF: they are all official, proving status such as naturalized citizens
4. Page 298—301: Ma and Bo go to night school; as Thi and Tam become less supervised by their older sisters, their night time entertainment erodes from *The Iliad* to *Die Hard*
PF: this is a conflict between an academic culture (reflective of Thi's well-educated parents) and popular culture (reflective of Thi's Americanized older sisters)
5. Pages 301—306: there is a fire in the apartment complex
6. Page 305: QUOTE: "This—not any particular piece of Vietnamese culture—is my inheritance: the inexplicable need and extraordinary ability to RUN when the shit hits the fan. MY REFUGEE REFLEX." Why would Thi run? What has the power to threaten her?
7. Page 306: IMAGE: Look at the bottom right panel, of Thi's sleeping face. Notice how the author uses it to connect her past to her present by reflecting the face in the top left panel of page 307, the first page of the last chapter of the book.

Chapter 10: Ebb and Flow (page 307—329)

1. Page 307: IMAGE: PF: The reflection of the sleeping face on page 306 and the sleeping face on page 307 indicate that the book is thoughtful as the author reflects on her parents and on her past.
2. Page 307: QUOTE: "There were so many things I didn't know about being a parent until I become one." How does this relate to GENERAL QUESTION # 10 ?
3. Page 312: IMAGE: How does this graphic relate Bo and Thi?
4. PF: Thi—ultimately—is more like Bo than Ma: a hero who fell short of expectations.
5. Page 316: QUOTE : "When my mother spoke to her children she called herself 'Me,' the term used in the North—a weighty, serious, more elegant word for 'Mother.' We preferred the Southern word 'Ma,' a jolly, bright sound we insisted fit her better." How is "Me" reminiscent of Thi's maternal grandmother (page 142)? How do you think Thi's mother wants to be remembered? How do you think Thi wants to remember her?
6. Page 322: QUOTE: "What if all my mother remembered was that I came up short? How do I let go of all the anger I have put away?" Why would anyone be angry or disappointed with their mother? Why is Thi angry with her mother? How is this book an attempt to rid herself of the anger?
7. Page 323 and 324. Look at the IMAGES of the tree. How is this the culmination of the IMAGE of a tree we see on page 56? How does the IMAGE on page 324 depict Thi's family tree?
8. Page 329: IMAGE: How is the graphic of Thi's son swimming a reminder of Bo swimming (page 97) and Ma swimming (page 139)?
9. PF: Relate this to GENERAL QUESTION # 10:
 - You're a grown-up when you can take care of your children.
 - Bo is not a grown up
 - Ma is a grown up
 - Thi is more like Bo than she is like Ma; but, she hopes to become a grown-up with the ability to accept her child's need for freedom

Further Reading

Compestine, Ying Chang. *Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party*.

Frank, Anne. *Diary of a Young Girl*.

Lai, Thanhha. *Inside Out & Back Again*.

