THE BEST WE COULD DO

AN ILLUSTRATED MEMOIR

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2017-2018 UCLA Common Book
Thi Bui’s The Best We Could Do

Thi Bui’s graphic novel The Best We Could Do was selected as the 2017-2018 UCLA Common Book, a program that brings together all new UCLA undergraduates to read a single book. The choice of The Best We Could Do is notable because it is the first book written by an Asian American to be the UCLA Common Book in the program’s nine-year history. An autobiographical narrative about the experiences of Thi Bui’s refugee Vietnamese family, The Best We Could Do addresses such relevant topics as immigration, racial stereotypes, and generational dynamics that not only speak to UCLA’s Asian American community, but also beyond it. To support our colleagues coordinating the Common Book program and our own campus community, Amerasia Journal is pleased to present a variety of perspectives on The Best We Could Do, including those of the Director of the First Year Experience, a faculty member who has taught the novel, and—perhaps most importantly—students who have forged a personal connection with the book.

The History of the UCLA Common Book Program

La’Tonya Rease Miles

La’Tonya “LT” Rease Miles is the Director of First Year Experience, where she also oversees the UCLA Common Book program. She is a proud Bruin alumna and an avid reader of books and lover of sports.

The program now known as the UCLA Common Book began in 2008 as a partnership between Resident Director Bridget Le Loup and World Arts and Culture Professor David Gere, both of whom were residents of Hedrick Summit hall at the time. The goal was fairly straightforward: Invite students to read the same text and then come together as a community to discuss. The first selection was Mountains Beyond Mountains (2003) about the life and work of physician and global health advocate Dr. Paul Farmer. The program was so successful that the Office of Residential Life decided to purchase copies for all incoming students—both freshmen and transfer—in an
effort to unite them as in incoming class around a central theme or text each year.

The Common Book program aims to expose students to communities or world problems that they may not have explored previously in their educational careers. Ideally, a shared text introduces new students to the rigors of academia and provides them with some kind of common ground for discussion inside and outside of the classroom. When executed thoughtfully and inclusive of university partners, especially faculty, Common Books have the ability to shape campus dialogue and even campus culture.

In my fairly new capacity as Director of First Year Experience, I had the privilege of shepherding the 2017-2018 selection and the ninth Common Book, *The Best We Could Do*, by first-time author and UC Berkeley alumna, Thi Bui. To be honest, this selection was a bit of a surprise and a “dark horse” given that the committee was charged with identifying a compelling text that addresses the admittedly broad topic of mental health. We were aware of the ongoing mental health concerns on our campus, ranging from generalized anxiety to depression and suicide. But a funny thing happened along the way. In one of our meetings, a committee member pointed out that in the near ten-year history of the Common Book program, there had never been a selection that addresses the experiences of any Asian American community. This point is even more significant when we consider that 32 percent of the undergraduate student population identifies as Asian/Pacific Islander.

Additionally, the committee was motivated by the contemporary federal legislation concerning immigration that was unfolding at the time. While campaigning for president, Donald Trump promised to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico presumably to curtail unauthorized entry into the States. In January 2017, Trump signed an executive order halting all refugee admissions and temporarily barring people from seven Muslim-majority countries. We did not yet know that the Trump Administration would move to rescind Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), but we were aware that there was a major shift in the nation and the message coming from the White House was clear: the U.S. is no longer a place of refuge or safe harbor. The selection committee was fully aware that many of our students would be impacted in some way by these new federal policies and by the shifting political climate. And while we did not set
out to do so, we ended up selecting a text that explores many of these issues and more.

There are many reasons why *The Best We Could Do* captures the UCLA spirit and ethos. As mentioned previously, the author is a UC alumna, former high school teacher, and current lecturer at California College of the Arts. We were delighted to work with a small press, Abrams Books, the first company in the United States to specialize in the creation and distribution of art books. And, of course, we were excited by the book’s major themes that Lauri Mattenson, faculty in Writing Program and committee member, eloquently describes here:

This book inspires compassion between generations and shows the impact of socio-economic-political history on individual families. It is at once a modern narrative and a glimpse into history, and reminds us that there are always multiple views of historical events. This book challenges stereotypes, and despite the comic form, humanizes history in a unique way. In fact, when we see the family photos on page 267 for the first time, the entire book opens up and shows us how to read history—not as a distant or frozen sort of relic, but as a means of participating in the lives of our forebears, and discovering more about the many links between ourselves and others. I believe this book can open up discussions about many international communities, about current refugees worldwide, about racial and ethnic stereotypes, immigrant stories and immigration issues, the impact of trauma, tension between parents and children (and how important it is to break silence sometimes. . .and to understand our parents’ histories). . .

I also believe our students are likely to read and complete the book; the form is inviting, creative, and participatory—and does not feel like homework. The form itself provides an excellent entry for discussions related to mental health, because it demonstrates that even when the people in the book are silent or obstinate, they are still communicating. It shows that there are ways we hide and ways we express—and invites us to listen more deeply and pay attention to each other’s needs and concerns. The form, again, shows us that there are many ways to express ourselves, and when we feel constrained by convention or external standards, we can still find a way.

The entire UCLA community is invited to join in or create their own conversation sparked by Bui’s memoir.

As we broach the ten-year anniversary of the Common Book and also approach the centennial anniversary of UCLA’s found-
ing in 2019, now is a good time to reflect thoughtfully about what it means for students and the broader campus community to share a common text and to embark upon a common conversation. *The Best We Could Do*, a graphic memoir created by an untrained comic artist, can help pave the way for the future and shape where we go from here.

The Best We Could Do in English 85

Christopher Mott

Christopher Mott teaches in the UCLA Department of English.

When we saw that UCLA’s Common Book committee was considering adopting the graphic novel by Thi Bui entitled *The Best We Could Do*, the TAs and I who teach English 85, “The American Novel,” got very excited about teaming with the Common Book Program to give our first-year students a coherent learning experience that bridged the gap between the classroom and the Hill. Indeed, this theme of bridging cultural and generational gaps is a key issue in *The Best We Could Do*, and a key symbol of the novel’s cover image.

The course is arranged as a chronological study of the American novel. We began with Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, then William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*, followed by a big chronological leap to James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, and finishing with *The Best We Could Do*. Our approach in teaching the course is to begin the study of a novel by working with the students to generate a list of themes, the cultural issues that form the context of the novel. We then ask students to think about how the novel comments on the social justice dimensions at stake in those issues through the use of literary devices. Following our discussion of the cultural stakes, we perform a close reading, selecting key scenes and analyzing the details in those scenes to establish the novel’s cultural comment. For the final text—*The Best We Could Do*, in this case—we will also ask the students to perform some archival analysis, introducing them to a few databases so that they might trace the cultural history and work of an object in the text.

As one of the themes or cultural stakes in *The Best We Could Do* has to do with building cultural bridges, especially the role of mother in assembling family and community history, we transi-
tioned from *Kindred* to *The Best We Could Do* by way of an investigation of the cultural role of mothers in the two novels. We spent quite a bit of time analyzing the opening chapter of *The Best We Could Do*, which depicts Thi in labor delivering her son, struggling with and against the professional caregivers in the hospital, and noting the empty chair where her mother had been sitting. Here, the text recalls the various births Thi’s mother had gone through, including three in Sai Gon, one in the Mekong Delta, and one in a refugee camp in Malaysia. Together, we close read not only the dialogue, such as comparing Thi’s wafting, soft “no,” to Dana’s complete paragraph, hard “no” in *Kindred*, but also noting that the “dried blood” background color of the panels comment on the many levels of blood labor women perform in both novels—they respectively shed their own blood to keep their family’s alive, while working to preserve the connections that keep family bloodlines intact.

The novel triggered many personal responses and recollections from our students. For example, one student came to my office hour to tell me the story of his grandfather who was in China at the end of World War II. The experience of Thi’s parents with the Vietnamese communists reminded him of the dangers his grandfather faced as the communists came to power, and how his grandfather, sympathetic to the nationalists of Chang Kai-shek, was forced to flee to Taiwan. Here, the student perceptively noted how Thi’s sense of peace while “swimming” through her apartment as a child matches her father’s peaceful swim in his grandfather’s pond, and his later swim to the Malaysian shore that saves his life.

Further, the depictions of American ignorance and racism, especially in the episode in which Nam is called “gook” and spat on by an American teenager, recalled to the student his own experiences hearing questions about his martial arts expertise and asking how he could be Chinese if he is so tall. The student said that his experience helped him understand the many cultural and emotional strands woven into the complicated phrase following the insult to her father Nam: “there were reasons to not want to be anything OTHER [than American?]” (67). He finally noted how ironic the Pledge of Allegiance became—particularly, the word “indivisible”—when any difference is persecuted and others are not welcome to join the fabric of the nation.

This student’s identification with people in the text touches on another issue explore by the class: cultural trauma. Cultural
trauma represents the disruption in cultural continuity that compromises our ability to make meaningful connections to and find value in our communities, families, and selves. We tried to create a coherent learning experience for the students by analyzing the efforts of Thi to create a coherent understanding of herself, her family, and her community. Part of this occurs through her use of various forms of historical recording: oral histories, books, films, and newspaper and magazine articles and images. We compared Thi’s efforts to weave together the history of her ancestors with Dana’s attempt to do the same thing in *Kindred*. We also compared their survival tactics, the ways they affiliated themselves with allies, how they learned to adapt to changing and threatening living conditions, and how they outsmarted oppressors.

At the same time, we considered how Thi traced personal history backwards through the births of her siblings and the larger history of the Indochina and Vietnam War(s) by talking with her father, watching videos, and reading books in the drawings that make up this graphic novel. Here, we introduced students to basic concepts of the form such as the use of gutters, the space between panels in a graphic novel. Indeed, we spent quite some time analyzing how the gutters worked to force the reader to do the same work Thi was doing in making connections and creating continuity between disparate moments in her past and in our history. We contrasted the gutters separating moments of her experience in childbirth with the lack of gutters in her depiction of a key moment when she identifies with her father, the paired images of her first day in New York City with his first day in Sai Gon.

Thi’s telling of her father’s story of survival and her difficult attempt to connect it to her own experiences brought us to another theme related to cultural trauma, specific to immigrants: How do the survival strategies of one generation become the liabilities and threats of another generation? We had seen something like this dangerous anachronism in *Kindred*, when Dana’s comment has the sudden realization that “my squeamishness belonged in another age.” Thi’s parents teach her and her sisters to take care of one another, but they also give “unintended” lessons that “come from their unexorcised demons” (295). Thi negotiates a moment of conflicting values when she listens to her mother’s story. She has a difficult time not judging her mother, and is not all that surprised when her mother stops telling Thi her history and starts to tell Thi’s husband Travis stories about her growing up in Vietnam as a daughter of privilege who tried to negotiate a complicated re-
relationship to the French colonizers. This triangulation of speech—Thi’s mother telling her story to Thi through Travis—helps Thi to suspend her judgment and hear her mother’s story, and it helps Thi’s mother to tell the story freely. In fact, students discussed the mother’s storytelling and Thi’s storytelling as parallel acts of healing the rifts that divide mother and daughter, the family, and the community.

The Best We Could Do
Steven Khang Duong

Steven Khang Duong is a second-year undergraduate student at UCLA, majoring in Business Economic and double minor in Labor and Workplace Studies and Public Policy. Involved with other student leaders of color at UCLA, he aims to apply his academic knowledge to help bring equity to underrepresented communities on and off campus.

The refugee narrative is always a difficult one to recount and talk about, even for second-generation Vietnamese Americans, most of whom, like myself, are children to refugee parents. A lot of modern Vietnamese history is taught through a Westernized lens, through textbooks that come nowhere close to capturing the raw emotions that accompany the displacement, exile, and struggle for survival that victims of the Vietnam War experienced. For most people, those “victims” are labeled as political refugees. But for me, they are also my parents, my Mom and Dad. That is why the Vietnamese American narrative is an incredibly personal one. Trauma does not easily fade, and, as a result, it is often difficult for my parents and other refugees to talk about their pasts. Therefore, growing up, I never really had a grasp as to what it meant to be Vietnamese, to have a unique ethnic identity that meant more than what is conveyed in the textbooks.

As such, it made me truly curious when I found out that UCLA’s Common Book this year, Thi Bui’s The Best We Could Do, was a graphic novel.

I wondered how Bui, a Vietnamese American herself, would utilize this unique medium to portray our people’s journey to the United States, the journey to rebuild life anew, to reconcile cultures and histories, to discover and comprehend our identities. In fact, I finished reading the novel a few weeks after receiving a copy. Her story hits home hard, touching me to the core. Bui employs her beautiful artistic style and first-person perspec-
tive to weave together a cohesive story that started only as fragment-
ment oral accounts, or in her words, as stories “with no begin-
ning or end—anecdotes without shape.” She captured so vividly
the fear, sadness, and pain of refugees, and how that trauma has
manifested itself over time and over generations.

Furthermore, despite “turning popular opinion in America
against the war,” Bui explains that “a lot of Americans forget that
for the Vietnamese...the war continued.” Even now, America
tends to forget and disconnect itself from its history with the
Vietnamese. We are often clumped under the umbrella terms
like Asian or Model Minority, and many people do not care to
seriously learn about or comprehend our unique history and ex-
periences.

For this reason, I see it as a very unique occasion and op-
portunity that *The Best We Could Do* is this year’s Common Book
for UCLA. Not only do I have the privilege of being a student at
UCLA, but I also am in a special position as a leader in the Viet-
namese Student Union (VSU) to be able to connect and collabo-
rate on this book with UCLA First Year Experience (FYE). Thus,
moving forward, I strive to bring more visibility and clarity to
the real experiences of the Vietnamese community by utilizing
FYE’s support for VSU programs to outreach to a larger, more
engaged UCLA student body. Capitalizing on the conversations
that the Common Book will spark, I intend to carry on this dia-
logue that promotes tolerance, diversity, and cultural apprecia-
tion at UCLA, especially in light of the tense political climate and
divisive rhetoric in our country.

Ultimately, the emotional significance that this book carries
makes me all the more appreciative and excited that *The Best We
Could Do* is this year’s Common Book for UCLA. Simply having
read the book inspires me to start more conversations with my
parents, not solely to understand them better, but also to help
me establish a stronger connection with my ethnicity and cul-
ture—integral components of my identity as a first-generation
Vietnamese American student. The fact that others in the UCLA
community can share in this experience further motivates me to
continue sharing the story that Thi Bui so eloquently narrates,
one of tenacity and resilience—the story of the Vietnamese refu-
gee community.
Reading *The Best We Could Do* led me further reflect on my relationship with my parents. My mom has told me multiple times throughout my life that I should be thankful that I am in America. Life in Vietnam meant wearing the same few pairs of underwear, walking on dirt roads to school, and sharing a room the size of our current living room with eight other people—and so I should consider having my own room a luxury. My dad told me about losing his eldest sister on one of the boat rides to Hong Kong, and that was the only time I had ever heard him cry. These are the few tidbits about their life back in Vietnam that I know—my understanding of it is a little disjointed and incomplete. They never really sat me down to tell me stories. Maybe it’s because they do not want to relive the past, or maybe they really just do not remember all that well.

Unfortunately, just asking “Tell me about life in Vietnam” doesn’t work for me. As Thi Bui writes, it takes learning how to ask the right questions, some gentle poking and prodding, to spill a story or a feeling out of them. I can also relate to the frustration Bui feels when she asks her mom about Vietnam, which her mom only briefly humors her with before switching the subject to something else, like what to eat for dinner. Why does Bui’s mom want to talk about dinner when so much has not been shared between them? More specific to my experience, why does my mom want to nag me about my persistent acne as a way to “show that she cares”?

I think a lot about how refugee and immigrant parents and their children show their care for each other. On one hand, there’s me: a second-generation American who speaks fluent English, watches families on TV who openly fight, forgive, and affirm each other. My idea of love and care is mutual self-disclosure of inner thoughts and feelings. It makes me feel close to the person because we are vulnerable enough to trust each other. However, I feel like...
I am imposing a family dynamic that doesn’t quite fit with my own family’s particular history and circumstances, because love and care in my family does not quite operate that way. My mom likes to cook and clean for me, locate things around the house for me when I need them to make sure I am prepared—practical acts of service that she willingly sacrifices time and effort for in order to make my life easier. I am a little ashamed to admit that I didn’t interpret this as an act of love and care until only recently. Instead, I focused a lot on her comments on my physical appearance and other superficial matters. I understand her intent. She wants me to be accepted, to fit in and succeed; society does reward beauty after all. But it still hurts when it seems like she only notices my outward appearance and not my inner qualities.

While Bui’s refugee reflex is the ability to run in a crisis, I think my mom’s refugee reflex is to create as much stability and security as possible. She is frugal with money, accumulates more reusable containers than necessary, and frequently cautions me from staying out too late. I wonder how she imagined her future when she was young—whether this is what she wanted and whether she is happy with her current life. I wonder how much of herself she sacrificed to provide this for my siblings and me, and whether she thinks it’s worth it. That’s a common thing that children of immigrants and refugees wonder about their parents. What did they have to go through to provide for us, and how can we make it up to them? How do we make them proud?

I hope that *The Best We Can Do*, as UCLA’s Common Book this year, inspires humanizing and critical conversations about parenthood and immigration. While the story is undoubtedly a story about Vietnamese refugees, I think *The Best We Can Do* is also ultimately about the relationship between parents and children, and how we can learn to love each other despite difficult pasts and not-so-ideal presents. That is something anyone, regardless of their background, can learn from and relate to.

I think you can feel how much I am speculating while you are reading this. I used a few “I wonder” and maybes, and it’s because I am not really sure where my mom stands about all this. *The Best We Could Do* helps me believe that it is possible for to dig out my parents’ stories in order to understand them more as people.
Feeling Unsteady

The Effects of Ethnic Stereotyping and Cultural Obligation in Academia

Angela Rose David

Angela Rose David is a fourth-year undergraduate student at UCLA studying Physiological Science with specialties in Public Health and Spanish Community and Culture. Through interdisciplinary research that explores the intersection between modern healthcare and cultural practice, she intends to investigate how factors like advancing biomedical technology, cultural tradition, community perspectives, and socionormative expectations affect health standards and contribute to individual and global growth and success.

“You’re smart, but there are thousands of Asians like you. Some things just aren’t possible.”

A year ago, I had sought advice from my departmental advisor regarding my desire to pursue medical school after graduation. She was a tough, uncompromising woman, but nothing could have prepared me for her curt, culturally-biased rejection. Race, gender, and sexuality are not easy topics to discuss, and building relationships amidst diversity can be a challenge. However, diversity in thought and background is essential for any student because such contrasts shatter complacency and challenge the status quo.

I bring up my advisor’s comment not to reveal her stereotypical thinking, but to emphasize the importance of cultural awareness. Students should not hesitate to share their own struggles with discrimination and conflict because stories engage people at every level—not just in their minds, but in their emotions, values, and imagination as well. Reading this year’s Common Book, The Best We Can Do by Vietnamese novelist Thi Bui, reminded me of my Filipino family’s immigration story, one wrought with similar anguish and loss. Brought up in a land unlike that of my ancestors, I, like Bui, grew up longing to reconnect with my heritage, to rediscover my family roots in hopes that, by building upon the ideals of past generations, I would somehow become more grounded in my individual identity. Bui vocalized what I would also spend countless nights silently pondering: “How much of me is my own, and how much is stamped into my blood and bone, predestined?”

As an American-born child, learning about my heritage was a trial-and-error process. For most of my childhood, I would expe-
rience my Pilipino culture secondhand, understanding empathy from the characters in teleserye romantic comedies and developing political awareness from the 9 o’clock news. It was difficult, and at the time, the cultural gaps in my mind resembled chasms. But despite this, a feeling welled within me to push forward, until at 13, I began spending my summers trekking through my ancestral country’s countless islands and cities, rather than on my couch. Each new trip allowed me moments of introspection. Vacations with extended family turned annual visits into moments of collaboration and teamwork. This teamwork led to trust, trust to caring, caring to empathy; eventually, I understood the satisfaction of helping others. Life with my family, whether in blood or in brotherhood, has shaped me. And it is because of their continued presence that I’ve made many of the decisions I have.

Starting college back in 2014, I had no inkling of where I was going, but I always knew where I wanted to end up—home. So I began tailoring my studies to my culture, to what resonated with my childhood. I volunteered with Samahang Pilipino at UCLA and trained as a peer counselor under the SPACE program to assist low-income, at-risk Pilipino students in Los Angeles high schools. While my primary function was academic support, I spent equal time studying the presence of Pilipino Americans in U.S. education and their roles in society. Later, through interdisciplinary research under psychologist Dr. Gail Wyatt that weaved together social, behavioral, and biological sciences, I learned how to examine cultural stigmatization in the healthcare system via topics ranging from HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, to sexual orientation and gender identity, to youth development, to mental health. And as my experience grew, my opportunities expanded from volunteering with minority youth groups and UCLA research teams to conducting my own observational studies as a research assistant at Ronald Reagan Medical Center and the Philippine Municipal Hospital. For two years, I would interact with patients of every race and color. I saw the fear in an expectant mother’s face while shadowing UCLA pediatrician Dr. James Lee, experienced the tedious monotony of redressing beds during my graveyard shifts as part of the janitorial staff, and even witnessed the miracle of death turning into life thanks to the skilled hands of forensic autopsy technician Dr. Jason Major. While each experience was different, studying cultural tradition and global health with individuals of diverse backgrounds has instilled within me curiosity and empathy, virtues that I hoped to instill in others at UCLA.
As a female student-of-color, I have always viewed education as a tool towards personal advancement and community action. And the longer I delved into my varied interests, the more I noticed the consequences of ethnic stereotyping—how small comments, like my advisor’s, that casually devalued individual progress based on factors like heritage and appearance would actually perpetuate long-term underachievement in even the most self-motivated students.

While I’ve always made it a point to infuse cultural awareness in all that I do, it was not until I read The Best We Could Do that I thought to combine my numerous passions into a single purpose. Bui expressed herself through her writing and what transpired was an evocative memoir that beautifully illustrated her journey from forced displacement to self-discovery. Guided by my mentors Professor Elisabeth Nails and Dr. Denise Pacheco, I tapped into the storytelling skills I acquired from their WAC 174A class to develop an original presentation for the 2017 Welcome To BruinLife Showcase. Incorporating aspects of music, spoken word, and dance, I expressed my racial insecurities and pondered my identity as it intertwined with my family’s, framing these feelings of unsteadiness to the song “Unsteady” by the X Ambassadors. I challenged myself to assess my relationships and parental obligations, issues that revealed themselves in my BruinLife performance when I admitted that “Everything I am was my parents, and isn’t it my duty to honor that? / But what if I never find an answer to ‘What do you want to be when you grow up? How do you plan to give back’?”

Standing with my dance team NSU Modern in front of the 9,000+ audience this past September, narrating my journey as a career-driven minority student via a spoken word/dance, was the most terrifying experience of my UCLA career this far. But it was also the most beautiful. By engaging with peers from multiple perspectives—as a student, artist, and future physician—I believe I created an inclusive space for others to reflect on their academic and professional potential. While my revelations and disappointments concerning my ethnicity may not have been as life-altering as Thi Bui’s, I believe my work resonated with hers by presenting our respective audiences an understanding of what it means to be an immigrant, of what it means to be simultaneously uplifted and weighed down by the demanding legacies of our ancestors.

So at the end of the day, yes, I am Asian.

But I’m also so much more than that.
Since that ill-advised meeting with my counselor, I’ve taken steps towards embodying the open-minded attitude, compassion, and diversity that UCLA should seek and expect of its incoming students. Regardless of our individual backgrounds and obligations, we should all strive to create inclusive environments for ourselves and with those we interact. Otherwise, our silence and lack of action merely perpetuates the very acts of discrimination and bias we’ve come to regret. Because, as I told my advisor, “I understand the risks, the fear and vulnerability required, and I accept them. Because these feelings, however unpleasant, serve as proof that I seek more than a good living, that I am striving for more than just living.”