

To Love Them Too

The universal challenges that intergenerational trauma presents barriers to understanding one another. As a Vietnamese refugee family fleeing from the Communist regime, the Bui family carried years of emotional burdens with them to America. Thi Bui shows how it may be hard for children to understand why their parents act the way they do without feeling resentment. Yet as she became older, she was able to reconcile with her parents through the stories of the past that transformed her limited view of them. *In The Best We Could Do*, Thi Bui's transformative journey explores the history and trauma behind her family's past, which leads to understanding and reconciliation. The evolution of Bui's relationship with her father grows with nuance as it shifts away from resentment and characterizes how emotionally difficult but beautiful reconciliation is.

As Bui looks back on her early childhood memories, she remembers being alone with her younger brother and father at home, and how frightening it was. One of the most powerful and nuanced symbols of their dynamic is the evolution of the motif of smoke. The fourth panel of seventy-four associates smokes with her father's anger and his emotional distance, using different elements to highlight the feelings of resentment and an obscured truth. In the panel, the reader cannot see the smoke rising from BỐ's mouth because Bui has illustrated him from behind, an image conveying the author's feeling of being abandoned. This complements the mood of anger and alienation that the surrounding typeface conveys; it is in all caps, extremely condensed, and the brush strokes are rough. The authorial choices characterize BỐ as an inattentive father and someone whom the children feared, one that was metaphorically and shrouded by

smoke and mystery. It is clear that at this point Bui does not have much of a relationship with BỐ, but the fact that smoke can convey an obscured truth implies that there is more to her father than she can see. It foreshadows the potential for their relationship to rebuild but also represents the painful memories and ghosts in the family. In the panel, the smoke physically looms over him, as if it were a constant reminder of the burden he carries. Her experience paints a universal challenge that children have understanding their parents and seeing them realistically, especially in communities that have been affected by intergenerational trauma. Bui had to see him as a child before she could understand the man her father grew up to be. Her initial depiction of her father was distant and cold, but it takes getting to see someone when they are vulnerable to truly understand them. To begin that journey, she had to take the initiative and approach BỐ. By asking the right questions and learning to converse with him in a way that she had avoided, their relationship transformed to include more dialogue and discovery. Bui supports this by how she transforms the form of a panel to indicate emotion and a flashback sequence (93). Her alteration of the border puts her father outside the confines of the panel, indicating how he can finally show someone who he is. The contrast between his white form and the scratchy black background further emphasizes how freeing being able to share this is. The image of BỐ's peaceful expression as he exhales the smoke and releasing his internalized pain supports the artist's transformation of the panel and border. The smoke has transformed as a symbol of her difficult relationship with BỐ to a symbol of reconciliation, taking on a more melancholic but peaceful feeling.

The first story he shares of his early childhood in the coastal port of Hải Phòng, where his family built the street and created a beautiful pond full of fish and shrimp. The pond was so plentiful that one morning, the “deck was covered by hundreds of shrimp that had crawled up overnight “(93). The first panel of BỐ fishing for shrimp has no border and allows the panel to bleed to the edge of the page. There are two effects of this: a borderless panel expresses how free and hopeful BỐ is, but the bleed can indicate the hurt that Bui described pouring out and being uncontained. It highlights the contrast between the innocent little boy and the hurt man he grew to be. The people that can hurt us the most have their own painful stories, and understanding that they are trying their best can alleviate our resentment. His story allows not only for Bui to see how flawed but also how human and vulnerable he is. Being born during WWII and growing up with the First Indochina War exposed him to a childhood of hunger and fear. He recounts one day where he waited all day to eat a small plate of water spinach (106). The second panel bleeds, but the entire panel is saturated with diluted red. It reveals the full extent of his pain, to where the panel has begun to bleed a muted red, remembering distant memories and pains he had not shared for so long. His story documents the transgenerational trauma of colonized peoples and how this historical trauma persists for decades. This allows Bui and the audience to understand why BỐ is the way he is, not because he is a terrible father, but inside of him the hurt little boy never left. Knowing how her father dealt with that trauma as a child helped Bui to connect her traumatic childhood to his and transformed their bond by giving them a shared commonality. Being able to get these experiences from BỐ is evidence of how far their relationship has come for him to show that vulnerability and trust in her.

Bui does not only see her father as a hurt child but grows to see him as a hero as he tells her of how the family left Vietnam for America. In difficult times BỐ stepped up to the challenges and saved his family and so many others. When the family leaves Vietnam, they travel in a boat, but no one knows how to navigate the boat. At one point, the boat was being followed by a patrol of Thai fishing boats, potentially pirates, but he saved everyone on the boat but piloting it until the ship was no longer following them (243). The bleed of the seventh panel highlights the relief and how free it feels but also communicates how they are free from danger. The motion of the boat and the texture of the water has a smoky effect and the jagged brushstrokes that were attributed to the typeface of BỐ's anger reappear as the motion line of the boat and the water level. Bui's inclusion of these elements transforms their initial meaning; the smoke and jagged, rough brushstrokes that she once attributed to her father's anger and emotional distance are now attributed to the heroism he displays. He can have this strength despite all he has lost and what he is leaving behind. The blood-red color of the sea in comparison to the small boat in the eighth panel, as well as the canted perspective, indicates the danger that always surrounds them. This pervasive nature of peril throughout the entirety of the two panels emphasizes the full extent of his bravery. However, BỐ fell into a long period of depression when they reached America, burdened by his trauma and suffering, and Bui never learns about how her father saved the people on the boat until she became an adult. It is through this respect of his courage that Bui cannot see him as someone that is traumatized but someone strong, albeit flawed. Their relationship has evolved to be one of mutual respect and trust as they reconcile their pain.

Bui's story is one that many families, not just Vietnamese families, face. Her memoir captures the complexity and nuance of transgenerational family trauma. She learns to see the world through a new perspective and finds herself reconciling with her father as she first begins to look back on their memories and reach out to him. Understanding the war, abuse, and hunger her father grew up with gave her the reasons why he is so distant but also why he is so strong. In fostering this dialogue with *Bố*, Bui poses to the reader a story, not of her own family, but all families in our effort to understand our parents and love them better. She challenges the reader to see our families as more than just the caricatures we construct of them during our childhoods.

Word Count: 1,429

Works Cited

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