

COMING TO AMERICA

Thi Bui combines political and personal history in her new graphic memoir

When asked how it feels to have published an illustrated memoir about you and your family's experience as refugees in the U.S., Thi Bui apologizes.

"I just want to apologize for it being required reading," Bui says with a laugh. "I hope that no one thinks it's a drag because they have to read it."

Bui's memoir, *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir*, was required this year for the University of Oregon's first-year students in its Common Reading program. Bui's book brings together historical research as well as her family's experiences as they built new lives in the U.S. after escaping the fall of South Vietnam in the 1970s.

Putting together the book took about 10 years because she worked on it during summer vacations and whenever she could while working as a high school teacher, she says.

Once she got a publishing contract, she took a leap of faith that it would work out and quit teaching full time.

To gather stories about what life in Vietnam was like, Bui interviewed her parents. This meant, for example, asking her parents what it was like hiding from French soldiers during the First Indochina War, from 1946 to 1954.

"There were times where I wanted to stop drawing because it was too heavy," she says.

In fact, when reconstructing one of her father's memo-



ART FROM *THE BEST WE COULD DO* BY THI BUI

ries of the violence soldiers did to villagers during the war, she had to put down her pencil.

"He had some graphic descriptions [of people] doing horrific things," she says. "When I was drawing, I just didn't want to continue. So I stopped."

To put together a complete story about life in South Vietnam, Bui also asked her parents about pleasant memories.

"Childhood is full of other things, like learning how to swim or fond memories of where you went," she says. "I think remembering those things was nice for them and nice for them to share with me, and also kind of necessary for me to stay with the story."

Her illustrated memoir bears some resemblance to such famous graphic novels as *Maus* and *Persepolis* in the sense that it presents a family story set against an historical event.

Bui recalls what she calls "low-brow" comics being just as influential to her. She says she wasn't into collecting or reading comics in the correct order as a child. However, she remembers when her parents brought home a stack of women-centered *Marvel* comics for her from a garage sale. Within that stack, she remembers "a trashy romance" in a future when Amazon warrior women have male slaves.

Don't expect her to use that childhood memory as a launching pad to *Marvel*, though.

"I'm not sure *Marvel* wants me," she says, laughing.

But she is looking at the future for her upcoming projects. She is toying with the idea of writing about climate change and refugees through the idiom of science fiction. ■

Thi Bui will have a live reading 11 am to noon Friday, Feb. 1, at Prince Lucien Campbell Hall, rm. 180. Bui will also have additional events at University of Oregon. Visit commonreading.uoregon.edu for the complete listings.

WAYFAIR HITS THE OREGON TRAIL

Why a Boston-based online furniture business found a home in Springfield

It took nearly a year for Wayfair to decide to move to Springfield. And it took a coalition of the willing to make the pitch: PacificSource, Lane County, Symantec, Business Oregon, the city of Springfield and both Eugene and Springfield Chambers of Commerce.

The Boston-based business announced on Jan. 7 it would have a customer service branch operating in Springfield. Attracting an out-of-state business like Wayfair often requires a slew of tactics. In this case, it took enterprise zones and a grant from Business Oregon with the hopes that Wayfair will invest long-term in the area, though there is some concern.

Despite the taxpayer-funded incentives, Wayfair officials say they're in for the long haul with its westward investment.

Wayfair is an online retailer catering to a broad marketplace of furniture customers looking for a more upscale version of IKEA, says Nathan Lillegard, a University of Oregon business instructor and program manager at Lundquist Center for Entrepreneurship.

"Wayfair has got stuff that's better quality [compared to IKEA]," he says. "Wayfair has got everything from traditional to French country. They have a bunch of styles."

This isn't Wayfair's only customer service branch. In the U.S., the retailer has locations in Utah, Texas and Massachusetts.

Wayfair will be exempt from paying new taxes attributed to new investments since the city approved a three-year deal for Wayfair. Springfield has 11.2 square miles of enterprise zones. The tax abatement is estimated to be less than \$300,000 for all three years of the deal, Amber Fossen, the city's public affairs specialist, said in an email to *Eugene Weekly*.

From 2014 to 2015, when the property wasn't completely utilized, Fossen says that the loss in revenue was nearly \$472,000.

Fossen adds that the new jobs could result in \$20 mil-

lion each year in new wages in the county.

Bob Warren, a former field agent for Business Oregon and an *EW* columnist, says enterprise zones are pushed by the state. Enterprise zones exempt businesses from paying local property taxes on new investments for a period of time.

Enterprise zones were created initially for rural areas to compete with urban economic zones, he says.

The state decides on the locations of enterprise zones, Warren says. Enterprise zones impact how much is collected in local property taxes, though the increased income taxes that would come from new jobs from a business like Wayfair would go to the state through income taxes.

To overcome the tax-base loss, cities and counties bank on new employees spending money locally or buying homes. Considering call center wages, the latter most likely won't happen, he says.

Wayfair's presence could push call center wages upward to attract workers from other call centers in the area. Lane County already has a low unemployment rate: 4.3 percent, according to the most recent count by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

If Wayfair offers an hourly wage of \$15, for example, other call center employees could use that as leverage to get raises from their current employers, Lillegard says.

Officials from Wayfair declined to disclose how much it would pay employees. Pete Boudreaux, Wayfair's director of sales and service, says the company will offer health insurance, stock benefits and a "fun place" to work.

In addition, Wayfair will provide opportunities to advance one's career, he adds.

Business Oregon offered Wayfair a \$400,000 grant on the basis that it must develop an internship program and employ 600 people at its Springfield location.

To offer Wayfair this money, Business Oregon used its Strategic Reserve Fund, a discretionary tool adminis-

tered by the organization and funded by lottery dollars, says Nathan Buehler, a spokesperson for Business Oregon. Buehler adds that the allocation of this tool is vetted within Business Oregon and then Gov. Kate Brown signs off on it.

A past *EW* investigation ("Big Corporate Handouts with Little Oversight," Sept. 20, 2018) showed that officials didn't verify companies' jobs claims necessary to receive its subsidies. Business Oregon is responsible for checking Wayfair's employment data and to conduct a financial review to check if it's keeping its promise, Buehler says.

Fossen adds that the city of Springfield will also be responsible for providing oversight of Wayfair.

Wayfair doesn't know what its internship program in Springfield will look like, only that it will be focused on customers, Boudreaux says. The internship is part of a public benefit requirement in the grant as a way to create more opportunities for underrepresented groups, Buehler says. He adds that Wayfair has a 70 percent internal promotion rate at its East Coast headquarters.

Warren says when he worked at Business Oregon in the past, these grants were often written with the understanding that the requirements would be easily met. In fact, he says that he would meet with companies and design the requirements together to ensure the business would meet them.

Whenever businesses didn't meet the criteria, he says that large portions of the grants were forgiven, allowing a small portion to be a loan.

If the business met 75 percent of employment goals, for example, the business would only pay 25 percent of the loan.

Warren says he feels confident in the investment from Wayfair, though. He says call center jobs offer great skill-sets for those who may not have them.

Boudreaux reassures that Wayfair is here for the long run. He says the business is still committed in other states it's invested in. And, since Wayfair is looking to stay, the company wants to be a place where employees have a sense of loyalty.

"We want long-term employees," he says. "Based on what we've seen in Eugene and heard from local community leaders, we believe this is a location where we can do that." ■