

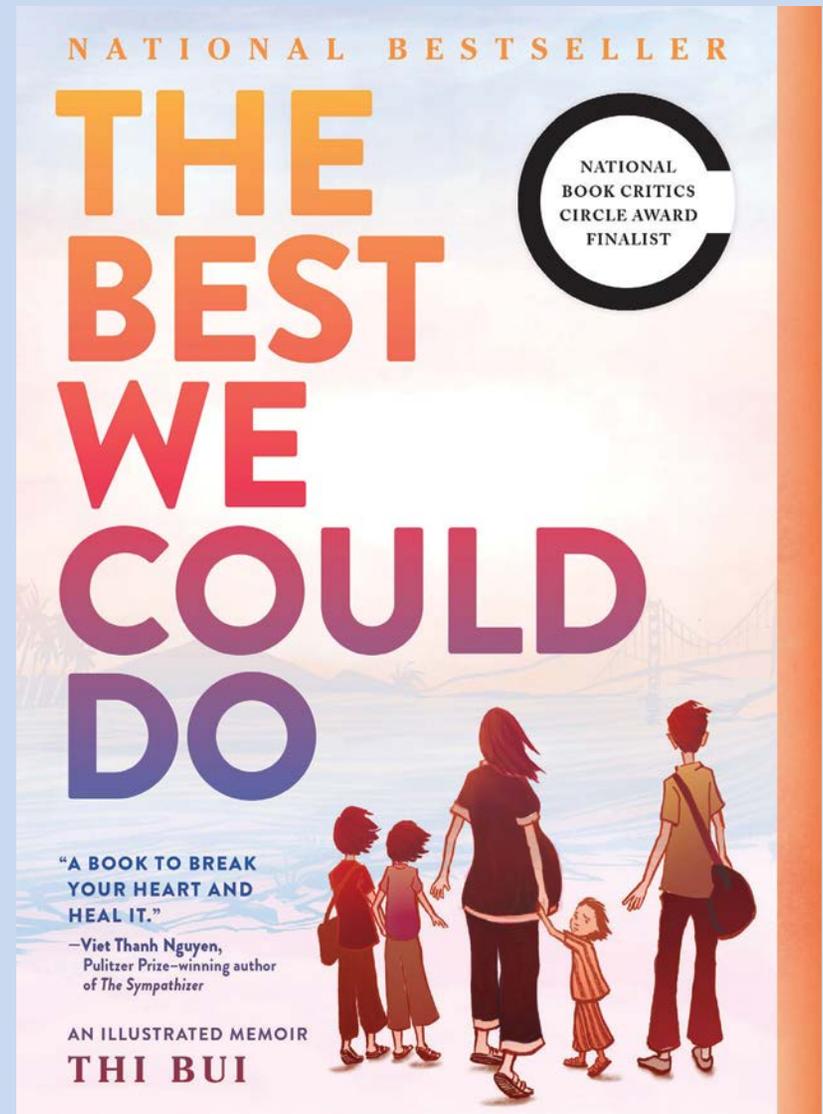


## NEA Big Read and DCA's *Big Read: Los Angeles Initiative*

The NEA Big Read, a partnership between the National Endowment for the Arts and Arts Midwest, broadens our understanding of our world, our neighbors, and ourselves through the power of a shared reading experience. Showcasing a diverse range of themes, voices, and perspectives, the NEA Big Read aims to inspire meaningful conversations, artistic responses, and new discoveries and connections in each community.

The NEA Big Read provides support to selected nonprofit organizations around the country to host dynamic, community-wide reading programs each year. As one of the recurring grant recipients receiving its 14th annual award in 2021–2022, the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) supports the Los Angeles Public Library in hosting reading and discussion groups as well as community reading programs for DCA's *Big Read: Los Angeles* initiative. Together, the two agencies create opportunities to explore the issues that are relevant to our lives with each year's book selection.

To learn more about DCA's 2021–2022 *Big Read: Los Angeles* initiative, please visit [culturela.org](http://culturela.org).



## Reading Guide

## About the Book and Author

Thi Bui's debut graphic memoir, *The Best We Could Do*, is the story of her family in the years before, during and after the Việt Nam War. It was selected for an American Book Award, a Common Book for UCLA and other colleges and universities, a National Book Critics Circle finalist and was an Eisner Award finalist. Her memoir was included in Bill Gates' Top 5 Books of 2017 and was called, "A book to break your heart and heal it," by Pulitzer Prize-winner Viet Thanh Nguyen.



A veteran illustrator, Bui's short comics can be found online at *The Nib*, *PEN America* and *BOOM California*. She is a contributor to *Refugees Anthology*, published by Abrams Press, and illustrated *A Different Pond*, a 2018 Caldecott Honor Book, with writer Bao Phi. With her son, Hien, she co-illustrated the children's book, *Chicken of the Sea* written by Viet Thanh Nguyen and his son, Ellison.

This uplifting book and its themes will deeply resonate with Angelenos and mirror the experiences of the diverse immigrant population of the Los Angeles area.



John F. Szabo  
City Librarian

**The Los Angeles Public Library is excited to share this year's NEA Big Read selection**, the award-winning bestselling graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui. As a heartwarming recounting of the Vietnamese refugee experience, this story and artwork connect deeply with so many of us in Los Angeles. Bui's ability to examine the multi-generational violence and political upheaval of Việt Nam will resonate with so many others who have gone through a similar refugee experience, regardless of where they came from.

*The Best We Could Do* is a first-hand account of three generations of Thi Bui's family as they journey from Việt Nam into the United States; readers are offered a window into the anguishing experience of immigration as Thi's family moves first from North Việt Nam to the South, then into refugee camps, before finally settling into the United States.

Specifically, this book illustrates the successes and sacrifices of immigrants and refugees that have come to the United States and I give a huge shoutout to all those who call Los Angeles home. In particular I'd like to recognize the Vietnamese community and others impacted by the Việt Nam War, through programs celebrating this book as well as honoring the strength and beauty that their resilience and diversity brings to Los Angeles. We invite you to visit one of our 73 libraries across Los Angeles and engage in all the resources the library has to offer: books, citizenship classes, tutoring and so much more.

Books, and this one especially, expand minds and change the world by letting us experience and gain perspective; I hope you find this book as moving and inspiring as I have.



**Bích Ngọc Cao**

*President, Board of Library Commissioners*

**As the first in my family to be born in the United States,**

I grew up as an American citizen who happened to be raised as an immigrant. We lived within my family's Vietnamese refugee bubble, wherein my parents conducted business and socialized almost entirely in their native tongue. Vietnamese was my first language, though by kindergarten I had gleaned enough English from TV and books to start thinking and dreaming in English. But there was no language for me to process the postwar trauma and pain that flowed through my parents' veins into mine.

As a child, I asked my parents about the Việt Nam War and what life was like for them growing up as teenagers and young adults. They told me about poverty, fear, oppression and reeducation camps. I learned that my father had been principal at a school until he was demoted by the Communist government for refusing to join the party. Eventually, he couldn't work at all. I asked about their perilous fishing boat journey to Hong Kong and what it was like living in a refugee camp there and in the Philippines. I asked a lot of questions and received mostly unsatisfactory, partial answers, because as it turns out, traumatized people struggle to share what they've experienced.

I asked them if any boat refugees had shared their stories in English. Their answer was no, and it remained so until books such as *The Best We Could Do* were released in recent years. I wept through my first reading of this graphic memoir in 2018, partly because it was the first time I'd read a story similar to my family's written in English, and partly because the story was presented so beautifully with illustrations.

I'm thrilled that the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and the Los Angeles Public Library selected *The Best We Could Do* for this year's Big Read: Los Angeles initiative. Though the story focuses on one Vietnamese family, its themes are universal and will resonate with many Angelenos whose families arrived here from all over the world. I hope that our library's readers will see themselves in this story too.



**Oil tanker rescues "Boat People"**

Photographer Unknown/Shades of L.A. Collection/Los Angeles Public Library

# Reading Group Questions

1. In the preface to the book, Bui notes that *The Best We Could Do* originally began as a project of transcribing her family's "oral histories." What is lost and what is gained by transforming an oral history into a written one? If you were to begin a record of your own family's histories, how might you choose to begin?
2. *The Best We Could Do* spans several decades and three generations. How does Bui convey the passing of time? How does she convey memory? How does she identify speakers or storytellers?



*The Best We Could Do*, p. 30

3. In an interview with *The Mary Sue*, Bui spoke about her choices of color in the book. "I tried out blue, but I felt like there's a certain kind of blue that just reads as graphic novel blue. Also, it didn't work with the way the story felt with me so I tried a few different shades of brown and I finally found just the right shade." What did you think of Bui's choice of brown? How do you think it affected your reading experience? Did you notice anything about the ways Bui used color or shading to evoke a scene? Can you think of any colors in your own life that evoke clear associations or emotions?
4. When visiting her family's old apartment in Sài Gòn as an adult, the author finds herself "documenting in lieu of remembering" (p. 180). What do you think is the difference between "documenting" and "remembering"? Which do you think the book is doing?
5. Throughout the book, language plays a major role: whether the colonial French language taught to Bui's parents in school, the Vietnamese language of her birth, the Malay language spoken at the refugee camp in Pulau Besar, or the English language in which the book is primarily written. In what ways does this multilingualism affect your experience as a reader? Why do you think Bui chose to translate certain moments

in the text to English, while leaving others untranslated? How would you describe your own relationship to the language or languages that you speak?

6. *The Best We Could Do* opens with a timeline of the history of Việt Nam, focusing on the period of war from 1945 to 1975. Why do you think the author chose to preface the book with a timeline? Are there any dates on the timeline that are referenced in the book? Can you point to those moments?



*The Best We Could Do*, p. 294

7. Birth and pregnancy play a prominent role throughout the book, which begins and ends with the birth of Bui's son. "It was important for me to bookend this story with a very typical experience, a pretty universal and archetypal entryway," Bui shared in an interview with *Brooklyn Magazine*. "Physical experiences have always been humbling experiences because they put you back in your body and help you connect with other people." Did you find the opening scenes to be effective in this way? Can you point to any other moments of the book where physical experiences are used to "put you back in your body," or to ground the reader? Were they effective?
8. Over the course of the book, there is only one moment when Bui incorporates real photos (of her family at a UN refugee camp in Malaysia, p. 267). Why do you think she chose to use real photos here? After spending the greater part of the book without the incorporation of photos or found documents, what is their effect?
9. At the end of the book, Bui writes: "But when I look at my son, now ten years old, I don't see war and loss...or even Travis and me. I see a new life, bound with mine, quite by coincidence, and I think maybe he can be free" (p. 328–329). How does Bui's relationship with her son change over the course of the book? What about her relationship with her parents? How does her understanding of parenthood change? Her understanding of childhood?



*The Best We Could Do*, p. 92

For more information, visit  
[arts.gov/initiatives/nea-big-read/best-we-could-do-illustrated-memoir](https://www.arts.gov/initiatives/nea-big-read/best-we-could-do-illustrated-memoir)



Vietnamese refugees arriving

Security Pacific National Bank Collection/Los Angeles Public Library



Vietnamese rally

Dean Musgrove/Herald Examiner Collection/Los Angeles Public Library

# The Asian American Experience of the American Việt Nam War

Vi Thục Hà, *Senior Librarian, International Languages Department*

Shirley Ly, *Children's Librarian, Lincoln Heights Branch*

Lynn Nguyễn, *Young Adult Librarian, Chinatown Branch*

**There is no universal immigration experience for those of us who identify as Asian American.** Various factors can affect this experience — when you or your ancestor arrived, U.S. culture at that time, the person's level of education, and the historical events in the home country. These factors, which can include traumas, lead to different experiences between different communities. Furthermore, the experience of becoming an American can change family structures, life standards, and emotional responses which can affect generations.

This ongoing generational challenge, when it is adverse and impacts generations, is called intergenerational trauma. As refugees, the trauma of being displaced from their homelands and of migration can lead to lifelong effects. Trauma from the first generation can affect the health of future generations; negative effects can range from psychiatric symptoms to poor coping skills.

Understanding intergenerational trauma, especially as it relates to refugees, gives a structure to see the suffering of the previous generation and how it impacts the lives of later generations. Parents or grandparents may be unable or unwilling to talk about their own experiences and as a result, children and grandchildren may have difficulty thriving in their daily lives. Being able to understand these experiences can potentially allow communities to heal themselves.

Knowing that not all Asian Americans experience these traumas similarly makes it important that communities share their experiences in coming to the United States. For this year's Big Read, with its focus on the American Việt Nam War, the Los Angeles Public Library has expanded our program focus to include Cambodia, Laos, the Hmong and Việt Nam diaspora.

The American Việt Nam War is just one chapter in a century-long conflict for self-rule for Việt Nam, Cambodia, Laos, and the Hmong. During the French colonial period (1887–1954), these countries, along with their indigenous populations, were referred to as French Indochina and the fighting from 1946 to 1954 is called the First Indochina War.

In July 1954, the signing of the Geneva Accords in Switzerland marked the end of French colonial rule. French Indochina was divided along traditional and political borders: Việt Nam was temporarily separated into two zones — a northern zone governed by the Việt Minh (later the communist Democratic Republic of Việt Nam) and a southern zone governed by the democratic State of Việt Nam; the Kingdom of Cambodia; and the Kingdom of Laos. During this time period, in fear of religious and political persecution, there was a mass exodus by northern Vietnamese into the South.

The war fought from 1955 until the Fall of Sài Gòn in 1975 is called the American Việt Nam War or the Second Indochina War and is taught in the United States as an international conflict involving the Americans, the Soviets, the Chinese. Much has been documented within American culture of the American experience of the Việt Nam War. More is coming to light now, such as “The Secret War in Laos”, which involved the CIA-funded recruitment of Hmong fighters along with the ecological and humanitarian devastation in Việt Nam, Cambodia and Laos due to the largest aerial bombardment in world history.

After the withdrawal of American troops in 1975, the Third Indochina War began, a continuation of the armed conflict between Việt Nam, Cambodia, Laos and neighboring countries. During this time, Pol Pot led the Khmer Rouge in the genocide of millions of Cambodians; the indigenous Cham and other minority communities were among those singled out for persecution. Fighting continued until the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991 that ended the Cambodian and Vietnamese conflict.

Immigration from this area into the United States has come in three major waves. The first influx started immediately at the end of the war in 1975, with people being directly evacuated by planes. The second and largest influx was from 1975 to the 1980s, when approximately 2 million people, commonly known as “boat people”, took a treacherous ocean voyage to Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Hong Kong into refugee camps to apply for resettlement into Western countries. Starting in the mid-1980s and continuing to this day is the third wave of immigration, where there are fewer refugees entering, more political prisoners and children of American servicemen coming in and more family-based immigration.

As part of this year's Big Read program series, the Los Angeles Public Library will be hosting programs on these topics of immigration, culture, and intergenerational trauma with representation from the Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian and the Hmong communities.

As children of Vietnamese refugees, it is exciting for us to extend the American experience to include our community's experiences through books such as *The Best We Could Do* so that people can further understand Vietnamese culture, the horrors of war and the difficulty of being a refugee.

## Learn Some Vietnamese!



*The Best We Could Do, p. 37*

### Greetings

Xin chào. (Sin chow) / **Hello.**

Chào buổi sáng. (Chow boy sang) /  
**Good morning.**

Chào buổi chiều. (Chow boy cheeh) /  
**Good afternoon.**

Chào buổi tối. (Chow boy toy) /  
**Good evening.**

Chúc ngủ ngon. (Chooch nu ngon) /  
**Good night.**

Khoẻ không? (Kweah kohng) /  
**How are you?**

Khoẻ, cảm ơn. (Kweah, gam uhnh) /  
**I'm fine, thank you.**

### Goodbyes

Tạm biệt. (Tam bee-et) / **Bye.**

Tạm biệt nhé. (Tam bee-et nhe) /  
**Bye for now.**

Hẹn gặp lại. (He gap lie) /  
**See you later.**

### General Phrases

Làm ơn. (Lam urn) / **Please.**

Cảm ơn. (Cam on) / **Thank you.**

Không có gì. (Comb caw zee) /  
**You're welcome.**

Không sao. (Comb saow) / **No problem.**

Xin lỗi. (Sin loh-e) / **Excuse me. /  
Sorry.**

Vâng. (Van) or Dạ. (Ya) / **Yes.**

Vâng is used for 'yes' in the northern  
Vietnamese dialect. Dạ is used for  
'yes' in the Southern dialect.

Không. (Comb) / **No.**

### Addressing Others

In Vietnamese, there are different  
ways to address people depending  
on their gender and age in relation  
to the person addressing them.

Tôi (Thoye) / **I**

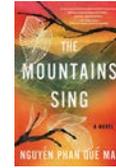
Bạn (Ban) / **You (around similar age  
to the person addressing them)**

Em (Em) / **You (Female/Male junior)**

Anh (An) / **You (Male and older)**

Chị (Chi) / **You (Female and older)**

## Suggested Books and Films



### **The Mountains Sing** by Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai

This novel tells an enveloping,  
multigenerational tale of the  
Tran family, set against the  
backdrop of the Việt Nam War.



### **Last Days in Vietnam**

This Academy-award  
nominated documentary  
traces the chaos and upheaval  
of the final hours of the Việt  
Nam War through the eyes  
of key witnesses to the Fall  
of Sài Gòn.



### **The Refugees** by Viet Thanh Nguyen

A collection of stories, written  
over a twenty-year period,  
examines the Vietnamese  
experience in America as well  
as questions of home, family,  
and identity.



### **The Vietnam War**

A documentary 10 years in the  
making. *The Vietnam War* is a  
10-part American television  
series written by Geoffrey C.  
Ward and directed by Ken  
Burns and Lynn Novick.



Resettlement of Vietnamese refugees

Conrad Mercurio/Herald Examiner Collection/Los Angeles Public Library

# Events

For all Los Angeles Public Library Big Read programs, visit [lapl.org/big-read](http://lapl.org/big-read).

## Thi Bui in Conversation with LeUyen Pham

**Saturday, April 30, 1 p.m.**

Join Thi Bui, author of this year's NEA Big Read book, *The Best We Could Do*, in conversation with children's book illustrator and writer LeUyen Pham.

## History of the International Refugee Committee

**Friday, May 6, 1 p.m.**

Learn about the history of the International Refugee Committee and their work in supporting refugee resettlement that started with the Vietnam War.

## Art and Healing After Genocide: A Conversation with Boreth Ly and Phung X. Huynh

**Saturday, May 7, 1 p.m.**

An intergenerational panel discussion on the conflict in Cambodia, how it affected Cambodians and refugees, and the role of arts and culture in the healing process.

## Conversation with Andrea Nguyen

**Saturday, May 14, 1 p.m.**

Explore Vietnamese cooking with cookbook author Andrea Nguyen and learn to make nước chấm.

## Nguyen Tran's Favorite Viet Foods

**Saturday, May 14, 4 p.m. (Zoom)**

Learn more about Vietnamese food with this action-packed variety show from the chef/owner of Starry Kitchen and author Nguyen Tran. To reserve your space, please email [bigread@lapl.org](mailto:bigread@lapl.org).

All programs listed, except where noted, will be streamed live on the library's YouTube and Facebook pages.

## U.S. Citizenship Process

**Friday, May 20, 1 p.m.**

Come learn about the U.S. Citizenship process from the International Refugee Committee.

## Meet Cynthia Thái Doanh Doanh

**Saturday, May 21, 1 p.m.**

Listen to Cynthia Thai (Thái Doanh Doanh) talk about her experiences as a second generation Vietnamese American singing in Vietnamese and her family's experiences publishing Sài Gòn Times and the creation of the Boat People memorial.

## Hmong Culture Showcase

**Saturday, May 21, 2:30 p.m.**

Learn more about Hmong traditions.

## Meet Laos Angeles

**Saturday, May 21, 4 p.m.**

Learn about Lao culture and listen to stories from the diaspora.

## Intergenerational Trauma

**Saturday, May 28, 1 p.m. (Zoom)**

Stacey Ma Dubois of the Los Angeles County Mental Health Department will talk about intergenerational trauma and how it has impacted Asian American refugees. To reserve your space, please email [bigread@lapl.org](mailto:bigread@lapl.org).

## Zine Making with Simon Tran (Ghost Ghost Teeth)

**Saturday, May 28, 4 p.m. (Zoom)**

Discover a zine making program that is focused on telling our family stories, the immigration experience and creating a cool zine to share with your friends! To reserve your space, please email [bigread@lapl.org](mailto:bigread@lapl.org).

# Los Angeles Public Library Locations

## Angeles Mesa

2700 W. 52nd St. (323) 292-4328

## Arroyo Seco\*

6145 N. Figueroa St. (323) 255-0537

## Ascot

120 W. Florence Ave. (323) 759-4817

## Atwater Village

3379 Glendale Blvd. (323) 664-1353

## Baldwin Hills

2906 S. La Brea Ave. (323) 733-1196

## Benjamin Franklin

2200 E. First St. (323) 263-6901

## Donald Bruce Kaufman - Brentwood

11820 San Vicente Blvd. (310) 575-8273

## Cahuenga

4591 Santa Monica Blvd. (323) 664-6418

## Canoga Park

20939 Sherman Way (818) 887-0320

## Central Library

630 W. 5th St. (213) 228-7000

## Chatsworth

21052 Devonshire St. (818) 341-4276

## Chinatown

639 N. Hill St. (213) 620-0925

## Cypress Park

1150 Cypress Ave. (323) 224-0039

## Will & Ariel Durant

7140 W. Sunset Blvd. (323) 876-2741

## Eagle Rock

5027 Caspar Ave. (323) 258-8078

## Echo Park

1410 W. Temple St. (213) 250-7808

## Edendale

2011 W. Sunset Blvd. (213) 207-3000

## El Sereno

5226 S. Huntington Dr. (323) 225-9201

## Encino - Tarzana

18231 Ventura Blvd. (818) 343-1983

## Exposition Park - Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune\*

3900 S. Western Ave. (323) 290-3113

## Fairfax

161 S. Gardner St. (323) 936-6191

## Felipe de Neve

2820 W. Sixth St. (213) 384-7676

## Granada Hills

10640 Petit Ave. (818) 368-5687

## Harbor City - Harbor Gateway

24000 S. Western Ave. (310) 534-9520

## Frances Howard Goldwyn - Hollywood\*

1623 Ivar Ave. (323) 856-8260

## Hyde Park Miriam Matthews

2205 W. Florence Ave. (323) 750-7241

## Jefferson - Vassie D. Wright Memorial

2211 W. Jefferson Blvd. (323) 734-8573

## John C. Fremont

6121 Melrose Ave. (323) 962-3521

## John Muir

1005 W. 64th St. (323) 789-4800

## Junipero Serra

4607 S. Main St. (323) 234-1685

## Lake View Terrace

12002 Osborne St. (818) 890-7404

## Lincoln Heights

2530 Workman St. (323) 226-1692

## Little Tokyo

203 S. Los Angeles St. (213) 612-0525

## Los Feliz

1874 Hillhurst Ave. (323) 913-4710

## Malabar

2801 Wabash Ave. (323) 263-1497

## Mar Vista

12006 Venice Blvd. (310) 390-3454

## Mark Twain

9621 S. Figueroa St. (323) 755-4088

## Memorial

4625 W. Olympic Blvd. (323) 938-2732

## Mid-Valley\*

16244 Nordhoff St. (818) 895-3650

## North Hollywood Amelia Earhart\*

5211 Tujunga Ave. (818) 766-7185

## Northridge

9051 Darby Ave. (818) 886-3640

## Pacoima

13605 Van Nuys Blvd. (818) 899-5203

## Palisades

861 Alma Real Dr. (310) 459-2754

## Palms - Rancho Park

2920 Overland Ave. (310) 840-2142

## Panorama City

14345 Roscoe Blvd. (818) 894-4071

## Pico Union

1030 S. Alvarado St. (213) 368-7545

## Pio Pico - Koreatown

694 S. Oxford Ave. (213) 368-7647

## Platt

23600 Victory Blvd. (818) 340-9386

## Playa Vista

6400 Playa Vista Dr. (310) 437-6680

## Porter Ranch

11371 Tampa Ave. (818) 360-5706

## Robert Louis Stevenson

803 Spence St. (323) 268-4710

## Robertson

1719 S. Robertson Blvd. (310) 840-2147

## San Pedro\*

931 S. Gaffey St. (310) 548-7779

## Sherman Oaks Martin Pollard

14245 Moorpark St. (818) 205-9716

## Silver Lake

2411 Glendale Blvd. (323) 913-7451

## Studio City

12511 Moorpark St. (818) 755-7873

## Sun Valley

7935 Vineland Ave. (818) 764-1338

## Sunland - Tujunga

7771 Foothill Blvd. (818) 352-4481

## Sylmar

14561 Polk St. (818) 367-6102

## Valley Plaza

12311 Vanowen St. (818) 765-9251

## Van Nuys

6250 Sylmar Ave. (818) 756-8453

## Venice - Abbot Kinney Memorial

501 S. Venice Blvd. (310) 821-1769

## Vermont Square

1201 W. 48th St. (323) 290-7405

## Vernon - Leon H. Washington Jr. Memorial

4504 S. Central Ave. (323) 234-9106

## Washington Irving

4117 W. Washington Blvd. (323) 734-6303

## Alma Reaves Woods - Watts

10205 Compton Ave. (323) 789-2850

## West Los Angeles\*

11360 Santa Monica Blvd. (310) 575-8323

## West Valley\*

19036 Vanowen St. (818) 345-9806

## Westchester - Loyola Village

7114 W. Manchester Ave. (310) 348-1096

## Westwood

1246 Glendon Ave. (310) 474-1739

## Wilmington

1300 N. Avalon Blvd. (310) 834-1082

## Wilshire

149 N. Saint Andrews Pl. (323) 957-4550

## Woodland Hills

22200 Ventura Blvd. (818) 226-0017

## \*Regional Branch