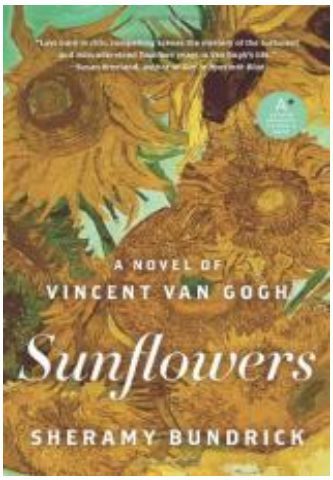
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# Sunflowers

by Sheramy Bundrick




## About the Book

"I'd heard about him but had never seen him, the foreigner with the funny name who wandered the countryside painting pictures."

From a talented new author comes a poignant and haunting novel of creation and desire, passion and madness, art and love.

A young prostitute seeking temporary refuge from the brothel, Rachel awakens in a beautiful garden in Arles to discover she is being sketched by a red-haired man in a yellow straw hat. This is no ordinary artist but the eccentric painter Vincent van Gogh --- and their meeting marks the beginning of a remarkable relationship. He arrives at their first assignation at No. 1, Rue du Bout d'Arles, with a bouquet of wildflowers and a request to paint her --- and before long, a deep, intense attachment grows between Rachel and the gifted, tormented soul.

But the sanctuary Rachel seeks from her own troubled past cannot be found here, for demons war within Vincent's heart and mind. And one shocking act will expose the harsh, inescapable truth about the artist she has grown to love more than life.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** Why do you think the author decided to have Vincent and Rachel meet in a garden? What significance does nature have in the story?

**2.** Perception versus reality is a theme of **Sunflowers**. What perceptions do strangers have about Vincent and Rachel? What perceptions do they have about each other when they first meet? How do their?and other people's?perceptions change as the novel proceeds? Do you feel your perception of van Gogh and his work has changed as a result of reading

the novel?

**3.** When Rachel goes to the Café de la Gare to watch Vincent paint, she expects to see a beautiful picture. Why is she disappointed? Why do you think the author chose to have the first painting Rachel sees be "sinister and brooding"?

**4.** Why is Rachel reluctant to visit Vincent's house/studio at first? How does their relationship change when she does decide to visit? She remains reluctant to pose for him for most of the novel. Why do you think this is? Why does she change her mind?

**5.** Discuss Rachel's reaction when seeing Vincent's painting of sunflowers for the first time. Why does it hold such emotional appeal for her? Have you reacted strongly when seeing a work of art in a museum, whether by van Gogh or another artist? What is your favorite painting by van Gogh, and why?

**6.** Discuss the character of Paul Gauguin, remembering that we see him through Rachel's eyes in the novel. How do Rachel's feelings about Gauguin contrast with Vincent's? Why is she so wary of him? Are her suspicions justified?

**7.** Vincent's mental illness (believed by some scholars today to be bipolar disorder) manifests itself over the course of Gauguin's stay in Arles. Did you see hints of his illness before Gauguin's arrival that Rachel does not notice? What factors made it worsen, do you think?

**8.** How does Rachel cope with the dramatic and tragic events that happen in December 1888 and afterward? Twice in the novel before those events, she refers to girls "braver than I" --- but is she braver than she thinks? Vincent is surprised Rachel continues to stand by him. Were you surprised? Was there ever a point in the story where you feel you'd walk away?

**9.** "Working is the only thing that does me real good," Vincent tells Rachel while he is in the asylum at Saint-Rémy, when she worries he works too hard on his painting. Do you agree? Why is Vincent so driven to create, even when he is most ill?

**10.** Why do you think the author chose letters between characters as a way to communicate key events? Did you find this method effective --- why or why not?

## Author Bio

Sheramy Bundrick is an art historian who teaches at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg.

## Critical Praise

"In a knockout debut novel, art historian Bundrick (**Music and Image in Classical Athens**) brings Vincent Van Gogh?s paintings and personal story to vibrant life. While Bundrick takes many liberties (recorded in an author?s note) in her fictionalized account of Van Gogh?s affair with her narrator, fille de maison Rachel Courteau, she gives Rachel such a

believable voice that the proceedings seem genuine. At 35, Van Gogh meets lovable spitfire Rachel while surreptitiously sketching her in a garden. Having taken refuge in an Arles brothel after the death of her parents, Rachel greets Van Gogh as a customer not long after, and soon feelings blossom between them. Visiting friend Paul Gauguin and the cloud of Van Gogh?s madness undercut the couple?s bliss, as do financial troubles and Rachel?s life at the maison, where she?s kept a virtual prisoner. While infusing well-known historical moments (like Van Gogh?s infamous self-mutilation) with vivid details, humanizing Van Gogh and putting his famous works in context, Bundrick generates an impressive volume of suspense, delight and heartbreak. (Oct.)"

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**Publication Date:** October 13, 2009
**Paperback:** 432 pages
**Publisher:** William Morrow Paperbacks
**ISBN-10:** 0061765279
**ISBN-13:** 9780061765278