



Saving Vincent: A Novel of Jo van Gogh

Joan Fernandez

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A climate of progressive change backdrops a determined widow's efforts in the male-dominated art world in the lovely historical novel Saving Vincent.

In Joan Fernandez's engrossing historical novel *Saving Vincent*, Vincent van Gogh's sister-in-law defies expectations by becoming the artist's devoted promoter.

In 1891, twenty-eight-year-old Jo van Gogh awaits her beloved husband Theo's return from a Utrecht asylum. Suffering from what the doctor refers to as "brain disease," Theo's painful rages resulted in his being brought to the asylum in a straitjacket. Though his prognosis was reportedly improving, Jo is shocked to learn that Theo has died from a seizure. Now widowed with a small son, Jo runs a boardinghouse while raising her son, Vincentje. She is also in possession of a large number of her brother-in-law Vincent's artworks; troubled Vincent died by suicide just months earlier.

As Jo learns more about her brother-in-law through his work and letters, she finds Vincent to be a kindred spirit in his praise of people who work "against the grain." Along with impressionistic historical details of chilly "horses snorting steam as they pulled lurching carriages" and trains "trundling" across fields "dotted with farmers and oxen," the book includes lovely descriptions of Van Gogh's paintings. Jo marvels at Vincent's *The Starry Night*, noting its "cobalt blue night sky" and half-moon with a "lemony white aura," while *The White Orchard* evokes blossoms that seem "to shimmer" in a "warm spring breeze."

Jo's characterization is gradual yet compelling, moving from her sudden widowhood to her later determination to sell and exhibit Vincent's work. She also resolves to change the public's perception of Vincent; at the time of his death, he was regarded as an untalented victim of his own "madness." Jo's venture into the male-dominated realm of art dealers, gallery owners, and museum directors is met with general contempt. Further, Jo feels "trapped" by her patriarchal family and domineering in-laws.

As a parallel to Jo's struggles, the book details late nineteenth-century progressive changes, including demands for improved labor and human welfare practices and the battle for women's rights. This climate moves the plot forward as Jo encounters more freethinking, expansive people. Even her sexual independence is heightened when she pursues a liberating, noncommittal affair with an artist.

A prominent French art dealer, Georges Raulf, adds an element of villainy. The snobbish Georges abhors "repulsive" modernism; his derision for Vincent, Theo, and Jo leads to obsessive, unhinged behavior, as with the bombastic declaration that Jo may "never set foot in Paris again." He is menacing as he threatens to destroy Jo's brother's business reputation. But despite Georges's schemes, Jo leads the story forward with finesse. It is grounded by her passion for Vincent's work and her persistence and exacting pragmatism. Her ultimate hope is that Van Gogh's fame will spread beyond Holland to Paris—and perhaps someday "across the world."

A resolute woman leads the appealing historical novel *Saving Vincent*, about the efforts and evolution of Jo van Gogh-Bonger.

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