



Sunflowers

By Sheramy Bundrick
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Questions for Discussion

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 Caf' 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-Remy, 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?