

Welcome Booklover!



People like us believe books make a difference. We lose sleep to finish a chapter. Bypass girlfriend gossip to read through lunch. Keep a book at all times tucked into our handbag to grab a few precious minutes of reading.

Combine talking about books + Hanging out with booklovers = Priceless Downtime.

To me, that's what book clubs are.

It feels like I've been a member of book clubs forever. Even before they were a thing. Like in a group with other English majors in college.

Then when I lived in NYC with four friends (we convened every month at Dana's on East 102nd St.—most central location). When I moved to the Midwest, a monthly impromptu Zoom club with sister authors (opened my eyes to storytelling techniques like structure, characterization, plot).

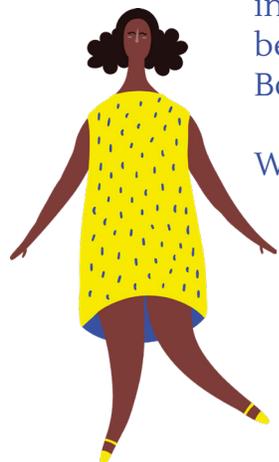
Next, in a new neighborhood, I joined a rollicking 25-member one that springboarded me into belonging. Still another in which we talk about books + movies-made-from-books so, of course, debate which one is better!

All this to say: **Book clubs come in lots of shapes and sizes.**

- If you love spontaneity: There's no wrong way to do a book club.
- If you like being a bit prepared: I have some tips and tricks I've picked up along the way.

Thank you for being interested in my historical fiction, *Saving Vincent, A Novel of Jo van Gogh*. Her true story is largely unknown—you'll read new info in my book—but it deserves to be told and I'm counting on you. What better place to appreciate Jo than in one of my favorite places to hang out: Book clubs!

Warmly,





Reader's Guide Questions



These questions will help guide discussions around the book.

1 After only twenty-one months of a marriage, Jo's husband, Theo, died, leaving her with a one-year-old baby to care for. If you were Jo, how would you feel?

2 While Jo inhabited a woman's world in the late nineteenth century, she aspired to function as an art dealer, a realm reserved for men. Discuss the spheres available to women at the time.

What factors led her to realize she could be a participant?

In what ways is the idea of "women's work" the same or different today?

3 The novel takes place at a unique time in history—the turn of the century—showcasing Europe on the cusp of change with newfound nationalism, a rising middle class due to industrialization, and a developing consciousness of women's and workers' rights.

How does the setting affect the characters?

What role, if any, does it play in shaping their lives?

Does it provide them with opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have?

4 Jo felt a strong duty to ensure her son would receive a valuable inheritance. How does this commitment motivate her decisions and actions?

If you were Jo, what type of commitment would drive you forward?

5 While the world of Jo is grounded in fact, Georges Raulf is a fictional character, an aggregate of the attitudes and objections Jo faced in her pursuit to promote Vincent's work.

How did you feel about Raulf?

Did those feelings change over the course of the novel, and if so, how?

6 Compare and contrast Jo and her nemesis, Georges Raulf. In what ways are they similar? How are they different?

7 Jo abandons her goal for Vincent's artwork to be known in Paris for the sake of her brother, Dries.

Why did she do this?

Do you agree with her decision?

8

Vincent van Gogh is one of the most recognizable names in the world.

What was your understanding of him before you read the novel, and how did your understanding change, if at all?

9

Did Jo's metamorphosis from a timid young mother to confident marketer surprise you?

If so, how? If not, why not?

10

What is the importance of female relationships in Jo's story?

Name the women who had the strongest influence on Jo and why.

11

The title of the book could be interpreted several ways.

What meaning do you glean from the title?

Did your interpretation change from the beginning to the end of the novel, if at all?

12

What benefits do we gain from rediscovering and giving credit to historical women like Jo whose stories are untold?

Note Space



Reader's Companion Guide



This guide will help lay out thought-provoking information that delves into the book's themes, characters, and historical context.

Typical Occupations for 20th Century Women

In the early 1900s in the Netherlands, women didn't have a whole lot of career choices. Societal expectations told them what they could and couldn't do.

Here's a quick look at the kinds of jobs they usually had:

Being a maid, cook, nanny – basically working in someone else's home – was the most common gig, especially for young, single women.

Lots of women worked in factories making cloth and clothes. Think spinning, weaving, sewing. The pay wasn't great, and the conditions were often rough.

Out in the countryside, women helped on the farm – planting, harvesting, taking care of the animals, that sort of thing.

As cities got bigger, women started working in stores as salesclerks, or in restaurants and as cleaners.

Teaching and nursing were seen as respectable jobs for women, but you usually needed some education or training to do.

*It's worth remembering that these **jobs were often divided by gender**. Women were mostly stuck in the lower-paying, less important jobs. Professional careers were rare, and everyone expected women stay home and take care of the house.*

*During the **Second Industrial Revolution** (roughly 1870-1914), a new middle class emerged, and with it came certain social expectations. One of these was that the wives of wealthy industrialists did not need to work. This was seen as a status symbol, indicating that their husbands were successful enough to provide for the entire family.*

Jo's Genius

A distinctive trait of Jo van Gogh was her persistence. As a woman of her time, she faced several setbacks; yet, expressed agency again and again to follow up on her intuitive marketing genius.

This genius transformed a product worth nothing (Vincent's works) into a combined value worth billions today.

In fact, Jo reminds me of Lucille Ball, the comic sensation. She had an intuitive genius for comedy that was so different, so new, that her ideas were initially rejected by studio executives. Yet, in one syndicated season her show, "Lucy," made her the female clown of the century. She gave style, authenticity and dimension to the staleness of sit-com.

How the World Was Changing in Jo's Time

Nationalism in France between the late 1800s and early 1900s was a big deal, and it wasn't a simple thing. Many factors contributed to it.

First, **history**: France got clobbered by Germany in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) and lost Alsace-Lorraine. That made them extremely upset; they wanted revenge and their land back. Then, the Paris Commune, a socialist uprising, got crushed, which deepened the divides in French society and made everyone want things to be stable again.

As for why this nationalism was happening: There was **cultural** nationalism, which was all about French pride in their culture, language, and history. It sought to promote a sense of national identity and pride based on shared cultural values.

Then, there was **political** nationalism, which focused on France being a powerful, unified nation-state with a strong military. This type of nationalism focused on the idea of the nation-state as the primary unit of political organization.

Socially and **politically**, more people were getting involved in politics, so nationalist ideas spread more easily. Economic competition between European countries, thanks to the Industrial Revolution, also made everyone more competitive. This fueled a sense of national rivalry and a desire to protect French economic interests.

Culturally, socialist movements were growing, pushing for workers' rights. It was also the "Belle Époque," a time that looked good on the surface, with lots of new things—the Eiffel Tower was built in this period—but there were also tensions hiding underneath.

Finally, new **technology** like automobiles, aviation, the Paris metro opened new geographies as never before with easier travel. The telephone and telegraph closed distance in communication. Innovations like cinematography, the phonograph, and electric lighting transformed homes and entertainment.

So, the rise of nationalism in France in the late 1800s and early 1900s was a multifaceted phenomenon with deep historical, ideological, social, and political roots. It played a significant role in shaping French society and politics, making it a vibrant worldview as background to Jo's story.

Key Examples of Jo's Intuitive Persuasion and Advocacy

Created FOMO.

Jo gave away paintings to well-known people admired by others (doctors, etc.) on the condition that they loan them back for exhibits. Her goal was to show that influential people thought Vincent's artwork was valuable.

Refused to flood the market.

Jo was careful about how many paintings were in circulation at any given time. She wanted to create a little scarcity so that the paintings would retain demand.

Gained a following on home turf.

Although Jo wanted to get into bigger markets, she concentrated on asking Dutch art dealers for exhibitions first. People are attracted to the familiar. Vincent's artwork was already outside the norm and gaining a foothold among his native Dutch countrymen gave her a first step to him being accepted elsewhere. Also, foreign dealers and artists came to the Netherlands and discovered Vincent there.

Educated the public.

By publishing Vincent's letters and accompanying them with his sketches, Jo humanized Vincent, helping to counteract rumors about his mental illness, but also introducing the person Vincent behind the strange paintings. She created awareness and curiosity through Vincent's letters and so an emotional connection to him.

Refused to lower pricing. Innovated with price bundling.

She resisted pressure to lower prices to be competitive despite angry dealers who wanted to get sales. Sometimes she offered a reduced price if people would buy 2 for 1 or 1 painting + 1 drawing.

Protected Vincent's brand by repudiating critics.

She defended Vincent through letters to the editor. She welcomed a parade of artists, critics and dealers who wanted to tour her boardinghouse once the word was out that she had so much art.

Refused to be undercut.

When she found out paintings were being sold for 1 guilder she bought the paintings back.

Raised prices and her own commission over time.

She insisted on raising prices over time, which included raising the commission she paid herself.

Family

Theo van Gogh (1857-1891)

Jo's husband, Theo, was a big supporter of modern art. He ran a gallery in Paris and was also Vincent van Gogh's younger brother. Theo, a Dutch art dealer, basically enabled Vincent to paint full-time by supporting him both financially and emotionally. He was a staunch supporter for modern art, especially artists who lived in Montmartre.

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

Theo's brother and a highly influential Post-Impressionist painter. He began his artistic career at the relatively late age of 27 and tragically struggled with mental health, ultimately taking his own life at the age of 37. Despite this short career span of just over a decade, Van Gogh produced an estimated 2,100 works of art, including approximately 860 oil paintings, the majority of which were created in the final two years of his life. His body of work encompasses landscapes, still lifes, portraits, and self-portraits, all typically characterized by vibrant colors and dramatic brushwork. His distinct style played a significant role in the development of expressionism within modern art.

Andries Bonger (1861-1936)

Jo's closest brother, just 16 months older and Theo's best friend. He worked in exporting and was a Dutch art collector.

Anna (Ma) van Gogh-Carbentus (1819-1907)

The Van Gogh matriarch was a minister's wife and had six children.

Willemien "Wil" van Gogh (1861-1947)

Vincent and Theo's youngest sister. She was a woman of many talents and interests, working at various times as a governess, florist, nurse, and scripture teacher. She was also involved in the early Dutch feminist movement. In later life, Wil suffered from mental health issues and was institutionalized for nearly 40 years.

Cor van Gogh (1867-1900)

Vincent and Theo's brother, the youngest in the Van Gogh family. In 1889, at the age of 22, he moved to South Africa, where he worked as an engineer on gold mines and railways. His life took a dramatic turn when the Anglo-Boer War broke out. Cor joined the Boers, initially working as a railway engineer and later fighting on commando in the Free State. In 1900, he died in a field hospital in Brandfort by a self-inflicted wound.

Johan Cohen Gosschalk (1873-1912)

Jo's second husband, an artist, art critic and lawyer.

Jo's Friends

Anna Veth-Dirks (1863-1929)

Jo's BFF. Her move to Bussum inspired Jo to move there. Anna married Jan Veth, a Dutch art critic and had five children.

Maria (Marie) Anna Catharina Mensing (1854-1933)

Dutch feminist and socialist. She was secretary on the board of the Association of Social Democratic Women's Clubs and the first national secretary of the Social Democratic Party.

Martha van Eeden-Vloten (1856-1943)

Jo's friend and feminist, married to psychiatrist Frederick van Eeden who treated Theo's illness.

Artists

Émile Henri Bernard (1868-1941)

Vincent's close friend. He was a French Post-Impressionist painter and writer. Most of his notable work was accomplished at a young age, in the years 1886 through 1897. He is also associated with Cloisonnism and Synthetism, two late 19th-century art movements.

Julien "Père" François Tanguy (1825-1894)

Père was a French art dealer, gallery owner, art collector, and patron who was one of the first buyers of Impressionist paintings. He played an important role in promoting Impressionism and Post-Impressionism.

Paul Signac (1863-1935)

Vincent's friend was a French Neo-Impressionist painter who, with Georges Seurat, helped develop the artistic technique Pointillism.

Isaac Israëls (1865-1934)

Jo's lover was a Dutch painter associated with the Amsterdam Impressionism movement. His father was the acclaimed artist Jozef Israëls.

Johan Rohde (1856-1935)

Danish artist; one of the first to purchase a Van Gogh, lithographer and designer. He was the principal founder of the Den Frie Udstilling artist society, established in 1891 to allow artists to exhibit works which did not fall within the Academy's selection criteria.

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)

French painter, sculptor, printmaker, ceramist, and writer, whose work has been primarily associated with the Post-Impression and Symbolist movements. Only moderately successful during his lifetime, Gauguin has since been recognized for his experimental use of color distinct from Impressionism.

Art Critics and Art Dealers

Jan Veth (1864-1925)

Friend to Theo, Jo's Bussum neighbor was a Dutch painter, poet, art critic and university lecturer.

Piet Boele van Hensbroek (1853-1912)

Artist who approached Jo about doing an exhibition for the artist society, Pulchri in The Hague and art society Haagsche Kunstkring.

Richard Roland Holst (1868-1938)

Dutch painter, draftsman, lithographer, book cover designer, etcher and writer.

George Seligmann (1866-1924)

Danish artist who acted as an ambassador for Johan Rohde's Den Frie Udstilling artist society.

Ambroise Vollard (1866-1939)

French art dealer who is regarded as one of the most important dealers in French contemporary art at the beginning of the twentieth century. He is credited with being a major supporter and champion of the contemporary artists of his period, providing exposure and emotional support to numerous then-unknown artists, including Paul Cézanne, Aristide Maillol, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Louis Valtat, Pablo Picasso, André Derain, Georges Rouault, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh.

Julien Leclercq (1865-1901)

French poet and art critic, devoted to Symbolism. He contributed regularly to the *Mercure de France*, for example in September 1890 an obituary of Vincent van Gogh. In the 1890s, while engaged to the Finnish pianist Fanny Flodin (1868–1954), Leclercq helped to organize exhibitions of contemporary art, the most important touring in 1898 in Scandinavia. In March 1901, he succeeded in bringing together the first important Van Gogh exhibition exclusively based on loans from French collectors or art dealers in Paris.

Pieter Haverkorn van Rijswijk (1839-1919)

Dutch politician and administrator, involved in several organizations, including assisting with exhibiting Van Gogh's at the Rotterdamsche Kunstkring in 1896.

Paul Cassier (1871-1926)

German art dealer and editor who played a significant role in the promotion of the work of artists of the Berlin Secession and of French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, in particular that of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne.

Paul Durand-Ruel (1831-1922)

French art dealer associated with the Impressionists and the Barbizon School. Being the first to support artists such as Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, he is known for his innovations in modernizing art markets, and is generally considered to be the most important art dealer of the 19th century. An ambitious entrepreneur, Durand-Ruel cultivated international interest in French artists by establishing art galleries and exhibitions in London, New York, Berlin, Brussels, among other places.



Host's Guide



This guide is designed to help you facilitate an engaging and insightful discussion, fostering a welcoming atmosphere for all your members, whether online or in person.

Setting the Stage - Creating a Welcoming Atmosphere

Consider holding your first meeting as an introductory meeting with just a few people to solicit ideas and get organized. Starting with a smaller group can make it easier to discuss and make decisions.

Hint: If your group is up to 12 people or more, consider splitting them up into two groups. An easy way to do this is with a deck of cards. Count out an equal number of black and red suit cards. After socializing, when it's time to do the book discussion, randomly hand out the cards. Those with the clubs or spades go to one room; those with hearts and diamonds to another.

Set the Mood and Create a Playlist

- Richard Wagner
- Emmanuel Chabrier
- César Franck
- Johannes Brahms
- Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
- Gabriel Fauré
- Claude Debussy

Embrace a theme with food

Have small bites and foods that are easy to consume while discussing a book. For *Saving Vincent*, here's a savory and sweet.

Bitterballen

Deep-fried tasty crispy meatballs. The ultimate Dutch pub snack, traditionally served with mustard. Similar to croquettes. Seasonings in the meat usually include onions, salt and pepper, parsley and nutmeg.

Appeltaart

Appeltaart means "apple pie," and the true Dutch "grandmother's apple pie" (oma's appeltaart). This apple pie has a delicious cinnamon taste, and its apple filling is mixed with raisins and sometimes even walnuts. Often served with whipped cream and/or vanilla ice cream.

Beverages should be self-serve

In addition to wine, beer or hard seltzer, be sure to include non-alcoholic choices. Small bottles of water are welcome.

How to Run the Meeting

Make introductions easy

Put out blank name tags and a fat black marker for guests to fill out a name tag when they first arrive. This is especially important when there's only a few newcomers because they may feel intimidated if the majority of the group knows each other well.

Socialize first. Give guests a generous 10 minutes to socialize before the book discussion and to help themselves to a beverage or snack before taking a seat.

Choose an icebreaker question

What's one thing you're passionate about that you wish more people appreciated?

(Because Jo was passionate about Vincent's art when others were not.)

What's the most unusual or interesting piece of art you've ever seen?

(Sparks conversation about different forms of art and personal tastes.)

If you could have any superpower related to getting things done, what would it be?

(Plays on the theme of female empowerment and achieving goals.)

Imagine you're giving a pep talk to a group of women about following their dreams. What's your opening line?

(Empowering and motivational.)

Begin book discussion

Take turns asking book questions. Each guest reads aloud her question and gives her thoughts on it (She's also free to pass on answering if she chooses). After this first response, guests in the group can respond.

Have the Readers Guide/Companion handy for extra info.

Author websites often include background and extra information on the book.

Before leaving, share the date and book for the next meeting. Members can double-check that they have the date on their calendars and plan on buying or borrowing the next book from the local library.

Tips for Facilitating Discussion

A fun book club is one where everyone feels welcome and comfortable participating if they want to. It can be helpful to set expectations at the very beginning to set the mood and have fun.

Be gentle but firm.

Insist that discussion time be limited to the book. Some clubs keep initial socializing brief, then transition to the book discussion, reserving time for more socializing later.

Dominating personalities.

Never easy. “Let’s hear from some others” is one approach. Some clubs pass an object around the room; you talk only when you hold the object.

Pose Open-Ended Questions.

Use questions that encourage thoughtful responses and deeper analysis rather than simple yes/no answers. Examples: “What did you think of Jo’s decision to...?”

Share a Few Ground Rules:

Agree to disagree. There is no one way to experience or interpret a book. In fact, differing opinions are good.

Share the mic!

No one person should dominate the discussion. After you’ve shared a few times, please hold off to create space for others.

First dibs.

The person reading the question has the option to answer it first (she’s also free to pass if she wants). After that a few more people can comment before moving on.

Recommendations for Books on Real Women by Female Authors

The Vow, Jude Berman

In eighteenth-century Italy, child prodigy Angelica Kauffman captivates.

Trial of Mrs. Rhineland, Denny Bryce

Inspired by a real-life scandal of a pioneering Black journalist.

By Her Own Design, Piper Huguley

The incredible untold story of how Ann Lowe, a Black woman and granddaughter of slaves, rose above personal struggles and racial prejudice to design and create one of America's most famous wedding dresses of all time for Jackie Kennedy.

Solitary Walker, A Novel of Mary Wollstonecraft, N. J. Mastro

A captivating work of historical fiction, intellectually stimulating and dramatically engrossing story of the world's first feminist.

The Blue Butterfly, A Novel of Marion Davies, Leslie Johansen Nack

A detailed moving portrait of actress Marion Davies, capturing her legendary, heartbreaking life.

The Dragon from Chicago, *The Untold Story of an American Reporter in Nazi Germany*, Pamela Toler

A captivating look at Sigrid Schultz—one of the earliest reporters to warn Americans of the rising threat of the Nazi regime.

Katherine, the Wright Sister, Tracy Enerson Wood

Shines a spotlight on one of the most important and overlooked women in history, and the sacrifices she made so that others might fly.

A Note about Zoom

With just a laptop computer, your book club can have an author visit your group live via the computer screen after you read her book. I'm available to meet virtually with your group as are many other authors. This can be a fun way to give value to the discussion.

I hope you've found these ideas helpful to get started. The most important thing: Have fun!

I wish your book discussions the very best.

Stay in touch!

Sign up for my weekly eNewsletter,
Digging in with Joan Fernandez.

