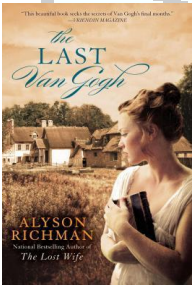




**Fr. Michael Goetz Library Learning Commons
Teacher's Book Review**



***The Last Van Gogh, Alyson Richman*
Reviewed by Ms. Cosgrove, May 8th, 2013.**

How many times have you walked through a museum or an art gallery and looked at a beautiful landscape or an intriguing portrait and wondered about the location or the subject? I have found myself staring into the eyes of the person in the portrait and asking just what kind of life that person must have lived. What secrets did they keep? What dreams did they harbor? Today's book is one author's attempt to answer these questions about the paintings completed by Vincent Van Gogh, in the weeks before he committed suicide. It is a novel, but the author has been thorough in her research about what actually happened and what constituted incidents of fictional filler.

The protagonist of the story is twenty-one year old Marguerite Gachet, the daughter of the doctor who treated Van Gogh for depression, in the small French village of Auvers-sur-Oise. Her mother has died and she has been in the care of a governess, who is actually her father's mistress. This woman, along with her daughter, are secreted away in the upper levels of the house for fear of drawing suspicion and exposing the family name to scandal. Marguerite's liberty to come and go as she pleases is controlled by her autocratic father who regards her as not much more than his maid. All of this changes when Vincent Van Gogh arrives and Marguerite experiences a new-found freedom, as she begins to challenge her father.

Several of Van Gogh's famous paintings are featured in the novel and the reader is exposed to his unconventional method of painting, along with the symbols in those works. His passion and genius are juxtaposed to that of his physician and frequent host, Dr. Gachet who fails, along with his untalented son, in impressing Van Gogh with their uninspired canvases. It is the quiet, unassuming Marguerite who understands the artist's bold application of the oils straight from the tubes onto the canvas and the dance of his palette knife across the surface, achieving what no one has achieved before him. Van Gogh's insistence that Marguerite sits not once, but three times

for portraits arouses the suspicion of her father and the jealousy of her brother. Two of these portraits have survived, while the origin of the third portrait becomes the focus for the tragic conclusion to the novel.

I loved this book for many reasons. I admired the character of Marguerite, a young woman like so many young woman in her time and in our times, whose lives are restricted by social or religious expectations and who through sheer intelligence, courage, and tenacity are able to break free. I was intrigued by the author's portrayal of Vincent Van Gogh – a man who created such masterpieces not simply because he could but rather because he had to. This author and this book inspired me to do additional research in the form of podcasts and online databases about this amazing artist's life and when a book, like a film, lingers in your mind long after the last page or credit rolls by, it is a sign of its merit.

