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"Vincent and Theo" | A Conversation with Deborah Heiligman

 By [Daryl Grabarek](#) on March 14, 2017 [1 Comment](#)

 Listen to [Deborah Heiligman](#) reveal the story behind *Vincent and Theo*, courtesy of [TeachingBooks.net](#).

Say the name Vincent van Gogh and most people can conjure up a few images—sunflowers and landscapes bathed in gold and russet tones, starry nights featuring the deepest indigo blues, and penetrating self-portraits that radiate energy and intelligence. Asked about van Gogh's life, the same people would probably relate an event or two, and are likely to note his struggles with mental illness. But perhaps most significant in the artist's life was his relationship with his brother Theo, recorded for posterity in the hundreds of letters they wrote to one another. In her stunning dual biography, *Vincent and Theo* (Henry Holt, Apr. 2017) Deborah Heiligman delivers a breathtaking portrait of that relationship.



Like *Vincent and Theo*, your award-winning *Charles and Emma: The Darwins' Leap of Faith* also explored an incredibly deep relationship. Coincidence or interest?

Interest, definitely. About 10 years ago, my husband went to a talk by the writer Tom Wolfe. Wolfe said that every writer has a theme that can be expressed in a word or a phrase. My husband asked, "What's your theme?" Without thinking I said, "Only connect." That's the epigraph in E.M. Forster's *Howards End* and the first time I read that book and saw that line I thought *that's me*. That's what I care most about—connections between people. And so when I can write about profound and unique connections, I'm really happy.

Van Gogh's passionate nature and incredible talent is well known, but less so his relationship with his brother, which you describe as "a masterpiece." Can you tell us more about it?

I do say it's a masterpiece, don't I? I mean that in the sense that it was something they worked on for their whole lives (short as their lives were) and that it was, in many ways, their true legacy. I know Vincent's art was his legacy, arguably *their* legacy, but you can't have his art without their relationship. When I say masterpiece, I don't mean that it was perfect. You can see the beauty in their relationship not only in their successes but also in their flaws—their fights, their misunderstandings, and their periods of disconnection.

As much as your book is about the artist, it's also about Theo, as their lives were entwined, even though they were most often apart. And as much as it describes their movements and activities, I'd consider it an emotional portrait—in the best sense. Was that your objective?

Yes. I wanted to do exactly that—paint an emotional portrait of the brothers' relationship. The question I kept asking myself was: "Why was Theo so committed to Vincent? Why did he support his brother for so long and during times when Vincent was being rather impossible?" I asked one of my sons that question early on in my research and writing process, and he said, in a shocked tone, "Because they were brothers!" But I know not all brothers are or would be that committed, and so I wanted to show why Theo was. As time went on I (finally) figured it out—yes, it was because Vincent was his brother and he loved him, but it was also because Theo got so much from Vincent. It was not a one-sided relationship. And finally, it was because Theo believed in Vincent, in his art, and

in his heart.

You frame the brothers' story in "galleries," chapters in their lives, and offer a number of croquis, or impressionistic sketches, about people, places, and events. Can you talk about this structure?

I wanted readers to get the same feeling reading the book that one can get looking at art. Art demands participation. When a painting grabs you, it asks you to enter with your mind and your heart and your life experience. I love that. Not all the paintings do that to me, but when it happens the experience is breathtaking. And then when I leave the museum and walk back out into the world, I see art everywhere. I wanted readers to have that kind of experience with the book: to look at the world in the way a painter does, and in the way a writer does. (See "only connect" above!) I thought the best way to accomplish this would be to make the book *feel* like art—and especially like Vincent's art. It's difficult to talk about this without sounding weird, but I wanted the book to feel like art in the same way that I wanted *Charles and Emma* to feel like a Victorian novel—the form to reflect the substance and vice versa.

In addition to learning about van Gogh's art, life, and relationships in your book, readers learn about his fanatical devotion to his work, his empathetic—and often—gregarious nature. Did you learn anything about him that surprised you?

I didn't know that much about Vincent when I started, so much surprised me, including his gregarious nature and big heart. I was also surprised at how much a champion of the downtrodden he was. OK, so that's three things—but they're connected.



Deborah Heiligman's hands-on research.
Photo by Jonathan Weiner

Your source notes and bibliography are impressive. Beyond the letters, what did the research for this book involve? Tell us about your "eureka" moments.

I describe my big "eureka" moment in the author's note—when I realized that Vincent's painting of a particular windmill is the painting of the brothers' relationship. I was writing about their walk to the mill when they were teenagers, the walk during which they made a pledge to each other. I wanted to see what the mill looked like, and I found the painting online. When I confirmed—by finding old photographs of the mill—that it was the same building, I screamed and threw myself on the floor. So yes, that was a "eureka" moment.

There were other moments as well. One was a eureka summer, really. It was the first summer I was working on the book. I was still researching, reading the letters, mostly, and I decided that I had to get into Vincent's head in a way that only making art could do it. I am not an artist, and so when I tried sketching, I was so abysmal that I quickly gave up. But then some friends gave me watercolors, and I tried fooling around with paints. I had so much fun, and I kept painting and painting—for more than a summer. I would read the letters and then make watercolors. I got to understand, in a way I never thought I would, about color and line and creating something that was fun to look at. Not for anyone else to look at, but for me. I have kept a lot of those paintings, but I also cut many up. They make great bookmarks!

Another important moment was as I was finishing what would be the penultimate draft of the book, I realized that Vincent and Theo were mine. It's very hard to write about a famous person, and the biggest struggle is always making that person mine. Right before the final draft of the book was due, I reached that moment. It was exhilarating, and then I cried.

Would we know what we know today without the efforts Theo's wife Jo took to preserve the brothers' letters and bring them to the public's attention?

We would not have Vincent's work without Jo. We owe so much to her. It's a beautiful thing, isn't it? She loved Theo so much, and had him for such a short time. The whole time she was with him, he was torn between loving her and loving and worrying about Vincent. She accepted it all. When Theo wrote that first letter to Jo, and what did he tell her? About Vincent. And when Jo was in labor and her water broke, what did she do? She sat down and wrote to Vincent, whom she had never met. So it's a love story that includes Jo.

AND just for fun....

Do you have a favorite van Gogh painting or drawing?

I have had over the course of this project a number of favorites, for very different reasons. I will limit it to three here! First of all is the windmill painting because I figured out that it was Vincent's plea to Theo not to leave him. Another favorite is the painting Vincent did for the Theo and Jo's baby titled *The Almond Blossoms*. And, of course, knowing what I knew about what happened to both brothers soon after that painting.... There was another painting in that exhibit that walloped me. I kept coming back to it because it entered me in a way that no other painting did—Vincent made it while he was living in the asylum. It's called *Garden at the Saint-Paul Hospital*. There are two trees framing the view, almost as if they are bars of a jail cell, and to me it says that even when he was so sick, Vincent could see beauty in the world.

So far a number of your nonfiction subjects might be described as quirky (and genius): Charles Darwin, Paul Erdős, and Vincent van Gogh. Who's next on your list?

I'm working on a picture book about the geneticist [Barbara McClintock](#). She fits the description of quirky and genius! But I'm also working on something pretty different: A World War II story with many characters. I guess some of them are quirky and very smart, but that's not the crux of the story. At least I don't think it is.... Can I get back to you on that?



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About Daryl Grabarek

Daryl Grabarek dgrabarek@mediasourceinc.com is the editor of *School Library Journals* monthly newsletter, *Curriculum Connections*, and its online column Touch and Go. Before coming to *SLJ*, she held librarian positions in private, school, public, and college libraries. Her dream is to manage a collection on a remote island in the South Pacific.

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Natasha Wing says:

March 24, 2017 at 5:45 pm

Wonderful interview and insight into a writer's process. I have Charles and Emma in my office ready to read.

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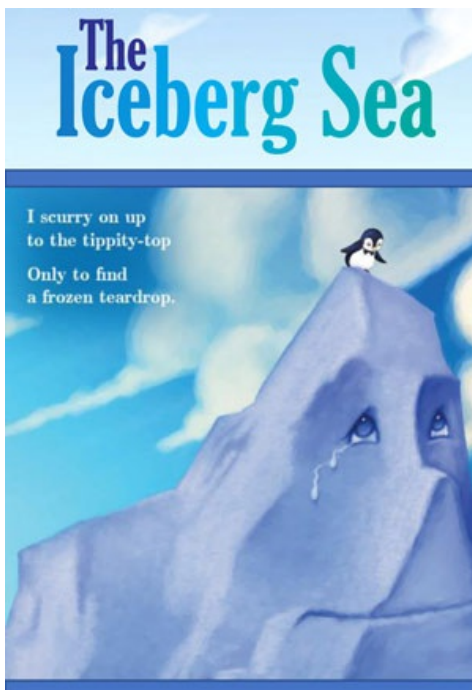
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