

YALSA EXCELLENCE IN NONFICTION AWARDS SPEECH

Thank you so much for including *Vincent and Theo: The Van Gogh Brothers* as a YALSA Excellence in Nonfiction Award Finalist. I am honored to be part of this group of talented writers and researchers, and I am deeply grateful that this award exists.

Eight years ago, when YALSA established it, the award acknowledged the growing category of nonfiction for teens and tweens. But in fact, you at YALSA have done more than just acknowledge a genre. You have bolstered a community of YA nonfiction writers. Looking at the books that are being published now, it's clear that YA nonfiction is excelling in groundbreaking research, great writing, experimentation with form, and unwavering commitment to truth-telling. You have encouraged us to create books that not only open up new worlds to kids, but also push them to think harder, to ask tough questions, and to *demand* the truth. Books that matter. Books that will, we hope, as Vincent van Gogh said so beautifully, leave the world a souvenir.

I learned many things about Vincent while researching this book. As I made my way through hundreds of his beautifully-written letters, I saw his passion for art and God and truth, his commitment to his beliefs, and his

ability to toil through the hardships of mental illness and poverty. I came to know his temper, his strong opinions and his longing for love and companionship.

Over and over what impressed me the most was how hard he worked. The popular—and incorrect—image of Vincent van Gogh is of a madman, impulsively brushing thick strokes of paint on the canvas. He did sometimes paint quickly, but only after thinking and planning. And he spent years teaching himself how to draw and paint. He copied figures from a drawing book, turned the book back to the beginning and started again. He read about color theory. And he practiced. And practiced.

And just as we writers do, he learned from the masters, studying and copying their work, trying to figure out how and why they painted what they did.

Without Theo, though, we wouldn't have Vincent's art at all. Theo was Vincent's supporter, financially, emotionally and intellectually. The brothers were, as Vincent said, companions in fate.

Theo, working as an art dealer in Paris, saw paintings Vincent didn't have access to. As they wrote letters back and forth, Theo encouraged Vincent and critiqued his art. Sometimes Vincent listened, sometimes he argued back. I was

thrilled to learn that it was Theo who told Vincent to use more color, to lighten and brighten his palette.

When Vincent came to Paris to live with Theo—uninvited—their lives changed. So did the art world.

Vincent met artists Theo had told him about—the Impressionists. He watched them work, studied their paintings and talked with them about light and color and point of view and composition. He tried new techniques. After two years, Vincent moved to Arles, and he took with him all he had learned in Paris and all he knew and all that he was and created many of the masterpieces we know today.

Vincent hadn't been an easy roommate, and there were times when Theo was desperate for him to leave. But when he did leave, Theo was sad and lonely. For as much as Theo gave to Vincent, so too did Vincent give to Theo: love, companionship, connection, inspiration, intellectual challenge, community.

Vincent would be envious of what we have in this community of children's book writers, librarians, teachers and publishers. On this special day when the ALA awards are announced, our community gathers together in a very public way. But the other 364 days of the year, we're emotionally

and intellectually together. Although I spend most of my time alone, working on my books, I know you are all out there. Thank you.

And thank you to my publisher, Macmillan, for helping me realize the book that was in my heart. I treasure that more than I can say. Thank you especially to Laura Godwin, my brilliant editor, and to the indispensable Julia Sooy, and to everyone else who worked on *Vincent and Theo*. A huge bow of thanks to Anna Booth for designing the book so beautifully. Vincent would have loved it!

I am deeply grateful to the amazing school library team at Macmillan--Lucy Del Priore, Katie Halata, Melissa Croce--for loving the book and telling others about it.

Working on *Vincent and Theo* was an honor. When I found it hard going, Vincent himself inspired me to keep working. When the story made me sad, it was Theo I looked to, Theo who didn't give up on his brother, or on life, until they were both taken away from him.

I would like to thank Vincent and Theo van Gogh for the masterpieces of their relationship and their art. And thank you to Theo's wife, Jo, for making sure we saw it all. You left the world quite a souvenir. Thank you.