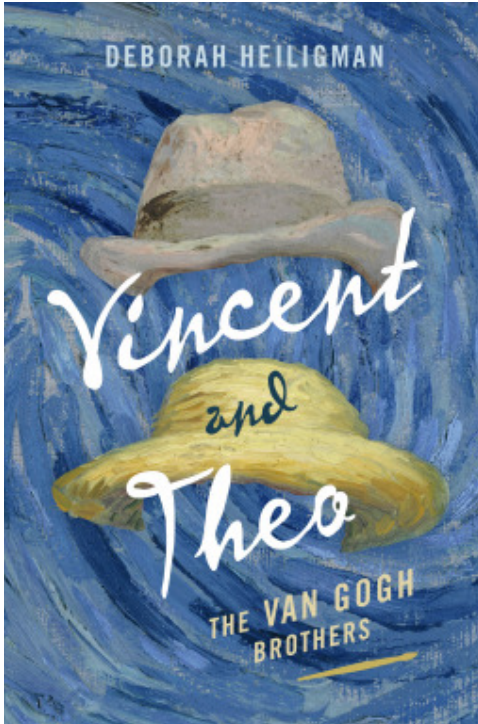


By Jean Westmoore

Published Thu, Jun 8, 2017

## CHILDREN'S NONFICTION



**Vincent and Theo: The Van Gogh Brothers** by Deborah Heiligman; Henry Holt, 424 pages (\$19.99)

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Deborah Heiligman was a National Book Award finalist for her marvelous biography "Charles and Emma" for young readers, and she brings the same original perspective, artistry, meticulous research and love for her subjects to this ambitious, heart-wrenching, stunning biography of the Van Gogh brothers. It's a beautiful book: each chapter begins with one of Vincent's drawings, and the 11 carefully chosen paintings include the "Laakmolen" near the Hague capturing a significant moment in the brothers' relationship, "The Potato Eaters," the almond blossom painting Vincent did for Theo's baby and "Starry Night," the wondrous work depicting the view from his room at the Saint-Rémy insane asylum.

Vincent wrote Theo 658 letters during his lifetime, and Heiligman uses them to tell the story of their close relationship, often writing in the present tense, giving their story a wonderful immediacy. (In an author's note, she says she wrote the book as if it were a museum show of the brothers' lives, varying the writing

style, depending on the topic, the time of Vincent's life "or the amount of knowledge we have.") She vividly describes Vincent's happy childhood in the parsonage in Zundert, Holland; a secondary school that included a focus on drawing; a junior apprenticeship at 16 at his uncle's art dealership in the Hague; a walk at 19 with Theo when they promised each other always to be close; Vincent's first disappointment in love and first bout of what might have been the beginnings of bipolar disorder, worsened by smoking, lack of food and sleep; his embrace of a religious fanaticism that alarmed his devout Protestant parents and his disastrous experience as an evangelist to the poor farmers and miners in the Borinage, a dark period in which he eventually abandoned God and found his way back to art.

Perhaps most fascinating are the chapters about Vincent's hard work to learn his craft, laboring to learn proportion and perspective, copying figures over and over, sketching people at the train station or the soup kitchen, sketching the former prostitute who became his lover, his struggle to learn color and the move to Arles where he would create 200 paintings and 100 drawings. Always he was supported financially and emotionally by his brother Theo, who waited for the world to discover his brother's genius and who suffered his own disappointments in love and the burden of being the "responsible" son:

*Theo "knows Vincent is a genius. He knows all his hard work will pay off. But when? Looking at Vincent's paintings, he tells [his wife] Jo: "One first has to relinquish all one's conventional ideas in order to grasp what he means. But one day he will be understood. When? That is the question."*

Heiligman notes lingering questions both about how Vincent lost his ear (could Paul Gauguin have slashed him with a sword?) and how he suffered the gunshot wound that killed him on July 29, 1890, just a few short months after the first critical appraisal of his work was printed, the critic describing his paintings as "strange, intense and feverish" and the artist as a worthy successor to the 17th century Dutch masters. Her beautifully written narrative sketching a portrait of this troubled, complicated, brilliant artist and his relationship with his brother includes this gem:

*"A painting Vincent makes during his time at Saint-Remy shows both his despair and his hope. He is looking through a window out into the garden of the asylum. You see the view through tree branches as if through prison bars. Vincent is still able to look out into the world and see its beauty. To see life. But he views it all*

from the prison of his hurting mind, as if the window of the asylum is his perspective frame."

Vincent died in his brother's arms; Theo died alone.

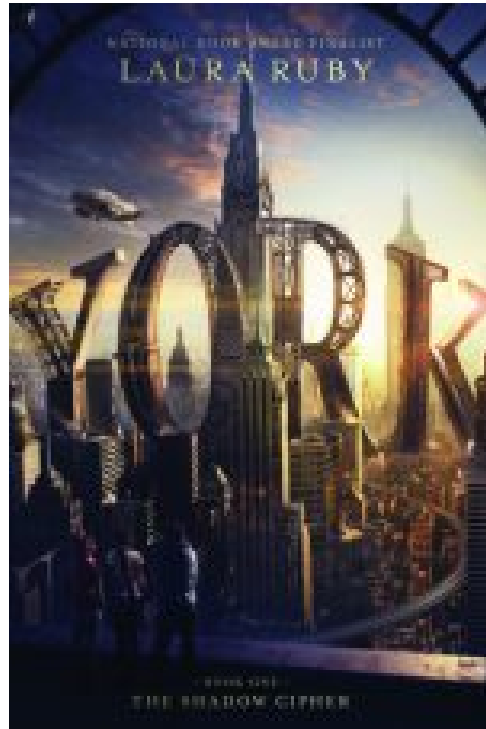
#### CHILDREN'S

**The Shadow Cipher: York, Book One** by Laura Ruby; Walden Pond Press, 431 pages (\$16.99) Ages 8 to 12.

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This dazzling adventure is set in an alternate-history universe, in a New York City shaped by 19th century visionary immigrant architect-engineers Tess and Theodore Morningstarr with its soaring skyscrapers, magnificent parks and the world's first mass transportation system (called the Underway), powered by mysterious technology. The two vanished in 1855, leaving behind the Old York Cipher, a puzzle built into the city they created and promising a fabulous treasure to anyone who can figure it out. Shift to the present day and 12-year-old twins Tess and Theo Biedermann are facing eviction from the home they love, in a Morningstarr apartment building purchased by evil developer Darnell Slant – "a man who bought beautiful old buildings and replaced them with shiny cracker boxes no one could afford" – and slated for the wrecking ball. The twins with the help of friend Jaime set out to crack the code, a quest that proves increasingly perilous. Laura Ruby has concocted a marvel of a treasure hunt, of complicated codes, riddles with more than one meaning, clues hidden in unlikely and picturesque places. Her alternative-reality New York includes all sorts of marvels including the new fad of keeping genetically altered and hybrid animals as pets – fer-otters, cat-coons, fox-dogs.

The rich cast of characters includes the eccentric personalities in the Cipher Society, Slant's creepy henchmen Mr. Pinscher and Mr. Stoop and the Biedermann's nosy little neighbor Cricket. The cliffhanger ending leaves the reader eagerly anticipating where the clues will lead this trio next in "The Clockwork Ghost: York, Book 2." Ruby is the author of National Book Award finalist "Bone Gap" and many other acclaimed novels.



**Don Paul's early career: Brutal in Bangor, promise in Wichita**

