



Q&A with Joan Fernandez

1. Why did you want to write about Jo van Gogh, and how did you discover her story?

I discovered Jo in 2016 when, on a girlfriend trip to Amsterdam, we visited the Van Gogh Museum. I spied Jo's black-and-white photo on a small display about the Van Gogh family. When I read an accompanying note about her being the one to sell Vincent's paintings, I remember staring into her eyes and thinking, "If not for you, none of this would be here." It felt wrong that she'd been lost behind Vincent's giant shadow. She must be acknowledged.

2. What was the writing process like for this book? How long did it take to write?

Truthfully, I wrote two manuscripts! In the first one I reimagined Jo's life, filling in the gaps I couldn't find with research. My manuscript was completely done and ready to begin pitching to agents when a new biography was released about Jo by the Van Gogh Museum. I'd just spent two years learning writing craft, hiring book coaches and editors, and now had to decide whether to go ahead to publish this first version or to toss it and start over. I chose to begin again. When my book is published, it will be seven years.

3. What is the most surprising thing you learned from this story?

Van Gogh is beloved worldwide, so we all know that Jo was ultimately successful. Yet, I am still awestruck by her conviction that Vincent's artwork was worthy of greatness when so many told her she was wrong. Her confidence gave her the resilience to persist, which in turn drove the paintings' value from worthless to priceless.

4. Tell us about Georges Raulf. Is he a real person? How did you write his character and why?

In real life Jo did not have a singular enemy, but rather lots of pushback from a number of forces. It was fun to create Georges Raulf as a composite of this headwind and also reflect the time's political crosswinds and shaky, gradual acceptance of modern art. He reflects a patriarchal worldview, offended by Jo's meddling in a man's art-dealing world, but I also fleshed him out so that he's not simply a caricature but has a human story behind his awfulness.

5. What about ethics of writing historical novels? Can you explore the past without doing harm?

Start with research, events and people in your subject's life, and read your character's diaries or journals, if possible. I read the 100-letter correspondence between Jo and her husband Theo, and 902 letters from and to Vincent. I believe you should write without the intent to harm, but rather to understand. If writing about violent historical events, avoid egregious details and show at least a few character's reactions and thoughts that they're repulsed. Even this small signal of empathy goes a long way toward ensuring you don't injure today's reader.

6. Why do you call this book a historical fiction parable?

Parables are stories that illustrate a larger universal truth. My rendition of Jo's story comes to life in fictional conversations and thoughts; yet I feel that her example of how to overcome the societal norms that stand in the way of living up to one's true potential reflects universal truth. Both Jo and Vincent van Gogh's lives are enormously inspiring by their examples of staying true to their gifts despite opposition from the status quo.

7. What do you hope readers will take away from Jo's story?

I hope they remember and know Jo's name! She has been lost in history for far too long. She deserves the credit for Vincent being a beloved artist worldwide. I hope readers will feel empowered by her example of what can be accomplished with determination and perseverance and so pursue striving to realize their full potential.