

“The light does not forgive me—it reveals me. In its gold I see not only the fields as they are, but the tremor beneath them, the restless pulse that will not be quiet. If I paint it, I might survive it; if I fail, it will swallow me whole.”

from *PEONIES AND POISON*



## **BOOK CLUB GUIDE & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The novel centers on Vincent's experience of light in Arles. How does Hartwell use light as both a source of revelation and a form of pressure or torment?
2. Vincent is described as having a "restless hunger he cannot name." What do you think he is truly searching for—artistic mastery, connection, peace, or something else?
3. The story explores the "fragile boundary between vision and ruin." Where do you see that boundary blur most clearly in Vincent's life?
4. How does the structure—intimate moments like unfinished letters and abandoned canvases—shape your understanding of Vincent's inner world?
5. Discuss the portrayal of Vincent's relationship with Paul Gauguin. Is it a genuine friendship, a rivalry, or something more complicated?
6. Vincent's bond with Theo van Gogh is a quiet but powerful thread. How does Theo function as an anchor in Vincent's life, and where does that tether begin to fray?
7. The novel contrasts Vincent's turmoil with the steady rhythms of provincial life. What effect does this contrast have on the reader's perception of his struggles?
8. Hartwell presents painting as both "salvation and affliction." Do you think Vincent would have suffered less without his artistic vision, or is that vision inseparable from who he is?
9. Nature—wheatfields, cypress trees, skies—seems almost alive in the novel. How do these elements mirror Vincent's psychological state?
10. The book aims to move beyond the "myth of the tortured artist." In what ways does it humanize Vincent, and did it change how you think about him?
11. Consider the role of isolation in the novel. Is Vincent's loneliness imposed by others, by circumstance, or by his own temperament?
12. The novel asks whether beauty can redeem a life marked by anguish. By the end, what answer do you think the book suggests—and do you agree?

# THEMED DRINKS & SNACKS

## ARLES SUN COCKTAIL

A bright, slightly bitter citrus drink with herbal depth—beautiful but a little unsettling.

### Ingredients:

2 oz gin  
1 oz fresh orange juice  
½ oz lemon juice  
½ oz honey syrup (1:1 honey + warm water)  
¼ oz Aperol  
1 dash orange bitters  
Fresh thyme sprig

### Instructions:

Shake all ingredients (except thyme) with ice.  
Strain into a rocks glass over fresh ice.  
Garnish with a lightly slapped thyme sprig.

## FRENCH-INSPIRED SNACKS

Keep it elegant and easy, like the French do.

French Bread  
Sunflower Seed and Herb Crackers  
Roasted Vegetables with Herbs  
Mini Lemon Tarts and Madeleines  
Dark Chocolate with Sea Salt

You could even decorate the table with sunflowers to evoke some Vincent Van Gogh spirit.

# CONVO-STARTER QUESTIONS

## BOOK ADJACENT

Before reading this novel, what was your perception of Vincent van Gogh? How did this book challenge or reinforce that image?

The idea of the “tortured artist” is deeply embedded in culture. Why do you think this narrative persists, and what are the risks of romanticizing artistic suffering?

Can you think of other novels, films, or artworks that explore the link between creativity and mental strain? How does Gogh compare in its approach?

## SPOILER-FRIENDLY QUESTIONS

Vincent’s mental state deteriorates as the novel progresses. Which specific scene felt like the true turning point, and why?

The conflict between Vincent and Paul Gauguin escalates sharply. Who do you think bears more responsibility for their rupture—or is that the wrong way to view it?

How did you interpret the novel’s depiction of the ear-cutting incident? Did it feel inevitable, sudden, or misunderstood?

In the final chapters, how does Vincent’s relationship to painting change? Does it feel more like compulsion, clarity, or resignation?

Theo’s role becomes increasingly poignant toward the end. How did his presence (or absence) shape your emotional response to Vincent’s decline?

Consider the ending: does the novel offer any sense of peace or resolution for Vincent, or does it deliberately resist closure?

Looking back on the full arc of the story, do you think Vincent achieves any form of redemption—through art, connection, or self-understanding—or is that idea ultimately questioned?

Thank you so much for reading (and hopefully enjoying) GOGH. Writing these books is such a labor of love for me, and I hope it’s the same for you.

BEATRICE HARTWELL