

## January 2024 Newsletter

### WHO'S TO BLAME FOR VAN GOGH'S MISSING EAR?



Hello: I hope this finds you well and reading a good book. I can recommend, “The Book of Lost Names,” by Kristin Harmel. She does a nice job of balancing historical World War II fiction with present day events, which is what I’m doing with my current novel-in-progress, “Saving Van Gogh.”

Thank you for your positive response to my December 2023 newsletter. The more I learn about Vincent Van Gogh, the more I respect his artistic journey, yet I agree there is something oddly compelling about him cutting off his ear.

Auditory hallucinations, lead poisoning, a fondness for absinth, and depression all come into play, but what about the climactic events surrounding the self-mutilation? I’m going to add Paul Gauguin to the contributing factors leading to Van Gogh’s first psychotic break. Here’s why:



*Sunflowers*, Vincent Van Gogh, August 1888

Van Gogh hung this painting of sunflowers in Gauguin's room at the yellow house in Arles to welcome him to what Van Gogh hoped would be the start of an artist community in the south of France.

Gauguin went to Arles under false pretenses, mostly because he needed money and Vincent Van Gogh's brother offered to pay for his trip in hopes that Gauguin would have a stabilizing effect on his brother.

In a 1902 letter to his friend, André Fontainas, this is what Gauguin had to say about his October arrival in Arles, "following my advice and my instructions, he [Van Gogh] worked quite differently [painting] yellow sunflowers on a yellow background."

In another bit of revisionist history in the same letter, Gauguin also claims that he was the one responsible for inspiring Van Gogh's experimentations with color by directing Van Gogh's, "intelligence and fiery temperament. I am forced to praise myself," Gauguin concluded.



*Still Life With Sunflowers on an Armchair*, Paul Gauguin, 1901

Vincent Van Gogh's sister-in-law, Jo Bonger, had no illusions about Gauguin, being aware that Gauguin had made false claims and tried to take credit for Van Gogh's innovative experiments with color and sunflowers. We can infer that she assigned some responsibility to Gauguin for Van Gogh's death by her actions toward the painting of Gauguin's chair. She kept *Gauguin's Chair*, 1888, hidden in her attic for 37 years, and it wasn't displayed until three years after her death when her son began managing her collection. Both paintings are pictured below:



Vincent Van Gogh: *Van Gogh's Chair*, (November 1888 – January 1889), and *Gauguin's Chair*, November 1888

More than just paintings of empty chairs, the images reflect the personality of the artists who sat in them. Van Gogh's rustic, simple straw chair on the left reflects his life of hardship and sacrifice, while Gauguin's chair is padded and stylish, with a candle and two books to signify his academic standing and familiarity with comfort. Compare the brick floor beneath Van Gogh's chair and the lush carpet beneath Gauguin's chair, which further underscores their vastly different backgrounds and personalities. Van Gogh added the pipe and tobacco pouch after his psychotic episode, because smoking a pipe calmed him. He also signed the painting of his own chair, which signified that he considered it complete—not so with his painting of Gauguin's chair. (For more hidden meaning concerning his signature, see the [February 2023 newsletter](#).)



## Please mark your calendars:

I will be reading excerpts from my book, "[A Promise Moon](#)," and discussing the Underground Railroad in Kentucky at 2pm on Saturday, Feb 3, 2024 at the South Central Regional Library, 7300 Jefferson Blvd., Louisville, KY 40219. The book and presentation evolved from a research grant I received to study the Underground Railroad in Kentucky. The [Kentucky Humanities Speakers Bureau](#) is sponsoring this talk

I'll be in West Virginia on Wednesday, February 7<sup>th</sup> for a 2pm presentation of, "[A Promise Moon](#)," and discussing my research into the Underground Railroad. Woodlands Retirement Community, One Bradley Foster Drive, Huntington, WV 25701

This speaking engagement comes with breakfast! Saturday in May 18<sup>th</sup>, 10am, I will be reading excerpts from my book, "[A Promise Moon](#)," and discussing the Underground Railroad in Kentucky at the Jack Jouett House Historic Site, 255 Craigs Creek Rd. Versailles, KY 40383. The [Kentucky Humanities Speakers Bureau](#) is sponsoring this talk.

I hope you've enjoyed this edition of my newsletter. If you haven't already, please take a moment to leave a review on Amazon. It is really helpful with sales. Here is the link to my latest book, "[Stealing Picasso](#)."

If you know of anyone who is looking for a speaker, the [Kentucky Humanities Speakers Bureau](#) is great about helping to subsidize appearances. I'm available as a speaker to talk about "[Stealing Renoir](#)," and how World War II was the largest art theft in history.

Or, if Kentucky history is appropriate for audiences, the [Speakers Bureau](#) will subsidize my appearance to discuss the findings from my research grant into the Underground Railroad in Kentucky.

The Speakers Bureau will also subsidize my appearance to talk about gardening with native plants and how this led to the publication of "[Let The Earth Breathe](#)." If you or anyone you know would like to schedule a talk, here's the [link](#).

Meanwhile, if you aren't already a member and are interested in gardening with native plants, here is the link: [Kentucky Native Plants Swap](#). The swaps are free, as are the plants and seeds, and a lot of fun.

[Here is a link to my previous newsletters.](#)

Happy reading.

Stephen Allten Brown

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