

I Once Knew Vincent

Michelle Rene

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Descriptions of the sights, smells, and sounds of everyday Dutch life among The Hague's poor are vibrant and poetic, often blending the senses.

Launched in concert with the 125th anniversary of the painting *Starry Night*, one of Vincent Van Gogh's most well-received works, Michelle Rene's *I Once Knew Vincent* is the story of the legendary painter's struggle to establish himself in the art world and to fulfill one of his deepest longings: to have a family of his own.

One winter evening in 1882, in The Hague, Netherlands, Sien, a pregnant, alcoholic prostitute, brings Vincent to the threadbare home she shares with her precocious seven-year-old daughter, Maria. In spite of what Maria, who is used to her mother's "business," fears, Vincent has merely asked Sien to be his model. Emotionally raw from having been rejected by the woman he loved and dismissed as unsuitable for the ministry by his church, Vincent soon becomes determined to wed Sien. Their tempestuous and ill-fated relationship, seen through Maria's eyes, proves life-changing, especially for the young girl, who, between Vincent's bouts of despair, her mother's alcoholic binges, and the lack of funds for basic necessities, has her hands full trying to keep the small family together.

Rene came to love art as a small child exploring the museums and libraries of Dallas, Texas. She earned a BFA from the Ringling College of Art and Design in Florida, and has been working in the art industry for over a decade and writing for nearly as long.

Her descriptions of the sights, smells, and sounds of everyday Dutch life among The Hague's poor are vibrant and poetic, often blending the senses, as in "The whole place always smelled like emptiness felt" and "Her tone was not sharp, nor was it frustrated. It just was, like the nothingness of a dreamless sleep."

Mostly a psychological study, Rene's fact-based but fictionalized tale is filled with emotion—everything from rage to the most tender love. In giving dialogue a formal tone, she effectively portrays the characteristics and constraints of the time and the aloneness of each individual character despite their efforts to become a family.

Rene's easy-to-read, poignant, and moving story of the beloved painter's struggle to create a longed-for family is sure to touch the hearts of readers and enhance their understanding of the torment Van Gogh experienced at the hands of his own inner demons.

KRISTINE MORRIS (Summer 2014)

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