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★ Sunflowers:

A Novel of Vincent Van Gogh

Sheramy Bundrick. Avon, \$14.99 paper
(432p) ISBN 978-0-06-176527-8

In a knockout debut novel, art historian Bundrick (*Music and Image in Classical Athens*) brings Vincent Van Gogh's paintings and personal story to vibrant life. While Bundrick takes many liberties (recorded in an author's note) in her fictionalized account of Van Gogh's affair with her narrator, *fille de maison* Rachel Courteau, she gives Rachel such a believable voice that the proceedings seem genuine. At 35, Van Gogh meets lovable spitfire Rachel while surreptitiously sketching her in a garden. Having taken refuge in an Arles brothel after the death of her parents, Rachel greets Van Gogh as a customer not long after, and soon feelings blossom between them. Visiting friend Paul Gauguin and the cloud of Van Gogh's madness undercut the couple's bliss, as do financial troubles and Rachel's life at the *maison*, where she's kept a virtual prisoner. While infusing well-known historical moments (like Van Gogh's infamous self-mutilation) with vivid details, humanizing Van Gogh and putting his famous works in context, Bundrick generates an impressive volume of suspense, delight and heartbreak. (Oct.)