

RANDOM HOUSE TEACHERS' RESOURCE KIT

Dear Vincent

Mandy Hager

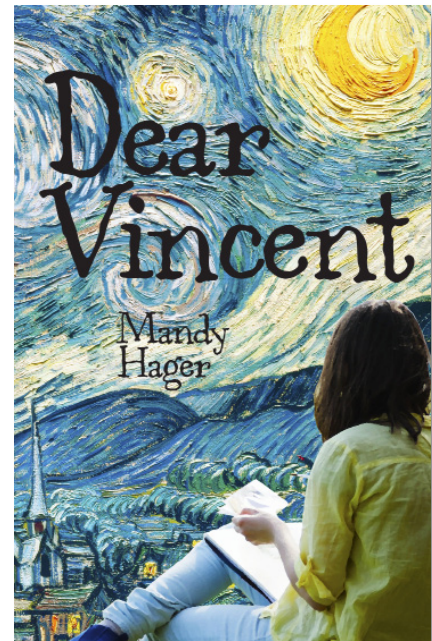
Seventeen-year-old Tara McClusky's life is difficult, to say the least. She shares the care of her paralysed father with her domineering, difficult mother. Tara is forced to cut down her hours at school to help support the family with a part-time job in a rest home. She is very much alone and still grieving the loss of her older sister Van, who died five years before.

Tara's only source of consolation is her obsession with art — painting in particular. Most especially she is enamoured with the life and works of Vincent Van Gogh. She has read all of his letters and finds many parallels between the tragic story of his life and her own struggles. Luckily she meets the intelligent, kindly Professor Max Stockhamer (a Jewish refugee and philosopher) and his grandson Johannes. Their unconditional support of Tara is crucial in helping her come to terms with some of the tragedies that have beset her family, both in New Zealand and in Ireland.

Dear Vincent is a powerful YA novel about a teenager coming to terms with the suicide of her sister. This is a novel about the power of love, and also about how it is impossible to achieve inner peace without first forgiving both oneself and others.



Mandy Hager is a Wellington writer and educator. She won the NZ Post Children's Book Award for Young Adult Fiction in 2010 for *The Crossing*.



SPECIFICATIONS:

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Format: Paperback
Extent: 288pp
Readership: 14+

RESOURCE KIT CONTAINS:

- Before Reading
- Close Reading
- Style and Techniques
- Characters
- Themes
- Creative Responses

Price (GST inclusive) and author details are correct at the time of writing but are subject to change without notice.
Visit www.randomhouse.co.nz for up-to-date information.

Before Reading

1. What does the cover picture indicate about the book's content?
2. When and where might the story be set?
3. What does the title suggest to you?
4. Where is the quote on p. 5 taken from? Why do you think the author chose it? (You can google the play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare if you are not familiar with it.)

Refer to these questions again once you have read the book.

Close Reading Questions

Chapter One

1. This novel begins with a quote from a letter written by Vincent Van Gogh to his brother (p. 7). What does this quote suggest about Tara's parents and her relationship with them?
2. The powerful first paragraph describes Tara's wheelchair-bound father (p. 7). What does it tell us about this man and his relationship with Tara?
3. Explain what is meant by the line, "He is living the inflexibility he's practised all my life" (p. 7).
4. What is your first impression of Tara's mother (pp. 8–9)?
5. What do you think Vincent meant when he said that an artist should "attack a painting the way a lion devours meat, to call on the grain madness that is the best of art" (p. 10)? Why might this approach appeal to Tara?
6. Why does Tara's mother want to keep nursing her husband at home (p. 12)?
7. Why does Tara feel an immediate affinity with Max (p. 13)?
8. What links do Tara and Max make between art and music (p. 15)?
9. Why is Tara so outraged to learn about the way her sister died (pp. 21–22)? To what extent do you think her mother might have just been trying to protect her?

Chapter Two

1. How does the quote from Vincent's letter at the beginning of this chapter relate to the events in Tara's life (p. 23)?
2. Why is Tara so angry with her sister (pp. 23–24)?
3. What attracts Tara to two such different painters as Vincent Van Gogh and Edith Collier? How does she feel connected to these two artists (p. 28)? You may need to do some research of your own.
4. Why do you think Ms. Romano takes such an interest in Tara (pp. 29–31)?
5. Why does Max offer Tara a cigarette (p. 33)?
6. Explain the quote by Martin Luther King (p. 34). What is Max trying to tell Tara?

7. Were you surprised by the way Tara's mother responded to the news that Tara had learnt how Van died (pp. 36–37)? Why or why not?

Chapter Three

1. How would you describe Tara's relationship with her sister from the way she talks about Van in this chapter (pp. 38–39)?
2. Why do you think Tara's mother kept the letters (pp. 42–44)?
3. Do you think Tara is responsible for her father's seizure (pp. 44–45)?
4. Why does Tara run away from the hospital (p. 47)?

Chapter Four

1. To what extent do you agree with the quote from Vincent at the beginning of this chapter (p. 51)? To what extent do you think that misfortune is an inevitable part of the cycle of life for human beings?
2. What does Tara mean when she says that seeing the school counsellor is like a secret signal (p. 54)?
3. Why is Tara so shocked by her own painting (p. 55)?
4. Why did Tara's mother try to stop her from seeing her father in hospital (p. 57)?
5. Why did the story of the Happy Prince (written by Oscar Wilde) appeal to Tara (p. 58)?
6. What does Max mean by the term "survivor guilt" (p. 60)?
7. Why does Max offer Tara the use of his home (p. 61)?

8. What does Tara mean when she says, "what turns a house into a home is love" (p. 64)?

Chapter Five

1. How does the quote by Vincent at the beginning of this chapter relate to what is happening in Tara's life (p. 65)?
2. What does Tara mean when she says, "Maybe I have to climb down to the very bottom of the pit and meet the Devil face to face" (p. 73)?
3. What hints are there in this chapter that something bad had happened to Tara's father back in Ireland? What do you think the Troubles were? (p. 77) You may like to research this topic by googling it if you know nothing about the history of Ireland in the 20th century.

Chapter Six

1. Why does Tara say that "it's hard to keep cheerful at the rest home" (p. 80)?
2. What link does Tara make between Vincent and Van while thinking about reworking the painting called *The Potato Eaters* (p. 83)?
3. What is the poem on p. 84 about and how is it significant for Tara?
4. What does Tara think when Johannes starts explaining philosophy to her (p. 88)? Is he being pretentious?
5. Why is Tara so angry to see her mother with another man (p. 95)? To what extent do you think her anger is justified?

Chapter Seven

1. What does Tara mean when she says, "Those von Trapps have a lot to answer for" (p. 99)?
2. Why does Tara drink the wine and then start cutting herself with the bottle top

(p. 102)? To what extent is this a call for help?

3. Why is Tara so determined to see her father even though it is the middle of the night (p. 106)?
4. Explain the significance of the old ballad Tara starts to sing (pp. 110–111).

Chapter Eight

1. Why does Max tell Tara the story about his family (pp. 113–114)?
2. To what extent do you agree with Max's statement that "all life is suffering ... In the end it's how we deal with it – or not – that makes us who we are ... The choice is ours." (p. 115)?
3. Put in your own words Seneca's statement, "Beware the mindless wilderness that lurks forever in the darkness of men's greed" (p. 116).
4. Tara puts herself in a dangerous situation at the party (p. 121). What do you think compels her to run away from Louis?
5. Why do you think Max did not share his own story with Tara when he had the opportunity earlier in the novel? Was Johannes right to tell Tara about the hideous event in his grandfather's past (pp. 125–126)?
6. What effect does the news that Vincent may have been murdered have on Tara (p. 126)? What links does Johannes make between Vincent and his grandfather?

Chapter Nine

1. What links does Tara make between her mother and Medusa (pp. 129–130)?

2. Why do you think the counsellor supports Tara in her wish to see where her sister died (p. 135)? Do you think this is wise?
3. Why does her mother want Tara to meet Brendon? Do you think that is a reasonable request in the circumstances? (p. 137)
4. Why does Max tell Tara that she reminds him of himself (p. 140)? To what extent do they have similar issues to resolve? Is Max making a reasonable comparison?
5. What does Tara mean when she says that Vincent and Van must live in her head (p. 143)? Why is she scared/shocked when she realises that she has shared this thought with Johannes?

Chapter Ten

1. Explain in your own words what Vincent was attempting to describe in the quote at the beginning of this chapter (p. 144).
2. Why is Johannes worried about disappointing his mother and Max (p. 146)? To what extent is he held captive by his grandfather's past?
3. What impression do you get of Tara's mother from this chapter? Is she as bad as Tara thinks (p. 149–154)?
4. To what extent do you agree with Kathleen's comment that "Life is shite, Tara. You'd better get used to it. We're all on our own and the only relief is when the good Lord takes us at the end" (p. 152)?
5. Do you think that Tara is right when she says that her mother has no love to give her (p. 153)?
6. Why is Tara so moved by the sight of May sitting beside her dying sister (p. 156)?

7. Do you agree with Max's view when he tells Tara that Johannes had to recognise what was in his own heart first (p. 157)? Should Max have made it more obvious that he would support Johannes even if his grandson decided not to continue with university?
8. Why is Tara dismayed at the thought that Johannes may be leaving soon (p. 158)?

Chapter Eleven

1. What do you think Vincent meant by the statement "grief gathers in our heart like water in a swamp" (p. 159)?
2. What does Tara mean when she says, "Hope is God's cruellest cosmic joke" (p. 159)?
3. What doesn't Johannes like about Austria and what does that tell us about his personality (p. 161)?
4. To what extent do you agree with Nietzsche's belief that "pain is an inevitable step on the way to reaching anything good" (p. 162–163)?
5. To what extent were you surprised by how happy Tara's aunt and uncle were for her to come and visit them in Ireland in the light of what happened to Van while she was staying with them (p. 165)?
6. Why do you think Tara's mother changed her mind about providing her with money for the trip to Ireland (p. 168–169)?
7. Why is Tara unsure of how to act around Johannes (p. 174)?

Chapter Twelve

1. Why do you think Tara is so unaware of her own attractiveness or of the fact that she looks like her mother and dead sister (p. 177)?

2. Vincent wrote that "Emotions are the great captains of our lives, and we obey them without knowing it." (p. 181) To what extent do you agree with Vincent?
3. Why is Tara so surprised by the way her mother tends to her father (p. 186)?
4. What does Tara mean when she says that Max is the Theo to her Vincent (p. 188)?

Chapter Thirteen

1. How does Tara react to her first glimpses of Belfast (pp. 193–194)?
2. Why is Tara so overwhelmed when she sees the family photos, particularly the one in which Van is present (p. 198)?
3. What evidence is there that Uncle and Aunt have a very happy home life (pp. 199–200)?
4. Are you surprised (as Tara was) to learn that Kathleen was once considered to be the sweetest, smartest girl at school (p. 202)? What clues are there that something traumatic may have happened to Kathleen?

Chapter Fourteen

1. How does Tara respond to seeing the evidence of Ireland's tragic history everywhere she turns in Belfast (pp. 205–206)? Are there some things that are best forgotten?
2. Why do Shanaye and Royan dislike their parish priest (p. 207)?
3. Why is Tara so shocked by the headstone and what it doesn't say (p. 208)?
4. What hints were there earlier in the novel that may have prepared you (the reader) and Tara for her Aunt's revelation? To what extent do you think Tara's parents made

Van a scapegoat for what happened to them (pp. 212–213)?

5. To what extent does Tara feel genuine sympathy for her mother (p. 215)? Can it overcome all the resentment that has built up over the years between them?

Chapter Fifteen

1. What evidence does Tara come up with to suggest that Van planned to take her own life (p. 220)?
2. What do you understand by the term “survivor guilt” (p. 223)?
3. Knowing what you do about Van, do you really think her message to Tara was that she should take her own life as well (pp. 225–231)?

Chapter Sixteen

1. What do you think happened to make Tara realise that death was not the answer (p. 236)?
2. To what extent does Tara begin to feel genuine sympathy for her father (p. 238)?

3. How does Paris compare to Belfast (p. 246)? Look at the choice of adjectives used to describe these two cities, both of which have experienced conflict.
4. To what extent do you agree with Johannes when he says to Tara, “Trust me, being loved too much can be as difficult as not enough. It’s a whole different kind of manipulation” (p. 250)?

Chapter Seventeen

1. To what extent do you agree with Vincent’s description of love at the beginning of this chapter (p. 253)?
2. To what extent do you agree with Tara’s comment to her mother that Van “didn’t kill herself from shame. She died from lack of love” (p. 261)?
3. How has the relationship between Tara and her mother changed since the beginning of the novel (pp. 261–263)?
4. Do you think the ending of this novel is hopeful and positive (pp. 270–271)?

Style and Techniques

1. Most of this novel is written in the first person subjective view so it seems that we are seeing everything through Tara's eyes. To what extent does this view limit the action of the novel? Would readers still identify closely with Tara if the novel was written from the third person omniscient viewpoint?
2. How important are the quotes from Vincent's letters to his brother in helping the reader understand what Tara is experiencing? Would the novel have been as effective without these extracts? To what extent is Vincent another character in the novel?
3. As well as Vincent's letters, the reader gets to see some of Van's letters to her parents and some of Tara's letters to her sister and to Vincent. There are also letters from Tara's relatives in Ireland. How does this use of letters contribute to the development of characters and theme in the novel?
4. During the course of the novel Tara does her own versions of a number of Van Gogh's paintings, and each one is packed with symbolism, both private to Tara and more universal. Discuss the symbols in each of these paintings. (The paintings referred to are *Starry Night*, p. 13; *Self Portrait with Felt Hat*, p. 31; *Almond Blossom*, p. 52; *The Potato Eaters*, p. 83; *The Siesta*, p. 94 and 180; and *Portrait of Gordina de Groot*, p. 129.)
5. A number of poems appear in this novel. How do they contribute to the themes explored? (See pages 21, 84, and 110)
6. In *Dear Vincent*, Hager mentions *The Happy Prince* and *The Selfish Giant* by Oscar Wilde (also considered an Irish author). Read these stories (you can google them) and explain the links between them and this novel. Also google the story of St Patrick. To what extent do these stories shed light on why Van may have chosen to take her own life in the manner that she did?
7. Hager alludes to the movie *The Sound of Music* several times in her novel. Why do you think Tara may have loved this movie and how is it also linked to Max and Johannes?

Characters

1. Select four adjectives to describe each of the following characters:
 - Van
 - Kathleen
 - Paddy
 - Johannes
 - Max
 - Shanaye
2. How would you have described Tara at the beginning of the novel? Select four key events in the novel that you think are turning points for Tara and describe the effect of each of these events on Tara's personality.
3. Kathleen (Tara's mother) is another character who changes in the novel as the reader discovers more about her past. What was she like at the beginning and how has she changed by the end?
4. Max, like Kathleen and Paddy, also had a traumatic early life. How does this character act as a contrast to Tara's parents? Are some people just better at being survivors than others? Or does it come down to the support of family and friends?
5. What are the turning points in the relationship between Tara and Johannes? What do they share in common?
6. Do you think Johannes is too good to be true? What does or doesn't make him a convincing character?
7. Although Van is already dead by the time the novel starts, how does Hager create a strong sense of personality for this character?
8. What do you think Tara and Vincent Van Gogh had in common, apart from the love of painting?
9. Unlike Van, Tara proves to be a survivor. What personal qualities does she have that enable her to overcome painful family secrets and emotional trauma? To what extent was Tara's situation less difficult than that of Van's?
10. Which character did you particularly like or dislike? Why?

Themes

Discuss the following themes and find examples from *Dear Vincent* that illustrate:

- The importance of family
- Parental love
- Coping with grief and loss
- Mental illness
- The place of the artist in society
- The impact of suicide
- The importance of history in shaping societies and character
- Teenage sexuality and attraction
- Care of and attitudes towards the elderly
- Creativity as a way of release
- Survivor guilt
- The idea that “the sins of the father are visited upon the children”
- Friendship across generations
- Betrayal
- The corrosive nature of secrets
- The impact of religion on society and on individuals

Creative Responses

1. A number of philosophers are mentioned in this novel. Select three of them, do your own research on them and present your findings in powerpoint.
2. Tara attempts to do her own versions of a number of famous Van Gogh paintings. Find out what the original paintings looked like. Choose one of them and use it as a springboard for your own creative response. Your response can take the form of a short story, poem, dramatic monologue, description, script or even a static image of your own.
3. Create a powerpoint showing your favourite Van Gogh paintings. Include a soundtrack by matching music and songs to the moods evoked in you by the paintings.
4. Tara thinks that Vincent killed himself while Johannes believes he may have been shot by another person. Do your own research on the internet and see if you can find out what really happened.
5. Imagine you are Sandy, the school counsellor, and create a report on Tara. Within your report include some possible ways that Tara could be helped or some actions Tara could take to help herself.
6. Do you think there could possibly be a sequel to this book? What do you think could or should happen in it? Write a one-page outline of the plot for the sequel you would write. Be sure to include a possible title for this sequel.
7. Find other books which have young adult characters dealing with grief and loss. Write a comparative review where you compare and contrast *Dear Vincent* with at least one other novel dealing with this theme.
8. Write a review of the book, aiming it at the readership of your favourite magazine, newspaper or website.
9. Rewrite one of the conflict scenes between Tara and her mother as a script. If your school has filming or recording equipment, produce your scene.
10. Write a series of diary entries about one of the main events in the book from the point of view of one of the following characters:
 - Kathleen
 - Paddy
 - Max
 - Vanessa
 - Johannes
 - Shanaye
11. Create a timeline that shows the main events of the novel.
12. Choose and research one of the topics from the list below. Present your findings as a formal report, a powerpoint or in poster format:
 - The Troubles
 - The Battle of the Boyne
 - The Easter Uprising
 - The IRA
 - Hitler Youth
 - Jewish refugees in New Zealand
 - The von Trapp family (the real family whom the movie *The Sound of Music* is based on)
 - The Eiffel Tower
 - The Musee de'Orsay
 - The Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam
 - Vincent Van Gogh
 - Klimt
 - Edith Collier

13. Look up the words to the song *Starry, Starry Night* by Don MacLean. To what extent do the views on Van Gogh expressed in this song correspond with Tara's own views on the artist and his work.

14. Attempt to summarise the plot of this novel in a 140 character tweet.