Dear Vincent
Written by Mandy Hager
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A number of recent young adult books have focused on suicide, but Mandy Hager's Dear Vincent is particularly powerful. Tara is going to high school, helping take care of her father (who has been incapacitated by a stroke), working in a rest home, and painting when she gets the chance. She loves Vincent Van Gogh and is making a series of paintings inspired by his work, but with themes from her own life. She is a very gifted artist. Her older sister, Vanessa, has died. Her mother, who works hard to keep them financially afloat, seems unable to nurture Tara—as she was unable to nurture Vanessa.

Tara finds letters from relatives in Ireland, Tara's parents' homeland, and realizes that Vanessa was not killed in a car accident as she had thought, but that she had killed herself. Filled with rage and anger that her parents had been untruthful and had not treated Vanessa well, Tara moves out and finds refuge at the home of Max, one of the temporary residents at the rest home where she works. She keeps painting, and as the images in her painting get more disturbing the teacher sees she is in distress. Tara thinks that if she goes to visit her uncle and aunt in Ireland, she will find answers to the questions that haunt her about her own family. The uncle and aunt receive her warmly, and indeed she does find out many answers about what happened in her family history during the "time of the Troubles" in Ireland and after their emigration to New Zealand.

Tara longs for her sister and grieves for the pain her sister bore and decides she will join her in death to accompany her in a way she was unable to when she was alive. She comes to the brink of taking her own life—the situation is prepared, ready and at hand–and in getting caught up in finishing her final painting, does not complete the act that would end her own life. The extra time brings her back to a sense that she does want to live, and so begins piecing back together a life that she will find worthwhile. Her aunt and uncle help her find a sense of herself, as does her friend Johannes. She returns to New Zealand as her father is dying to try to figure out how she will live her own life and reconcile herself to her parents.

The book is convincing in helping the reader understand why and how she makes choices. It is written from Tara's point of view, so we follow her thinking, but we also see other's actions and responses and know she has some choices before she realizes it herself. It takes us to the brink of thinking that ending her life is a reasonable choice, given the circumstances, all-the-while thinking "no, no, no—she can't do that." And it does this without being contrived or sentimental.

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The book does not leave you with all the pieces tied together or everything being okay, which makes it feel authentic to the trauma that has unfolded. The roles of Max and Johannes in her life seem almost too good to be true sometimes and leave you wondering how likely it would be to have someone come along who could help Tara to that extent. Johannes is a mature 17-year-old. While critical to the plot and a contrast in having to deal with the issue of too much parental love rather than not enough love (and we see that has its problems, too), he is the nurturing opposite of Tara's imperfect mother. On the other hand, without Max and Johannes, the book would be much bleaker—they give a sense of hope and are, in a number of instances, the embodiment of things she has been thinking about in her own head anyway.

The history of her parents and their immigration to New Zealand are easy to believe in their authenticity, both to historical events and to ways people responded to the events. While it has a particular setting, the kinds of stresses her family faces are ones any reader could identify with at some level.

Hager begins each chapter starting with a quote from a letter from Vincent Van Gogh to his brother Theo. As the book continues, the parallel of Vincent writing to his brother Theo, who tried to help Vincent but was in the end unsuccessful in keeping Vincent from killing himself, adds an extra level to the book. Tara's analysis of Vincent's work and mental health are wonderful connections to her making sense of her own life and do not seem contrived or misplaced.

This book could be paired with Looking for Alaska by John Green (2005). Alaska is also burdened by complexities of family, particularly what has happened to her mother, and in the end decides to exit the "labyrinth of life" via suicide. In this book, friends must deal with her death more than the family. In both cases the females are dealing with tough interpersonal issues and the story is told from the perspective of the person left behind.

Mandy Hager has written largely for the YA audience and has personal experience with a friend who was a victim of suicide. This topic is close to her heart and she writes with passion about it—including an afterward pleading for those considering suicide to get help. She was also a teacher for special needs children before she became a full-time writer. A number of her books were written as her own children were teenagers, which may be part of the reason the voices of her characters seem so true and authentic. She has been a finalist for a number of awards and won the LIANZA Esther Glen medal for Smashed (2008) and the New Zealand Post Children's Award in 2010 for The Crossing (2009). This book is stronger and hopefully will be shortlisted for the New Zealand Post Children's Award for 2013.

http://www.storylines.org.nz/Profiles/Profiles D-H/Mandy_Hager.html

http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/writers/hagermandy.html

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