



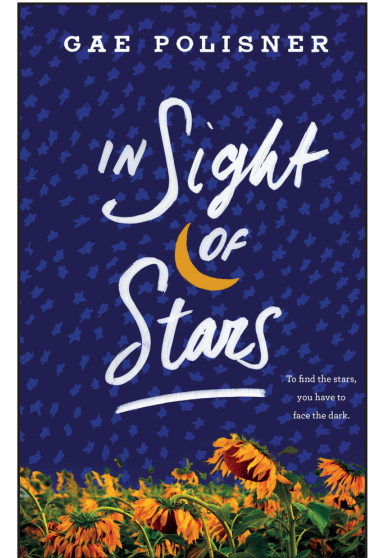
In Sight of Stars



by Gae Polisner

“In Sight of Stars deals with mental health, Vincent van Gogh, family and recovery; all told in some of the most beautiful prose you will probably ever read.”

—*Teenreads*



256 pages

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TO THE TEACHER

Seventeen-year-old Klee’s father was the center of his life. He introduced Klee to the great museums of New York City and the important artists on their walls, he told him stories made of myths and magic. Until his death.

Now, forced to live in the suburbs with his mom, Klee can’t help but feel he’s lost all the identifying parts of himself—his beloved father, weekly trips to the MoMA, and the thrumming energy of New York City. That is until he meets wild and free Sarah in art class, with her quick smiles and jokes about his “brooding.” Suddenly it seems as if she’s the only thing that makes him happy. But when an act of betrayal sends him reeling, Klee lands in what is biting referred to as the “Ape Can,” a psychiatric hospital for teens in Northhollow.

While there, he undergoes intensive therapy and goes back over the pieces of his life to find out what was real, what wasn’t, and whether he can stand on his own feet again. Told in alternating timelines, leading up to the event that gets him committed and working towards getting back out, Gae Polisner’s *In Sight of Stars* is a gorgeous novel told in minimalist strokes to maximal effect, about what makes us fall apart and how we can put ourselves back together again.

“An unapologetic and wry story about a teen finding his way out of a personal crisis.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“An achingly fierce exploration of the way the world wounds us and heals us. If you love exquisitely written coming-of-age stories that will leave you breathless, *In Sight of Stars* is for you.”—Jeff Zentner, William C. Morris award-winning author of *The Serpent King* and *Goodbye Days*

“What a book. So human and kind and forgiving and real.”—Geoff Herbach, award-winning author of *Stupid Fast* and *Hooper*

“In the vein of Ned Vizzini’s *It’s Kind of a Funny Story*, Polisner’s short novel destigmatizes mental illness, emphasizing that everyone needs a little help sometimes. Readers will laugh, cry, and ache alongside Klee as they follow his recover. In a sea of recent contemporary novels about teens with mental illnesses, this one stands out for its strong writing, likable protagonist, and overwhelmingly positive messages.”—*School Library Journal*

“Gae Polisner’s latest release is nothing short of extraordinary. As I like to say, this book is the lovechild of Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and Ned Vizzini’s *It’s Kind of a Funny Story*. From start to finish, *In Sight of Stars* is compelling and real.”—*GERM*

“An intense, sometimes graphic, totally heartbreaking portrait of a character who will keep pages turning.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

PREPARING TO READ

This guide is intended to help teachers use *In Sight of Stars* in their classrooms. The guide is divided into two parts, “Reading and Understanding the Book” and “Discussing and Studying This Book in Class.” The first part will help students follow and grasp the book’s major points and plotlines, while the second will help them explore and explicate *In Sight of Stars* with their classmates.

This guide adheres to the Common Core State Standards Initiative. After each question below, the relevant Common Core Standards are listed—and all of the questions appearing in this guide correspond to the English Language Arts Standards (Grade 11–12) for History/Social Studies, Reading: Informational Text, Writing, and/or Speaking & Listening. Although we have listed the Grade 11–12 standards as examples, *In Sight of Stars* has a reading level of ages fourteen and up and thus is appropriate for lower grades. Upon previewing the book, educators will know best which individuals and groups of students will respond most meaningfully to the content of this novel in settings such as reading workshop and literature circles. The emotional maturity of the student or group should be taken into account when recommending and assigning the novel to younger grades.

1. In the opening pages of the book, the author flashes back and forth between the present and past as well as between visceral dream-like imagery and phrases without solid context. Why does the author intentionally open the book this way? How does this inform your understanding of Klee's state of mind? What can you infer about his relationships with Sarah, his mother, and his father as well as their individual personal histories from these early pages? After you have finished reading the novel as a whole, reread the first chapter. What do you now notice that might not have been as clear at the beginning? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5)

2. In the opening pages, the author also uses italics not only to highlight certain thoughts of Klee's, but also to indicate when he is responding to Dr. Alvarez and others. Why do you think the author made this choice? What has altered about Klee when the author begins to use standard formatting choices again? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3)

3. Throughout the work, the author uses symbols and references. For example, starting on page seven, when Klee is in the middle of a hallucinatory state, he often sees a crow. The crow even speaks to him, manipulating what Klee knows to be real through his words. What do you think the author meant to accomplish through use of the crow? What might the crow mean as a symbol? Are there other symbols in the book that you recognize, what might they mean? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4)

4. On pages 10-11, readers glimpse Klee and Sarah sharing their first moment together in art class. As an artist, Klee knows how wrong it is to alter someone else's work, but he is compelled to trace Sarah's work. He is so overcome that he cannot help himself. And at the end of the scene he notes: "It is Sarah who says we are good." What does this scene tell us about Klee's current state of mind and the future dynamic of his relationship with Sarah? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3)

5. Starting on page 35, Klee begins opening up to Dr. Alvarez and readers see key moments in his life playing out very vividly, most notably his father's death on pages 40-41. Klee's anger for his mother hits home in this instance, based on her reaction to his death. Do you think Klee is right to be angry? If so, why? As a reader, how do you interpret her reaction? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6)

6. *Daubigny's Garden* by Vincent van Gogh is mentioned several times in the text. Notably, on page 57, Klee informs Dr. Alvarez that her print is not of the original. In the original version there is a black cat that is missing in the reproduction. Why do you believe this detail is important to Klee? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6)

7. By page 113, cracks have begun to show themselves in Sarah and Klee's relationship, yet Sarah refers to Klee as "the real deal." From your understanding of

her thus far as a character, why do you think this is so important to her? Would you say he views her the same way? If not, what might their differing needs lead to as their relationship progresses?

(CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1)

8. Klee often refers to his mother as the Ice Queen. When he mentions this nickname for her during group therapy (page 125), Sabrina recognizes the reference but points out Klee got the name wrong. It's The *Snow* Queen from the eponymous fairytale. Dr. Howe then goes on to discuss how much the fairytale is about perception and misperception. Do you think Klee misremembered or does this error signify something greater in his relationship with his mother? If the latter, what does it signify and what other evidence might there be of this? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1)

9. Starting on page 160, Klee begins to share with Dr. Alvarez the series of events that led to him hurting himself that night. While part of his story is based in fact—Sarah betraying him—part is also based on assumption—that his mother was cheating on his father. How might the events of this night have been altered if Klee had taken the time to find out the truth? Do you think that would have even been an option for him? Why or why not? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5)

9. When Dr. Alvarez is not having therapy sessions with Klee, Sister Agnes has Klee join her in playing games like Candyland and Chutes and Ladders throughout the book. She even gives him a tiny ladder memento to take with him when he leaves. Why do you think she engages him in these games? Do you think this activity was a helpful tool? What are the lessons he is meant to take from them? Why do you think Klee needed both Sister Agnes and Dr. Alvarez during the course of his recovery; why these two professionals instead of just one? Discuss. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.3)

10. Throughout the book, Klee mentions a hideous mural of fish under the water. Near the end, he takes his paints and adds to it, before adding an inscription: "For Dr. Alvarez, A sky full of stars. In honor of my father, who lost sight of them." How does this scene speak to Klee's journey? What do you think this means for Klee's life after he returns home?

DISCUSSING AND
STUDYING THIS
BOOK IN CLASS

—Before beginning the unit, take the time to pre-assess what students already know about Vincent van Gogh, and tap into any expertise in your classroom throughout the course of the novel study. Consider reading and analyzing the following short texts in class as students read the novel: "Hanging Fire" by Audre Lorde, "Richard Cory" by Edwin Arlington Robinson, and "Digging" by Seamus Heaney. An excerpt from *Vincent and Theo* by Deborah Heiligman would also help to frame the study of the novel. Playing the songs "Vincent" by Don McLean and "The Flight" by the Roots, consider designing an instructional unit with these other thematically apropos novels as choices: *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven, *Still Life With*

of Icarus” by Iron Maiden, and analyzing their lyrics in relation to the characters in the novel would be another germane learning experience for readers. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9)

—If you offer this book as a literature circle choice, consider designing an instructional unit with these other thematically apropos novels as choices: *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven, *Still Life With Tornado* by A.S. King, Gabi, *A Girl in Pieces* by Isabel Quintero, *The Gospel of Winter* by Brendan Kiely, *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock* by Matthew Quick, *Goodbye Days* by Jeff Zentner, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika L. Sanchez, and *The Memory of Light* by Francisco X. Stork. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9)

—A recurring theme the author explores is how we frequently act and/or react wrongly when operating under a misperception; or the harm we can cause when we don’t show our true selves to the world. Where are the places in the story where a character is doing so and how might the story have shifted if they had had the correct information in the first place? Some examples include: Klee’s father keeping the truth about who he was secret; Klee erroneously believing it was his mom who was having an affair; even Eugene when Klee assumes his tattoo is a swastika. In class, read Emily Dickinson’s “Tell All the Truth But Tell It Slant.” What are the consequences of circling the truth, of only giving half truths to others in your life? Both of Klee’s parents, Sarah, etc. are all “guilty” of “telling it slant.” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2)

—On page 54, Martin, one of Klee’s peers in the “Ape Can,” makes an offhand remark that “with great genius comes great madness,” equating the desire or ability to create art with some degree of emotional or mental upset. This theme also comes into play when Dr. Alvarez introduces the book with the Van Gogh paintings and they discuss Klee’s own father. However, Klee is also named after artist Paul Klee who—to public knowledge—has never struggled with his mental health. Do you feel Martin’s assessment is accurate? Why or why not? In this vein, discuss public figures as representations of private ones in contemporary society. As a potential literary pairing, consider the Emily Dickinson poem “Much Madness is Divinest Sense.” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2)

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

—Thanks to his father’s stories and teachings, Klee knows a lot about the life and work of Vincent van Gogh, often referencing him and his work in conversations about life. Have a student “read” a painting and then write their interpretation of it. Select a piece of art by any artist and write a story either inspired by the piece in question or where the piece in question informs the narrative in some way. As an alternative, have a student “read” a painting using color choices, size, and objects within the work to analyze purpose and meaning and then write about it.

—Klee’s father tells him folktales to teach Klee about the world, and sometimes, to give Klee a better understanding of himself. Chose one and explain what you think it means and why, as well as why you believe the author chose to include it.

—One of the themes the book explores is how our perception of a situation can be different than the reality of the situation. Can you think of a time when your perception did not align with what was true? Write an essay or story that explores how you behaved and felt when operating under the misperception, and what changed when the reality was made known. Use research—a TED Talk, an article from *Psychology Today*, or other resources from your school library database—to explore your ideas

—While the book is not from Sarah’s point of view, she plays a pivotal role in the narrative. But, much like Klee, the reader doesn’t quite know everything about her. Write a narrative from Sarah’s point of view that takes place during Klee’s stay in the hospital and they cannot communicate. Explore not only her feelings about her relationship with Klee, but also her relationship with her mother and family life.

—Famous quotes are used throughout the book, primarily shared via the stress balls that Dr. Alvarez gives her patients as needed during sessions, but also shared by Dr. Alvarez herself. Select one quote from the book and explain what you think it means and apply it to your own experience.

—There are no laptops or cellphones allowed in the “Ape Can” so we don’t see the usual technology we might in other stories. But let’s imagine Klee had access to a camera. What might he have photographed? How would he caption things? As an alternative, create a social media account for one of the characters in the story following the timeline before, during, and after Klee is in the “Ape Can.” Use details, share photos, include biographies, friends and followers, etc.

—Read the original fairy tale of “The Snow Queen” and compare and contrast to the novel’s characters and archetypes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gae Polisner is the award-winning author of *The Memory of Things* (Finalist, Keystone to Reading; Finalist, Three Apples Book Award; Nerdy Book Club Best YA 2016), *The Summer of Letting Go* (Nerdy Book Club Best YA 2014, Teen Ink Editor’s Choice Badge of Approval) and *The Pull of Gravity* (2012 Bank Street Best, 2012 PSLA Top Forty, Nerdy Book Club Best YA 2011). *The Memory of Things* also was selected for the 2017 WSRA Children’s Literature Committee’s “Just One More Page” list. She also co-hosts *Teachers Write!*, a virtual writers camp for teachers and educators. She lives in Long Island, New York with her family.

This teacher’s guide was developed by Vicki Lame with Oona Abrams.

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