

"An utterly intoxicating story of love, betrayal, and loyalty."—TAYLOR JENKINS REID

a novel

HALF- BLOWN ROSE

LEESA
CROSS-SMITH

AUTHOR OF *THIS CLOSE TO OKAY*

BOOK CLUB KIT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the different ways in which we find and define ourselves? How does Vincent? Does this change at all throughout the novel?
2. There are many descriptions of food throughout *Half-Blown Rose*, from Vincent and Loup's eating fruit in her kitchen, to indulgent dinner parties, and more. Discuss what significance or symbolism different foods might have in the story.
3. How would you characterize Vincent, and what specific passages support your characterization? In what ways does she transform over the course of the book?
4. Agathe describes Vincent as a flâneuse because of the hours she spends strolling the streets of Paris. What does this term mean? Discuss the connotations of flâneur and flâneuse, and what being one says about Vincent. In what ways is she a flâneuse, both literally and figuratively? How might this be seen as a subversive act?
5. Discuss the concepts of agency, identity, and reinvention in relation to Vincent.
6. Compare and contrast Vincent's relationships with Cillian and Loup. What does she get from each relationship? Is she able to access different parts of herself when she's with them? When she's alone?
7. What kinds of family structures and types of romantic relationships do you see in this novel? Was your reaction to Vincent's choices or the relationship dynamics in the book ever informed by predominant social/societal norms?
8. What are some examples of actions or gestures that Vincent, Cillian, and Loup make to convey their emotions to their loved ones? Are there instances in which you think a gesture is insufficient to communicate feelings?

9. How do you think being in Paris affects Vincent's emotional journey after Cillian's betrayal?

10. Examine Cillian's novel excerpts and Vincent's journal entries. How do they inform the novel as a whole? What can you tell about them and the way they each perceive the world based on their writing?

11. "Cillian had his secrets and kept them and kept them and kept them even though Vincent worked hard never to keep anything from him; things that revealed even the parts of her she didn't particularly like or want to admit...she was forty-four and could keep her own secrets and make her life whatever she wanted it to be instead of waiting and waiting and waiting..." (pages 103-104). How does the above quote shed light on Vincent and Cillian's relationship, as well as how Cillian's betrayal changed Vincent?

12. In Vincent's travel journal, she considers the liminal nature of travel and certain spaces surrounding it, like airports. Discuss liminal spaces in the book and why they might resonate with Vincent. Are you drawn to any liminal spaces in your own life?

13. "I want you to know that I'm sorry for the way I handled the situation with Shalene Byrne. Snatching you away like that. I never thought it was right...I knew it was wrong...but it's what I had to do in order for you to have the life you deserve." (140). Discuss this quote from Cillian's novel. What does it reveal about Cillian/Cian's father? What does the larger context reveal about Cillian/Cian, and how his father's mindset affected his behavior?

14. If you were Vincent, would you be able to forgive Cillian? And would you go back to him?

15. Vincent notes to Loup: "I've read this book before, by the way...what we're doing...I know how it ends. If a man were writing this story I'd have to die, right? You've read *Anna Karenina*...*Madame Bovary*?" (173). What does she mean? How does *Half-Blown Rose* play on or subvert classic literary themes surrounding women and sex?

A CONVERSATION WITH LEESA CROSS-SMITH

What is the significance of the title *Half-Blown Rose*?

Sometimes it means beauty...arrested...if only for a moment. Sometimes it means wait and watch it bloom. Sometimes it means that liminal space between a beginning and an end, which could be all of life...and also, quick moments, too. It means a lot of things to me and I think it can mean something different to everyone. I love flowers and thinking of that life cycle...a seed, a bud, half-blown, full-blown...all very necessary stages and all different, but also the same. Half-blown is no less important just because it's in between stages, no less important than the before or after, so let's explore that feeling...sit there for a while and not rush anything. The book is filled with liminal spaces and *half-blown rose* gives me those same feelings.

Where did you get the idea for *Half-Blown Rose*, and did the novel change in concept from that first spark?

Most of the time it's hard for me to say where I get my ideas from, because sometimes I just don't know! But I do have a very vivid memory of walking while listening to *Jane Eyre* on audiobook and when Thandiwe Newton read the line about the half-blown rose, I literally stopped walking. My feet stopped, and I had to open my notes app and write it down. The rest of the story really just came out of that idea... something in between...liminal spaces. Originally, I was going to write some short stories and I did write a short story about Vincent and Loup that eventually became the beginning of *Half-Blown Rose*.

Your books are always liberally sprinkled with references—from art and music to film and books—and *Half-Blown Rose* is no exception. What songs, films, artists, creative works, etc., especially inspired you during your own creative process?

I watched a lot of French films...Jean-Luc Godard films. Luca Guadagnino films, too. I listened to a lot of French music. Some of the art I mention, like *Judith and the Head of Holofernes* by Gustav Klimt...it's just one of my favorite pieces...I have it in my bedroom. I'm always inspired by Vincent van Gogh and naming Vincent after him was an easy choice. I love Impressionism and Postimpressionism. I always envisioned Vincent's dad a bit like Jean-Michel Basquiat. Cillian Murphy is one of my favorite actors and Cillian is a beautiful name...things like that...they just come together easily for me when I'm working on a book. So many things!

You have written an impressive five books (and counting!). Do you find yourself returning to any common threads, themes, or patterns in your writing?

I often write about women attempting to piece their lives back together after huge shifts or big events in their lives. I like to find them at the time when they are most vulnerable and allow them to be broken and difficult and human and see how they manage...how they reach for the light, even when it's darkest. I love writing about stubborn hope and I love writing about the female gaze and women's desire.

On a similar note, how do you feel you've changed or grown as a writer over the years?

It's much easier for me to write a novel now because I have a sort of blueprint in my mind...but also, every book brings new challenges that I look forward to. And I never want to stop growing when it comes to beauty on a sentence level.

In *Half-Blown Rose*, you play with form, incorporating excerpts from Cillian's novel, snippets from Vincent's travel journal, film scripts, emails, and playlists. Did this pose a challenge to you as a writer, and how did you decide which portions of the novel should be told through a different medium?

It wasn't really a challenge, no, but that's because I do it so often in my work! I've written most of the book from third-person limited and we only get inside Vincent's head that way. I wanted to write from Cillian's point of view, too, but I did that only through the lens of "Cian" via his novel excerpts. But I also wanted to write from first-person point of view when it came to Vincent, so I do that through her journal entries. It all happened organically and I just tried different things until they stuck. I did it enough to keep it interesting, but not too much so it would get boring or distracting.

Did you do any research for *Half-Blown Rose*?

I've been to most of the places I write about in the book. I was lucky enough to visit London, Paris, Amsterdam, etc., in 2019. I've driven across England and taken the walks along the Seine that they take in the book. And I also took French lessons so I could be immersed in the language for some months.



Photo: © Mickie Winters

In Vincent's class, she focuses on the connections between color, feeling, and memory. What is your favorite color? Does it evoke any particular memories, emotions, or states of mind?

My favorite color is lavender/lilac. I'm very picky about my purple, but I love most shades of it. It's dreamy and beautiful and it feels personal, like God made it just for me. I think everyone should feel this way about their favorite color.

You wrote this novel during a pandemic when travel was largely restricted. Was writing about Paris and Vincent's travels a vicarious experience for you? Where's the first place you want to travel to once you're able?

Absolutely! I started writing it not long after I returned from Paris and working on this book let me go to this dreamy, wanderlusty place in my mind where I could jet off and visit again (and again) whenever I wanted. First time I'm able to travel abroad again, I'd like to go back to Paris, then I want to visit Seoul. Tokyo, too!

Towards the end of the novel, Vincent and Loup pick up books from her shelf to let the titles illustrate how they're feeling. What book would you choose for yourself right now?

Right now I'd choose one of my Korean books because I'm learning Korean and it's such a beautiful language; I surround myself with it as much as I can.

What's next for you as a writer?

A break! And then, more books! Until then, I'll keep sleeping with snippets of Book Seven under my pillow.

MORE RESOURCES FOR YOUR BOOK CLUB

"C'est bon bon bon"
Listen to Loup's band!
[@anchoismusic!](https://www.instagram.com/anchoismusic/)



ENJOY THE HALF-BLOWN ROSE PLAYLIST,
FEAT. FLORENCE + THE MACHINE,
THE WEEKND, STORMZY, & MORE!



Leesa Cross-Smith at The Louvre
Photo © Leesa Cross-Smith

**Follow in Vincent Wilde's
footsteps with Leesa Cross-
Smith and this interactive
walking tour of Paris.**

VINCENT WILDE'S COLOR JOURNAL PROMPTS

Make a list of colors you observed this morning. Which colors repeated most often? How did they make you feel?

What is your favorite color and has it changed? Does it change often?



Choose a color (green, yellow, red, purple, blue) and notice how often it pops up during your day/week. Make note of it. Once you are paying attention to one color, do you see it more often, even if you're not looking for it? Does it feel a bit like magic?

What is a color you hate and why? Do you have negative associations with it or does it just hurt your eyes?

What's a color that you think is "not for you" and what do you think would happen if you tried to wear an article of clothing in that color anyway? Would you feel like a different person?

What's the color that appears the most in your life/wardrobe? Is that on purpose?

What's your favorite name for a color?

What color is your spirit? Does it change? Is this the same color you think other people would choose to represent you?



BOOK CLUB RECIPES

Enjoy a full Parisian experience with these seductive recipes and menu ideas.

HALF-BLOWN ROSÉ 75

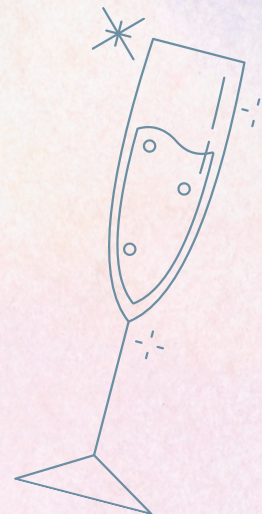
Recipe adapted from Ashley Rose Conway's *Celebrate Rosé: Cocktails & Parties for Life's Rosiest Moments* as seen in [Wine Enthusiast](#)

INGREDIENTS

- Edible gold leaf, for garnish (optional)
- 1½ ounces gin
- ¾ ounce fresh lemon juice
- ¾ ounce simple syrup
- 3 ounces sparkling rosé
- Lemon peel

DIRECTIONS

If using, drape edible gold leaf on flute. In cocktail shaker filled with ice, combine gin, lemon juice and simple syrup. Shake well, then strain into flute. Top with sparkling rosé and stir. Twist lemon peel gently over top of glass to express essential oils. Garnish with peel.



PAIN AU CHOCOLATE

This elaborate creation is perfect for a gloomy day in need of some indulgence. [Find the recipe here.](#)



MORE MENU IDEAS...

- [Vincent's Caprese Salad](#)
- [Farfalle Carbonara with Spring Peas](#)
- [Spaghetti Puttanesca](#)
- Charcuterie board with meat, cheese, fruit, & crackers
- Assorted chocolates & pastries
- Macarons in a rainbow of colors

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