

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO



by Jack Gantos



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Grades 4–8

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ABOUT THE BOOK

During the summer of his thirteenth year, Jack Gantos is “grounded for life” by his quarreling parents until his mom loans him to an elderly neighbor for a very odd chore. Miss Volker, the arthritic town medical examiner and obituary writer, needs a typist. The last of the original town residents are dying, and the Volker and Gantos team work overtime to meet the newspaper deadlines. What once seemed like a summer of doom for Jack turns into an adventure involving dead bodies, cooked hands, poisoned rats, a homemade airplane, Hells Angels, a man on a tricycle . . . and possibly murder. Jack, a nosebleeder, spews blood with each anxious moment, but through it all he learns what it takes to be a man.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Ask students to brainstorm the kind of information normally featured in an obituary. Read aloud the obituary of a house that Miss Volker writes for the *Norvelt News* (pp. 194–97). Have students write an obituary of an old toy. Encourage them to include personal information. They may also wish to make it humorous.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS:

Questions for Group Discussion

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

- Describe Jack's family.
- Jack is punished by his mom for shooting his dad's rifle and for mowing down her cornfield. Discuss how he is the victim in both incidents.
- Jack's parents try to convince him that they work as a team. Debate whether there is any teamwork in the Gantos family.
- Cite evidence that Jack's mom "wears the pants in the family."
- Which of Jack's parents does he most respect?

FRIENDSHIP

- Ask students to discuss Jack's reputation among his peers.
- Bunny Huffer is Jack's best friend. Trace their relationship from the beginning of the novel to the end.
- At first, Jack is simply Miss Volker's scribe. At what point does he become her friend?
- How does Bunny regard Jack's relationship with Miss Volker?
- Ask students to discuss the relationship between Mr. Spizz and Miss Volker.
- Mr. Spizz enjoys pestering Jack. Debate whether he is jealous of Jack's relationship with Miss Volker.

COMMUNITY

- Norvelt is a New Deal community that was built to give "hardworking poor people a helping hand" (p. 54). Why does Jack's dad call it a "Commie" town?
- Discuss Miss Volker's commitment to the town.
- Debate whether Norvelt has lost its true sense of community.
- What does Mrs. Gantos miss most about the "old" Norvelt? How is she trying to instill a sense of community in Jack?
- Discuss how a town can change without changing its sense of community.

COURAGE

- Jack tells his mother that his dad made him mow down the corn. Why does he feel that squealing on his dad was a cowardly thing to do?
- Anytime that Jack is anxious or fearful, his nose bleeds. How does it take courage to let Miss Volker operate on his nose?
- Explain how Bunny contributes to Jack's fears. How does she also help him gain courage?
- What is Jack's most courageous act in the novel?

LYING/HONESTY

- Explain what Mrs. Gantos means when she tells Jack, “Remember, a person first lies to himself before he lies to others” (pp. 207–8).
- Jack tells his parents that he didn’t put the bullet in the rifle. Why does it take Mr. Gantos a while to admit that Jack is telling the truth?
- Who are the most honest and trustworthy characters in the novel?
- Discuss the most dishonest characters. How do they lie to themselves and to the entire community?

GROWING UP

- At different times in the novel, Bunny and Miss Volker tell Jack that he needs to be a man. How might their definition of a man differ?
- In what ways is Jack’s father still a boy? Debate whether this interferes with Jack’s journey toward manhood.
- At what point in the novel does Jack begin to understand his role as a man? Which character is most responsible for his coming of age?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

VOCABULARY

The vocabulary in the novel is not difficult, but students should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them using clues from the context. Such words may include: *sinister* (p. 22), *delusional* (p. 27), *abscond* (p. 30), *feral* (p. 49), *contempt* (p. 55), *willful* (p. 71), *carnage* (p. 90), *barter* (p. 95), *convulsive* (p. 128), *euthanized* (p. 135), *simian* (p. 166), *incredulous* (p. 175), *ingrate* (p. 175), *tirade* (p. 202), *restorative* (p. 263), *impaled* (p. 303), and *noxious* (p. 311).

LANGUAGE ARTS

Jack’s favorite part of the newspaper is the “This Day In History” column written by Miss Volker. The paper reprints old columns that she wrote when her hands were good. Ask each student to pick a date in July or August and research historical events that happened on that day. Then have them write a new “This Day In History” column that Jack might write for the *Norvelt News*.

For another assignment, ask students to think about the humor in both character and plot in the novel. Then have them do a funny live radio interview with Miss Volker and Jack about the day Miss Volker is held captive by Mr. Spizz, how she got him to confess to the murders, and how he arranged his getaway. Ask other folks in Norvelt to react to his crime.

SOCIAL STUDIES

There were many New Deal communities similar to Norvelt located throughout the nation. Refer students to the following Web site for information about some of these communities: <http://www.arthurdaleheritage.org/history/new-deal-homestead-communities/>. Ask each student to write and illustrate a brief article on one New Deal community. The illustration may include, among other things, a map or a drawing of the architecture of the homes. Instruct students to make a statement about what has happened to the community.

For another activity, arrange a classroom debate based on the ongoing argument between Jack's parents about the principles on which Norvelt was founded. For instance, consider the scene where Jack and his parents play Monopoly on his birthday (p. 185). His parents disagree about the value of the game. Mr. Gantos calls it "the American dream in a box." Mrs. Gantos counters: "It teaches you how to ruin other people's lives without caring." Divide the class into two opposing teams. Have one team adopt Mrs. Gantos's view of Mrs. Roosevelt and the New Deal communities, and the other Mr. Gantos's attitude toward Norvelt and his role in dismantling the town. Then hold a debate between the teams about the New Deal communities and how the game of Monopoly relates to the concept of community.

SAFETY

Jack's dad has a talk with him about gun safety. Divide the class into small groups and ask them to make a two-minute video on gun safety. Encourage them to be creative and to use a title or slogan that will get kids' attention. Then have them become familiar with the gun laws in their state.

DRAMA

Divide the class into four groups. Ask each group to pick a favorite chapter in the novel, prepare a script from it, and present it as a one-act play in one of the following genres: mystery, horror, comedy, or soap opera.

ART

Have students record everything they know about Mr. Spizz. Ask them to make a "Wanted" poster for his arrest. Include a reward for his capture. Make a composite sketch for the poster that Jack and Miss Volker offer to the authorities.

INTERNET RESOURCES

<http://www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=33>

This official Web site of the National First Ladies' Library provides a biography of Eleanor Roosevelt and discusses her contribution to her husband's New Deal programs.

<http://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=6328>

This official Web site of the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force provides the history and specifications of the Piper Cub J-3 plane like the one Mr. Gantos bought.

PRAISE

★ “An exhilarating summer marked by death, gore and fire sparks deep thoughts in a small-town lad not uncoincidentally named ‘Jack Gantos.’ The gore is all Jack’s, which to his continuing embarrassment ‘would spray out of my nose holes like dragon flames’ whenever anything exciting or upsetting happens . . . [A] characteristically provocative gothic comedy, with sublime undertones.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “There’s more than laugh-out-loud gothic comedy here. This is a richly layered semi-autobiographical tale, an ode to a time and place, to history and the power of reading.” —*The Horn Book*, starred review

★ “A bit of autobiography works its way into all of Gantos’s work, but he one-ups himself in this wildly entertaining meld of truth and fiction by naming the main character . . . Jackie Gantos.” —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“This is a brilliant book, full of history, mystery, and laughs. It reminded me of my small-town childhood, although my small town was never as delightfully weird as Norvelt.” —*Dave Barry*

“Nobody can tell a story like Jack Gantos can. And this is a story like no other. It’s funny. It’s thoughtful. It’s history. It’s weird. But you don’t need me to attempt to describe it. Get in there and start reading Gantos.”

—*Jon Scieszka, founder of gusread.com and author of the Spaceheadz series*

“Jack Gantos has a way with boys, or a good memory for being one.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Gantos has a refreshingly wicked and sharp wit, he’s honest as hell, he’s fearless, and he knows how to tell a good story . . . Delivered with his signature quick-witted insight on adolescence.” —*Kirkus Reviews’s “Seven Impossible Things” blog*

“One of the finest [Gantos has] produced in years . . . Of course the whole reason to come to this book in the first place is to bear witness to the poetry of the language. Individual lines would just jump out at me and demand to be noticed . . . A book I can read and enjoy and recommend ad nauseum.”

—*School Library Journal, Fuse #8 (Betsy Bird’s blog)*

“This winning novel, both humorous and heartwarming, takes place during the summer of 1962, when narrator Jack Gantos turns 12 and spends most of his days grounded. Jack’s main ‘get out of jail free card,’ and one of the novel’s most charming characters, is Miss Volker. The blossoming of their friendship coincides with the blooming of Jack’s character.” —*Shelf Awareness Pro*

“Small-town life has never been funnier than in Jack Gantos’s *Dead End in Norvelt*. The 12-year-old main character, who suffers from profuse nosebleeds, also happens to be named Jack Gantos . . . This boy’s life is over the top, but readers would expect nothing less from Jack Gantos (either one of them).” —*BookPage*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Anne Lower



JACK GANTOS has written books for people of all ages, from picture books and middle-grade fiction to novels for young adults and adults. His works include *Hole in My Life*, a memoir that won the Michael L. Printz and Robert F. Sibert Honors; *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*, a National Book Award Finalist; and *Joey Pigza Loses Control*, a Newbery Honor Book.

Jack was born in Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania, and grew up in nearby Norvelt. When he was seven, his family moved to Barbados. He attended British schools, where there was much emphasis on reading and writing, and teachers made learning a lot of fun. When the family moved to south Florida, he found his new classmates uninterested in their studies, and his teachers spent most of their time disciplining students. Jack retreated to an abandoned bookmobile (three flat tires and empty of books) parked out behind the sandy ball field, and read for most of the day. The seeds for Jack's writing career were planted in sixth grade, when he read his sister's diary and decided he could write better than she could. He begged his mother for a diary and began to collect anecdotes he overheard at school, mostly from standing outside the teachers' lounge and listening to their lunchtime conversations. Later, he incorporated many of these anecdotes into stories.

While in college, he and an illustrator friend, Nicole Rubel, began working on picture books. After a series of well-deserved rejections, they published their first book, *Rotten Ralph*, in 1976. It was a success and the beginning of Jack's career as a professional writer. Jack continued to write children's books and began to teach courses in children's book writing and children's literature. He developed the master's degree program in children's book writing at Emerson College and the Vermont College M.F.A. program for children's book writers. He now devotes his time to writing books and educational speaking. He lives with his family in Boston, Massachusetts.

For more information about the author, visit jackgantos.com.

ALSO BY JACK GANTOS

Rotten Ralph Rotten Readers

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HC: 978-0-374-36355-0

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E-BOOK: 978-1-4299-3578-4



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Hole in My Life

HC: 978-0-374-39988-7

PB: 978-0-374-43089-4

E-BOOK: 978-0-374-70610-4

Love Curse of the Rumbaughes

HC: 978-0-374-33690-5

PB: 978-0-312-38052-6

DEAD END IN NORVELT

A CONVERSATION WITH JACK GANTOS

(Excerpt from an interview conducted by Laura Wilson, producer of the Macmillan Audio recording of *Dead End in Norvelt*)

Q: *Dead End in Norvelt* is a wild combination of autobiography and fiction. And when you read it, you kind of want to know what's real. Are the nosebleeds real? Did you really almost shoot Miss Volker? How did you make that combination?

A: When I was trying to parse the real life with the fiction I had to add some features. But I added them on top of a really good foundation. So, like the nosebleeds—yeah, I had these vicious splashy nosebleeds which I was kind of famous for with big wads of paper sticking out of my nose. And the town is real, the whole Eleanor Roosevelt history is real, and then all of the history that's referred to is real. So how do you make that fit together? Then you have to construct—that's where the fiction comes in. You construct the plot. But Miss Volker was a real character. That's not her real name but that was her town role.

Q: Are your parents in real life the way they come across in the book?

A: My parents really are that divergent. My mother was from Norvelt and she believed in those Norvelt values. That neighbors help neighbors, and you all band together in a community effort. And my father was from that area, but he went off to the war, and when he came back he wanted his piece of the American pie. And Norvelt was not the place to get it. So he wanted money and success. She wanted to kind of settle down and have a small-town life.

Q: The Jack Gantos in the book is really sort of pulled between these two quite different parents. Did you feel that a little bit when you were growing up? Or is that something you created for the plot?

A: Actually, I think it's very true, I think it's pretty organic to me. On one hand, I'm just like my mother—even when I go visit her, gosh, I start moving like her, I talk like her, I just about look like her. And then when I start feeling almost too much like her, I start thinking no, no, no, no, you know—I really want to get out there and swing my cat and write this book and go after my success and be ambitious and knock 'em out. So I've got both sides in there—that soft and that aggressive.

Q: You mentioned already that Norvelt is a real place with this real connection to Eleanor Roosevelt. Obviously history is important to you—is it really important to you to get that across to young readers?

A: Yes. I'd say one of the prime motivations for the book is this notion that our history is so vastly important. And that each day we live, even as children, our day can reflect and tie into very established historic moments. And so when you know who you are and what's come before you, you might have an opportunity to see what's coming down the line. And for kids there's this huge blind spot: What's tomorrow going to be like? And I think if you just have some sense of the great bones of the history of this country, you can kind of get a sense of where you're going forward.

Q: Miss Volker is sort of the town historian and obviously loves history. Did you ever feel that she loved it too much?

A: I think Miss Volker's sense of history was a little bit in amber. Her historic moments were the big twentieth- and nineteenth-century social movements . . . She was not really looking forward so much. She was old and at her age she was really sort of reviewing the past. And I think she was really buffing it up and making it beautiful.

Q: Is Eleanor Roosevelt one of your heroes?

A: I just think Eleanor Roosevelt has got to be the heart and soul of the greatest first lady that this country's ever had. She cared about people very deeply and really helped steer the social policies of this country during a time when this country needed somebody like her. I always look toward her.

The full-length version of this interview is available on the audio edition of *Dead End in Norvelt*, read by the author, published by Macmillan Audio.

Guide was written by Pat Scales, Children's Literature Consultant,
Greenville, South Carolina.

