

About the Author

Jack Gantos was born in Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania; he and his family moved to Barbados when he was seven years old. Later, the family moved to Florida and often returned to Pennsylvania for visits and vacations. From his childhood, Gantos kept a journal, certain that one day he would fulfill one of his dreams and become a writer. While he was in college, he and a friend, Nicole Rubel, collaborated on what would become the Rotten Ralph series of picture books.



photo © Merry Scully

Gantos continued to write books in the Rotten Ralph series and to teach classes in children's literature and writing for children. 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. Gantos went on to write books about his own middle school experiences in the story collections about Jack Henry, including *Jack's Black Book* and *Jack Adrift*. His novels about a young boy with attention deficit disorder (ADD) won critical and popular acclaim: *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* was named a finalist for the National Book Award, and its sequel, *Joey Pigza Loses Control*, received a Newbery Honor. *Hole in My Life* garnered a Michael L. Printz Honor for distinguished contribution to young adult literature and a Robert F. Sibert Honor for informational books from the American Library Association.

Gantos now travels across the United States, speaking to kids and educators about books and reading and writing.

For more on Jack Gantos:

A Partial List of Articles by and about Jack Gantos:

Alfano, Christine. "Jack Gantos." *Riverbank Review* (Interview). Summer 2001.

Gantos, Jack. "Creativity and Structure." *Teaching K-8*. March 1998.

—. "The Hit List: Books for Young Writers." *School Library Journal* (Up for Discussion). January 1997.

—. "The Next Level: Using Journals to Write Great Short Stories." *Book Links*. May 1998.

—. "Warts and All." *School Library Journal* (Up for Discussion). March 1996.

Lesesne, Teri S. "Portraits: True Meanings, True Feelings, True Choices: Jack Gantos." *Teacher Librarian* (formerly *Emergency Librarian*). November-December 1997.

Shoemaker, Joel. "Filling Holes with Words: An Interview with Jack Gantos." *VOYA*. June 2003.

Web sites:

www.fsgkidsbooks.com

Contains more information about the author and his books

www.jackgantos.com

Jack Gantos's Web site, with lots of information about his life, books, and travels, including downloadable art

www.Authors4teens.com

An online interview with Jack Gantos conducted by Donald R. Gallo

http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/education/kidlit/aom/current_aom.htm

Biographical information plus some information about other books by Jack Gantos

Hole in My Life

by Jack Gantos

ISBN: 0-374-39988-3 · \$16.00

Paperback: 0-374-43089-6 · \$8.00

A Michael L. Printz Honor Book
 A Robert F. Sibert Honor Book
 An ALA Best Book for Young Adults
 An ALA Notable Book
 A Booklist Editors' Choice
 A Bulletin Blue Ribbon Book
 Fanfare, *The Horn Book's* Honor List
 A *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year

"Riveting . . . More than a harrowing, scared-straight confession: it is a beautifully realized story about the making of a writer . . . A wonderful biography for teens struggling to discover their deepest, truest selves." — Starred, *Booklist*

"Gantos has written a courageous and compelling autobiographical book. All its little ironies spin in perfect balance, all the characters, especially himself, are unsparingly honed to precise plausibility. The humor and pathos of desperate measures almost turn the pages themselves . . . Gantos has succeeded in writing about drug convictions without actually preaching."

— Carol Chittenden, Eight Cousins Bookstore, Falmouth, Massachusetts

"His account is remarkably free of both self-pity and self-censorship . . . This is a tale of courage and redemption proving that a bad start in life does not have to lead to a bad life story." — *The New York Times Book Review*

"Jack Gantos is not just a writer — something he dreamed about from childhood. He's a National Book Award Finalist, a Newbery Honor medalist, and a university writing instructor. In this tough, sad, funny memoir, he tells how he got there."

— *The Washington Post Book World*

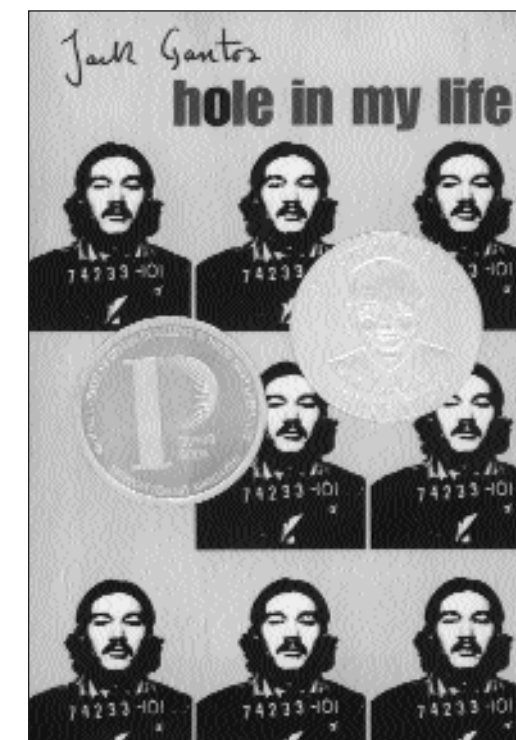
FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX
 19 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003

Visit www.fsgkidsbooks.com

This guide was prepared by Teri Lesesne, former middle school English teacher and Professor of Library Science at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas.

Teachers' Guide

Hole in My Life



by Jack Gantos

"*Hole in My Life* is beautifully written and straight from the gut . . . Because it is a memoir, its punch is more powerful. It illustrates poignantly that bad decisions don't have to equal shattered lives."

— Nancy Bell, Youth Services,
 Geneva Public Library/Outreach Librarian
 to the Illinois Youth Center-Valley View

"You learn a lot of lessons that inspire you to head down the right path in life . . . Excellent."

— Lindsay W./Student Reviewer/
 La Entrada School Library

Introduction

In *Hole in My Life*, Jack Gantos recounts an experience from his own life that many other writers would rather keep hidden from public view. In the summer of 1971, the young Gantos, desperate for cash for college and willing to take a risk, runs a boatload of hashish from the Virgin Islands to New York City. For this job, he is to receive \$10,000. In reality, he gets a six-year prison sentence.

This hauntingly frank story is a slice-of-life autobiography that examines the events

leading up to Gantos’s decision to take part in illegal activities. He doesn’t make excuses; he doesn’t rationalize his behavior by saying he was young and foolish and impressionable. Instead, what Gantos does so wonderfully in this book is to confront the mistakes of his past head-on with no apologies.

Classroom Connections

Since reading, language arts, and English curricula often contain overlapping skills and strategies, this autobiography can be used in any setting that encourages students to read and respond to print. *Hole in My Life* offers teachers the chance to utilize a text that is nonfiction in genre yet employs several of the same techniques used in fiction. Many state tests rely on nonfiction selections in their reading component, so this book can help students read nonfiction effectively. Additionally, several standards in social studies may be addressed with this book.

Language Arts /English /Reading Standards:

This guide meets the following standards from the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE):

- Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
- Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
- Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

gives readers a chance to observe Gantos, to draw their own conclusions about his behavior, and, most important, to benefit from his experience.

Gantos talks about his less than stellar final year of high school, his restless search for something to do after graduation, and his rash decision to earn money quickly. Without a great deal of thought, he accepts an offer from an acquaintance, Rik, to help run a boat filled with hashish to New York. Once he and the skipper, Hamilton, are in the city, Gantos helps his cohorts sell the drugs. Then he begins to relax, telling himself that perhaps things will work out, that his part in this escapade will remain a secret. But that is not to be. Rik is busted and snitches before Hamilton and Gantos even arrive in New York. Unbeknownst to Gantos, all of his customers have been rounded up and have provided statements identifying him. Gantos is the last one to be caught and therefore cannot “cooperate” by providing names of drug contacts in St. Croix. At the trial, the prosecutor, stating his belief that Gantos is withholding information, recommends incarceration. Gantos’s log of the journey is also used against him, and he is left to face severe consequences for his actions. The result: a sentence harsher than his companions’.

Once in prison, Gantos has the opportunity to reflect more sensibly on his career goal — to become a writer — and to set up a carefully developed plan for reaching it. At first the goal seems elusive. The harsh day-to-day existence inside the prison makes Gantos wonder if he will ever be able to realize any of his dreams. However, determination to prove himself propels Gantos forward into action, positive actions that ultimately lead to his release from prison and the beginning of his new life. Gantos’s frankness and his ability to critically examine his impetuous youth blend seamlessly to create a story at once riveting with excitement while tempered with caveats for the reader. Never preachy, this book instead

- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

- Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Social Studies Standards:

This guide meets the standards of the National Council for the Social Studies.

- Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic.
- Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of individual development and identity. Personal identity is shaped by one's culture, by groups, and by institutional influences. How do people learn? Why do people behave as they do? What influences how people learn, perceive, and grow? How do people meet their basic needs in a variety of contexts? Questions such as these are central to the study of how individuals develop from youth to adulthood. Examination of various forms of human behavior enhances understanding of the relationships among social norms and emerging personal identities, the social processes that influence identity formation, and the ethical principles underlying individual action.

Pre-Reading Activity

What is the significance of the title? What could cause a “hole” in someone’s life? What do students think the story will be about? Does the photo of Gantos facing the title page give any clue as to his identity? What conclusions about this person could a reader draw from the photograph alone? Would the conclusions differ when paired with the title?

Discussion

■ Much of the story is told in flashback. The opening chapter refers to Gantos’s prison photo and the food in the prison. Then Gantos reflects on something from his childhood. This collapsing of settings/time frames could be confusing without the use of literary techniques. How does the author signal whether he is talking about something in the distant past versus the setting/time frame of the story?

■ Go through the book and make a list of the titles of each chapter. How does Gantos signal the reader ahead of time about what will occur in the chapter? What kinds of clues do the chapter titles provide?

■ As you read through the chapters, keep a chart of the decisions Gantos made that culminated in his trip to smuggle drugs. For instance, in chapter 2, he talks about living on his own as a teen and wandering through casinos and drinking. How did these early actions lead up to the one that changed the course of his life?

■ The story is divided into three sections. Why do you think the author decided to separate parts of the story? What important event occurs in each part?

■ In part 1, chapter 4, Gantos refers to *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. Look up a synopsis of this book, or read an excerpt from its early chapters. Why do you think Gantos was enamored of the life described by Kerouac? What connections do you see between Gantos and Kerouac?

■ “I have learned this: it is not what one does that is wrong, but what one becomes as a consequence of it.” How does this quote from Oscar Wilde (found on the epigraph page) reflect the major theme of this book? How does Gantos change as a result of what he has done wrong? What does he “become” that might not have happened without his experiences in prison?

Reaching across the Curriculum

Social Studies

This story could be used to focus on current events as they relate to topics such as prisons, prison life, drugs, drug abuse, drug smuggling. Students could be placed in groups and given some choices about possible topics to explore. After students have had the chance to complete their research using print and nonprint materials, their information could be presented in the form of a traditional report, a Power Point presentation, or a Web site designed to provide readers with links to sites related to the individual topics. Alternatively, students could research similar topics as they relate to other countries. What is the prison system like in Britain or Russia? How does the criminal justice system in the United States differ from that of Australia or Japan? Teachers can tailor these comparisons to curricular demands.

Additionally, map skills could be a topic chosen by the students, as they trace the route sailed by Gantos from the Virgin Islands to New York.

Reading / Language Arts

Throughout the book, Gantos refers to the saving power of books and reading. In the list at right, he identifies books that were important to him as he worked through his time in prison. However, he also refers to reading as something like a drug. Gantos used books to comfort himself in times of trouble, to distract him from his problems. How can reading be both beneficial and detrimental? Ask students to write in their journals about this almost schizophrenic approach to books and reading. Ask them to provide examples from their own lives that mirror this conflicted view. Are there other elements in their lives that are similar? For instance, what about the positive and negative effects of Internet surfing? Of music? Of television? Etc.

Alternatively, students could be asked to select one of the books from the list below, read it, and write about why they think this particular book was important in Gantos’s life.

<i>Books that filled the hole</i>	
<i>Go Ask Alice</i> by Anonymos	<i>The Old Man and the Sea</i> by Ernest Hemingway
<i>Peter Pan</i> by James M. Barrie	<i>The Odyssey</i> by Homer
<i>Artificial Paradise</i> by Charles Baudelaire	<i>On the Road</i> by Jack Kerouac
<i>An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge</i> by Ambrose Bierce	<i>One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest</i> by Ken Kesey
<i>This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen</i> by Tadeusz Borowski	<i>Martin Eden</i> by Jack London
<i>The Delicate Prey</i> by Paul Bowles	<i>Billy Budd</i> by Herman Melville
<i>On the Yard</i> by Malcolm Braly	<i>Mutiny on the Bounty</i> by Charles Nordhoff and James N. Hall
<i>Naked Lunch</i> by William S. Burroughs	<i>The Bell Jar</i> by Sylvia Plath
<i>Papillon</i> by Henri Charrière	<i>Treasure Island</i> by Robert Louis Stevenson
<i>Heart of Darkness</i> by Joseph Conrad	<i>Seven Long Times</i> by Piri Thomas
<i>The Red Badge of Courage</i> by Stephen Crane	<i>The Car Thief</i> by Theodore Weesner
<i>Robinson Crusoe</i> by Daniel Defoe	<i>The Glass Menagerie</i> by Tennessee Williams
<i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> by Fyodor Dostoyevsky	<i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> by Tennessee Williams
<i>The House of the Dead</i> by Fyodor Dostoyevsky	<i>Look Homeward, Angel</i> by Thomas Wolfe
<i>The Thief’s Journal</i> by Jean Genet	<i>Revolutionary Road</i> by Richard Yates