

Teachers' Guide

The Jack Henry Books

by Jack Gantos

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Jack Gantos kept a journal throughout his childhood. His Jack Henry stories grew out of actual events that he recorded in his journals. Ask students to begin their study of the Jack Henry books by keeping a daily journal. Instruct them to focus on themselves and their interaction with family and friends. Those who wish to may illustrate their journal entries. For information about the process Jack Gantos uses, see the article he wrote for *Book Links*, posted on www.fsgkidsbooks.com/teachersguides/jackgantos.htm. Remind students that their journal entries should remain private unless they want to share them.

JACK ADRIFT: Fourth Grade without a Clue

Fourth grade becomes by turns hilarious and painful for Jack Henry when his father joins the Seabees and moves the family to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. Their house, a trailer in the middle of a swamp, is cramped quarters for a family of five and gives Jack no escape from his judgmental older sister or from his parents' disagreements, which, while amusing, leave Jack utterly confused. For example, his parents' contradictory advice on making friends and influencing people: Dad says to tell people what they want to hear, while Mom cautions him to just tell the truth. Jack is really at sea as he drifts through the year. He becomes infatuated with his teacher, falls into the clutches of the principal when she makes him the bad-behavior spy, and is forced to make a presentable pet out of a



JACK ADRIFT:***Fourth Grade without a Clue* (continued)**

duck with backward feet. Imagination is Jack's strong point, but the adults in his life don't appreciate this attribute, and neither do some of the neighbors. Jack records his feelings in his diary, but even that doesn't help when he must face the death of Elliott, a handicapped boy who lives next door.

Discussing and Responding

Jack says to his parents, "I'm a little concerned about how to make friends in a new place" (p. 5). Mr. and Mrs. Henry disagree on how to meet people and make friends. Contrast their beliefs regarding friendship. What would you suggest to Jack? Brainstorm ways to help new kids in the neighborhood or new students in school adjust to their new surroundings.

Mr. Henry says, "*Luck* is what a man needs to succeed" (p. 58). Define success from Mr. Henry's point of view. What is Jack's mother's idea of success? Debate whether Mr. Henry feels that his life is filled with "bad luck." How might Mr. Henry's attitude toward his own life contribute to Jack's insecurities? Discuss what Mr. Henry calls the "Popeye stage of my life" (p. 58). Why is success based on the willingness to change?

Betsy, Jack's older sister, often bullies him, and she torments him even more when he feels weak. Describe Jack's weakest moments in the book. At what point does he show strength? How do you know that Jack will always be vulnerable to people like Betsy? How is Mr. Henry a bully to his family? How is Jack a bully to Pete? Discuss whether bullying is a learned behavior. How is bullying related to unhappiness?

Mrs. Henry talks out her problems, and Mr. Henry deals with his problems by retreating

into silence. Jack's mom doesn't agree with her husband when he encourages Jack to brood. How does silence lead to brooding? How does brooding make problems worse? How does Mrs. Henry help Jack deal with Elliott's death? Discuss how Julian deals with Elliott's death.

Mrs. Henry accuses her husband of being a quitter. How do you know that Jack isn't a quitter?

Reaching across the Curriculum

Language Arts

Miss Noelle, Jack's fourth-grade teacher, asks her students to write the story of their life. Then she has them write a second biography about their life as they wish it to be. Ask students to complete Jack's assignment.

Jack and Julian are very upset when Elliott dies. Julian deals with his grief by writing a ballad about Elliott. Write a journal entry that Jack might have written on the day Elliott dies.

Social Studies

Jack's father joins the Seabees, a division of the United States Navy. Ask students to read the history of the Seabees and to construct a timeline of the troops' activities during war and peace. Explain their motto: "We build, we fight."

Science

Miss Noelle gives her class a list of famous fliers, from the Wright brothers to Amelia Earhart. Ask students to use books in the library and sites on the Internet to identify important fliers, beginning with the Wright brothers. Then ask them to pick one and write about that person's contribution to flight.

JACK ON THE TRACKS: Four Seasons of Fifth Grade

Jack Henry is in fifth grade when his family moves from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, to Miami, Florida. Unsure of what his life will be like in Miami, Jack worries about making new friends, attending a new school, and learning what it takes to be a man. Though he gets himself into some precarious situations, Jack reveals his sensitive and vulnerable nature when he uses humor and imagination to create a perfect birthday gift for his brother, reacts to the untimely death of a friend's older brother, and gains insight into life from a caring teacher. These experiences, along with daily lessons from his father, lead Jack on a humorous journey toward manhood.

Discussing and Responding

In the story "Riding Shotgun," Mr. Henry tries to teach Jack the difference between "thinking" and "worrying." Explain what Mr. Henry means when he says, "In the game of life, one will take you to the top of the heap. And one will put you on the bottom." What are Jack's greatest worries about moving to Miami? Jack knows that worrying shows weakness. Find evidence in the book that Jack is weak. When does he show strength?

Mrs. Pierre, Jack's fifth-grade teacher, teaches her students the five senses. She tells them that the sixth sense is "good taste." How does Mrs. Pierre define "good taste"? Why does Mrs. Pierre think that Jack's story "The Ugly Thing" is in bad taste? How does Jack reveal that he has "good taste" in the story "Beauty and Order"?

Jack Henry has a "generous imagination." How does he use his imagination to create a birthday gift for Pete? Why don't his parents appreciate his imagination? Why is an imagination important for a writer?



Jack goes to the library to find a book about becoming an adult. The librarian tells him that the only book in the library on the subject is approved by the school board, but he must have permission from his parents to borrow the book. Ask students to define censorship. Discuss whether the library's policy requiring parental permission to take out the book is considered a form of censorship. How do you think Jack's parents would react if he asked them for permission to borrow the book?

Reaching across the Curriculum

Language Arts

Jack Gantos uses similes to create certain images — for example, "the screened door banged back against the jamb like a starter's pistol" (p. 1). Find other examples of similes in the book.

Jack has no idea about what his life will be like in Miami. He wonders whether it will be funny, scary, or mysterious. Ask students to

JACK ON THE TRACKS:
Four Seasons of Fifth Grade (continued)

take a scene from any of the stories in the book and rewrite it either as a comedy, a mystery, or a tragedy.

Social Studies

Mrs. Pierre takes Jack's class to a mansion to experience the beauty of French things. Divide the class into groups and assign each group a room in the mansion. Send them to the library to research French furniture, art, books, or other things that could possibly be displayed in their assigned room. Ask them to write a description of the room that might appear in a brochure about the mansion.

Science

Tack Smith's older brother dies of alcohol poisoning. Ask students to find out what organizations or agencies in their city or town work to educate teenagers about the dangers of alcohol abuse. Ask a person from one of the organizations to speak to the class.

Art

Mr. Henry gives Jack a book of Aesop's fables. This is an appropriate gift for Jack since Mr. Henry likes to teach lessons through story. Ask students to read a fable and make a drawing to illustrate the lesson that it teaches.

HEADS OR TAILS: Stories from the Sixth Grade

At eleven years old, Jack Henry is in his fifth school in six years. His father, a construction worker, moves the family wherever he can find work. As a result, Jack is never in one place long enough to form solid friendships; therefore, he spends his time pestering those around him. Jack's family and teachers view him as a mischievous, irresponsible, and immature brat; but he is often his own worst enemy. He labels himself "stupid" and tries to find ways to improve his self-worth. By keeping a daily journal about his good days and bad days, Jack reveals his keen sense of humor and vivid imagination. Through his crazy antics, Jack rollicks through life and realizes that sometimes you win and sometimes you lose.

Discussing and Responding

Jack's mother tells Betsy, "A diary is for keeping all your secrets, and nobody is allowed to read it but you." Why is it important to record your secrets in a diary or journal? A secret is no longer a secret once it



is shared. What type of secrets should be shared? How do you know when a secret should be shared? Discuss incidents in the novel where Jack should have shared his secrets. Mrs. Henry tells Jack that she will get him a diary when he is old enough to have secrets. How old must a person be to have secrets? How might Mrs. Henry define "grown-up secrets"?

HEADS OR TAILS:***Stories from the Sixth Grade*** (continued)

In the story “Candy Itani,” Jack goes to the Baptist Mission with Johnny Ross. At the end of the story, Jack says that he will never go to the church again. What turns him against the church? What does Jack’s decision reveal about him? Jack is sure to encounter Johnny Ross at school. What do you think he will say to Johnny?

Jack is fascinated with the idea of UFO’s in the story “Death and Taxes.” He says that UFO’s can take him “away from all this confusion and set me down in a place without fear.” Discuss the confusion and fear in Jack’s life. Find incidents in the book when Jack uses humor to deal with his fear.

When the Henry family moves to Fort Lauderdale, Jack writes in his diary, “Was this going to be a fresh start? Or was this only another beginning without an end, like all the others?” Why does Jack need a “fresh start”? What type of ending does he want? How does Jack use humor to deal with his “new beginning”? What could Mr. and Mrs. Henry do to make their frequent moves easier for the children?

Reaching across the Curriculum

Language Arts

Jack Henry likes to read detective novels. Ask students to make a summer reading list that includes at least ten novels that they would recommend to Jack.

Jack puts fortune-cookie messages in his diary. Ask students to write a fortune-cookie message for Jack. Tell them that the message should offer him encouragement and make him feel better about himself.

Social Studies

In the story “Death and Taxes,” the Henry family drives from Miami to Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania, to attend a family funeral. Ask students to use maps or atlases to determine the shortest route for the Henry family to take. Then, have them plan a scenic route for their return trip.

Fort Lauderdale is known as the “Venice of Florida.” Ask students to plan a day tour of Fort Lauderdale and the surrounding areas. Instruct them to give brief information about each site.

Science

In the story “Rabies,” Jack is bitten by a dog and worries that he has been infected with rabies. Ask students to go to the library and obtain information about rabies. Have them make a pamphlet that informs other people about this deadly infection. The pamphlet should include a brief discussion about the causes, symptoms, and treatment of the infection. The students may also want to include a brief history about the discovery of the treatment of rabies.

The Henry family is preparing for a hurricane in the story “Rabies.” Ask students to research the weather conditions that produce hurricanes. What is the difference between a Hurricane Warning and a Hurricane Watch? How does the National Hurricane Center in Florida collect and use data?

Mathematics

Ask students to use the most recent *World Almanac* or the Internet to locate figures regarding the death toll and property damage from hurricanes in the United States since 1950. Have them construct graphs that compare the data. Which hurricane is considered the most devastating?

JACK'S NEW POWER: Stories from a Caribbean Year

In the summer after his sixth-grade year, Jack moves with his family to the island of Barbados. Here, he expects to make changes in his life. He promises himself that he will be more grown-up and mature. He won't lie or cheat or misbehave. He will be responsible, brave, and smart. When Jack gets a case of blood poisoning, falls in love with his sister's best friend, and encounters a "shady character," he finds out that his life is still plagued by misadventure and trouble, comedy and errors. Through it all, he learns that his best weapon is his sense of humor, and his most reliable best friend is his trusty diary.



Discussing and Responding

In the story "New Power," Jack breaks a window in his dad's office. His dad tells him, "There is no such thing as an accident. There is right and there is wrong. There is thoughtful thinking and thoughtless thinking." What is the difference between "thoughtful thinking" and "thoughtless thinking"? Find other scenes in the book that indicate that Jack is guilty of "thoughtless thinking." Identify times when he shows that he is also a "thoughtful thinker."

What is Jack's new power? How does it change his relationship with his family? How does it change his feelings about himself?

Why does Jack say that living in Barbados is almost like living a fairy tale? Who or what might represent the "good" and the "evil" in the book? A fairy tale always ends happily ever after. Think about the Henry family's last days in Barbados. How might the ending of the book be considered both "happy" and "sad"?

Jack's father tells him, "A son that can't look his father in the eyes is a coward." Define a coward. How is being a coward related to fear? Find scenes in the book where Jack shows that he isn't a coward.

Reaching across the Curriculum

Language Arts

Review the characteristics of a fairy tale: fast-moving plot, vague characters, good versus evil, element of magic, good always wins, things happen in threes, and happily-ever-after endings. Ask students to select one story from *Jack's New Power* and write it as a fairy tale.

In the story "Dynasty," Jack's father saves a couple from drowning. Ask students to pretend that they are newspaper reporters. Instruct them to write an on-the-spot news story when the couple is saved. Include an interview with the couple and Jack's father.

JACK'S NEW POWER:***Stories from a Caribbean Year (continued)***

They may also wish to include a quote from Jack and other members of the Henry family.

Social Studies

After a neighbor's house is burglarized, Jack's father buys two pistols. He tells his family, "The only reason to be afraid of a firearm is if you don't know how to use it." Engage the class in a discussion about gun safety. Ask students to learn about the firearm laws in their state. Have each student make a poster about gun safety.

While in Barbados, the Henry family enjoys the entertainment at some of the local hotels. The folk culture of Barbados is of African origin. Ask students to look into the music, dance, and food that the Henry family discovers in Barbados.

Science

Jack, in the story "Man's Man," gives Cush twenty dollars, which he bets at the

cockfights. Betsy tells Jack that cockfights should be considered animal abuse. Ask students to find out about other types of animal abuse. What organizations support animal rights? Are there local and state laws to protect animals?

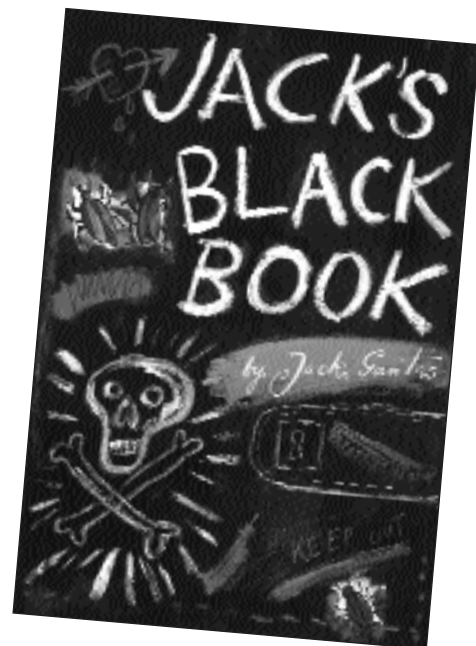
Jack's father warns the Henry children about the undertow in the ocean. Have the students find the definition of "undertow." Why is it dangerous? What causes it? How should a swimmer deal with it?

Art

Jack sees a coat of arms in Barbados that dates back to British rule. He thinks that it would be nice to have a Henry family coat of arms. The coat of arms that Jack sees has words like "honor," "courage," and "wisdom." Ask students to think of words that would best describe Jack's family. Then design a coat of arms for the Henry family.

JACK'S BLACK BOOK

The Henry family has moved back to Fort Lauderdale, where Jack enters seventh grade at Sunrise School, a magnet school for unmotivated and low-achieving students. Still fighting low self-esteem, Jack begins his journey toward fulfilling his dream of becoming a writer by trying to turn his worst experiences into a money-making scheme. In the process, he encounters an escaped convict, suffers humiliation from a gorgeous girl, almost fails shop class for making a dog coffin, and risks being led astray by a former neighbor, Gary Pagoda. At times, Jack's life seems doomed to failure, but his tenacity and his ability to use humor to conquer life's problems make him a winner.



JACK'S BLACK BOOK*(continued)***Discussing and Responding**

Jack reads in an old writers' magazine that writers are often misfits who have to make their own place in the world. Why might Jack be considered a misfit? Discuss whether Jack is comfortable with being a misfit. What are Jack's efforts to make his own place in the world? How does Jack change by the end of the novel?

Jack says that he feels humiliated when rejected by the synchronized swimmer. Find other times in the novel where Jack experiences humiliation. How does he deal with humiliation? How do these experiences help Jack change?

In chapter 5, "The Blind Leading the Blind," Jack thinks about the difference between real tragedy and fake tragedy. What is Jack's definition of tragedy? What does "near tragedy" mean? What is the difference between tragedy and bad luck? Ask students to find articles in the newspaper that they would label either tragic or bad-luck stories. Invite them to share the stories with the class.

Jack thinks that his family is very cynical, especially his dad. What is a cynic? Jack feels that his family is negative toward the positive changes that he is trying to make. What causes his family to be so cynical? What might Jack do to change their attitude toward him? What are the positive changes that Jack makes?

Reaching across the CurriculumLanguage Arts

Jack doesn't want his writing to sound like Hallmark greeting cards. Ask students to read various types of greeting cards. Remind them that Jack enjoys a good laugh. Then instruct them to write a greeting card of encouragement that they would send to Jack.

Jack's father tries to teach his children lessons by telling them stories. Divide the class into groups and ask each group to make up a story that would teach Jack a lesson about hanging around with Gary Pagoda.

Social Studies

At one point in the novel, a woman says that Pete is a juvenile delinquent and that she is going to make a citizen's arrest. Ask students to find out how a person makes a citizen's arrest. What are the dangers involved in making a citizen's arrest?

Science

Mr. Pagoda invents a Pet Pad. Send students to the library to use books, magazines, or the Internet to research unusual inventions. How does a person obtain a patent for an invention?

Art

Design a newspaper advertisement for Mr. Pagoda's Pet Pad or Jack's Dog Coffin. Include a picture, a description of the item, the cost, and where the item can be purchased.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

Family Relationships

In *Heads or Tails*, Mr. Henry says, “I don’t want people talking about our family the way they talk about the Pagodas” (p. 116). Ask students to compare and contrast the Henry family with the Pagoda family. Which family has the stronger “sense of family”? Discuss some special times that the Henry family spends together.

Father/Son Relationship

Discuss how Jack’s father attempts to contribute to Jack’s life in *Jack Adrift*. How does his father fail? In *Jack on the Tracks*, Jack says that he wants to be like his father. In *Heads or Tails*, he says that he and his father have nothing in common. How does Jack’s relationship with his father change as he gets older? Jack’s mother goes away for a week in *Jack’s New Power*. She tells Jack, “I think this will give you and your dad some time together to smooth out some of your friction.” Discuss the friction between Jack and his father. Jack says that his dad’s greatest fear is that his kids will let him down. Identify times in all of the Jack Henry books that Jack lets his father down. How does Jack try to win his father’s approval? Discuss times when Mr. Henry is proud of Jack.

Sibling Relationships

In *Jack on the Tracks*, Jack says, “I never had a nice thing to say to Betsy, I bullied Pete, and I seemed to spend a lot of time thinking about everyone’s worst qualities.” Ask students to make four columns on a sheet of paper and label them Jack, Betsy, Pete, and Eric. Have them enter actual dialogue from each book that reveals Jack’s relationship with his siblings. Discuss whether these

relationships might be considered normal sibling relationships. Ask students to discuss what they think Jack’s relationships are with his siblings today.

Self-Concept

There is evidence in all of the Jack Henry books that Jack has a poor self-concept. Discuss how his family, teachers, and friends contribute to his low self-esteem. Jack is sometimes a bully, especially to his brother, Pete. How does low self-esteem contribute to a person’s being a bully? What other characters in the books might be considered bullies? Describe these characters’ self-esteem. Jack grows up to become an author. How does it take a positive self-concept to be a writer?

Growing Up

In *Jack Adrift*, Jack’s mom and dad discuss manhood. How does Mrs. Henry define manhood? What is Mr. Henry’s idea of a man? In what ways is Jack’s father still a boy? Jack is in fifth grade in *Jack on the Tracks* and worries about becoming a man. Ask students to discuss Jack’s definition of manhood. Then have students list the qualities that they think best describe a man. What does Jack’s behavior in the other Jack Henry stories reveal about his journey toward manhood? Discuss the most humorous parts of his journey.

Responsibility

Several times Jack and his brother and sister are left at home while his parents are at work or on a trip. Though Jack sometimes displays responsibility, he more often comes across as a person who isn’t very responsible. Cite times when Jack isn’t very responsible. In

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS*(continued)*

Jack Adrift, Mrs. Nivlash, the principal, names Jack Respect Detective. How does the principal see this as a responsible job? Why is this type of responsibility tough on a student? Debate whether Jack is accepting or rejecting responsibility when he tells Mrs. Nivlash that he wants to give up the job. How is Jack's determination to tackle his problem with his shop teacher in *Jack's Black Book* the sign of a responsible person? Name other times that Jack shows responsibility. How does accepting responsibility lead to trust?

How do responsibility and trust relate to growing up?

Truth

In *Jack Adrift*, Mr. Henry is prone to embellishing the truth, but his wife calls it plain lying. Relate moments in the novel when Jack displays these exact qualities. What is the difference between stretching the truth and lying? Cite evidence from all of the Jack Henry books that Jack does understand the difference between the two. Discuss whether Mr. Henry understands the difference.

CULMINATING ACTIVITY

Ask students to review the journal entries that they have written during the study of the Jack Henry books. Instruct them to select one or two entries and turn them into a short story. Refer to the *Book Links* article for ideas. Ask them to take the advice of Mrs. Pierre, Jack's fifth-grade teacher, and use all five senses in writing their stories. They should give their short story an appropriate title. Plan a special day for students to share their stories.

A Partial List of Articles by and about Jack Gantos

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

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———. "Hannibal Crossing the Alps." *Speaking of Journals*. Ed. Paula W. Graham. Honesdale, Pa.: Boyds Mills Press, 1999.

———. "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.

Peress, Robin, ed. "Jack Gantos — Picture This." *American Bookseller* (People in Books). April 1998.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jack Gantos was born in Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania. He remembers playing a lot of “pass the chalk” in Mrs. Neiderheizer’s class in first grade. He was in the Bluebird reading group, which he later found out was for the slow readers.

To this day he’d rather be called a Bluebird than a slow reader. His favorite game at that time was playing his clothes were on fire and rolling down a hill to save himself.

When he was seven, his family moved to Barbados. He attended British schools, where there was much emphasis on reading and writing. Students were friendly but fiercely competitive, and the teachers made learning a lot of fun. By fifth grade he had managed to learn 90 percent of what he knows to this very day.

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. His greatest wish in life is to replace trailer parks with bookmobile parks, which he thinks will eliminate most of the targets for tornadoes and educate an entire generation of great kids who now go to schools that are underfunded and substandard.

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.

In junior high he went to a school that had been converted from a former state prison. He thinks the inmates probably fled for their lives once the students showed up. Again, he spent most of his time reading on his own.

In high school he decided to become a writer. But he would have to wait another three years, until he went to college, before he could actually meet other writers and study with teachers who thought writing amounted to more than just cribbing book reports and composing sympathy notes.

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. This surprised a great many people who thought he was going to specialize in rehabilitating old bookmobiles into housing for retired librarians.

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.

His publications can take a reader from “cradle to grave” — from picture books and middle-grade fiction to novels for young adults and adults.

Mr. Gantos is known nationally for his educational creative writing and literature presentations to students and teachers. He is a frequent conference speaker, university lecturer, and in-service provider.

The Jack Henry Books by Jack Gantos

JACK ADRIFT:

Fourth Grade without a Clue

0-374-39987-5 · \$16.00

JACK ON THE TRACKS:

Four Seasons of Fifth Grade

0-374-33665-2 · \$16.00

Sunburst Paperback: 0-374-43717-3 · \$5.95

HEADS OR TAILS:

Stories from the Sixth Grade

0-374-32909-5 · \$16.00

Sunburst Paperback: 0-374-42923-5 · \$5.95

JACK'S NEW POWER:

Stories from a Caribbean Year

0-374-33657-1 · \$16.00

Sunburst Paperback: 0-374-43715-7 · \$5.95

JACK'S BLACK BOOK

0-374-33662-8 · \$16.00

Sunburst Paperback: 0-374-43716-5 · \$5.95

Other Books by Jack Gantos

JOEY PIGZA SWALLOWED THE KEY

0-374-33664-4 · \$16.00

A National Book Award Finalist

An ALA Notable Children's Book

An ALA Best Book for Young Adults

JOEY PIGZA LOSES CONTROL

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A Newbery Honor Book

An ALA Notable Children's Book

WHAT WOULD JOEY DO?

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