

Redemptive Reading

How time spent in jail unlocked a prolific and award-winning author's creativity

Jack Gantos may not be a familiar name among adult book buyers, since his target audience over five decades of professional writing has been young readers, but in that milieu, he is akin to a rock star. With close to 60 books in print across a variety of genres, and a raft of prestigious awards on his resume, he is in constant demand to speak in schools, libraries, and teacher conferences, averaging 40 to 50 appearances a year.

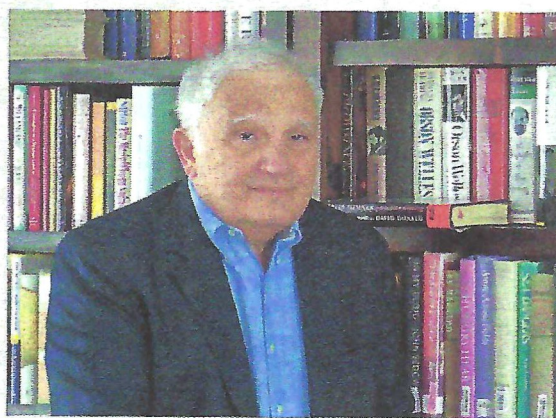
When the venue is a high school auditorium and the students a bit older than the readers of his wildly successful *Rotten Ralph*, Gantos likes to begin his program with a photo of himself projected on a giant screen, the same photo that appears on the cover of *Hole in My Life*, his 2002 memoir for readers of all ages. “I put that picture up and I’ll say, ‘let me tell you about that,’” he told me a few months ago in Boston, his home base since the mid-1970s while attending Emerson College, and staying on afterwards to teach creative writing, ultimately becoming chair of the department.

Gantos states the significance of the picture succinctly in his memoir, beginning with this no-nonsense explanation: “The photo was taken in 1972 at the medium-security Federal Correctional Institution in Ashland, Kentucky. I was twenty-one years old and had been locked up for a year already—the bleakest year of my life—and I had more time ahead of me.” The portrait, in common parlance, is a mug shot of prisoner number 74233-101.

A year earlier, Gantos had foolishly agreed to be a helping hand on a yacht bound for New York from St. Croix in the Virgin Islands with a ton of hashish packed aboard, the prospect of being paid \$10,000 in cash he could use for

college tuition too seductive to turn down. Sent to prison for drug trafficking, he was paroled after fifteen months of model behavior when he applied—and was accepted—for admission to a college writing program in New York. Transferring to Emerson in 1974, he went on to earn BA and MFA degrees in creative writing, sold two books to Houghton Mifflin before graduating, and reoriented his life in the process.

Gantos and I met in June at More Than Words bookstore in the city’s south end, where I was speaking at the twentieth anniversary meeting of the Ticknor Society. He introduced himself after the talk, and we hit it off immediately—kindred spirits in the passion for books and all they represent. As a full-service book review editor back in the day, I had thousands of children’s and young adult books pass through my hands, so I knew Gantos by reputation. His novel *Dead End in Norvelt* won the Newbery Medal for Excellence in Children’s Literature in 2012. The first installment in his widely admired Joey Pigza series for middle school-aged chil-



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dren, featuring a boy who suffers from an attention disorder, was named a National Book Award finalist in 1998. Another continuing character for middle level readers, Jack Henry, draws heavily on his own childhood journals. I didn’t immediately connect Gantos with *Hole in My Life*, which was widely praised when published twenty years ago, but very quickly brought myself up to speed after we met, deciding on the spot that I wanted to write about him, and arranged for another conversation.

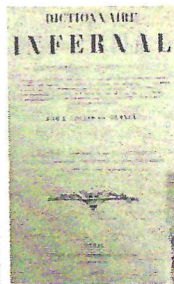
Honest, sober, and straightforward, the memoir makes no excuses and seeks no sympathy for poor choices. The



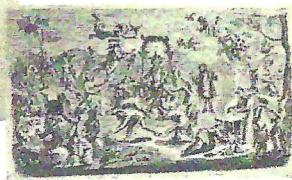
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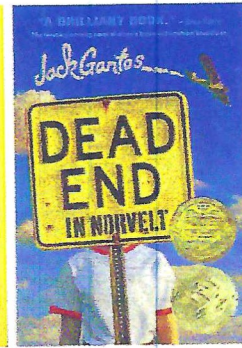
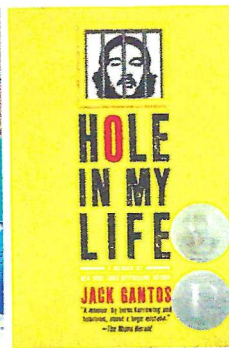
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only hint of redemption comes in the final pages with a lucid declaration of what Gantos learned from the harrowing experience. His first attempts at writing fiction had been “brutal stories about prison, about New York street life,” but then “one day I got tired of all the blood and guts and hard lives and hard hearts and began to write more stories about my childhood, like the ones I had started writing while in prison—stories which at one time I did not think were important, but suddenly had become the most important stories of all. And once I began retrieving the lost pleasures of my childhood, I began to write stories for children.” Before long, “the mistakes I made, the pain I endured, the time I wasted were now the smallest part of me.”

While an undergraduate, Gantos teamed up with another student, the artist-illustrator Nicole Rubel, on the *Rotten Ralph* series, based on a mischie-



Jack Gantos at More Than Words bookstore in Boston. *Hole in My Life* is the author's 2002 memoir of his time in prison. His *Dead End in Norvelt* (2011) won the Newbery Medal for Excellence in Children's Literature.



vous cat who plays jokes on his family. The character has since appeared in several animated specials and episodes for the Disney Channel and the BBC. “I was living in a one-room flat with a bathroom down the hall for twenty-five bucks a week,” Gantos said. “Once *Rotten Ralph* began to get some attention, I was asked to do more, so I stuck with it. Then I started to read more children's literature, and I realized you didn't have to compromise yourself. I have gone from picture books, to upper elementary, to middle school, short stories, I have YA novels, and I have *Hole in My Life*, which has no age limit to it.

So I do have a variety pack of books.”

Something that hasn't changed over the years for Gantos is how he goes about his work, writing not at home, but surrounded by books in the fifth floor “quiet room” of the Boston Athenæum, a routine established during his earliest days in Boston when the only place he could write in peace was in the Bates Hall reading room of the Boston Public Library. “I must have written twenty books over there,” he said, relocating to the magnificent membership library on Beacon Hill when cellphones began making their way into what was once a bastion of enforced silence.

Gantos is often asked what it was that turned his life around and his answer is not writing, but reading, which he relied on obsessively while incarcerated, devouring a wide range of fictional works, thirty of which are cited in his book as being particularly influen-

tial, all helping “fill the hole” in his life. As a writer, Gantos said he has always relied on “honest” books for inspiration. “I could see myself in them. I could hear myself. I never felt I had an honest voice of my own before that, so I kept on reading honest books with the hope and presumption that after reading a lot of good books that I would inherit an honesty in my own books. At a certain point a collage of books that you have read becomes a single item, and a single voice, and it becomes yours—and you can write with it. That's what happened with me—and that's what I tell these young readers can happen with them.”