

Hole in My Life

By Jack Gantos

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

Best known for his insightful writing for children, Jack Gantos departs from his earlier work in *Hole in My Life* to discuss mature themes. He explores his tumultuous young adulthood in this disarmingly candid memoir. Incarcerated at the age of 20 on drug charges, Gantos spent 15 months behind bars. *Hole in My Life* examines the years leading up to that imprisonment and how Gantos's sobering experiences in prison ultimately led him to a life of writing. One should note that this book includes two instances of sexual violence in prison, thus rendering it a sophisticated choice for young adult readers. Please take into account the maturity of your reading audience when recommending this exceptional book.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why, after experiencing life in prison -- and inadvertently gaining a lot of material for writing -- did Gantos decide to become a children's author? What did his books for children accomplish? What did books mean to your life when you were a child?
2. Throughout the story Jack reads continuously: in high school, on the boat, in prison. What role did books play in his life? (See p. 77 for his list of books.) How have books shaped your life?
3. Four convicts serving life in prison spoke to Jack's high school, warning students of the consequences of crime. How do their cautionary tales differ from Jack's own story? Which was more effective and why?
4. The motel room at King's Court where Jack stayed was entirely yellow, as was his cell later in the book. How did Gantos mean to connect these two rooms? What did the color yellow represent in his story?

5. While on the boat, Jack said he wasn't doing anything wrong by smuggling drugs; he was just afraid of the punishment. He planned to use the \$10,000 to pay for college. Is he justified? Does he feel the same way at the end of the story (e.g., p. 84-85)?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Reprinted from: www.jackgantos.com

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.

HELPFUL LINKS:

Author Web Site: www.jackgantos.com

FSG [Teacher's Guide](#) for *Hole in My Life*

Supplementary Reading Suggestions:

Other Books by Jack Gantos:

The Jack Henry Books

Jack Adrift: Fourth Grade Without a Clue (2003)

Jack on the Tracks: Four Seasons of Fifth Grade (1999)

Jack's Black Book (1999)

Jack's New Power: Stories from a Caribbean Year (1995)

Heads or Tails: Stories from the Sixth Grade (1994)

The Joey Pigza Books

What Would Joey Do? (2002)

Joey Pigza Loses Control (2000)

Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key (1998)

The Rotten Ralph Rotten Readers

Practice Makes Perfect for Rotten Ralph (2002)

Rotten Ralph Helps Out (2001)

Young Adult

Desire Lines (1997)

Other Authors' Memoirs Geared for a Young Adult Audience:

Chris Crutcher, *King of the Mild Frontier: an Ill-Advised Autobiography* (2003)

Walter Dean Myers, *Bad Boy: A Memoir* (2002)

Lois Lowry, *Looking Back: A Book of Memories* (2000)

Madeleine L'Engle, *Madeleine L'Engle Herself: Reflections on a Writing Life* (2001)



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