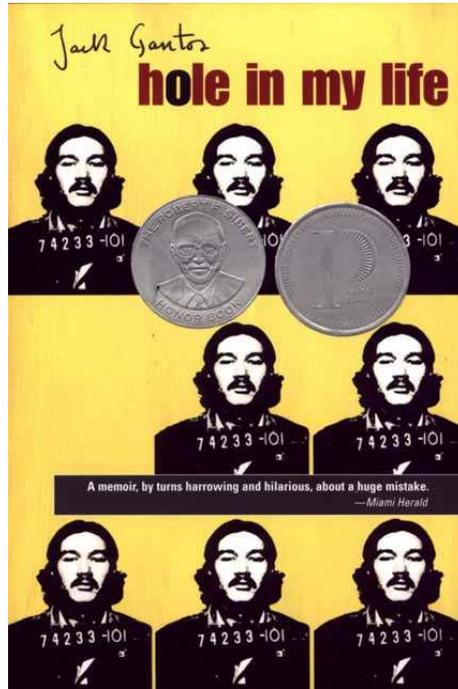


HOLE IN MY LIFE

Teachers' Guide



HOLE IN MY LIFE

by Jack Gantos

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Grade Range: 9 and up/Age Range: 14 and up

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.

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

HOLE IN MY LIFE

Teachers' Guide

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

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).

HOLE IN MY LIFE

Teachers' Guide

- 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.
- 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?

HOLE IN MY LIFE

Teachers' Guide

- 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

HOLE IN MY LIFE

Teachers' Guide

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:

Go Ask Alice

by Anonymous

Peter Pan

by James M. Barrie

Artificial Paradise

by Charles Baudelaire

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

by Ambrose Bierce

This Way for the Gas, Ladies and

Gentleman

by Tadeusz Borowski

The Delicate Prey

by Paul Bowles

On the Yard

by Malcolm Braly

Naked Lunch

by William S. Burroughs

Papillon

by Henri Charrière

Heart of Darkness

by Joseph Conrad

The Red Badge of Courage

by Stephen Crane

Robinson Crusoe

by Daniel Defoe

The Brothers Karamazov

by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

The House of the Dead

by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

The Thief's Journal

by Jean Genet

The Old Man and the Sea

by Ernest Hemingway

The Odyssey

by Homer

On the Road

by Jack Kerouac

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

by Ken Kesey

Martin Eden

by Jack London

Billy Budd

by Herman Melville

Mutiny on the Bounty

by Charles Nordhoff and James

N. Hall

The Bell Jar

by Sylvia Plath

Treasure Island

by Robert Louis Stevenson

Seven Long Times

by Piri Thomas

The Car Thief

by Theodore Weesner

The Glass Menagerie

by Tennessee Williams

A Streetcar Named Desire

by Tennessee Williams

Look Homeward, Angel

by Thomas Wolfe

Revolutionary Road

by Richard Yates

HOLE IN MY LIFE

Teachers' Guide



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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 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.

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