



Jack Gantos

Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Movie

Jack Gantos, interviewed in his studio in Boston, Massachusetts on August 14, 2001.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You journaled a lot as a child. How did this begin?

JACK GANTOS: I was lucky to get started with journal writing. I had an older sister who was very smart and very well-disciplined, and she had a journal. She would write in it at the dining room table at night, and I would watch her. And this just seemed to me to be so powerful because everyone would watch her and, naturally, everyone wanted to know what she was writing about. And she would look at all of us and say, "I'm not telling." And, you know, that just aroused us so much. Then I thought, "I want a journal, because then I could write down things and people would pay attention to me because they would want to know." So I begged my mother for one, and eventually I got one. And I kept it up.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How many journals have you completed in your life?

JACK GANTOS: From the time I received my first journal in elementary school to now I probably have about 200 journals. Most of these 200 journals I keep in boxes in a closet. I don't go back to them unless I'm really searching for something specific, like when I'm going to write another Jack Henry book that's set in fourth grade. Then I will go back and pull out my third grade and fourth grade journals, re-read them, pull out the good stuff, the little nuggets. But otherwise, I generally keep them in the closet.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you think is so special about journaling that you and so many others, particularly children, value it so?

JACK GANTOS: I think a journal is a little bit like a pirate's treasure chest, you know, and I wouldn't tell you where I buried all my treasure. Nor would I tell you all my secrets. I think, to some degree, one of the things that makes a journal so powerful is it has in it something I know and you don't. My journals reveal secrets to me in two different ways. One is the secret I have in my mind that I know I'm going to write when I sit down to write. And then there is always the bonus secret – that thought that you have while you're writing that you never knew you were going to have. And that's the bonus of writing.

One of the great things for children, when it comes to journaling, is they find out, through reflection, an awful lot about themselves. And in that moment of reflection, they realize that they have more in common with the people around them than differences.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did the young Jack Gantos move as much as your character Jack Henry?

JACK GANTOS: I grew up moving constantly. My father was in the Navy when I was younger, then he was in construction. And we moved nearly every year. I saw so many different kids, and I was such a fringe kid myself, always being a new kid, that I always hung around with all the other fringy kids. And the fringe group is a little bit wacky. All the Joeys (from the Joey Pigza books) are out there, all the Frankie Pagodas (from the Jack Henry books) are out there, all the Rotten Ralphs are out there. They were the fun, smart kids, and I liked them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How would you characterize what you're doing in the Jack Henry books?

JACK GANTOS: I think when I write a Jack Henry story, what I'm really concerned about is trying to get after the hidden truth for a child. When I was young, I could see what was on the surface, and yet I was always aware that the surface was not driving the direction of the conversation. The surface wasn't driving the family; there was something deeper. And I would, every now and again, get a glimpse of it.

When I write a Jack story, I have plenty of surface, but then I sort of part the surface and then look in and see the theme, and really look for the motivation of why my family did certain things, and why people behaved the way they did. And that's what I'm trying to do with kids: give them that dimension, the front of the story and the engine behind the story.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have many layers in your books. Can you describe how you work with them?

JACK GANTOS: When I write a book, whether it's a children's book or an adult book, I'm very aware that the surface needs an awful lot of attention. I make sure that my surfaces are rich and sort of seamless. But I also make sure that there are little holes, little peepholes in that surface that when you get real close, I'll take you right on in, and then you'll see the inner workings of everything. And then you'll come back out to that surface, then go back in. And it's beautiful to paint it, but then, after a while, it's just a billboard. It's static, and so then you have to show why people do things and get the emotions really right. And that's why I like writing the Jack Henry books. I like the emotional landscape of those books an awful lot. And when I talk to children about those books, they like all the goofy stuff, but then they pause, and then they get to the theme. They know.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please share an example of these layers within one of your stories.

JACK GANTOS: Whenever I write a "Jack Henry" story, I'm always trying to get the surface right and then get that theme behind it, or some sort of lesson or moment. Let me just talk about this one.

In *Jack's New Power*, the book where I spent a year in the Caribbean, in Barbados, there is a story called "The Pistol," where my dad brought home a pistol. Actually, he brought home two pistols. Now, there had been a problem at our house. We had this babysitter, this maid, and my brother was one-year-old. My mother came home from work one day and caught the maid holding my brother face down over the gas jet to put him to sleep for his afternoon nap. Now that was a very awful thing. Just on the surface of it, it was very awful, but that wasn't enough for my dad. So he went out and he bought these pistols, and he gave

one to my mother. He said next time something like this happens, you'll know what to do with it. Meaning, of course, you know, you would shoot the babysitter, which to me seemed to be a rather harsh thing to do.

My mother didn't want the gun, so my dad went out and gave her shooting lessons. So they went out at night, and she practiced firing off the gun. The next morning she picked up the newspaper and there was a headline, "man found shot dead at racetrack" — where my mother had been practicing shooting. So my mother thought that then she had killed somebody. So she called the police and the police arrested my mother for murder, and then, of course, she was released. But one of the big details in this story is this: my mother did not want those guns in the house, but she was too afraid of my father to get rid of them herself. So my mother had me hide and throw away the guns. I thought my mother would protect me because I knew my dad would find the guns missing. And I knew he would go to my mom, and I expected my mom to cover for me. But she didn't cover for me. And then my dad came to me.

Now, when I wrote that story in *Jack's New Power*, it has got plenty of surface — brother being gassed, almost a murder, mother being arrested. But really the deeper issue for that story for me was how parents can betray you, how they can betray your trust. And as much as you love them, sometimes parents have weaknesses, too. And sometimes they will allow the kid to be the fall guy in the family.

TEACHINGBOOKS: On to Joey Pigza. Can you share a little bit about the genesis of this character?

JACK GANTOS: I was doing school visits in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and I was in a school's fifth grade class. I was speaking to just that class. Every kid was in their desk, and I was standing at the front. And there was this kid sitting, oh, a foot away from me, right in front of me. And as I was doing my spiel, this kid was finishing every one of my sentences. He was scanning my brain. He was cracking my jokes. On one hand he was a little bit annoying. And, on the other, I was totally fascinated with him. The kid was really sharp.

But then he started spinning around in his seat. And then he got this really worried look on his face, and he stopped finishing my sentences, and he stopped doing my jokes. And he looked over at his teacher, and he says, "Teacher, teacher, I forgot to take my meds." And she pointed to the door, and that kid just shot from his desk right out the door and ran down the hallway, punching all the lockers, "Wham wham wham wham wham wham!" all the way down to the nurse's office. And when that kid shot out that door, I thought, "I love that kid. That's a great kid."

That night I went back to the motel, sat down, and asked myself the same question I ask every night, "What's the most interesting thing you saw today?" The kid was definitely it. And the first Joey Pigza book started that night.

TEACHINGBOOKS: I love the name "Pigza." How do you select the names for your characters?

JACK GANTOS: Whenever I search for names for my books, I am searching for distinctive names. I want people to be able to remember them, and particularly if it's a character that has a lot of personality. Rotten Ralph and Jack Henry serve the "every boy" kind of guy, so they have "every boy" kinds of names. But then Joey Pigza is not every boy, so he has to

have his own distinctive name. I worked for a man once whose last name was “Pigza,” and I always remembered and loved that name.

Whenever I go home to visit my mom, we take a drive through the cemeteries, and I have her write down all the cool, interesting names on the tombstones as possible character names for my books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are the Joey Pigza books about?

JACK GANTOS: There are three Joey Pigza books all together. The first one, *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*, was really introducing Joey as a kid who was having problems in school with ADHD, but also providing family background and focusing on his mom and her journey. She had sort of abandoned Joey, and now she’s working her way back to really being a good mother. So as Joey is trying to get control of himself, the mother is really trying to get control of herself and do the right thing. Eventually they both do, they both meet up at the end. I think it’s really warm and good at the end.

In the second Joey Pigza book, *Joey Pigza Loses Control*, Joey has to go spend some time with his dad. Every boy, generally, wants his father to love him, and Joey wants his dad to love him, too. But the dad, Carter Pigza, is a bit of a character. He’s like Joey. As the mother said, “he’s like you only bigger.” So, Joey goes to spend the summer with his dad. And, true to his reputation, his dad gets a little out of control. He is bigger than Joey, and he thinks if Joey were any man at all, he wouldn’t need medication. He’d be able to take control of his own life, pull himself up by his bootstraps and straighten up. So the father takes Joey’s medication away from him to see if he’ll be a real man. And, of course, that doesn’t work.

In the next and final Joey book, *What Would Joey Do?*, Joey Pigza has now mastered control of himself. He has experienced both parents, and he’s beginning now to look out of his family, into the world. Who is Joey going to be in the world? But he also finds one last hurdle before he can enter the world, that he is attached to his parents. He has to find some way to really organize his relationship with them, in order to feel comfortable enough to move on into the whole world.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Tell me about how you envision the depth of Joey’s character.

JACK GANTOS: For me, for me as a writer, and for me as a person, there is always a gap between what it is I set out to do and what it is that I accomplish, and that gap is always quite a puzzle for me. For a kid like Joey Pigza, not only is it a puzzle, it’s a challenge. There’s a moment when he thinks, “I think I’ll go outside and throw rocks at a target in the backyard,” and the next thing you know the neighbor’s windows are broken, and they’re all upset. Or he has thrown a dart through his dog’s ear. He just gets a little out of control, and there’s that moment where he goes from good intent to wacky result.

The Joey Pigza books for me are really books about a kid. Sure, he has ADHD, but it’s really about his relationship to himself and his relationship to his family and his relationship to his community, and about him trying to find the definition of right and wrong.... It’s that definition of pleasing and not pleasing, and really trying, like so many of us, to really have that kind of control that says, “This is what I want to do and then I’m going to go do it.”

TEACHINGBOOKS: You've said before that you like to have a central moment of each book. Can you give an example of this central moment in one of the Joey books?

JACK GANTOS: Whenever I'm writing a book, especially a novel, I'm always looking for those key moments. Certainly the key moment in *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* has got to be the moment when he's running with scissors and he trips in those little silly slippers, and he flies through the air, collides with Maria and he snips off her nose tip. He was so distressed. And he picks that little tip up off of the floor, and he tries to press it back on to her nose as if through magic, through some miracle, it would stick. Of course it doesn't. But that moment, I think, is the keystone moment in that book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Rotten Ralph* is now 26 years old. How did it get started?

JACK GANTOS: When I was in college, I started writing picture books, and Nicole Rubel, the illustrator, was in college, too. We teamed up. We started to write picture books because we always liked the humor in picture books. But, we were a little tentative, because we thought maybe our humor is just over the top. So I became very conservative. I started writing books like *A Visit to Grandmother's House* and *The Library Caper* and *Albert the Alligator*. And they were all very nice controlled, contained stories. And you know, I couldn't get those books published. I took them from publisher to publisher to publisher, and every one said, "Yes, nice, but just no zip on that thing."

I had a change of perspective that changed everything in my whole career. Instead of writing books that I thought kids would like, I said, "You know, Jack, why don't you write a book *you* really like?" And so I wrote the first *Rotten Ralph* book, with my sense of humor — that kind of rottenness and the violation-to-redemption cycle. I took *Rotten Ralph* to Houghton Mifflin, and they liked that one. And right away I thought to myself, "You know, from now on I'm only going to write books that really float my boat, because if I like them, other people will like them."

TEACHINGBOOKS: There's a consistent structure for your *Rotten Ralph* books.

JACK GANTOS: When Nicole Rubel and I started out, weren't exactly sure what we were doing. So we started looking at a lot of books, and at Houghton Mifflin we liked the books of Jim Marshall. He was really great. He had a great sense of humor. And we noticed that Marshall's books were generally structured text on one side, picture on the other side. A very straight-forward format. And so, we just copied that format, and we stuck with that for many years. There are probably about 10 *Rotten Ralph* books in this exact same format, text / picture. I like it because I can understate the text and let Nicole really springboard off of that text to really provide all of those rich details.

Recently, we've now added a new format. We have easy reader chapter books for *Rotten Ralph*. The first one is called *Rotten Ralph Helps Out*.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like most about *Ralph* books?

JACK GANTOS: The thing I like best is the rottenness. I really do. It's the thing I write first. Whenever I start the book, I always know I've got the characters. I'm going to get a good setting. I'm going to get some sort of theme. And then I go right to the middle, and I write all

the rotten scenes first. And that's really where I'm having a good time. The rotten stuff is the part the kids get to and they're like "Ahh, excellent, Ralph is doing something rotten." And then, we bring it down to that crisis, and Ralph has to, ultimately, resolve the friendship rift with Sarah and then, of course, be loved again.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You write for all ages [*Rotten Ralph* for young children and emerging readers; *Jack Henry* and *Joey Pigza* for middle school and young adult; *Hole In My Life*, *Desire Lines* for young adult. Even *Zip Six* for adults.] Is there an age group you prefer addressing with your books?

JACK GANTOS: As a writer, and a writer of children's books, one of the things that I really enjoy having is a range of books, from the picture books to the chapter books to the books of short stories, to the middle grade novels to the young adult novels, to young adult autobiography, to then, of course, adult material. I have that range, and I really am very protective of the right to have a range. I don't like being pigeonholed as just a picture book author, or just a chapter book author. I'm a writer. And as such I can write anything, from picture books to essays, from newspapers to novels, and that's really what my job is. Not just to do the same thing over and over. There would be no challenge in it for me. Being a writer, being an artist, means you have to challenge yourself with each project. And so I give myself plenty of range to do this challenge.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You've been writing for a long time. How has your work changed over the years?

JACK GANTOS: I think over the years my work has changed in that I'm more efficient with what I want to say, with building the surface of the novel and really making sure that the theme behind the surface, the emotions within the characters are all braided together very tightly. I think that's what I've gotten better at over the years. There is now nothing extraneous, nothing that's in there just for a big wow. Everything has to count.

TEACHINGBOOKS: So when do you do all this work? Can you describe your workday?

JACK GANTOS: Getting all of my work done is a problem because my time is limited. I have a wife and daughter. I could spend all my time with them, get no work done and be perfectly happy. But then, of course, we'd be living out on the sidewalk. What I have to do is be very efficient with my time. And so I get up early in the morning. I usually get up at 5:00 in the morning. I come down to my office and I really try and get my first draft material done in the next two hours, because then my daughter wakes up and I have to get her ready for school. And then the day begins to trundle forward. The phone rings. The mail comes, and then the distractions come. I think really the goal is to every day try and move the book forward, whether it's a paragraph or whether it's a chapter you move forward. You just simply have to become an unrelenting force.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you're stuck and having trouble writing?

JACK GANTOS: I find that when I get stuck on a book, the sticking point for me is that I'm imagining a dozen different books with the same characters. And it's as if I have overlapping books in my mind. And what I have to do is settle down and find the best story, the story that really launches the strongest theme and tells the most traumatic tale. It's not so much that I'm fallow, it's that I have so many ideas. All of them are loud and demanding, and they want to be the real book. So it's like taming all those ideas and then just settling down on the best.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What's next?

JACK GANTOS: I know what Ralph is up to — I'm pretty good at Ralph. It's a challenge to write him, but it's not a brand new event. Joey Pigza — I'm finishing the third Joey Pigza now. That's a big challenge, but then that will be over. I have one more Jack book. I'll write that, and then Jack Henry will be over. And, suddenly, I'll have reached an area of my writing career where I really have just about put all my major material — my big characters — to rest. So I have to move on. Well, I keep lots of ideas in my file cabinet. So, I think I'm right back to square one, and I think I'm going to move on into novels.

Books by Jack Gantos

- HOLE IN MY LIFE, Farrar Straus Giroux, 2002
- ROTTEN RALPH PLAYS FAIR (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), Farrar Straus Giroux, 2002
- WHAT WOULD JOEY DO?, Farrar Straus Giroux, 2002
- ROTTEN RALPH HELPS OUT (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), Farrar Straus Giroux, 2001
- JOEY PIGZA LOSES CONTROL, Farrar Straus Giroux, 2000
- JACK ON THE TRACKS: FOUR SEASONS OF FIFTH GRADE, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999
- ROTTEN RALPH'S THANKSGIVING WISH (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), HarperCollins Publishers, 1999
- WEDDING BELLS FOR ROTTEN RALPH (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), HarperCollins Publishers, 1999
- BACK TO SCHOOL FOR ROTTEN RALPH (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), HarperCollins Publishers, 1998
- JOEY PIGZA SWALLOWED THE KEY, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1998
- ROTTEN RALPH HAS THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), HarperCollins Publishers, 1998
- ROTTEN RALPH HOWLS (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), HarperCollins Publishers, 1998
- DESIRE LINES, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997
- JACK'S BLACK BOOK, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997
- ROTTEN RALPH'S ROTTEN ROMANCE (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), Houghton Mifflin, 1996
- ZIP SIX, Bridge Works Publications, 1996
- JACK'S NEW POWER: STORIES FROM A CARIBBEAN YEAR, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1995
- HEADS OR TAILS: STORIES FROM THE SIXTH GRADE, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994
- NOT SO ROTTEN RALPH (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), Houghton Mifflin, 1994
- HAPPY BIRTHDAY ROTTEN RALPH (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), Houghton Mifflin, 1990
- ROTTEN RALPH'S SHOW AND TELL (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), Houghton Mifflin, 1989

- ROTTEN RALPH'S TRICK OR TREAT (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), Houghton Mifflin, 1986
- RED'S FIB, Jim Henson Associates, 1985
- ROTTEN RALPH'S ROTTEN CHRISTMAS (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), Houghton Mifflin, 1984
- WILLY'S RAIDERS, Parents Magazine Press, 1981
- SWAMPY ALLIGATOR, Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 1980
- WEREWOLF FAMILY, THE, Houghton Mifflin, 1980
- GREEDY GREENY, Doubleday, 1979
- PERFECT PAL, THE, Houghton Mifflin, 1979
- AUNT BERNICE, Houghton Mifflin, 1978
- WORSE THAN ROTTEN RALPH (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), Houghton Mifflin, 1978
- FAIR WEATHER FRIENDS, Houghton Mifflin, 1977
- ROTTEN RALPH (illustrated by Nicole Rubel), Houghton Mifflin, 1976
- SLEEPY RONALD, Houghton Mifflin, 1976

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