

Swinging His Cat:

A Conversation with 2010 ALAN Award Recipient Jack Gantos

It's an early Saturday morning in November 2010, and more than 500 teachers, librarians, university professors, and adolescent literature aficionados in general have gathered for the annual Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English (ALAN) breakfast in Orlando, Florida. A portion of the morning's program is dedicated to naming the recipient of the ALAN Award, an award that honors those who have made outstanding contributions to the field of adolescent literature. Receiving the 2010 ALAN Award—and assuming the coveted (though imaginary) crown, scepter, and sash to sport all through 2011—is prolific and ebullient author Jack Gantos.

Jack Gantos: The Writer

The ALAN Award recipient may be a publisher, author, librarian, scholar, editor, or servant to the organization of ALAN. Most people know Jack Gantos primarily as a writer, one who “can take a reader from ‘cradle to grave’—from picture books and middle-grade fiction to novels for young adults and adults” (“Jack Gantos’ Bio and Photos,” n.d., para. 10). Jack’s productivity and accomplishments as an author, alone, merit him honor as an outstanding contributor to the field of adolescent literature. His books are tremendously entertaining; however, it is the balance of physical and emotional events in a Jack Gantos book that subtly hooks readers and keeps them coming back for more. Common threads through all of his

books and stories are forgiveness and second chances, and in an interview with *BookPage* (Meet Jack Gantos, 2007), Jack encourages children to endlessly invent themselves.

Jack traces his interest in becoming a writer to as early as sixth grade when he snuck and read his sister’s diary. Once he convinced his mother to buy him his own journal, he began practicing the simple habits that allowed him to become the writer he is today: He paid attention to what was happening in his world, and he recorded bits and pieces of what he saw, heard, and thought. Although Jack described this process as owning “a box full of jigsaw puzzle pieces, and there was no telling if they’d ever fit together” (Gantos, 2002a, p. 21), he developed a certain discipline and ignited an insatiable curiosity about life happening around him. His journals became the home of overheard teachers’ lunch conversations, maps of his ever-changing neighborhoods, wild streams of thought, and long passages from books. Jack’s journals even served as a repository for an endless assortment of collected objects, such as a wart he worked long and hard at extracting from his foot (Gantos, 2010).

Once Jack began writing books, he was an instant success . . . if you don’t count all the time after high school that he worked construction for his father, the 15 months he was a resident of Ashland Federal Prison, the years he spent studying creative writing at Emerson College, or the numerous picturebooks he wrote that were rejected—at times viscerally so.

Meet Jack Gantos and you will find him quick-witted, honest, appropriately irreverent, and inspiring. Simply, he makes himself unforgettable.

Finally, in 1976, after months of immersing himself in quality books for children, speaking with other writers to gain insight into their processes, and “swinging his own cat” as a writer, he and illustrator Nicole Rubel

published *Rotten Ralph*, their first of many Rotten Ralph books. As the endearing gigantic dog Clifford, Ralph is red; however, that is the extent of similarities between the canine and feline. Simply put, Ralph is rotten and recalcitrantly mischievous. Still, even a cat as rotten as Ralph needs love and acceptance, and Sarah is the person who remains by

Ralph’s side through all of his misdeeds and adventures.

Then there are Jack’s books geared at intermediate-aged readers, the first collection being his Jack Henry books. Starting with the publication of *Heads or Tails: Stories from the Sixth Grade* (1994), Jack chronicles semi-autobiographical junior-high tales of Jack Henry and his often-unpredictable life and family. This was followed with four other Jack Henry books. Not a Jack Henry book but still a young adult read that fuses memoir and fiction, Jack’s latest creation, *Dead End in Norvelt* (2011), chronicles “an exhilarating summer marked by death, gore and fire” (Review of . . . , 2011). Reviewer Elizabeth Bird (2011) writes, “Folks, it’s a weird book. . . . It may also be one of the finest [Mr. Gantos] has produced in years.”

Also for intermediate-aged readers (or anyone who was once of an “intermediate age”) are Jack’s books featuring Joey Pigza. Jules Danielson (2007) of *Seven Impossible Things before Breakfast: A Blog about Books* suggests that in all of middle-grade fiction, there is not a more sympathetic, lovable character than Joey Pigza. The first Pigza book, *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* (1998), begins, “They say I’m wired bad, or wired sad, but there’s no doubt about it—I’m wired” (p. 1). Thus begins the adventures of Joey—a well-meaning kid who has ADHD and finds himself in all sorts of precarious situations when his meds wear off and his moods/behavior become more difficult to control. Joey not only won the hearts of

readers, but *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* was named a National Book Award finalist and a *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year. In 2000, Jack delivered *Joey Pigza Loses Control*, which was awarded a Newbery Honor; he followed with *What Would Joey Do?* (2002b). Then—surprising his readers with one more Pigza book after stating he would stop at a trilogy—Jack published *I Am Not Joey Pigza* (2007).

Targeting older adolescents, Jack wrote *Desire Lines* (1997), which is about 16-year-old Walker who gets caught up in a witch-hunt against homosexuals; *Hole in My Life* (2002a), Jack’s Printz Honor and Robert F. Sibert Honor autobiography describing the period of his life after graduating high school in which he spends time in prison for drug smuggling, all the while hoping to become a writer; and *The Love Curse of the Rumbaughs* (2006), which focuses on a young woman named Ivy, who must sort out if she has inherited her family’s curse of excessively loving her mother as well as an aptitude for taxidermy. Jack has even published a novel geared toward adults: his jailhouse narrative titled *Zip Six* (1996).

Jack Gantos: The Teacher

Not only has Jack contributed to adolescent literature as a writer, he travels the world working directly with students, teachers, librarians, parents, and administrators. To date, Jack has visited over 500 schools and has helped tens of thousands of kids and teachers develop and write their own stories. He also is a frequent conference keynote speaker and university lecturer. Corresponding with Jack via email is similar to participating in a frenetic electronic travel log:

Hey—I’m just finishing up a two week speaking tour in Qatar and Dubai. (personal communication, December 14, 2010)

Hope you are well. Doha (capital city of the state of Qatar) has been interesting. (personal communication, December 16, 2010)

Gang tackled with work in Boston then shot down to NYC . . . then took off for a speaking tour in Bangkok . . . now on the flight back from Narita to DC, then back up to Boston. (personal communication, March 5, 2011)

Not long ago, during one of his visits to Tennessee, Jack led three separate days of workshops in three different geographical sections of the state (east, middle, and west). It takes only a quick glance at a

map to see that Tennessee is a L-O-N-G state. Still, Jack being the trooper that he is gave each gathering of high school and middle school students an incredible presentation. All together in those brief three days, Jack spoke with nearly three thousand adolescents and made certain to sign every copy of all the books that each young person handed him.

Meet Jack Gantos and you will find him quick-witted, honest, appropriately irreverent, and inspiring. Simply, he makes himself unforgettable. Although he is a master storyteller and entertainer, most of his conversations are spent listening to others and making inquiries into their lives.

Furthermore, common to all master teachers, Jack Gantos is an encourager. As he accepted his ALAN Award in Orlando, Jack encouraged all of us who work with learners—regardless of our grade levels or our professional roles—to “swing our cats,” to give every ounce of energy we have to getting children, adolescents, and the adults around us involved in their own books and their own writing.

Who better to represent the multifaceted field of adolescent literature through his writing and service than Mr. Jack Gantos.

Jack Gantos: The ALAN Award Winner

S. D. Collins (SC): Jack, first things first, thank you for taking time away from the frenzied schedule of “swinging your cat” to speak with us. Most importantly, congratulations on receiving the 2010 ALAN Award.

Jack Gantos (JG): It is an honor that caught me by surprise since there is no advance warning, no short list circulating, no public nomination process, no tip sheet to alert me that I may receive the award. I was sitting at a desk on the fifth floor of the Boston Athenaeum when your email arrived with the news, which was delicious to read. I sit in the library herding sentences for the most part and am focused not on awards but in just getting a page or two to comply with my intentions, no matter how accidental. This is not always the most graceful job. The work is labyrinthine and at the end of the day, no one claps as I exit the library and stroll toward home across the Boston Common and Public Gardens where the squirrels and ducks

and birds and trees are being their mysteriously charming selves.

Nature is so constant when compared to the slippery human artifice of language, and watching a squirrel perform only squirrelish tasks reminds me of how much time I spend inventing texts instead of being myself. What is so lovely about receiving the award is that it feels like a scene from a daydream—some wordless confection indulged in when the words won’t come to the paper, and I’m staring up at the ceiling and pampering my ego with imaginary awards so I don’t sulk and turn against myself. I can be pathetically juvenile. In the meantime, squirrels remain squirrels.

SC: Past recipients of the ALAN Award include Robert Cormier (1982), Madeleine L’Engle (1986), Katherine Paterson (1987), Gary Paulsen (1991), Walter Dean Myers (1994), S. E. Hinton (1998), and Jacqueline Woodson (2004), to name a few. Will you describe what it’s like to be named to such an excellent group of people who have contributed to the field of adolescent literature?

JG: So many great bookish people, including fine writers, have received the ALAN Award, and it is very satisfying to join their ranks. It takes endurance to write a book, but when the task is finished, the book takes on an ambitious endurance of its own. There is nothing more the writer can do to it. The book is what it will always be as it fervently journeys off to find a pair of hands to hold it, and a fresh mind it can influence. I’m sure that no matter how many young adults I address in my speaking tours, their deeper and more enduring relationship will be with the book—not with me—and I firmly believe that is as it should be.

The ALAN Award, on the other hand, points to the writer—the person behind the curtain, the slight-of-hand con artist who conjures up a story more articulate, shapely, elegant, and powerful than his or her own daily life. So often books hog the spotlight and steal the awards, but the ALAN Award kindly nods toward the writer.

SC: Would you take us a bit further behind your curtain? What is your process of creating a story and the potential influences on the writing as the text evolves?

JG: For me, it seems that gaining access to the voice of the character is what helps me puncture the plane between being clueless and outside the story, to entering the story and beginning to understand the main character and to take his or her pulse. The “voice” of the character really charts the early path of the story for me, and once I seem to have summoned the voice, I begin to

paint in the setting.

But, even though I feel somewhat confident in the voice of the character and the paint has dried on the setting, it is not until I begin to gather my ideas for the book that I envision the cast of themes that will add bite to the story and must ultimately add thoughtful resonance to the tale, beyond the typical action line of “he did this

and she did that.” It is the clash of voice and theme that is critical, because neither can be allowed to win as they both have to be equally attractive in the full bloom of their potential.

For instance, when Ivy from *The Love Curse of the Rumbaughs* (2006) is first revealed, she is opening the story and unfolding her character through her voice. We meet her, and gather round her, and are magnetized toward her once she finds the taxidermed Rumbaugh mother. Yes, the taxidermed mother is an interesting proposition, but it is only because Ivy is a sympathetic character that we feel what she feels. Once we settle into her character, she can then carry the weight of the story and advance the themes. In *The Love Curse*, I wanted to examine the American Eugenics Movement, which was a darkly racist and sexist movement in this country built on Social Darwinism. Basically, the movement advances an all Aryan Supremacy, which was not unlike Hitler’s vision of a superior white superman. The history and theme within the book have to have equal weight with the character and plot.

Any platform of information can launch the story in one direction or another. The research behind the book was constantly causing me to

rewrite—and in fact I would say during the course of a writing day I did as much rewriting of the manuscript as I did pushing the story forward by a thousand words or so. Plot and pace weakness is always on my mind because once I establish a pace for telling the story, I don’t like to deviate too much or get bogged down in needless (even if it’s beautiful) detail, or move forward so fast that the action far outstrips the character’s emotional and mental responses.

And then, of course, there are the 40 rewrites or more and all my fussy obsessing over every little image, all the dialogue flourishes, and the kitchen sink. So, when I say that the ALAN Award points toward the writer, I’m just saying that the award is aware of far more than the finished book (which always looks so elegant and effortless)—the ALAN Award is also aware of the “how” the story was muscled, begged, and manipulated and occasionally romanced onto the page by the writer. Believe me, I’m not after sympathy; I’m just appreciative that the award looks beyond the book, which loves the spotlight on the red carpet.

SC: You are a prolific reader and mention more than 60 novels/stories/authors in *Hole in My Life* (2002a). How does reading figure into your process while you are working on a project?

JG: In general, I have to be careful with what I’m reading when writing fiction, which is why I read a lot of nonfiction when I’m working on a book. I don’t want to inadvertently pick up the fumes of other prose.

SC: Jack, the characters you create are complex and possess multiple emotional layers; furthermore, they can be outlandish and unpredictable when it comes to their actions. On the other hand, a Gantos story seems to have a certain tenderness about it, a certain mercy imbedded in the narrative. What do words like “forgiveness” and “second chance” mean to you?

JG: The impulse to write *Rotten Ralph* (1976), my first published book (a picturebook created with Nicole Rubel), was not just to tilt the cart a bit and have a lot of fun with a character who gets carried away

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and truly enjoys intentionally breaking the rules of good behavior, but also to cap the story with the theme of “unconditional love.” I suppose, from the beginning, my characters have been in a tug of war with themselves—going both ways at once. Rotten Ralph loves to be rotten, yet loves to be loved despite his behavior. Some might say he just wants everything his way, to be self-indulgently rotten and not have to suffer any consequences. I prefer to think that he is granted, despite his own faulty behavior, a great measure of Sarah’s love, understanding, and forgiveness—just as any child would hope to receive despite their worst moments.

In the Joey Pigza books, we see the subject of forgiveness in a more complex way. Rotten Ralph only wants forgiveness for his transgressions; Joey, on the other hand, not only wants to be forgiven for his out-of-control behavior, but he also has the task of forgiving others (mother, father, grandmother) who have caused him a great deal of grief and harm. Though his behavior at times is manic and may seem intentionally self-indulgent, he would prefer not to cause others emotional or physical pain. And in the case of his grandmother, he learns to love her very deeply. He realizes his grandmother’s strengths and weaknesses, despite her tough love tactics and her own “wired” behavior, which often results in the grandmother belittling Joey. And yet, he seeks her love just as he offers her his own affection.

In the case of Joey’s father, Carter Pigza, the gift of “forgiveness” is at the crossroads of *I Am Not Joey Pigza* (2007). Carter, who has been a delinquent father, to say the least, has the gall to ask Joey to forgive him for all the meanness he has brought into Joey’s young life. It is not easy for Joey to turn the corner from resenting his father to forgiving him, but he applies himself to the task and earnestly does forgive Carter—who of course loves being forgiven and then turns right around and guts Joey once again.

The Jack Henry books are laced with Jack needing forgiveness and offering it in return, but when we get up to *Hole in My Life* (2002a), we can see another manifestation of forgiveness—which would be self-forgiveness. For me, the burden of my own criminal activities—which were exacerbated by my personal failures as a young writer—had to be set

aside. I had to, in some way, suspend how harshly I was judging myself until I could sort out what I needed to forgive myself for, and I had to determine what I needed to forever remember about myself.

Personally, I do think being forgiven and receiving second chances to be the better part of yourself is a great gift to receive. It is just as essential to offer that gift to others. This push-pull of forgiveness within a character certainly creates a lot of room for depth, and it can show off strengths and weaknesses in a character’s foundation.

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SC: You end *Hole in My Life* (2002a) with the words, “And I’m out in the open doing what I have always wanted to do. Write” (p. 200). During those early days as you were gaining steam as a writer, do you recall when the thought first hit you, “Hey! I am *really* a writer!?”

JG: It was a moment after I finally got out of prison and ended up at college to get my BFA in Creative Writing. I felt as if I had finally met a lot of other young people, who like myself, were looking for a supportive group where you could actually call yourself a writer and be treated like one. Getting my BFA in Creative Writing was about one of the smartest decisions I ever made as it gave me instruction, allowed me time to write and rewrite, and eventually to publish my work.

SC: Obviously, judging from your reams of accomplishments, writing was the work you were meant to do; however, are there ever days when the writing becomes interrupted? If so, what do you experience when that happens.

JG: I always *want* to write. But some days that just doesn’t happen. Sometimes circumstances are to blame (speaking on the road, heavy travel schedules, family activities . . .), but mostly, I always feel

I am at fault when the work is not tackled. I have great stretches of writing when there is good flow, and then there are other times I'm just crabbing around and figuring out yet another way to avoid moving the book forward. It's a bit of a revolving door into and out of your own madhouse.

As I respond to this specific question, I'm on a flight back from speaking for six days in Bangkok, and though I did write while there, and found a lovely neo-classic jewel box of a library around the corner from my hotel where I could tuck away and think, I wouldn't exactly say I pushed my novel forward. In fact, I think I could easily say I did a lot more substantial eating than I did writing. It is a great privilege to have the time to write (just ask someone who doesn't have the time), and so when I fritter time away, I feel like a slacker.

SC: Doubtful anyone would ever accuse you of being a slacker, especially since you always seem to be mentally engaging the world—either the actual world or your story worlds. Since writing demands such a generous portion of cerebral resources, how do you see creative writing bolstering a young person's cognitive development and learning in general?

JG: In the same way that it is good for architects to first learn how to actually build a house before they design one. In the same way that doctors are rigorously trained before they take on patients. In the same way that librarians should design their own libraries because they know what they need and what they don't.

When a person spends a lot of time writing, they begin to see the rigging between the content and the structure of the story. They begin to realize the importance of words, the variety of sentences, the use of dialog, and all the vast numbers of skills that it takes to construct a book. When someone learns how to write, and write well, then when they open a book to read—for information or pleasure—they see more deeply into the book and into the craft and content. It is this ability to deeply explicate a book that is made keen through writing a book, or story, or poem. As educators, what we are always after is depth of explication—the how and the why of the construction in conjunction with the content

and humanity.

Plus, if you can sit still in a chair and read 50 pages at a crack, then we are talking about “strength of focus.” Once I was fortunate enough to scrub up and enter a surgical theatre where a patient was having a complex by-pass operation. The patient's heart was stopped; a machine was circulating his blood, and my friend, the heart surgeon, was suturing the new healthy vein together with a suture material you couldn't see with the naked eye. It took five hours for the surgeon to deftly suture the new veins. When the patient's heart was started and his blood pressure was clearly at a healthy level and his chest was being sewn up, the nurse looked over at me and whispered, “The doctor has a gift of focus.” Focus is what she admired most.

Writing will give you focus. You set goals and you master those goals. No matter the subject, without focus you are out to sea. As students advance from grade to grade and from elementary to middle to high school to college, the demands on their ability to focus will increase. It has been shown that multitasking is not the genius-making strategy it was thought to be. Just think of how text messaging and driving have been a formula for disaster. Writing is thinking with logic and clarity. That skill will take you far, even if you have no interest in writing novels.

SC: In an interview with Gail Gregg (2001), you mentioned how you never had the opportunity to write creatively while you were a public-school student and never had any teachers encourage you to write creatively. As you visit classrooms across the country, how do you perceive the various opinions of creative writing?

JG: Before answering this question in full, let me say that I went to 10 schools in 12 years, so it was not entirely the fault of the school system that I didn't receive a nicely dovetailed education as I passed from grade to grade. My family moved a lot, so my choppy education is largely a result of our peripatetic life. That said, I did not have an education that valued creative writing. I did have music and art, but no creative writing. At times, I was a member of the chess club and Latin club. I believe

there were times when I could have worked on the school newspaper, but for reasons I do not recall, I was not interested in that. Most likely, I found it dull.

Currently I visit about 40 schools per year, and the schools I enter are vastly different from the schools I exited as a student. I'm invited to schools because they read my books, but also because my creative writing and literature presentations focus entirely on teaching students how to write their own books. Schools that invite me understand this goal, and so I assume that (a) they want me to teach creative writing forms and approaches to writing that students can put to work with success, and (b) they are actively working on creative projects in the classroom. So, I end up in schools where their educational mission and my accomplishments parse and combine to inspire students to read good books and write good books.

I am sure there are schools out there across America that do not include time for creative writing in their curriculum. I don't think this is out of any mean intent. I think that some schools just don't realize how much creative writing is related to good, solid writing practices as well as related to creative and logical thinking in general. The root cause of this lack of creative instruction is not entirely found in the culture of standardized testing where schools teach to the test; I think that the universities that train teachers need to provide more creative writing instruction. No one wants to teach a subject in which they feel insecure, so when student teachers have the opportunity to write creatively and workshop their material, they will gain the confidence necessary to teach the subject to students.

SC: What's your advice for teachers who recognize the value of writing but are insecure and don't know how to proceed.

JG: You ask a very difficult question—one that points out a truth I see all the time (keep in mind I have visited 40 schools a year for the past 20 years). The truth is, there is not one parent who doesn't want their child to write better, or a teacher who doesn't want their students to write better, or one school who doesn't want better student writers. But, when

you ask a school to devote more time to writing, to devote more inservice resources to teaching writing instruction to their teachers, to become a school that is known for their "writing" accomplishments, and to ask parents to place inspired writing on par with math and science and other meat-and-potatoes subjects, then you get some push-back.

Every institution wants students to be great writers, but they hamstring their teachers and students by not giving the teachers the professional development they need and the class time needed in the curriculum that will nurture and instruct and produce great, articulate

writers. There is some sort of nonsensical old-world notion that writers are self-made—as if the hand of God smacks a kid on the head and declares them to be a writer. Parents and teachers would never allow that romantic idea to apply to science or math or other content and problem-solving subjects.

So how do we advise teachers? I'd play "small ball." Drop Everything and Read (D.E.A.R.) is a great approach to reading a bit every day. Writing can be layered into the daily school schedule in the same way. It is not that the students have to write volumes every day—they just have to write consistently and with purpose. So, a little bit of focused writing each day (either on a creative form or essay) is what I would suggest.

The key, of course, is the focus. Students have to be guided in choosing what they want to write about and then instructed about the form in which they write. If they are writing short stories, they should understand the general notion that the character, setting, and problem are introduced in the beginning of the story; they should understand that the action building to a crisis should appear in the middle; and they should understand that the resolution and emotional/physical endings should be revealed at the finish. Of course, we all know that if a student wants to write poems, they should be reading poetry. If they write short stories, they should be reading short stories. If they write pic-

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turebooks, they should read picturebooks.

Matching the reading up with the writing is a key component for good writing. Then, teaching students how to be thoughtful *rewriters* is essential. I certainly don't believe I'm suggesting anything to teachers that they don't already know: If you want better writing students, it takes teacher training and student instruction time in order to achieve positive results.

SC: Jack, I thank you for your generous gifts of time, thought, and words for this interview. As we come to the end, a final question: With all that others believe you to be (writer, teacher, consultant, friend . . .), what do *you* believe to be your role in the field of adolescent literature?

JG: It is difficult to imagine a role more important for me than writing good books for adolescent readers. That said, I think my role is also twined with being an educator, literature enthusiast, and bibliophile. Each year I visit quite a number of schools where I speak to young adults about reading and writing. I work with teachers on orchestrating creative writing and literature workshops in schools. I speak to young adults in prisons and to those who freely show up for readings and book talks at public libraries. And though it is not my intent to usurp the ambition of my own books, I do feel that public speaking is a calling of sorts for me to hit the road and promote the love and transformative power of literature.

Author's Note

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Editors' Note: Just as this issue of *The ALAN Review* was headed to press, the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, presented Jack Gantos the 2012 Newbery Award for his screwball mystery *Dead End in Norvelt*, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. The Newbery Award was actually Gantos's second award in less than a week as he also received the 2012 Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction, again for *Dead End in Norvelt*.

S. D. Collins spent 10 years as a middle school language arts teacher at the Tennessee School for the Deaf. Currently, S. D. is an associate professor of Language and Literacy Education at Tennessee Tech University where he founded and directs the Upper Cumberland Writing Project. He may be reached at scollins@tntech.edu.

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