



Jack Gantos

Discussion & Activity Guide: Creative Suggestions for Sharing TeachingBooks Author Programs with Children

This guide includes activities for students of all ages. All suggested activities and discussions should be adapted to fit your particular classroom dynamic.

On the Jack Henry books and Journaling

Show the students the Jack Gantos movie on TeachingBooks.net or, alternatively, explain to them that Jack Gantos began as a writer by keeping journals as a child. His Jack Henry books are autobiographical; he actually pulled out episodes from his fifth, sixth, and seventh grade journals to write the books!

- Discuss or brainstorm the many different reasons someone might keep a journal. Point out Jack Gantos' statement that he likes journaling "because it's the one place I can go to...and maybe I can discover another little section of myself."
- Jack has a lot of unusual and sometimes humorous experiences, but is still a "regular kid." What thoughts, aspirations, or worries make Jack a like a regular kid? Ask your students "How are you like Jack?"
- Many students are scared or apprehensive about keeping a journal. After pointing out that Jack is a regular kid and asking them to compare themselves to Jack, they may be more open to the idea. Ask your students to keep a journal, making sure to emphasize the private nature of the activity. Students only need to share journal entries if they choose to.
 - As Jack Gantos says, "Make sure they set that journal up like a real pro." Ask them to carefully think about things that are important to them such as their time with friends, their relationship with their parents/family, home/neighborhood, sports, time in school, stories, good days, bad days, etc. Once they have created a list of "important things," ask them to divide their journal into sections, each section headed by one of the important things. Each entry then goes into the appropriate section rather than into chronological order. Entries may be fully written sentences and paragraphs or may simply be lists.
 - Rather than begin the journal by writing an entry, Jack Gantos suggests that they take the time to draw a map of their neighborhood. Encourage them to "start paying attention to where they live." It is often inspirational if the teacher draws his/her own map and shares the details with the class.
- As a writing or discussion activity, ask students to describe Jack's relationships with his brother Pete, his sister Betsy, his mom, his dad, and his pets. You may begin this activity by creating character webs or simply listing student's thoughts. If they have read more than one of the Jack Henry books, ask students whether Jack's relationships with his family members change as he gets older.

On the Joey Pigza books

- Joey is a complicated character, a genuinely good kid who suffers from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or ADHD. Jack Gantos describes Joey: “Joey, at the center of his heart, is a very good kid...every time he has a desire to do something good, there seems to be a hurdle for him — sometimes he gets over it, sometimes he trips but in the reader’s mind, he’s trying....” Create a list with your students about ways in which they see Joey trying?
- One way to assist your students in understanding ADHD is to read *Joey Pigza* aloud. Stop and discuss: Who is telling the story? Why can’t Joey sit still? Does his medication help? Did the special education center help? Do you understand what Joey is going through? How does the way the book is written help in understanding what Joey is going through?
- Discuss the definition of empathy. Be sure to differentiate between “sympathy” and “empathy.” Ask your students if they feel empathetic towards Joey. Why or why not?

Caveat: If you have ADHD students in your class, you might want to let their families (and them) know that you plan to use the book. Invite them to read it and give you their responses. Some may be apprehensive; some may want to share experiences.

On the Rotten Ralph books and Writing Stories

- Read aloud to the class *Not So Rotten Ralph* or another Rotten Ralph book of your choice. After students have had a chance to enjoy the book, teach them the elements of writing or the elements of a story including characters, setting, problem/situation, action/plot, crisis, and resolution. As a reference if you have access to it, please refer to Mr. Gantos’ article in *Booklinks* May 1998.

Or, you may create a visual teaching aid as Jack Gantos has done by placing these elements along with “an emotional or mental change in the Character” into a 16-box grid much like a calendar. The grid is created for the picture book format where a book has 32 pages. For every two pages of picture book, there is approximately one page of text or writing. On page 1 of text, the characters are introduced. On page 2 and 3, the setting is described. On page 4, the problem or story situation is introduced. On pages 5–11, the action unfolds with the participation of the main character, thereby furthering the story. The actions on these pages must be properly sequenced, and there should be no more than one action per page. Page 12 is the crisis page where the story reaches its climax or the main character reaches a moment of discovery. On pages 13 and 14, the character examines his or her feelings until on pages 15 and 16, the story comes to a resolution as a result of the character examining his feelings. This same format may be adopted for longer books; however, each element will take proportionately more pages to complete.

- Give students a copy of the Picture Book Grid described above. Ask them to write the story element from *Rotten Ralph* that fits into each box. Once they have identified all of the story elements, discuss how *Rotten Ralph* fits together as a story. You may do this with any of the other Jack Gantos books as well.
- Give students another copy of the grid. Ask them to, either using the journals they have been keeping or using their imaginations, create their own “story elements” and fill in the boxes accordingly. Once the “outline” for their stories have been created on the grid, it is time to expand by connecting the ideas with further description, detail, dialogue, and possibly illustrations. Let students write in any order they wish. If they want to start in the middle or at the end and work from there, let them. After their

writing has been proofread and edited, usually several times, have students bind their books and create book jackets. Invite parents, other teachers or other classes to hear your students read their stories.

Jack Gantos, interviewed in his studio in Boston, Massachusetts on August 13, 2001.

Multimedia program available at www.TeachingBooks.net beginning September, 2002.

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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