

Hole in My Life

One man's imprisoned youth is set free ... in words.

Adapted by Bryon Cahill • Based on the book by Jack Gantos • Illustrations by Jon Proctor

CHARACTERS

(main characters in **boldface**)

Jack 1, 2, 3, *Jack Gantos telling the story of his own life*

Narrators 1, 2, 3, *characters who relate the action of the story*

Prison guard

Mr. Gantos, *Jack's father*

Rik, *a drug dealer*

Gantos, *the Jack Gantos that speaks to other characters in the present*

Hamilton, *a drug smuggler*

Jack's Diary

Cadet

PROLOGUE

Jack 1: The prisoner in the photograph is me. The ID number is mine. The photo was taken in 1972 at the medium-security Federal Correctional Institution in Ashland, Kentucky. I was 21 years old and had been locked up for a year already—the bleakest year of my life—and I had more time ahead of me.

Jack 2: At the time the picture was taken, I weighed 125 pounds. I parted my hair down the middle and grew a mustache in order to look older and tougher. With the greasy prison diet, and the stress, and the troubled dreams of capture and release, there was no controlling the acne. I was over-matched.

Jack 3: I was smart and **cagey**. I managed to avoid a lot of trouble. I knew how to blend in and sift through the days unnoticed by men who spent the majority of their time looking to inflict

pain on others.

Jack 1: Your number could come up anywhere, anytime—in the dark of night while you slept or in full daylight on the exercise field while you strolled in the sun.

Jack 2: I wasn't raised around this level of violence. I wasn't prepared for it, and I've never forgotten it.

Jack 3: Even now, when walking some of Boston's meaner streets, I find myself moving like a knife, carving my way around people, cutting myself out of their picture and leaving nothing but a hole behind.

SCENE 1

Narrator 1: When Jack is 19, his family moves from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to San Juan, Puerto Rico. Jack's family has been moving around his entire life, so this **upheaval** is nothing new.



Narrator 2: Jack's father has a habit of switching jobs almost every year. His new job in San Juan is as a construction superintendent rebuilding a beachfront hotel and casino.

Jack 1: I'd go to the different casinos, drink a little too much, and wander around the tourist zones. After a while, I began to think about school again. I talked to my parents, and they agreed to send me back to Florida to my old school, Sunrise High.

Narrator 3: Jack's parents arrange for Jack to live with a family in Fort Lauderdale.

Jack 2: It took them about six weeks to realize I was a live-in party crasher. I'd go out drinking with friends, and afterward I'd come home late and play my stereo at full volume, smell up the house with cigarette smoke, and make long-distance calls on their bill.

Jack 3: I kept drinking more and more. I always became blind drunk and ferociously ill. I spent every night loudly heaving my guts out in the toilet while begging God for mercy. I was a mess.

Narr 1: The morning after one particularly terrible drunken night, Jack is summoned into the kitchen. He is promptly informed that he has to pack his bags and be out of the house within the hour.

* **vocab**

CAGEY: wary, careful, cautious

UPHEAVAL: a radical change or disturbance



Jack 1: They told me I was an “immature, spoiled brat who needed a major butt-kicking in order to straighten up.” I left quickly and spit up on their grass.

Narr 2: Jack takes up residence at a motel called King’s Court. His job at a local Winn-Dixie allows him to pay his rent but little else. He begins to have more time to read and write—two activities he has always loved.

Jack 2: I could write stuff down all day, but I could never seem to organize it into anything worth reading. Ever since I was in elementary school I had kept diaries. I filled them with odds and ends of writing like a box full of jigsaw puzzle pieces. There was no way of telling whether they’d ever fit together.

Jack 3: I had great notions of sprawling novels. They jolted me awake in the middle of the night and sneaked up on me as I drove my car. I wrote down

these ideas in my frantic, spastic penmanship. But that was all they ever amounted to—ideas.

Jack 1: I decided my biggest writing problem was that I didn’t have anything to write about. Nothing interesting had happened to me.

SCENE 2

Narr 3: At school one day, there is an assembly. Jack and his fellow classmates are brought into the auditorium. Soon, prisoners from the local jail are marched in on the stage. A prison guard addresses the students.

Prison guard: These men you see here will never be released from prison. They regret their crimes, but it is too late for regret. Their lives are ruined, but they have volunteered to speak to you all today about the perils of a criminal life. Please listen carefully. Someday you will graduate, but you will not want

to go to your class reunion dressed like these guys.

Jack 2: What could they say that could possibly change my life? I wasn’t going to become a criminal. I was going to be a writer.

Jack 3: The first prisoner stood up and said, “I have an anger problem.” He punched himself hard in the chest and then picked up a telephone book from the stage and ripped it in half. Everyone laughed. We couldn’t help ourselves. The show seemed ridiculously fake.

Narr 1: More prisoners tell their stories and then walk off the stage in handcuffs.

Jack 1: As I watched the prisoners being marched away, I knew there was nothing we had in common. I wasn’t angry. I didn’t use drugs. I didn’t steal. I wasn’t a rapist. But something was wrong. I felt adrift inside. I had a **compulsion** to be someone else. But that didn’t mean I’d end up in prison.

SCENE 3

Narr 2: Jack graduates from high school. He learns that his father’s business is not doing well and that his family is moving from Puerto Rico to St. Croix* in the Virgin Islands. There, his father can start a new business.

Narr 3: Jack considers going to college but decides it isn’t worth the effort.

Jack 2: Like every guy, I had read *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac and wanted to cut loose and travel from coast to coast. I wouldn’t think about money or trouble or anything but the great freedom that awaited me. I would be a ship zooming out to sea. I needed a change. And of course, I wanted to write.

Jack 3: I knew I was going to join my family in St. Croix. But first, I figured I’d drive around Florida and visit Ernest Hemingway’s home. That’s all the planning I could handle. Like Kerouac wrote, “I was a young writer and I wanted to take off. Somewhere along the line I knew there’d be girls, visions, everything. Somewhere

*Croix—pronounced kroy

along the line the pearl would be handed to me.”

Jack 1: I wanted that pearl.

Narr 1: Jack is all set to go when he gets a call from his friend Tim Scanlon. Tim wants to visit. Jack’s trip is put on hold.

Jack 2: I picked up Tim at the train station. He had changed in the past year. His hair was down to his shoulders. He looked like he hadn’t slept in a week.

Narr 2: After very little persuasion, Tim convinces Jack that they can make some money selling marijuana.

Jack 3: I gave Tim \$200 to buy some so we could resell it for more. He ripped me off and disappeared.

Jack 1: I was charged up and ready to write.

Jack 2: I retreated to Sloppy Joe’s bar in Key West, where Hemingway drank and played cards with his mob of friends. I sat and imagined the great books I might write. Of course, I didn’t write a word. It was easier just to do drugs and drink

than it was for me to do anything productive.

Narr 3: After a week or so, Jack decides it is time to move to St. Croix with his family. When he gets there, he discovers that a lot of racial tension has built up on the island.

Jack 3: The racial divide widened and the anger boiled. Homes were broken into. People were murdered. Stores were looted. Tourism dropped. My father’s new hotel business was a bust. He was reduced to building large wooden containers for the hundreds of people that were scrambling to empty their homes. They wanted to ship their belongings off the island. The white **exodus** was on.

Jack 1: I was working with my father building those giant containers when a man named Rik came to us one day. He asked

* vocab

COMPULSION: a strong, irresistible impulse to perform an act

EXODUS: a departure or emigration of a large group of people



for a crate with a false bottom about 4 inches deep. I remember him in detail. He was in his late 20s, blond, and had a shaggy haircut, green eyes, and a silver-dollar-sized burn scar on his forehead. He said the scar came from being shot by a flare gun.

Mr. Gantos: What was that like?

Rik: Blinding.

Narr 1: Jack and his father agree to take the job. When Rik leaves, Jack's father talks about him.

Mr. Gantos: That guy's a dope smuggler.

Gantos: How do you know that?

Mr. Gantos: Just do. It's a gift I have.

Narr 2: A few days later, Rik returns to pick up the wooden container. He pulls out a hash pipe.

Rik: You mind?

Gantos: Fire it up.

Narr 3: Two days later, Rik returns again. This time, he does not come alone. He is accompanied by a tall, well-tanned man wearing cutoff jeans and a T-shirt. He is British, and his name is Hamilton.

Rik: We have a proposal to make. Before we get into particulars, do you think you could help us sail a boat to New York and leave, like, this week? And take, say, six weeks to deliver it?

Jack 2: The thought of it hooked me right away. I was ready to push off immediately. With everything going the wrong way, I figured the boat was my

exit. Plus, I'd end up in New York, where all the writers ended up.

Gantos: Yeah. I can do that.

Rik: Then here's the deal. But if you don't take it, you can't say a word to anyone.

Gantos: OK.

Rik: We have 2,000 pounds of hashish buried somewhere. I need to fly to New York and arrange some deals. We need someone, you, to help Hamilton sail the boat to Manhattan, where I'll be waiting. Your job is to get the boat to New York, and for that you'll get \$10,000.

Jack 3: This was the jackpot. The answer I was looking for. I didn't think of the danger involved with breaking the law. I didn't even consider that I had no idea how to sail a large boat, or that Hamilton might kill me and dump my body off the coast of New Jersey. I didn't think that anything bad could possibly happen.

Gantos: Count me in.

Jack 1: When I got home that night, I told my father about the trip ... leaving out the part about the ton of illegal drugs, of course.

Mr. Gantos: Is this on the up-and-up?

Gantos: You bet.

Mr. Gantos: Then smooth sailing, sailor.

Jack 2: He slapped me on the back with pride.

Mr. Gantos: I only wish I could go with you.

Jack 3: I'm so glad he didn't.

SCENE 4

Narr 1: The next few days, Jack and Hamilton take the boat out on a few practice voyages. Jack quickly learns that he is not the world's greatest sailor. He also learns that Hamilton is not the most pleasant man in the world.

Narr 2: Despite Jack's lack of skill and Hamilton's impatience with teaching, the two inexperienced sailors set out to sea.

Jack 1: It was not lost on me that so many great writers had gone to sea. Before leaving, I had gone to a used bookstore and selected every title I could find that had something to do with the sea. I had *Billy Budd*, *Martin Eden*, *Treasure Island*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Odyssey*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and the *Mutiny on the Bounty* trilogy. I wanted to write while sailing. More than anything, I wanted to fall under the spell of books.

Narr 3: The morning after they leave St. Croix, they come to a small, **uninhabited** island.

Hamilton: It's called Little Dog Island. I got us here, now you get the **dinghy** and go ashore. Somewhere between that stand of trees you'll find a tarp covered with sand. Under that is the hash. Start bringing it on board—but don't get it wet.

Jack 2: In my head I was imagining myself as Long John Silver

* vocab

UNINHABITED: having no residents

DINGHY: a small open boat carried as a lifeboat or pleasure craft on a larger boat



singing "Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum."

Jack 3: I rowed to shore, dug up the 50-pound canvas bags, dragged them through the sand, loaded four at a time into the dinghy, rowed through the choppy surf back to the ship, tied up, and heaved the heavy sacks onto the deck.

Jack 1: I did this 10 times in a row, until finally, we had all 2,000 pounds of hash on board. I dropped down to the deck and lay there as if I had fallen from

the top of the mast. I was exhausted.

Narr 1: For the next two weeks, they sail to New York. Along the way, Jack writes in his diary—his only real companion. Hamilton is not much of a talker.

Jack's Diary: July 19—I've missed talking to another human. Last night, after Hamilton came to relieve me of my shift, instead of heading down to the cabin to sleep, I stayed put.

Gantos: Have you ever thought about what might happen to us if we get caught?

Narr 2: Hamilton's laugh comes out of him like a coiled spring jiggling up and down.

Hamilton: You are *afraid*. Afraid of the punishment. You can't be afraid of what we are doing, because we're doing nothing wrong.

Jack's Diary: I stood up and went downstairs. But I didn't sleep. Hamilton had read my mind—I'm not doing anything wrong.



I'm just afraid of the punishment.

Narr 3: Jack goes to sleep with those thoughts swimming in his head.

Jack's Diary: July 29—Another night without a breeze. Nothing to do. I'm tired of just sitting. I dove overboard earlier and swam around the boat. On my second lap, I noticed that Hamilton's **porthole** was open. I stopped beneath it and listened for a minute. I could hear him breathing heavily. I held on to the bottom rim of the hole and pulled myself up with one hand. With the other, I reached in and grabbed his leg. He hollered and kicked out. I dropped under the water, but even from there I could hear the gunshot.

Hamilton: You think you're so

funny? I'll show you what scared is!

Jack's Diary: He fired again and again into the water. I was terrified.

Hamilton: You laughing yet?

Jack's Diary: After a few minutes, he dropped the gun and began to adjust the sails. I swam around to the stern.

Gantos: Can I come aboard, captain?

Hamilton: Yes, I'm tired of wanting to shoot you.

Jack's Diary: He turned and went back to his cabin. I retook the wheel, and when my shift was up, I didn't go wake him.

Narr 1: After a few days of stormy weather, another serious problem arises.

Jack's Diary: August 6—The

morning weather was hazy with low visibility. As the haze lifted, we saw a sign announcing we were in restricted military waters.

Hamilton: Let's just push on until someone tells us to turn around.

Gantos: Can't we just turn around now? Why invite trouble?

Hamilton: Just do as you're told. Take the bow, and look out for shallow water.

Jack's Diary: I did. Suddenly, I heard a motorboat coming our way. It was the Coast Guard.

Gantos: What do we do?

Hamilton: Wave nicely.

Jack's Diary: They kept getting closer. Finally, they pulled up right next to us, and a cadet shouted at us through a bullhorn.

Cadet: You have entered restricted waters. Turn **starboard** and we'll escort you out.

Jack's Diary: My face went pale. But Hamilton turned the boat around, and we escaped without having to pull over for a customs check.

Gantos: That was a close call.

Narr 2: They decide to go to shore. After a brief stay at the harbor at Cape May, New Jersey, they push off again and sail for Manhattan.

SCENE 5

Narr 3: When Jack spots the Statue of Liberty, he searches the water for police.

Hamilton: Are you worried?

Gantos: Yes. I'll be worried till it's over.

Jack 2: We docked at a Queens marina. Soon, we met up with Rik, and he started making deals. I had to wait around to get my money, and that was making me extremely nervous.

Narr 1: Jack gets paid his \$10,000. He is inside his hotel room when the place is raided by the FBI.

Jack 3: I heard Hamilton cry out.

Hamilton: OK, OK, don't hurt me!

Jack 1: They must have had him pinned down.

Jack 2: I was on the second-floor landing, frozen. I couldn't see the front desk from where I was, and I didn't dare look around the corner to see exactly what was happening.

Narr 2: Jack bolts. He goes back to his room, grabs his money, and escapes down the fire es-

cape. A jumpy, nervous wreck, he gets on a train back to Florida.

Narr 3: Jack arrives back at his old motel, and checks in. He calls his father and learns that the FBI is looking for him. His father sets up a meeting for Jack with a lawyer.

Narr 1: The lawyer convinces Jack to turn himself in.

SCENE 6

Jack 3: I was convicted and sentenced to 60 days to six years

* vocab

PORTHOLE: an opening (as a window) with a cover or closure, especially in the side of a ship or aircraft
STARBOARD: a nautical term meaning the right-hand side of a boat

and shipped to federal prison in Ashland, Kentucky. At first, I pointed the finger at everyone else—my family, my friends, the crooks that convinced me this was a good idea. I burned them all on a bonfire of blame. But I could get no relief.

Jack 1: I smuggled the hash. I took the money. I hurt my family. No fire rages like guilt.

Narr 2: After Jack's first few days in his cell, a food-service worker takes pity on him and drops off some books. One of the books is *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

Jack 2: Dostoyevsky spent some time in prison. He wrote about it in *House of the Dead*. And I guess knowing that encouraged me to use *Karamazov* for my journal. I read the book first. Then I began to record my own lines between his lines. Naturally, his were better. But mine were mine, and now I had plenty to write about. Finally.

Narr 3: Jack is lucky. He lands a job as an X-ray technician in jail. He spends most of his time in the hospital wing and has little interaction with the general population.

Jack 3: After five months, I went to see the parole board. I was very tense because they were going to determine how much of the 60 days to six years I would have to serve.

Narr 1: The parole hearing does not go well.

Jack 1: From my cell window, I could see a line of houses in the distance. As the months passed,

I watched people celebrate their lives—Easter, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day. In October, I watched them put up Halloween decorations. We didn't celebrate Halloween in prison—or, should I say, every day in prison was scarier than any Halloween.



SCENE 7

Jack 2: For a long time I had known I wanted to write books, but I didn't have any help. I didn't know what to write or how to get started.

Jack 3: I didn't have the patience

to slow down and see that I had plenty of material to write about in high school. I just didn't have the confidence and determination to sit still and nurture it properly. My mistakes, my self-doubt, and my insecurity got the best of me.

Jack 1: From the wrong side of a cell window, I longed for a more interesting life outside. And as I sat in my cell with my journal in my lap, I realized that my past was so much richer than what was before me. My struggle as a writer was a lot like my life, I figured. I made up rules for myself and broke them and made others until I got it right.

Narr 2: Jack ended up serving a year and a half for his crime. When he got out, he had a new outlook on life. He saw his life, and his future, in a new way.

Jack 2: But my *Karamazov* journal was gone. They wouldn't let me take it, because it was considered prison property. It was the biggest loss of writing I've ever suffered. I often wonder if it still sits on the prison library shelf. I hope so. That thought sustains me. I imagine some prisoner checking it out and reading my book within that book. And maybe he will add his thoughts to it, and maybe others will too. Maybe the library will become filled with books with the trapped world of prisoners' thoughts concealed between the lines.

Jack 3: I'm out in the open now. Doing what I have always wanted to do.

Jack 1: Write. ■

Interview

The play you have just read was based on the true events of Jack Gantos's life as a young man. Here, we offer a short interview with the author. To read the complete interview, go to our blog, **WORD**, at www.readandwriting.com on October 23.



COURTESY OF JACK GANTOS

READ: Did your family enjoy *Hole in My Life*?

Jack Gantos: My family never really responded to the book. I think they lived the experience in their own painful way and had no interest in reliving their pain, anger, and discomfort.

Hole in My Life was difficult to write for several reasons. The first being that it is a memoir, which means it has to be honest. Now, I'm a fiction writer, so I know I could juice up that story and make it better in spots by adding material that did not happen. But I stuck to the facts, so the challenge in the writing was to shape and construct the truth so it was captivating. This required me to really dig deep into each scene and carve it in language so that it was honest and engaging.

I had to do this with both the physical aspects of the story and especially with the emotional portions. It was difficult simply because I had to experience all the pain and fear all over again, then boil it down and add it to the essential core of each and every scene. When you read *Hole in My Life*, you see how much of the book is actually inside the character. I felt every one of those words, and a good number of them brought me shame and guilt and pain, but also pride and confidence because I did pull myself out of a mess and build a solid life despite my worst qualities.

READ: Did prison change you?

Gantos: In prison, I read and wrote every day. I tried my best to stay away from all the drugs (in prison, there are plenty) and all the guys who are not there to be kind to you. My goal was to mind my own business, make friends with good people who I could trust, do my prison job, and read and write—and then to get out of there as soon as possible so I could move on with the life I wanted to build.

READ: How did you find writing material in everyday experiences?

Gantos: As a boy, I kept journals. I would set the

journals up in a specific way. First, I would start by drawing maps: I'd work up a detailed drawing of my house and all the rooms and the yard, and then I would draw where everything happened—where I threw up on the wall, where my dog was eaten by an alligator in my back yard, where I broke my brother's arm, and on and on. No detail was too small. Then I would use the drawings for jumping-off points for writing. I kept this up all through my life.

If you pay attention to the world around you (and to the world within you) every day, then you will have plenty to write about.

READ: Would you recommend your map drawing strategy to any aspiring young writer?

Gantos: Yes. Get a journal and a decent pen. Then draw a map of your room, your house, your neighborhood, school, and other important locations. Then start drawing down every important thing that happened, and where you had very strong emotions too. Sometimes the physical action is easy to find and you have to look a little deeper for the emotional material—but I assure you it is there and it is essential to writing.

Next, set up good writing habits. Ten or 15 minutes each day. Take out the journal, look at your map, and start writing a wild first draft of some story you know. Once you get that first draft, you can type it up, begin to give it shape, and work through it. You bring structure to the work and make certain the character is changed by the events. About half a story is physical and half is emotional. If you write a little each day, you can improve your skills and build confidence and your talent can shine through. Good luck!

Since the publication of *Hole in My Life*, Jack Gantos has written several children's books, including the Rotten Ralph and Joey Pigza series. Check out his Web site at www.jackgantos.com.