First Opinion: No Dead End in Sight: Connecting the Past to the Present


Benjamin Boche

The cover of the Newbery award book Dead End in Norvelt shows a young boy with his head hidden behind a road sign containing the book’s title. This, perhaps, represents the feeling the fictionalized Jack Gantos felt after his mother grounded him for the entire summer following a mishap with a Japanese sniper rifle. Faced with the prospect of complete banishment to his room, Jack reluctantly agrees to occasionally help his elderly neighbor, Miss Volker, to escape his summer imprisonment. Plagued with arthritis, Miss Volker immediately has Jack write obituaries for the sleepy town of Norvelt. As depressing as obituaries sound, this is where the real fun begins.

Miss Volker isn’t content with a simple record of people’s lives. Instead, she focuses on one of the most important themes found in the book: history.

“I guess you could say the obits are the honey to attract readers. Now here is the part I want to write, so stretch your fingers and get your pencil revved up – people may die but we’ve got some important ideas to keep alive” (32).
Through these historical accounts, readers learn all about the humble beginnings of Norvelt along with numerous other events in history that all seemingly connect together in ways one might not expect. These lessons from history are one important aspect the real Jack Gantos hopes readers will get from the book, as indicated in an interview with School Library Journal:

“I don’t think history should be looked at as a project covered in dust on the back shelf. I want young readers to read that book, and not only look at history but also question it. Look at that landmark. Take a look at that and at American history and also community history and the history of individuals, which is what all those obituaries [in the book] were. Which is what Miss Volker was doing connecting those obituaries to the immediacy of history itself.” (qtd. in Barack)

The fictionalized Jack Gantos learns more than his fair share of history, as more and more residents of Norvelt die mysteriously with more than one possibility as to who could be causing the deaths.

Thankfully, Dead End In Norvelt doesn’t take itself too seriously, and there is a sense of playfulness amidst all the deaths. Jack is a chronic nose bleeder, so blood spurts out at some of the most inopportune times, causing many hilarious encounters and adventures with Miss Volker. Jack also has to submit to the battle of the wills between his parents, which can only mean more trouble and extra hard work for a kid who has already lost the privileges of summer. Still, Jack takes everything in stride and in the end probably has more adventures than he expected. He even learns a thing or two along the way, especially that history is alive and all around us.

In an age of instant gratification, this can be a difficult concept for many young people to realize. Making connections between the past and present, therefore, is an important element for teachers and adults to consider when interacting with children. “That truth is that reading and thinking about how people thought and acted in the past provides material for thinking about the present. Literature dealing with historical events and choices is a relevant guide for living our lives today” (Zarnowski 42). Most youngsters might hear these ideas in school on a regular basis, but I think they may enjoy it a little more if they read Dead End in Norvelt. After all, Jack Gantos learned his lesson: “The reason you remind yourself of the stupid stuff you’ve done in the past is so you don’t do it again” (340). Those are pretty good words to live by.
Works Cited


About the Author

Benjamin Boche is a former middle school teacher and Ph.D. student in the Literacy and Language program at Purdue University. His interests include how literature is an important element in creating successful literacy communities in schools and classrooms.