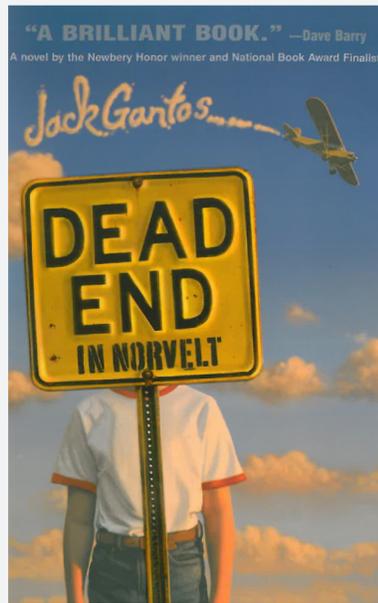


Second Reaction: Thoroughfares, Alleys, and Dead Ends in Norvelt

Gantos, Jack. *Dead End in Norvelt*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2011.

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In the novel, *Dead End in Norvelt*, the main character, Jack Gantos, starts his summer off with a “Bang!” – literally. By mistake he shoots a Japanese sniper rifle that his father kept as a souvenir from his duty in the navy during WWII. Since Jack was not supposed to play with his father’s “war stuff” and because he shot off a gun, even though he did not know it was loaded, his mother grounds him. Before Jack has a chance to serve one grounding sentence, his father puts him in a situation where by obeying his father Jack is forced to disobey his mother; thus, she grounds him for the rest of the summer. Before originally grounding him, Jack’s mother had agreed to loan him to the next door neighbor, Miss Volker, the author of the obituary column for the town’s newspaper. Unfortunately, Miss Volker’s arthritis has become quite severe and she needs someone to write the obituaries while she dictates them.

As a member of one of the original 250 families of the town, a town named after Eleanor Roosevelt and created to assist families after the Great Depression, Miss Volker also serves as the town’s nurse and medical examiner. Miss Volker sees the task of writing the obituaries of the last members of the original families of Norvelt, Pennsylvania,

as completing their final health report and thus complying with the job for which Mrs. Roosevelt hired her as well as a means of providing the readers with a lesson in history. This summer, somewhat enigmatically, the original members of the town start dying off in quick succession. Eventually the consecutive deaths prompt a criminal investigation. For Jack, having to help Miss Volker write all the obituaries means getting out of his room, out of chores, and thereby gaining some freedom. While accompanying and assisting Miss Volker, Jack learns about the past and present history of his town and along the way also learns some things about himself.

Jack is a sympathetic character. His signature trait is a nose that begins to bleed anytime he gets overexcited, anxious, or scared. As can be imagined, a nose that gives away one's weaknesses can be the cause of much humiliation. Since this is a coming-of-age novel, opportunities for humiliation and growth abound during this memorable summer. Jack has many experiences that help him change and grow into an adolescent boy. Much of these experiences revolve around one of the novel's themes – life and death. However, these same experiences are ones that some adult readers might find disturbing, offensive, or inappropriate for the 2011 Newbery Medal award winning young adult novel. For example: Jack shoots a gun; at his father's request, he mows down his mother's cornfield which she planted to harvest and feed the elderly and needy of the town; he is bullied by his friend, Bunny, the daughter of the town's funeral parlor owner, into sneaking out of his house at night; he drives a car without a license; he rides on his father's airplane after his mother forbade him to; and he, prompted by his father and as his accomplice, vandalizes a drive-in theater screen by throwing balloons filled with paint at it from the airplane.

From an adolescent reader's perspective, not all of these events were seen as unfitting. As a matter of fact, one 14 year old female reader commented that she has "read other books where the main character lies or sneaks out of his house." She said "I'm a teenager and all teenagers think of doing that or do something bad on a smaller scale." She also added that it made her think that Jack should have chosen better. When asked about the events surrounding the gun, she said that "it seemed normal that a boy with a father that went to war was curious about the gun." When we discussed the scene at the funeral parlor with the dead body, this adolescent reader commented that while that was a bit "awkward, [she's] read other books and seen movies that were more graphic or gruesome than that!" Regardless of how one might interpret these contentious actions and events in the story, within and between these events there are sections of this novel that will have the reader literally laughing out loud. The twist that took the adolescent reader by surprise was the murders. It seems that adolescent readers were not expecting a "who-dun-it" with this book.

There is a great deal of history provided throughout the novel, hence why *Dead End in Norvelt* also won the 2012 Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. One adolescent

reader commented: "I found the history sections interesting given the fact that I don't enjoy non-fiction or history." Familiarity with the historical periods allows for additional layers of interpretation, connections, and analysis. However, even if the reader is not familiar with the historical events, the novel is still enjoyable. Many of the history segments are connected to the obituaries dictated by Miss Volker. In keeping with the novel's focus on the value of history and the life and death themes, a writing activity that can stem from this novel is that of writing obituaries or eulogies. Readers could identify a person or inanimate object, contemplate, and write about the contribution this person or object makes to their world. A history-related writing activity could be to have the readers keep a journal and write not only about the events that happen to them on that day, but find and read about an event in history that also happened on that same day and summarize it in the journal.

Unsurprisingly, the author's writing style is superb; therefore, the prose and dialogue are enjoyable and the book is easy to read. However, The novel does have a shortcoming, and that is that the end "dead ends" in more ways than one. The subplot lines revolving around Will, Jack's uncle, and the pyromaniacal Hell's Angels are not fully developed or resolved. Also, the murder plot line is so quickly and loosely brought to a close that the ending is perhaps not as satisfying as it could be. Yet, in the end, Jack is no longer grounded. He has the opportunity to author an obituary all by himself and even contemplates how his own obituary might read. His experiences and the events of the summer have caused him to change and grow. Mainly, he learns that life is a cycle, change is a constant, and one should learn from history.

About the Author

Adriana L. Medina is Assistant Professor at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her interests include adolescent literacy, teacher education, and educational program evaluation. She was grounded until she finished this book review but now you can find her riding her bike around her neighborhood with her kids!