

Study Guide

Hole in My Life by Jack Gantos

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Plot Summary

Plot Summary

"Hole in My Life" by Jack Gantos is a story of one young man's struggle to become a writer.

"Hole in My Life" is the autobiographical story of Jack Gantos during his younger years. Gantos was a young man with little supervision who led a life that involved many moves and opportunities. This was a life quite unlike those of many other children. Living abroad for part of his childhood, Gantos learned how to navigate the world his own way. Once he returned to the states to finish high school without his parents, however, his lack of focus and his partying nature left him without a permanent home. He used his job at the grocery store to afford a room at the King's Court motel where he lived for the rest of his senior year. He dabbled in drugs, but when his friend Tim came to stay, he began to heavily use marijuana. Tim even talked him into selling the drug so he could earn money for college, but after he gave Tim \$200 for his share of the weed, Tim disappeared. Gantos drove his way across Florida, stopping at all the historical writer's homes, hoping to be inspired, and finally rejoined his family in St. Croix. St. Croix, at the time, was in the midst of a race war, and drugs were readily available. Gantos and his father built crates for all the people moving off the islands fearing their safety, and Gantos found himself helping Rik, a customer who wished to have a box with a hidden bottom compartment made. Through this meeting, Gantos landed a job helping to sail two thousand pounds of hash from St. Croix to New York, for ten thousand dollars. His shipmate, Hamilton, was a grizzly man, and made difficult company on the trip. Gantos learned plenty about the sea and sailing on his way up the coastline, but several times, things occurred that made him fear for his safety, and his freedom. Once in New York, they met Rik, and sold and delivered the hash, but they were soon approached by the FBI. Gantos was tried in New York, and was sentenced to sixty days to six years, depending on behavior. In prison, Gantos saw a lot of violence, but he realized that the inspiration he needed for his writing had always been around him, if he had simply taken the time to look. He began to journal in a copy of a book he had, but on his release from prison, he discovered he was unable to take the book with him. Following prison, Gantos attended college, working nights as a security guard. He learned that stories of his childhood are far more entertaining than the blood and death stories of his prison life, and his writing career takes off. "Hole in My Life" is about one man's mistakes, and how he used those mistakes to learn, and to achieve his dreams, despite his setbacks. It is a great lesson for teens, not only about recovering from mistakes, but about taking the right paths in life to avoid mistakes entirely.

Section 1: Chapter 1 and Chapter 2

Section 1: Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

"Hole in my Life" by Jack Gantos is a story of the author's young adulthood, where his mistakes lead him to prison. While his journey is difficult, his optimism and his writing eventually lead him to the proper path, and into a wonderful writing career.

In Section 1, Chapter 1, Gantos now admits the prisoner photograph on the front cover of the book is him, taken when he was twenty one in a federal prison. He was slight at the time, but his face was covered in acne as a result of stress and a prison diet. He was in a place where violence was common, and he sought to avoid those who aimed to hurt others. Gantos discusses several incidents of violence in prison, and notes that his childhood was in no way filled with such violence. Mr. Gantos would drive the family from Florida to their hometown in Pennsylvania, and would spend time pointing out ex cons and criminals to Jack. Gantos knows his father was trying to warn him about walking the wrong path, and he finds it surprising that Mr. Gantos never pegged his own son as a criminal. As Gantos recalls his and his father's talks, his attention to detail shows these really did make an impact on him, even if he failed to follow his father's warnings.

Looking back now, Gantos realizes that prison was where he needed to go in order to change his life. He became a writer through his ordeal, something he had dreamed about as a child. He wrote stories about those around him, as well as his own ordeal, by journaling in his copy of a book by Dostoyevsky, as they were not allowed to keep actual journals. Gantos can see he turned his life around in prison, and began taking the right road.

In Section 1, Chapter 2, Gantos explains he was merely a junior in high school when he began working, and gained access to unlimited freedom. His family moved to San Juan, and because Gantos did not speak Spanish, he could not attend school. He began working as an electrician, and he stayed in a hotel room with the other workers. He was given access to alcohol, gambling, and a free lifestyle, but soon, he began dreaming of becoming a writer, and of finishing school. His parents sent him back to Fort Lauderdale to live with a family there, the Bacons. The Bacons were in need for cash, as they were disabled and made a living from selling prosthetic limbs. However, when Gantos began showing up all hours of the night, drunk and loud, the family decided he was not worth the effort. One evening, after throwing up all over the house in a drunken spree, the Bacon's threw him out, warning him that he would not amount to anything. As Gantos spent the night in his car, he blamed the Bacon's for his problems, noting they were desperate and hopeless, while he was full of promise and hope. At the same time, Gantos also realized he had lost control of his life, and needed to change things.

On waking in the morning, Gantos found a room for rent at the King's Court, a local motel, run by a woman who claimed to be Davy Crockett's relation. The room was musty, hot, and clearly rundown, but Gantos knew it was home for the rest of the year. After bringing in his large collection of books and other belongings, Gantos began to realize he had no future, and no plans for his life. He knew, however, that he could rise above, and as he readied himself for work, he thought he would begin to succeed.

Section 1: Chapter 3

Section 1: Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

In Section 1, Chapter 3, Gantos explains that after his bout with the Bacon's, he began drinking less and reading and writing more often, but his writing was haphazard at best. To attempt to correct this, he organized a journal into four sections, one for daily entries, one to record passages from books that inspire him, and one to practice vocabulary. The final section was to write down inspired ideas for books, but these ideas always filled Gantos with self doubt. He believed his stories were not interesting enough.

Gantos' school was a renovated prison, and he found himself fantasizing about prison life, believing it could lead to wonderful stories. He was not successful with girls, and spent much time alone, although he did have a few friends, and a crush on his psychology teacher. One afternoon, the entire school was sent to the auditorium, where they heard presentations from prisoners about what life is like in jail. Although the act was supposed to frighten students, Gantos points out the entire thing was staged, and unbelievable. However, he does recall that he knew something in him was wrong, that he was adrift.

One afternoon, a friend invited him to smoke marijuana at a party that night, and Gantos accepted. When he arrived, however, he found only a group of guys sitting on the floor, trying to get high from stems and seeds. Gantos drank a few beers and left, telling himself he wouldn't do that again. He spent the rest of the year living in the hotel, where he experienced a rare peaceful existence with all races and types of individuals. But back on the home front, his father's business was failing. The family had moved to St. Croix, but the construction business was not successful. Even Gantos' news he did not want to attend college right away did not phase the family. He had planned to attend, but a meeting with the University of Florida convinced him he wanted something more interesting out of life. When he left the interview, he felt relieved, but wasn't sure why. He assumed he would find out why later, and he admits now he did.

Section 1: Chapter 4

Section 1: Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

In Section 1, Chapter 4, Gantos found himself inspired by Jack Kerouac's novel "On the Road". He wanted to be free, to experience life beyond his hotel room. He decided to drive criss cross over Florida on his way to see his family in St. Croix, stopping to visit writers' landmark homes along the way for inspiration. His plans were delayed, however, when a friend, Tim Scanlon, arrived in town, and needed a place to stay for a few days. Gantos agreed, and the two began smoking marijuana and discussing life. Gantos realized marijuana made his thoughts seem expanded, and his conversations much more in depth and intriguing. Scanlon believed all human behavior was controlled by chemical reactions, and as they talked, Gantos regretted his decision not to go to college. Scanlon promised to help him by going in with him to buy a great crop of marijuana the two could sell, thereby earning enough money for college. The two drove to Tallahassee where Scanlon claimed he was picking up the merchandise from the lab at the college. Gantos dropped him off after giving him \$200, and waited in the hotel room, but Scanlon never returned.

Shaking off the obvious betrayal, Gantos continued across the state, inspired by the authors he read. He arrived in Key West just as a tropical storm hit, and he found it thrilling. After the storm, he traveled to Hemingway's home, and thought of more great writers like Hersey, who wrote of Hiroshima after the bomb. Yet Gantos realized he was a coward, and could not believe in himself enough to go to Vietnam to be a reporter. Still hopeful but depressed Gantos called Scanlon, only to find he claimed to have been arrested on campus, after smoking some of the drugs he was supposed to pick up. Gantos fell into self pity for a while, but overcame it through alcohol and drugs, and dreamed of the books he would write as he read other authors. When he woke in the morning, he was covered in blisters. He began to think it was a stigmata, a sign he should go to church, but he realized it was only a reaction to tree sap from a chair he used after the storm.

The end of this section signifies the end of this portion of Gantos' life. This first section showed the path Gantos took which leads him back to St. Croix. Readers can see that literature is important to Gantos, as is his dream to be a writer, and this knowledge sets up an understanding of why Gantos makes the choices he does in the following sections of the book. He is not a bad person, but he does have dreams his own self consciousness refuses to let him achieve, and this lack of self confidence leads him to many undesirable decisions in his life, as readers have already seen.

Section 2: Chapter 1 and chapter 2

Section 2: Chapter 1 and chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

In Section 2, Chapter 1, Gantos found himself back in St. Croix, but it had changed drastically. Drugs were available constantly, and race relations in the area had deteriorated to riot conditions. Gantos admits he continued to smoke marijuana, but never realized it would land him in prison. Gantos' father's construction business was failing as a result of the race tensions, as the wealthy whites no longer wanted retirement homes in a war zone. Instead of construction, Gantos and his father built crates for the wealthy to offload their possessions. Gantos was paid only in room and board, and realized quickly he would not be able to save money for college. One day, a man named Rik came to the warehouse, asking for a false bottomed crate to be made. Gantos agreed, and although his father believed Rik to be a dope smuggler, he still agreed to make the crate, as the family needed money to get off the island.

Gantos found himself reading whatever was available, as the libraries in the area were plagued with theft and mold. He began reading political novels, and found himself jumping right into the middle of the race issue in St. Croix in an effort to find his writer's voice. He traveled to the black militant group's headquarters, only to be thrown out as they noted he was simply a white boy playing at revolution. Disheartened, Gantos retreated, knowing he was in over his head and rather than write, he drank and smoked weed.

A few days later, Rik returned to the warehouse, and he and Gantos smoked marijuana as they prepared the case for shipping. They filled the false bottom with hash, and then filled the crate with miscellaneous shipping material. Rik paid for the crate in hash, and asked Gantos to call him if he saw a red sailed boat in the harbor. Days later, Gantos saw the craft, although it appeared to be badly sailed by an amateur who needed assistance. After speaking with Rik, Gantos agreed to meet with him about another business deal. They rowed out to the sailboat, where Gantos met the sailor, Hamilton, a gruff, older British man. Rik offered Gantos ten thousand dollars to help Hamilton sail two thousand pounds of hash from St. Croix to New York. Gantos saw this as an opportunity to escape St. Croix, and attend college, so he naturally accepted. He didn't think about the legality of the situation or the danger, but merely how it could help him escape. Mr. Gantos questioned the deal, but only knew Jack was sailing a boat to New York. He knew nothing of the hash, and although he suspected something was up, he allowed his son to go, knowing it was his only way off the island.

In Section 2, Chapter 2, Hamilton and Gantos practiced sailing, although it was generally a disaster. They finally set sail anyway, and their first stop was Buck Island, where they ran aground as Gantos realized he knew little of sailing. Soon after, they sailed out on their way to Manhattan. Gantos realized how many writers had gone to sea as well, and hoped it would inspire his writing. After a day's sail, Hamilton took them to Little Dog Island, where the hash was buried. After loading, the men each began smoking or drinking the hash daily, small bits at a time. Gantos used his time to write in the ship's log as though it were a journal. Over time, Gantos, in his stoned state, realized Hamilton was partially insane as he began to refuse to wear clothing and mumble to himself.

Section 2: Chapter 3

Section 2: Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Section 2, Chapter 3 shows Gantos knew little of smuggling, as he took photos of Hamilton. Hamilton, on the other hand, clearly understood the dangers, as he threw the photographic evidence overboard. Further, Gantos' logs showed he feared Hamilton, and that Hamilton clearly understood more of life than Gantos, as he feared pirates as well as police. Gantos had reason to fear Hamilton, as he forced Gantos to hold cans on yardsticks while he shot at them, but at the same time, Hamilton clearly understood Gantos. He realized early on that Gantos was afraid, not because he felt guilty about what they were doing, but because he was afraid of the punishment if they were caught. This fact comes into play later, when Gantos is on trial for smuggling and the court reads his confession about his own lack of guilt.

Gantos also learned from Hamilton, as much as he hated to admit it. It was Hamilton who taught him that he couldn't just defecate in the ocean, as sharks would likely attack him. Hamilton also cleaned his wounds when he fell and took care of him, even if reluctantly. The men ate moldy bread, consumed too much hash, and were consistently stoned. One evening, Gantos played a joke on Hamilton by grabbing his leg through the porthole as he swam around the boat, but Hamilton panicked and began shooting at him. He eventually calmed down, but Gantos learned not to harass Hamilton further.

To occupy his time, Gantos began acting out scenes from the books he was reading. He could relate to the characters, knowing he himself dreamed of achieving great things, but also knowing he lacked the ambition to do so. To compensate for the lack of wind, the men began using the engine, but soon began to run out of gas. Believing they saw an oil derrick in the distance, the men navigated to it, only to discover it was a Japanese fishing vessel. After locating a translator on board, the Japanese agreed to give the men gasoline. Hamilton sent up a bottle of rum as a thank you gift, and the Japanese, in turn, gave the men a bottle of sake. As Gantos needed to use both hands to carry the bottle, he found he could not climb down the ladder. Instead, he jumped from the fishing vessel, only to knock the wind from himself. He began sinking, but forced himself to swim. Finally, he emerged to cheers from the Japanese, and a smile from Hamilton as he helped him aboard.

A few days later, the men ran into severe storms, and after three days of being battered, they had little idea where they were. A Coast Guard turboprop flew close over them, and although Gantos was nervous, Hamilton ordered him to follow the plane, as they were likely returning to base after looking for people in trouble after the storm. Gantos even waved to the pilot, a fact that haunts him later when he learns the Coast Guard was photographing their movement of the hash.

The following morning, the men found themselves in restricted waters, but near shore. A Coast Guard craft approached, and informed them they were near a Coast Guard training base. The men were escorted out of the area, only to run aground, and Hamilton pointed out Gantos constantly looked guilty. They threw anchor and went ashore where they ate and were able to wash. However, they were unable to reach Rik in Manhattan. Gantos knew the only option was to continue on.

Section 2: Chapter 4

Section 2: Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

In Section 2, Chapter 4, Gantos laments that everyone in prison has a story of how they were caught, and Gantos loved hearing them, as he believed at first that these stories had all the makings of a good tale, with violence and blood and action. He discusses several of these stories before telling his own tale of how he himself was caught for smuggling. Gantos admits now his fear of being caught at the time was far worse than actually being caught. As the men came to the New York coast, Gantos was definitely nervous but Hamilton reassured him the police were not bright enough to catch them. The men sailed to Queens, and found an available docking point. Once tied up, they called Rik who had already lined up a sale for two hundred fifty pounds of the hash. Gantos began to relax, knowing the sales had already started and that he would soon be paid, and free.

The men, including Rik, met up with the buyer, but the money wasn't there yet. Gantos was petrified as they drove to the buyer's remote location, and while the others slept, he snuck off into the woods, avoiding what he believed to be certain death or capture. However, the following morning the money arrived, and the men were back out on their way. Soon, however, Hamilton began driving off the interstate, believing they were being followed. Back at the dock, this fear was almost confirmed as the men learn their boat broke away from the dock and was boarded and secured by two unknown men. The extra anchor, Gantos realized, was stashed right by the hash. The men had to have seen the drugs.

Hamilton and Gantos set sail again to move the boat while Rik made more deals. They attracted no attention, and redocked the boat further up the coast. The men stayed at the Chelsea Hotel, where they continued to sell the hash and collect their payments, and Gantos found himself lost in the sea of poets, artists, and drug addicts that inhabited the hotel. He asked about writers who had stayed and wrote at the hotel, and there were many including such greats as Twain, O'Henry, Thomas Wolfe, Arthur C Clark, and others. Gantos was finally paid, and reveled in his new wealth. However, when Rik asked him to sail for him again, this time to England, he knew he needed to leave, and begin writing. He called colleges and set up interviews, but the final Friday of the operation, the men were caught. Rik and Hamilton left to attend to one final delivery, and Gantos left the room to check out the room a writer had stayed in. As he passed the lobby, he heard Hamilton being accosted by the FBI, and realized they were caught. Hamilton escaped, and Gantos ran back to the room to gather his things. He snuck from the hotel and hid in a theater while waiting for the first train to Florida. Once in Florida, he immediately fled to the King's Court, and reentered the room he had stayed in not a year before. Gantos realized, however, he was much worse off than when he had promised himself in this room that he would improve when he first arrived.

The end of this section signifies the end of this part of Gantos' life. Whereas Section 1 discussed how Gantos came to become a smuggler, Section 2 deals with his adventure while smuggling. It is clear by the end of this section that Gantos is in serious trouble. Since he has already revealed he was caught, one can safely assume the final section of the book deals with his capture, and the events that lead him to prison. Again, readers understand that Gantos' end goal, that of becoming a writer, was certainly noble enough, but his means to get there was not only illegal, but not well planned. This illustrates the idea that Gantos' decisions were not made with malice, and that he will eventually learn from his mistake.

Section 3: Chapter 1 and Chapter 2

Section 3: Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

In Section 3, Chapter 1, readers learn just how naive Gantos was during his adventure. First, Gantos called home only to learn the FBI was already bothering his parents and family. His father had contacted a lawyer in New York, and Gantos was told to immediately turn himself in, which he did. Al E. Newman, his attorney, informed him he was to meet with the district attorney the following day, so Gantos took a flight back to New York. On the way he saw a newspaper reporting Hamilton's capture and his own participation in the crimes, and Gantos found himself almost pleased that he was famous for something. In New York, he stayed in their old room at the Chelsea, and discovered nearly everything was still in the room, minus the ship's log.

During his initial interview with his lawyer, Gantos learned he was being prosecuted federally, for fifteen five year charges, all of which were conspiracy charges surrounding the smuggling of the hash, and its distribution. During the meeting with the district attorney, the DA revealed that Gantos was the final person to come forward, so everyone else had already snitched him out. The DA also informed Gantos that Rik had actually been arrested in Florida before ever arriving in New York, and had been the FBI's inside man throughout the entire job. They also had aerial photos, taken by the Coast Guard, and photos of the hash on the boat, taken when they boarded it at the marina. They also had photos of Gantos smiling as he helped deliver the hash around town. The DA offered Gantos a deal, where he could reveal his drug contacts and receive a lighter sentence, but Gantos knew no one, as he was not part of the drug ring as everyone assumed. Unfortunately, no one believed him and he was simply thought to be uncooperative. The following day, Newman reported the DA was willing to drop the charges to one count of conspiracy, and Gantos agreed, not knowing what a guilty plea might mean for sentencing. His attorney, however, believed he would be let off easy.

In Section 3, Chapter 2, Gantos admits his concern, drug habit, and bad eating, led to an acne problem while he stayed at the Chelsea that resulted in a disturbingly habitual ritual, where each night Gantos worked over the acne on his face until blood and pus would ooze from his skin. Gantos now sees his face at the time as a reflection of his inner thoughts and attitude. Gantos knew, as he stayed in the hotel awaiting trial, that there were agents constantly watching him, although he learned to lose them. In his spare time, he read prison literature and dreamed of turning his fear into words, but he still felt as though he were unable to write well enough to do so. One afternoon, Gantos visited a man they had sold to, Lucas, only to find his wife at home. She informed Gantos that Lucas was in the federal holding facility, as she refused to bail him out. Newman continued to tell Gantos he would only receive probation, but Gantos was beginning to have doubts. As he sat at the dock one day, he realized he was beaten, and this feeling worsened when news of the Attica prison riots made the news. Gantos realized no one would protect him in prison, and that he would be on his own. He buried the remaining hash in Central Park, and the following day, left his belongings with the front desk of the hotel to be picked up, or shipped to his parents after his sentencing.

Section 3: Chapter 3 and Chapter 4

Section 3: Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

In Section 3, Chapter 3, Gantos attended his hearing, only to find himself in very deep trouble. Although his lawyer tried to help, the judge was read Gantos' own admission from his journal that he felt no guilt about his actions, but only feared punishment. The judge, therefore, handed down a sentence of 5010B, which even his lawyer had to look up. In the meantime, Gantos was taken by the bailiff, as his father looked on. Gantos realizes now the look on his father's face was one of anguish and suffering, but admits that at the time, he saw only his own pain. When his lawyer returned, he explained that the sentence was a youth sentence, meaning Gantos could do anywhere from sixty days to six years, depending on his behavior and the decisions of the parole board. His father came in, and Gantos finally felt the pain he had caused his family. Gantos, however, turned his anguish to anger as his father asked him to sign over the insurance papers for his car, because it had been totaled, and the family needed the money. Gantos, shame again filling him, apologized, and signed over the money as he realized the suffering his family had gone through. Mr. Gantos admitted he should never have let Jack sail the boat, but he hoped for a brighter future. Gantos told his father the situation was his own fault, and no one else's. He then walked away, knowing he couldn't cry because those in prison were looking for weakness.

Gantos admits now that the first night was the worst. A group of prisoners was driven to the West Street Federal holding station, where they were issued uniforms and towels, and taken to an eighteen bunk cell. Gantos hurriedly chose a top bunk in the corner, so he could see anyone coming. Lucas, the man who bought hash from Rik, was given a bunk in the middle of the room. Gantos was accosted by a man who told him he would eventually be made to have anal sex, but that if he gave it up willingly, the man would protect him. Gantos refused, and the following morning, he found Lucas huddled in a ball in a bathroom stall. He had been repeatedly raped, to the point of severe bleeding and bruising. Gantos was terrified, and realized he was over his head.

In Section 3, Chapter 4, Gantos was sent from West Street to the federal prison in Ashland Kentucky. Luckily, he was found to have lice on arrival, and was immediately sequestered, and given his own hospital cell. Gantos began to fall apart in the bright yellow cell, his moods rapidly shifting from elation to misery. However, he did realize his luck in having a single cell, in that he is unbothered by the general population. During the first week, Gantos went through a range of emotions as he was left alone with his thoughts, and he finally came to accept that he alone was responsible for his current position. Without books, Gantos found himself reading the graffiti on the walls, and was struck by the irony that the visit from the prisoners in high school really told him his future.

In a few days, a hospital worker brought Gantos books left in the cafeteria, and he was thrilled to again occupy his mind. He began keeping a journal in one of the books, as the prisoners were not allowed to keep real journals. Gantos quickly learned he had plenty to write about, and his journal was a mass of thoughts and emotions. He was only accosted once by a group of men who promised him protection. In turn, he was to pull down his pants in front of them, showing he trusted them. Gantos refused politely, knowing they would rape him. A week later, he was cleared of lice, but asked Mr. Bow, the physician's assistant, if there were any openings on the prison hospital staff, as he was terrified of going to general population. He was rewarded by a new job as xray technician, and was given his own private cell in the hospital. Gantos found himself trained, and working constantly as men in prison often fought or attempted escape, to disastrous results. Gantos, for the time, was safe.

Section 3: Chapter 5 and Chapter 6

Section 3: Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

In Section 3, Chapter 5, Gantos found himself getting used to prison life, although he could never get used to the constant up and downs. As a result of the pressure, everyone wanted drugs of some sort to keep them occupied, and they were available through a variety of means. He explains several episodes of overdose and other drug related medical issues he saw in prison, and admits that he wanted to use drugs, but the fear of lengthening his prison sentence was greater than his desire to escape through drugs.

Gantos mentions the hospital unit housed other prisoners in addition to staff, such as sex offenders and witness protection participants on their way somewhere else. One day, they housed an Elvis impersonator, and Gantos was impressed at his abilities, although he missed the concert the young man gave, as he was attending to participants who were wounded in a fight. In another situation, Gantos mentions there was one female worker in the hospital. One day, her chest xrays were stolen, and found in a bathroom. Gantos admits the xray was likely as valuable to a prisoner as a playboy centerfold. In another case, Gantos helped a prisoner who swallowed balloons filled with hash. Not wanting to get caught, Gantos told the man to give himself an enema to free the balloons from his intestines. Gantos was paid by the man in hash, which he immediately traded for a pair of scissors.

Five months into his sentence, Gantos was taken to see the parole board. However, when he was unable to give them information on other drug dealers in the network, admitted he never paid taxes on his ten thousand dollar payment, and was unable to convince the board he was not more involved, they deemed him uncooperative and denied parole for two years. Immediately, Gantos began working his acne again as a release, causing himself pain and suffering, but he eventually got used to the concept of prison, and his face cleared. He found himself looking out his window, watching as the rest of the world celebrated their holidays and lived their normal lives. He was reminded of stories of his youth, and discovered that these stories gave him great pleasure and a needed release from his violent day to day life. He wrote these in his journal, learning slowly to take pleasure in his past.

In Section 3, Chapter 6, Gantos counted off the days of his sentence, as did the other prisoners. Sundays were the worst, as Gantos never had visitors, so he made arrangements to clear the hospital offices. One Sunday, Gantos realized the medical files were unlocked, and he looked in his own file. He found the board had called him uncooperative, while his psychiatrist had called him a situational sociopath. His caseworker at least had called him a minimal risk to society. He found himself angry and anxious, and the following day, he was nearly suicidal, but managed to push it aside.

One weekday afternoon, Gantos' father came to visit. He was with his brother, and the two were uncomfortably intoxicated. Gantos tried to get them to stay until the weekend, when they could actually visit during visitation time and therefore have more than ten minutes, but the two men lamented they needed to get back. After difficult "I love you's", Gantos returned to his cell, angry at his father, but after journaling about the situation, he realized his father was never a man of emotion, and that for him to admit his love for his son probably required the liquor. Gantos admits he realized then how hard it had to be for his father, and that his only reward to him would be to keep himself safe and out of trouble.

After a failed attempt to con the prison psychiatrist into believing he was free of emotional baggage, Gantos admitted he realized he was a fake, and that he needed to change his attitude. One day, he was taken to the solitary confinement cells, where a man laid injured, a broken light bulb stuffed into his anus. Gantos felt the intense despair and anguish of prison at that moment, and wrote about it in his journal, allowing his feelings to direct his words. He realized that through this writing, he was both emptying himself, and filling himself. Gantos realized that, in high school, he couldn't write because

he always ran away from his true feelings, instead choosing to get high or drunk. Instead of having the patience to sort through those emotions, he simply masked them. Gantos came to realize that the entire time he spent searching for material, he had been ignoring the obvious material of his own life, his own past and present. It was only when Gantos was unable to run away that he was finally able to see his own worth, and nurture his own writing.

Section 3: Chapter 7 and Chapter 8

Section 3: Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

In Section 3, Chapter 7, Gantos points out that every prisoner has a getting out story, much like a getting caught story. He discusses several escape attempts he witnessed while in prison, and admits that after he was given his two year delay by the parole board, escape entered his mind. When he received his minimum security custody rating, Mr. Bow offered to take him on furlough, but Gantos knew he wouldn't return. It was only by staying in that Gantos was able to eventually reach the end. Mr. Wilcox, his old caseworker, was removed and replaced by a younger man, Mr. Casey. Casey agreed to help Gantos attempt to get into college, in part as a way to prove to the parole board that he was reformed. Mr. Bow helped Gantos to fill out the requests for applications for several smaller colleges, and Mr. Casey sent them from his house to avoid a Department of Corrections stamp on them. Casey also helped Gantos fill out the applications themselves, and wrote the check personally for the application fee. Several weeks later, Gantos was accepted into college, and Casey went to the board for him, requesting an early release. To his surprise, he was given a release date of December 18th, nearly fifteen months after his sentencing. He had to maintain a job and have a ready living area upon his release, however, and Gantos knew he had neither. Desperate, he called his father, who made all the necessary arrangements.

Gantos, on his departure, was allowed to choose his clothing and he chose a clean cut look. He was given his belongings, but was unable to take his journal, as it was written in a prison library book. At first, Gantos was devastated, as this writing was some of the most important in his life, but he kept his mouth shut. He was driven to a local bus station, and left, finally free. He traveled to New York, where he stayed with an older Italian woman who was kind, and motherly. He worked selling Christmas trees through the holiday season, and was thrilled to have any position at all, outside of prison life. In January, Gantos retrieved his money from his lawyer, who held it for him throughout his incarceration, and began attending college. He worked nights at the school as a security guard, while during the day, he wrote about his time in prison. After a while, however, Gantos tired of the violent stories, and began writing about his childhood, and then fiction stories for children. Gantos now admits he realized these stories reclaimed the innocence and happiness of childhood. While he still had moments of intense anxiety, he shook them off and moved forward.

Gantos informs readers he never returned to Central Park for the hash. Once, he nearly did, in an effort to raise money, but on arriving, he could not bring himself to make that mistake again. He knew that to do such an act would show a desperation that he no longer felt. Years later, Gantos retrieved the ship's log, but he laments he has never retrieved his prison journal. He does, however, gain hope when he imagines another prisoner reading his work, and perhaps gaining his own insight from it. In the end, Gantos managed to bury his past, like the hash in Central Park, and uncover himself. He found, while in prison, that within him lay a wonderful writer with something to say. Gantos closes the book, reminding readers he is now doing what he loves, writing, but it is clear to reader's that the road he took to achieve his dreams was not easy. Gantos does, however, close the novel with a feeling of hope, and the knowledge that even the worst of mistakes can lead to the best results.

Important People

Important People

Jack Gantos

Jack Gantos is the author of the book, and the subject of this autobiography. Gantos is now a popular children's author, but this harrowing story is not for children. Gantos recounts his decisions as a young man that land him in a federal prison. Gantos is a decent young man, although his priorities are certainly questionable. Having had too much freedom in his youth due to constant moves by his family, Gantos is introduced to drinking and drugs far too early in his life. As a mere junior in high school, Gantos is working and drinking with men over twice his age. With little parental supervision, Gantos quickly begins down the wrong path. His decision to return to high school shows he does have a plan for the future, but his drinking immediately gets him thrown out of the only home he has. His move into a seedy hotel for the rest of his senior year of high school merely furthers his freedom. However, it is not until his friend, Tim Scanlon, returns to town that Gantos really begins down the wrong path. Gantos wants to be a writer, and he wants to be witty and intelligent and brilliant. His friend convinces him college is the way to go, and convinces him to give up his money, as an investment. Gantos shows he is an easy mark, as he is constantly willing to please others. However, Gantos is also an eternal optimist, and his constantly bright image of the future allows him to overcome this, and move on.

Once in St. Croix again, however, the desolation of the situation preys on Gantos. His turn to drugs only serves to show the depressing nature of the situation, and his rash decision to sail a smuggling boat shows his desperate need to escape. Even his father, who seems to know something is wrong, allows him to go, knowing he needs to leave the island, which is in such turmoil. Gantos shows, however, through his writing and his words, that at the time, he did not see smuggling as a crime, but merely a means to an end. His fear of punishment is great, but this does not indicate he is aware he is committing a crime. It is only when Gantos is caught that he realizes his mistake.

Again, however, Gantos is able to turn his misery into a positive. Gantos learns, in prison, that he has writing ability, and that his stories are rich and wonderful, even without the adventure he thought he needed to become a great writer. Gantos uses his time in prison to hone his skills, and to really prove to himself that his talents are worth pursuing. Once released, Gantos attends college, and manages a successful writing career, despite his rocky start.

Rik

Rik is a man in his late twenties that Gantos meets while in St. Croix. Rik originally requests that Gantos makes a crate for him that has a false bottom. Once completed, he fills the bottom compartment with hash, and Gantos helps him to load the crate with nonsense items in the hopes the crate will be allowed through customs. Rik pays Gantos with hash, and by the time he offers Gantos a job sailing a hash smuggling ship to New York for ten thousand dollars, Gantos is already hooked on the idea. Rik's methods are dubious, and his character is clearly one of haphazard planning. His sailor, a forty year old British man, is gritty and rough, and the entire operation is badly planned, at best. It is Rik who meets Hamilton and Gantos in New York, and sets up several selling trips, which Gantos assists on. When everyone is arrested by the FBI, however, it is revealed that Rik is actually a snitch, having been caught shipping his hash in the false bottom crate. He snitched on Hamilton and Gantos even before they left St. Croix, and as a result, the FBI have photos of them throughout their entire journey. After talking Gantos into doing the crime, it is Rik who also gives the evidence to put Gantos away for that crime. While Rik is not responsible for Gantos' decisions, he is a part of the society and atmosphere that leads Gantos to prison.

Hamilton

Hamilton is a British man, between forty and fifty years of age, who helps to sail the ships for Rik that carry drugs around the world. Hamilton is a grizzly individual, with a full bushy beard and a gruff personality. Hamilton is a professional smuggler, and has stories of many narrow escapes and successful operations he has participated in. There are times, however, that Hamilton is frightening for Gantos, as he becomes very paranoid, and sometimes delusional. He refuses to wear clothing in the middle of the journey, and therefore spends most of his time naked on the deck. Hamilton likes to blame Gantos for most of the ship's issues, even when he himself is at fault. He seems afraid of little, including being caught. When Hamilton is finally caught, he gives the FBI information they need to arrest Gantos. Hamilton is a criminal, and unlike Gantos, his entire life involves drugs and smuggling. As a contrast to Gantos, Hamilton isn't looking for college money, he is looking for the next crime, because for him, it is now a way of life. It is Hamilton who ignores Gantos' warnings that something is wrong throughout the entire trip, as Hamilton has lost his fear. Having been in the business for so long, he no longer feels vulnerable, and believes the police to be too stupid to figure out their plan.

Mr. Gantos (Jack's Dad)

Jack's father, Mr. Gantos, is a hard working individual, but with little skill in child rearing. He moves his family from town to town as he changes positions, and he seems to think more highly of work than education, as he allows his son to drop out of school as a junior and go to work. He also allows Gantos to live on his own in the hotel they are renovating, which gives him a taste of freedom few children have. This sense of freedom, in part, leads Gantos down a path that will eventually land him in prison. Mr. Gantos consistently points out criminals to his son, in an effort to steer him away from the life, but he loves his son too much to see him for who he really is. When Jack decides to accept the job sailing the ship, Mr. Gantos knows something is wrong. However, his own desires to get out of St. Croix bleed into his judgment, and he is too anxious for his son to save himself to see what is really occurring. Mr. Gantos is not a bad man, and he clearly loves his son dearly, but it is difficult for him to show this love. He hires his son a lawyer, and does come for his trial and comes to visit Gantos, but it is clear he is uncomfortable showing affection. Although Mr. Gantos did not cause Jack's problems, his actions certainly contributed to the environment that led Jack astray.

Tim Scanlon

Tim Scanlon is a friend of Gantos' from the grocery store where he worked during high school. Right before Gantos is set to head home to St. Croix, Scanlon calls him for a place to stay for a few days. Scanlon is a bad influence, in that he is a heavy marijuana user. He is very intelligent, and convinces Gantos that marijuana is actually not harmful. His intelligent conversation entices Gantos, and when Scanlon advises they sell marijuana to earn money for college, Gantos is more than happy to part with half his savings. However, Scanlon disappears with the money, leaving Gantos high and dry. Gantos later hears from Scanlon, who claims he sampled the drugs they were supposed to be selling, and was so high, he was detained by campus police, and his parents were contacted. The money and the marijuana were confiscated.

Mr. Wilcox

Mr. Wilcox is Gantos' original caseworker when he enters the federal prison system. Wilcox cares little about his position, as he is older, and has been a part of the prison system for quite some time. He does little to help Gantos, and seems to feel there is little effort in helping him. As Gantos notes, Wilcox has heard the stories of thousands of prisoners, and has lost faith in their claims of innocence or rebirth of faith. Gantos can do little with Wilcox as his caseworker, and it is only when Wilcox is replaced that Gantos is able to convince the parole board to release him.

Mr. Casey

Mr. Casey is a young, bright caseworker assigned to Gantos' case after the retirement of Mr. Wilcox. Casey is willing to work for Gantos' release, and even writes a special report in order to inform the parole board that Gantos has been accepted to college. It is, in part, because of Mr. Casey's efforts that Gantos is released.

Mr. Newman

Mr. Newman is Gantos' lawyer in the novel. From New York, Newman attempts to help Gantos, but he soon realizes Gantos was not a good criminal. Having never been in trouble before, Newman hoped to free his client with just probation, but with the evidence from the FBI, even he realizes there is no way for Gantos to escape punishment. Newman is a good man, and a good lawyer, but Gantos' own actions during his smuggling operation and after, lead Newman to have little hope in defending him, although he does at least manage to obtain for Gantos a fairly light sentence.

Mr. and Mrs. Bacon

Mr. and Mrs. Bacon are the couple that Gantos stays with when he returns to Florida to finish his high school education. Mr. and Mrs. Bacon are both disabled, and sell prosthetics from their home as a source of income. Because they are unsuccessful, they welcome Gantos' rent. However, when Gantos begins partying all the time, and throwing up all over their carpets, the Bacon's have enough, and throw Gantos out. This leads Gantos to his time at the King's Court, and perhaps plays a part in his decisions later in the novel, which land him in federal prison.

Mr. Bow

Mr. Bow is the receiving physician's assistant at the federal prison where Gantos spends his time. Mr. Bow is the person who originally sees and treats the lice that lands Gantos in the prison hospital, and this chance encounter leads Gantos to his position as XRay tech for the prison. As this position allows Gantos to stay within his own, private cell, this encounter is vital to Gantos' story, as his entire life may have been drastically different without Mr. Bow's assistance.

Objects/Places

Objects/Places

Skulls

Skulls are men in prison who thrive on pain and suffering.

Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico is where Gantos first begins drinking, as he goes to work as an electrician instead of heading to school for his second half of his junior year.

Fort Lauderdale

Fort Lauderdale is a city in Florida where Gantos finishes high school.

The King's Court

The King's Court is the hotel where Gantos finds himself living during his senior year in high school.

Hashish

Hashish is a drug much like marijuana that Gantos helps traffic from St. Croix to New York.

St. Croix

St. Croix, the largest of the Virgin islands, is where Gantos begins his journey into drug smuggling.

New York

New York is the city where Gantos arrives and helps to sell hash in order to earn money for college.

West Street Federal Holding Prison

West Street is the federal holding facility where Gantos is first taken following his sentencing.

Ashland, Kentucky

Ashland Kentucky is the location of the federal prison to which Gantos is sent to serve his time.

Graham Junior College

Graham Junior College is the school which accepts Gantos into their writing program, helping him to be paroled from prison.

Themes

Themes

Recovering From Mistakes / Learning From Adversity

One of the primary themes in the novel is the ability for a person to recover from mistakes. Jack Gantos makes a series of mistakes throughout this autobiography, but instead of being beaten by them, he uses them to his advantage. In the beginning of the novel, Gantos finds himself unable to attend high school in San Juan, as he is unable to speak Spanish. He is also unable to hire a private tutor. Instead of simply giving up and not doing anything, Gantos takes the opportunity to go to work, learning a trade. Although this doesn't pan out as successfully as he would like, Gantos still uses his time to earn money, showing he is not the type to wallow in self pity.

One back in Florida, Gantos makes some very bad decisions that result in his loss of housing. Again, however, Gantos is not one to kick himself perpetually, but instead, he uses his money and his job to find a cheap place to live, so he can finish his schooling. Gantos doesn't call home for help, or just give up, but he continues to forge ahead, despite the odds against him. Determined to be a writer, he continues to journal his thoughts. This determination continues when his meetings with Tim Scanlon go awry. His friend convinces him to earn money for college by selling drugs and takes \$200 of his carefully earned money to begin the process. He doesn't return, however, and Gantos realizes he has lost out. He is down momentarily, but even this setback doesn't discourage him for long. Soon, he is back to driving along the Florida coast, searching out writer's homes and other sources of inspiration for his work.

In St. Croix, Gantos again meets with adversity. Anxious to begin his writing career, Gantos dares to go into the radical black party headquarters to try and interview the radical leader. He is rejected, and threatened, but again, he continues to write, showing he is not easily deterred. His sense of lost purpose as he works on his father's crates is clear, and as his drug use increases, his motivation decreases. It is clear that, if continuing on this path, Gantos will likely not succeed. But when faced with an opportunity to exit the situation and earn money for college, Gantos has to go for it. Although his means are faulty, his end goal is again clear.

While on the ship, Gantos again uses his writing to overcome his situation. He is trapped on a ship with a man whose sanity is questionable, and with a feeling he is constantly being watched. He struggles with his decisions, not because they are wrong, but because he fears the outcome. To overcome this, Gantos writes in the ship's log as a journal, using his situation as fodder for his writing, and using that to overcome his situation.

Gantos' prison time is the clearest example of his attempts to overcome adversity, and recover from his mistakes. Gantos is caught by the FBI and imprisoned for drug smuggling. In effect, he is thrust into a world of violence and severe dysfunction. Gantos, however, seeks a positive outlet for himself almost immediately. He realizes he will suffer in general population, and so he seeks a position that allows him to remain segregated. His job as an xray tech allows him to do his time while relatively safe. In addition, he uses prison books as journals, allowing him to further his writing skills while serving his time. Gantos comes to realize that he can recover from the situation, and move on, provided he is well equipped to do so. His college entries and his immediate job after prison show he is anxious to move forward and that he has learned from his mistake. Gantos never apologizes in the book for his actions, but instead uses his experiences to learn, and to grow as a person.

Power of Guilt

Guilt is another powerful theme in the novel, and it is used in a variety of different perspectives. First, Gantos does feel remorse and guilt following his behavior at Mr. and Mrs. Bacon's, although he doesn't place the emotion until much later. Gantos knows he feels hollow, and knows he cannot blame the Bacon's for their reaction to his life choices. He himself accepts blame for his behavior eventually, causing him to feel downtrodden and lost for a time. The guilt weighs on him, causing a sense of despair.

In addition, once Gantos reaches the islands, it is his father's guilt that lends to the Gantos' troubles. Mr. Gantos knows he is responsible for his family, and the fact they are stranded in St. Croix. Unable to free them himself, Mr. Gantos overlooks the obvious illegal nature of the situation, and allows his son to sail from St. Croix to New York. It is his guilt that drives him to this and his guilt that leads him to accept things he knows are not on the up and up. This guilt pesters Mr. Gantos throughout the novel, during Jack's arrest and subsequent prison sentence. This is obvious by his visits to Jack in prison, and in how he deals with his son.

Gantos again understands guilt and allows it to motivate him throughout his time in prison. Gantos comes to accept his actions in smuggling, and the pain he has caused his family. He understands that he has potentially ruined his own life. However, he uses the power of his guilt to help him excel in prison, and eventually to apply for colleges and free himself. His writing improves, as he learns to use his feelings in his works. In the end, it is in part, his guilt that allows him to achieve success.

Power of Literature

Another topic in the novel is the power of literature and writing, particularly to Gantos, but to other individuals in the novel, as well. Gantos himself desires nothing other than to be a writer. While he is in Florida, he uses the authors he reads to inspire his own writing, and to understand himself better. Authors such as Frank Conroy help him to identify his feelings of hiding from himself, while authors such as Richard Yates inspire his thoughts. On occasion, however, the writers' work would simply deter Gantos, as he felt his own work was so much less inspiring. It was these moments where literature actually took Gantos off track, whereas authors like Jack Kerouac inspire him to travel on the open road to find himself.

It is when Tim Scanlon arrives, and the two begin to speak of authors such as Harner and others who wrote of hallucinogenic drugs and their scientific premises that Gantos really finds himself off the beaten path. These authors, along with peer pressure, inspire Gantos to not only take these drugs, but also to sell them. When this falls apart, he again uses authors to cheer himself, as he seeks out the homes of John Hersey and Tennessee Williams.

Once in St. Croix, Gantos attempts to use his own literary genius to appease his urges, as he tries to write a story about the race relations issues on the island. However, his fear as he is accosted by the black fighting group suppresses his literary genius. Once on the boat to New York, however, it is again his writing that sustains him, as he uses the ship's log to record his thoughts and adventures. He also uses works such as *Heart of Darkness*, *Martin Eden*, and other books to keep his mind occupied, and he finds these books encourage him and entice him to higher levels of thinking.

In prison, too, it is literature that helps Gantos. He is given a Zane Grey novel, and autobiography, and "The Brothers Karamazov," which he uses as a journal. Although he isn't allowed to take his journal when he leaves, it is through this writing that he finally learns his words are powerful even without great adventure. Through literature, including his own, Gantos finally learns that all stories are important and that in them, one can find one's self as well.

Style

Style

Perspective

The novel is written in the first-person perspective, which is vital for the themes presented in the novel. Jack Gantos, as the narrator, is the subject of the book, and therefore is the key to many of the primary themes. Gantos is a reliable author, in that he is telling his own story, and any biases he has are against himself. It is his view of the world that the reader must understand in order to fully comprehend his decisions in the novel. It is through Gantos' own words that the reader sees the picture he paints of his thought process, his behaviors, and his opinions, making the entire story reliable and believable. If told in third person, the depth of Gantos' experiences wouldn't be nearly as poignant, and his story would hold far fewer lessons. Gantos is his own worst critic, and it is with humor and hindsight that he is able to really show readers the mistakes he made that changed his life, and allowed him to see his finest gift, his ability to write. By understanding where Gantos has been, one is able to better understand his choices for stories about children and his own reasons for writing.

Tone

The tone of the novel changes, but is often hopeful even if the themes in the novel are not. Gantos uses humor extremely effectively in the novel, making it an often lighthearted account of Gantos' own follies. That being said, there are several sections of the novel that are very downcast in tone, as Gantos loses hope and faith in himself and in the world around him. There are other sections of the novel that are frightening in tone, as Gantos explains some of the horrific circumstances he encounters while in prison. These moments are frightening in both detail and tone, as Gantos seeks to be very pointed in his depictions of the horrors of prison life. Still other times, Gantos' tone is hopeful. Gantos is, without a doubt, an eternal optimist, as he has shown in his works for younger audiences. Here too, even in his darkest hours, Gantos has a tendency to remain positive even in negative situations, a trait he teaches his younger audiences about in other books. This willingness to believe in the best, even during the worst of times, permeates the novel, making it a harrowing, and yet hopeful, book about recovering from mistakes, and about learning from life and moving forward. Gantos doesn't preach, and he doesn't judge, but instead relies on his own story to prove his point and help others.

Structure

The novel is broken into three separate sections, each of which depicts a new section in Gantos' own life. The first section deals with Gantos' life leading up to his second arrival in St. Croix. The second section details Gantos' time in St. Croix, his decision to sail the hash boat, his role in the smuggling operation and his near capture in New York. The final section deals with his trial, time in prison, and his release.

To further break down the story, each section is further broken into chapters, with the numbering restarting in each section as Gantos embarks anew in each part of his life. Each chapter is numbered and titled, corresponding with what is occurring in the story at the time. These chapters help to delve deeper into Gantos' life during his three phases, and help to show how his decisions in each chapter lead from one phase to another.

The language of the novel is fairly simplistic, although there are some strong, violent, and sexual scenes in the novel that make the story unsuitable for a younger audience. Although such sections are necessary, they are highly detailed, and do make these sections difficult. However, the novel is humorous at other times, and always remains engaging, making it a

book that is enjoyable to read. The book is 200 pages in length in total.

Quotes

Quotes

"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 twenty-one 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" (Section 1, Chapter 1, p. 3).

"My entire year was a grand balancing act between doing what I wanted and doing what I should, and being who I was while inventing who I wanted to be: a writer with something important to say." (Section 1, Chapter 2, p. 9).

"I kept drinking more and more until I discovered I could drink lots of beer. Nearly a case of it in a sitting. Unfortunately, I was also in the process of discovering I had no tolerance for that much alcohol and I always became blind drunk and ferociously ill, spending almost every night loudly heaving my guts out in the toilet while begging God for mercy. I was a mess" (Section 1, Chapter 2, p. 13).

"But smoking wasn't doing any more than providing a physical activity that masked the emptiness behind it. I could blame the hollow feeling inside me on the hangover. But when the hangover passed, I know I'd still sense that barren internal landscape." (Section 1, Chapter 2, p. 19).

I couldn't seem to concentrate long enough to weigh the worth of each thought, isolate its potential, allow it to grow. Instead my mistakes, self-doubt, insecurity, and wandering mind left me high and dry. It was never too long before I lowered my pen and set down my journal" (Section 1, Chapter 3, p. 22).

"Racial tension in St. Croix had always run high. There were a lot of white haves and a lot more black have-nots" (Section 2, Chapter 1, p. 58).

"Stoned out of our minds, we navigated through the long madhouse days of the voyage as if crossing the ocean in a floating sanitarium" (Section 2, Chapter 2, p. 80).

"Everyone in prison has a story about how they were caught. Sitting on the edge of a man's bunk while telling and listening to stories about how people got busted is about the same as being in the Boy Scouts and sitting around a campfire telling ghost stories" (Section 2, Chapter 4, p. 99).

"And just like that I was walking toward the dock, knowing for certain now that someone was watching us. Someone knew. And it had to be the police" (Section 2, Chapter 4, p. 108).

"I just couldn't believe how ugly I was becoming. At first I was horrified. It was as if I had contracted a disfiguring disease that was slowly but surely reshaping my face. Huge lumps heaved up under the skin. Blemishes surfaced. Brown marks appeared as if I were rotting fruit" (Section 3, Chapter 2, pg. 132).

"I sat there and cried. I felt sad, and I hated myself for it. I felt beaten, and I hated myself for that. I didn't have one friend. I couldn't write one word. I was just waiting for the one day to arrive when my entire life would pivot. And I was sure things were not going to pivot my way" (Section 3, Chapter 2, p. 137).

"And the truth is always in the motivation. You did it for the money. That much is true. Now the law must respond" (Section 3, Chapter 3, p. 144).

"His legs had been mauled as if a pit bull had caught him from behind. He had been raped, and when he finished telling me what had happened - how many guys got him after dark, how the first man held his throat and mouth, more got his legs and arms and then they flipped him over on his belly and started, and only stopped once everyone finished their turn" (Section 3, Chapter 3, p. 153).

"At first I pointed the finger at everyone else-my family, my friends, the gang of backstabbers that I worked with in the smuggling ring. I burned them all on a bonfire of blame. But that didn't give me any relief. Had someone else been responsible for what I had done, I suppose my blaming them would have satisfied me. But it didn't" (Section 3, Chapter 4, p. 156).

"When life was funny in prison, it was hysterically funny. And when it was scary it was menacing. The trick was to observe everything and every person without becoming the object of anyone's negative attention. The effort to become invisible, or to appear nonthreatening yet dangerous, was exhausting, which is why in prison almost everyone wanted drugs." (Section 3, Chapter 5, p. 164).

"And as I sat in my yellow cell with my journal on my lap, I understood I had come all the way to prison to realize that what I had in 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." (Section 3, Chapter 6, p. 186).

Topics for Discussion

Topics for Discussion

Gantos noted while on the boat that he didn't feel what he was doing was wrong, although he did fear punishment. His end goal was to earn money for college. Do you think Gantos' end justified his means? Why or why not? Do you think those who help to smuggle drugs are as responsible for the drug problem as those who sell it, and those who grow it? Why or why not? Do you think people like Gantos should be given a lighter sentence? Why or why not?

When Gantos landed himself in federal prison, he had a fairly severe drug addiction. Do you think prison helped Gantos? Do you think he would have ended up with writing as a career had he not been to prison? Do you think he would have succeeded in college, had he not been caught? Why or why not? What did prison give to Gantos and how?

Throughout the novel, Gantos reads a variety of books. How do you think books influence Gantos in the novel? How does he describe what they do for him? Do you think books influence his decision to help sell drugs? Why or why not? How do they help him while on the boat or in prison? What do books mean to him?

In the novel, Gantos and the rest of his high school hear a presentation from prisoners who warn against committing acts of crime. Gantos gets little from their presentation. Compare and contrast their presentation to Gantos' own story. Which would be more effective for you, and why? What does Gantos' story have that the presentation at the school lacked? How does this affect the overall ability of the story to help deter readers from criminal acts?

Gantos' parents gave him little supervision during his high school years, and even sent him back to the states without them to finish school. Do you think his parents' actions influenced Gantos' own decisions in life at that time? Why or why not? How do you think the story may have changed if his parents had been more involved in his life at that time? Do you think their influence would have made a difference in Gantos' actions?

By the end of the novel, Gantos admits he first tried to blame everyone else for his problem, but in the end, found that he only found resolution when he accepted the blame for himself. Why do you think Gantos first had to take blame in order to begin moving on? What does he mean when he says "No fire rages like guilt" (pg. 156)? Do you agree or disagree and why?

There are two rather serious sexual abuse scenes in the novel, both of which occur in prison. These are graphically depicted by Gantos. Why do you think Gantos included such graphic depictions? Would the message have been the same without these scenes? Did they help the novel, or hurt it? Why? Would you have included these passages, or would you have skipped them to make the novel more appropriate for a younger audience?

Gantos loses his prison journal in the novel, and it deeply affects him. Why does this loss affect him so drastically? What did his writing in prison mean to him? What are his hopes concerning his journal, now that he knows he is not in possession of it?