



Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech

The Newbery Win and the Mausoleum Library

Jack Gantos



Photo: Anne Lower

Jack Gantos is the winner of the 2012 Newbery Medal for *Dead End in Norvelt*, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, an imprint of the Macmillan Children's Publishing Group. His acceptance speech was delivered at the American Library Association Annual Conference in Anaheim, California, on June 24, 2012.

Good evening. Good evening. Good evening. Everyone, please pour yourself a drink and settle in as I haven't yet timed this speech.

I like a formal occasion that calls for good posture and traditional modes of expressing gratitude. I find that sprucing up and saying "thank you" brings out the best in people, and I'm no different. I've given a lot of thought to my recent good fortune and have practiced saying "thank you" in the mirror about a hundred times so that when I say "thank you" it does not sound ironic, smarmy, or even mandatory.

Honestly, I haven't been more earnest since I surprisingly won the first-place medal for religious studies in second grade. Even then, as I accepted the medal, I told myself not to laugh first at my own jokes.

I'm a very conventional person, and so I wish to first thank my lovely and ever-supportive wife, Anne, who sometimes thinks a spirit from above sent me to exasperate her patience each and every hour of her life. And I thank our daughter, Mabel, who is far more clever than her father and who has a generous heart when it comes to not being harsh toward his speeches—especially since she has a leading role in this one.

Next I wish to thank Wesley Adams, my longstanding editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux, who for twenty years has worked with me, fenced and sparred with me, and sustained me throughout all nineteen of our publications, from picturebooks to collections of short stories to novels and even a truly nonfiction memoir in which the main character is most certainly the fully realized *Jack Gantos*. (More on *that Gantos* to follow.)

I'd also like to say "thank you" to Amy Berkower, my ever-insightful, hard-working, and always charming agent, who is president of Writers House in New York.

And finally, with great joy in my heart, I want to express my gratitude to Viki Ash, chair of the Newbery committee, and to all of the diligent committee members who met in a very secretive scrum and came away with the sweet conclusion

that *Dead End in Norvelt* would be the recipient of the 2012 John Newbery Medal "for the Most Distinguished Contribution to American Literature for Children." What could be more blessedly formal than the honorific phrasing stamped upon that gleaming, golden medal? I will have to purchase a monstrance at the All Things Religious shop to properly display it on my writing desk.

I thank all of you on the committee and all of my readers for the pillar on which I stand this evening—and now on with the speech.

Given the ceremonial tone of this occasion, I really feel as if I should be wearing a tuxedo, but instead I will just structure this talk in the tuxedo of literary genres: *the obituary*. After all, the tuxedo has long been the fancy pajama choice for the eternal thereafter. The formality of an obituary dictates that it begin with the announcement of a death, then continue with a short bio, a list of survivors, and a notice of final viewing, and end with where cash donations or royalties can be dropped off.

The "obit" is a very tidy literary form and one that *Dead End's* Miss Volker generously stretched to also include some meteoric moment in history that intersected with the life of the deceased in order to point out how, in life, we might feel like but a speck of dust on the planet but in truth we are all tied together in one massive hand-holding of humanity—for better or for worse.

That said, I cannot assume that everyone has read my recent *Horn Book* article "Mausoleum Madness," in which I detail my final resting place, and so I will paraphrase myself here. Upon noticing one day that Walt Whitman had a mausoleum, I wanted one, too. So I have designed mine thusly: on a small hillock of grass will be standing a tombstone in the shape of an eight-foot granite book mounted on an ebony threshold.

On the book is a keyhole. My daughter Mabel will have the large cast-iron key. When she misses me she will insert the key into the lock and pull it open, revealing a passage of stairs leading into a heated granite library. One wall of

the library will be lined with shelves of my collected works. When she touches a volume, a light from the ceiling will project a hologram of me onto a small stage, and I will read that selected volume aloud. For her listening comfort there will be a lovely Le Corbusier lounge chair and a small beverage refrigerator.

In addition to the above, there will now be a wall button in the shape of the golden Newbery Medal that she can push and that will deliver this portion of the Newbery speech, which begins with my voice saying:

Dear Mabel, when I was a child I realized that a book was an object you held in your hands, and when you read it, all the theater of the text took place on the stage within the mind. This caused me to go stand in front of a mirror, where I saw only the outline of my small boy body. But when I closed my eyes I saw the inside of myself—my mind, and the emotions and passions and hopes and dreams and the ever-growing, ever-changing, ever-invented fictional self in there. The playful

spell and unspell the stories of their lives. It didn't take me long to realize the town itself was a vital, living book—just an *unwritten* book. And like the fiction spooling 'round and 'round within the boy, the town too had an interior engine of fiction sitting upon its foundation of history.

And I liked exploring history, but since we don't have forever to read Hendrik van Loon's *The Story of Mankind*, the five-hundred-plus-page winner of the first Newbery Medal in 1922, let's just pick one auspicious date on the calendar—say, January 23rd—and see where that leads us.

On that day in 1737, John Hancock was born, and later he planted an English Elm tree on the Boston Common in order to help block the view of a ramshackle prison from his window. It seems the Puritans were becoming less pure. That tree stood for well over a hundred years, and a man named Joseph Henry Curtis wrote a first-person autobiography from the tree's point of view, which had seen so many seasons come and go beneath its leaves. What the tree did not see was that years later, in

we were better for it. When she cauterized my nose with that veterinary tool I felt the *burning conviction* of that *infliction*.

On January 23, 1897, Elva Zona Heaster was found dead. In court, her mother testified that the ghost of Zona returned and revealed to her that the husband had strangled Zona to death. The husband became the first and only man convicted by the testimony of a ghost and was sent to prison for life. Somehow I knew this fact, and after my mother had found all my Christmas gifts unwrapped in the back of her closet, I told her a ghost revealed to me that I had an evil twin who had been living in the attic and that he had done it. Moments later I found out my *mother* had an evil twin because she was the one who cracked me across the butt with a bedroom slipper.

On January 23, 1912, the International Opium Convention was signed at The Hague. It was the first drug control treaty to outlaw various preparations such as hashish and all other cannabis resins not used for medical purposes.

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mutations of the self were as endless as a vast library of books and mirrors. In short, whatever I read I could then close my eyes and become. And when I was called to dinner I would then open my eyes and take my seat and eat like the young boy I was.

The town of Norvelt, where I was born, is similar in construction. It may be a town and not a boy, and it may have streets for boundaries rather than skin, but within the town are people shifting around like movable type and constantly gathering to

1974, it was there, on the site where it had been planted, that I did a little Snoopy “happy dance” when I found out I had sold my first book for children, *Rotten Ralph*.

I just love the neatly tied knots of history.

On January 23, 1849, Elizabeth Blackwell became the first female medical doctor in the United States. Miss Volker wasn't a doctor, but she didn't need a degree to practice medicine—she *inflicted* medicine on her patients in Norvelt, and

Somehow I hadn't read that fact, and in 1970, I made the mistake of smuggling two thousand pounds of hashish on a British yacht from St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands into New York City. After about a year and a half in prison, I got out and wrote the *Rotten Ralph* book that made me dance where John Hancock planted his tree. About thirty years later, I wrote *Hole in My Life* about my time in prison.

I've always felt so impure for breaking the law and then going on to write books for

innocent young readers. But recently my spirits were lifted when I learned that, prior to winning the Newbery for *Smoky the Cowhorse* in 1927, Will James had been sentenced to fifteen months in a Nevada

afternoon when she was sleeping I took one of my cockroach friends, Zippy, and dropped him into her open mouth. She was bigger than me, and to punish me, she made me remove my clothes and

“Within the town [of Norvelt] are people shifting around like movable type and constantly gathering to spell and unspell the stories of their lives. It didn’t take me long to realize the town itself was a vital, living book—just an unwritten book.”

state prison for cattle rustling. He was released a month early, as he convinced the parole board that he wanted to write books for children. Shocking! Just amazing how history repeats itself.

Then in 1928 the Newbery “runner-up” was Ella Young, who earlier had been convicted of smuggling guns to Republicans during the Irish Easter Uprising. Once released, she crossed the ocean to the United States. At Ellis Island, she was detained. It looked like her past had caught up with her, but when she told her examiners that she “believed in fairies,” she was instantly welcomed into the country, where she wrote *The Wonder Smith and His Son*. There are other stories of the slippery lives of Newbery winners, but this is *my* obituary and the only dirt I’m supposed to dig up is my own. So let’s push on.

On January 23, 1930, Clyde Tombaugh discovers and photographs the planet Pluto. He feels jubilant. In 2006, Pluto is downgraded from a planet to a “dwarf” chunk of ice. He feels deflated. I’ve had book reviews that were equally as dispiriting.

On January 23, 1941, Charles Lindbergh testified to Congress that the U.S. should sign a neutrality pact with Germany, which had already blitzkrieged Poland. The patron saint of Norvelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, was against such a treaty. Wisely, Congress was against it, too.

But I wasn’t so wise when years later I signed a truce with my older sister. It was called the “No More Bickering” treaty. This went well for a time until her constant kindness got under my skin, and one

run naked around the perimeter of the house. I went sprinting out the back door without a stitch on (contrary to popular belief, this was not very freeing). I ran screaming blindly as I circled the house, utterly terrified of being seen by our psychopathic neighbors, who might have thought we were throwing a wild party. When I reached the back door, my sister had locked it, as well as all the other doors and windows. I then ran to the neighbor’s yard to pull laundry off the line—ladies’ things—and was caught by the lady, who called me a “pervert” as I hopped away, hands cupping my crotch like a shaved rabbit, back to my yard, where I hid in the bushes.

In the evening, when I was missed for supper, my father went outside to hunt for me and found me hiding under a “shrubbery.” He took one look at me and summed up the situation. “Never trust your sister,” he said. “She’s smarter than you and unscrupulous.”

“What’s *unscrupulous* mean?” I asked.

“Like I said,” he replied dryly. “She’s smarter than you.”

On January 23, 1957, Walter Frederick Morrison sold the rights to his flying-disc thingy to the WHAM-O toy company. (They later call it the “Frisbee” and make a zillion flying discs that taunt the ex-planet Pluto.) As for me, I invented “The Genius Test.” It didn’t work on me, so I scrapped it. But later I helped reinvent the “Roman Catapult” with Scary Gary Pagoda—the tattooed ex-criminal son of the next-door lady neighbor who had had the nerve to call *me* a pervert.

For the catapult, we used a springy Australian Pine tree. We sawed off the branches but left climbing stubs on the trunk. Then I took a rope and tied it to the top of the tree. Scary Gary got into his tow truck with the other end of the rope and put it in his winch and winched the tree down into a tense, unstable arc. I hung onto the tip of the tree like an upside-down koala bear and watched as he removed a machete and cut the rope with a mighty hack. The tree sprang forward, but instead of shooting across the yard, I let go too soon and was launched straight into the air. A few seconds later, I landed awkwardly on his father’s parked Mercury. The roof did not dent, but I dislocated my shoulder. When I staggered back home, my mother popped my shoulder bone in place, then walked off muttering, “He’s no genius, that boy.”

I could continue, as the latitude and longitude of history has a way of discovering the most mundane of days. But I’d better move on.

As for a bit of contemporary history, early in the morning of January 23, 2012, I was in the kitchen feeding our cat, Scootch, some treats and glancing suspiciously at my cell phone. I was trying not to think what I was thinking, but the week before, *Dead End in Norvelt* had received the Scott O’Dell Award for historical fiction, and so the Newbery was toying with me like the fruit that Tantalus could never reach or the water he could never drink.

To distract myself, I read the “This Day in History” column in the *Boston Globe*. It was the birthday of Captain Chesley Sullenberger, the pilot who successfully landed US Airways Flight 1549 on the Hudson River. The nation’s spirits were floated by his skillful accomplishment. Would my spirits float or sink, I wondered.

And then my phone rang. I stared at it and thought, “If this is my mother calling to tell me again where she hid her life insurance policy, I’m going to put that policy to work.”

I picked up the phone and it was not my mother but it was Viki Ash and a chorus of excited voices in the background, and she

told me—I think but I wasn't sure because of the raucous background noise—that *Dead End in Norvelt* had been chosen as the John Newbery Award book for 2012.

After a moment, Viki asked, “Do you have anything to say?”

I had been oddly silent. I wanted to ask if I had won the gold or silver because I wasn't quite sure I had heard her correctly, and as I hesitated I thought that it would be rude to ask for clarification. So I just said, “Why, thank you. I'm very thrilled that I wrote a book about history that made history.” There were more cheers. More giddy conversation. Then I was sworn to secrecy not to tell anyone except my editor, and then I was told about the live webcast in two hours. And in a flash the call was over.

My wife read my confusion and asked, “Well?”

“I'm not sure if I won the gold or silver,” I replied.

“Of course you won the gold,” she said. “I'm sure they are very specific when they call.”

“But maybe they *did* tell me it was the silver and I just didn't hear it—I heard only what I wanted to hear. When I won the silver for *Joey Pigza*, people were cheering. Maybe I should call Viki back.”

“No!” my wife insisted. “You have a history of doing stupid things. Don't embarrass yourself. Call Wes. He'll straighten you out.”

I called. Wes was in the shower, but luckily he was using his cell phone for a bar of soap.

“I think I won the Newbery,” I said.

“No way!” he shouted.

That was not the response I was looking for. “Well, to tell you the truth, I only *think* I did,” I said. “I'm not totally sure.”

“Of course he won,” my wife cut in.

It went on this way. Him in the shower. Me in a quandary. My wife absolutely certain.

She and I both went back to bed and turned on our laptops. The cats joined us. And in about two hours, we watched the live feed and there it was: *Dead End in Norvelt* had won. It was the very last book announced. “It just squeaked in,” I said to my wife.

“No. They saved the best for last, you moron.”

I was grinning like one. “You were right,” I said to her.

“No kidding,” she replied. “For the entire history of our marriage, I've been right on every single issue.”

“I should remember that so I'm not stupid again.”

“Write it down,” she suggested.

And then the phone rang, and rang all day. That night I was lying in bed thinking, This day in history Jack Gantos received the Newbery Medal for *Dead End in Norvelt*. I haven't stopped thinking about it. Or talking about it—right, Mabel?

And now we cut back to Mabel in the mausoleum library. She presses the golden button. My voice stops. The speech ends. I've vanished, and she stands and exits into the fresh air. She gets into her car, and amazingly the same cast-iron key fits her ignition switch and she zooms off.

But wait a minute! I've broken my own rules and once again created a fiction of myself. I'm still alive and talking. For a real obituary, you need a corpse and not just a *corpus* of work. As Mark Twain said after reading his obituary in the *New York Journal*, “The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.”

And this is how history works: it's one infinite ball of bailing wire connecting each bit of information—big or small, eventful or human—to each other. Just as I always thought it was when as a boy I closed my eyes and saw it all.

I thank each of you for this wonderful occasion, and this lifelong award. Good night, and go “Read in Peace.” ☺



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