



Dead End in Norvelt (Norvelt Series Book 1)

By Jack Gantos

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Dead End in Norvelt is the winner of the 2012 Newbery Medal for the year's best contribution to children's literature and the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction!

Melding the entirely true and the wildly fictional, *Dead End in Norvelt* is a novel about an incredible two months for a kid named Jack Gantos, whose plans for vacation excitement are shot down when he is "grounded for life" by his feuding parents, and whose nose spews bad blood at every little shock he gets. But plenty of excitement (and shocks) are coming Jack's way once his mom loans him out to help a fiesty old neighbor with a most unusual chore—typewriting obituaries filled with stories about the people who founded his utopian town. As one obituary leads to another, Jack is launced on a strange adventure involving molten wax, Eleanor Roosevelt, twisted promises, a homemade airplane, Girl Scout cookies, a man on a trike, a dancing plague, voices from the past, Hells Angels . . . and possibly murder. Endlessly surprising, this sly, sharp-edged narrative is the author at his very best, making readers laugh out loud at the most unexpected things in a dead-funny depiction of growing up in a slightly off-kilter place where the past is present, the present is confusing, and the future is completely up in the air.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This is a brilliant book, full of history, mystery, and laughs. It reminded me of my small-town childhood, although my small town was never as delightfully weird as Norvelt" -- Dave Barry "A bit of autobiography works its way into all of Gantos's work, but he one-ups himself in this wildly entertaining meld of truth and fiction by naming the main character ... Jackie Gantos" Publishers Weekly "Gantos, as always, delivers bushels of food for thought and plenty of outright guffaws" Booklist "A fast-paced and witty read" School Library Journal

About the Author

Jack Gantos was born in Norvelt, Pennsylvania, and has spent time living in Barbados and South Florida. He has written books for readers of all ages, including the acclaimed *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* and its sequels, the teenage novel *Desire Lines*, and the youthful memoir *Hole in My Life*. His is also the writer of *Dead End in Norvelt* and *From Norvelt to Nowhere*, a pair of semi-autobiographical novels about the importance of history and reading, the first of which won the prestigious Newbery Medal in 2012. He lives with his wife and daughter in Boston, Massachusetts.

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1

School was finally out and I was standing on a picnic table in our backyard getting ready for a great summer vacation when my mother walked up to me and ruined it. I was holding a pair of camouflage Japanese WWII binoculars to my eyes and focusing across her newly planted vegetable garden, and her cornfield, and over ancient Miss Volker's roof, and then up the Norvelt road, and past the brick bell tower on my school, and beyond the Community Center, and the tall silver whistle on top of the volunteer fire department to the most distant dark blue hill, which is where the screen for the Viking drive-in movie theater had recently been erected.

Down by my feet I had laid out all the Japanese army souvenirs Dad had shipped home from the war. He had been in the navy, and after a Pacific island invasion in the Solomons he and some other sailor buddies had blindly crawled around at night and found a bunker of dead Japanese soldiers half buried in the sand. They stripped everything military off of them and dragged the loot back to their camp. Dad had an officer's sword with what he said was real dried blood along the razor-sharp edge of the long blade. He had a Japanese flag, a sniper's rifle with a full ammo clip, a dented canteen, a pair of dirty white gloves with a scorched hole shot right through the bloody palm of the left hand, and a color-tinted photo of an elegant Japanese woman in a kimono. Of course he also had the powerful binoculars I was using.

I knew Mom had come to ruin my fun, so I thought I would distract her and maybe she'd forget what was on her mind.

"Hey, Mom," I said matter-of-factly with the binoculars still pressed against my face, "how come blood on a sword dries red, and blood on cloth dries brown? How come?"

"Honey," Mom replied, sticking with what was on her mind, "does your dad know you have all this dangerous war stuff out?"

"He always lets me play with it as long as I'm careful," I said, which wasn't true. In fact, he never let me play with it, because as he put it, "This swag will be worth a bundle of money someday, so keep your grubby hands off it."

“Well, don’t hurt yourself,” Mom warned. “And if there is blood on some of that stuff, don’t touch it. You might *catch* something, like Japanese polio.”

“Don’t you mean Japanese *beetles*?” I asked. She had an invasion of those in her garden that were winning the plant war.

She didn’t answer my question. Instead, she switched back to why she came to speak to me in the first place. “I just got a call from Miss Volker. She needs a few minutes of your time in the morning, so I told her I’d send you down.”

I gazed at my mom through the binoculars but she was too close to bring into focus. Her face was just a hazy pink cupcake with strawberry icing.

“And,” she continued, “Miss Volker said she would give you a little *something* for your help, but I don’t want you to take any money. You can take a slice of pie but no money. We never help neighbors for cash.”

“Pie? That’s all I get?” I asked. “Pie? But what if it makes her feel good to give me money?”

“It won’t make *me* feel good if she gives you money,” she stressed. “And it shouldn’t make you feel good either. Helping others is a far greater reward than doing it for money.”

“Okay,” I said, giving in to her before she pushed me in. “What time?”

Mom looked away from me for a moment and stared over at War Chief, my uncle Will’s Indian pony, who was grinding his chunky yellow teeth. He was working up a sweat from scratching his itchy side back and forth against the rough bark on a prickly oak. About a month ago my uncle visited us when he got a pass from the army. He used to work for the county road department and for kicks he had painted big orange and white circles with reflective paint all over War Chief’s hair. He said it made War Chief look like he was getting ready to battle General Custer. But War Chief was only battling the paint which wouldn’t wash off, and it had been driving him crazy. Mom said the army had turned her younger brother Will from being a “nice kid” to being a “confused jerk.”

Earlier, the pony had been rubbing himself against the barbed wire around the turkey coop, but the long-necked turkeys got all riled up and pecked his legs. It had been so long since a farrier had trimmed War Chief’s hooves that he hobbled painfully around the yard like a crippled ballerina. It was sad. If my uncle gave me the pony I’d take really good care of him, but he wouldn’t give him up.

“Miss Volker will need you there at six in the morning,” Mom said casually, “but she said you were welcome to come earlier if you wanted.”

“Six!” I cried. “I don’t even have to get up that early for school, and now that I’m on my summer vacation I want to sleep in. Why does she need me so early?”

“She said she has an important project with a deadline and she’ll need you as early as she can get you.”

I lifted my binoculars back toward the movie. The Japanese were snaking through the low palmettos toward the last few marines on Wake Island. One of the young marines was holding a prayer book and looking toward heaven, which was a sure Hollywood sign he was about to die with a slug to a vital organ. Then the scene cut to a young Japanese soldier aiming his sniper rifle, which looked just like mine. Then the film cut back to the young marine, and just as he crossed himself with the “Father, Son, and Holy—” *BANG!* He clutched his heart and slumped over.

“Yikes!” I called out. “They plugged him!”

“Is that a war movie?” Mom asked sharply, pointing toward the screen and squinting as if she were looking directly into the flickering projector.

“Not entirely,” I replied. “It’s more of a *love* war movie.” I lied. It was *totally* a war movie except for when the soon-to-be-dead marines talked about their girlfriends, but I threw in the word *love* because I thought she wouldn’t say what she said next.

“You know I don’t like you watching war movies,” she scolded me with her hands on her hips. “All that violence is bad for you—plus it gets you *worked up*.”

“I *know*, Mom,” I replied with as much huffiness in my voice as I thought I could get away with. “I *know*

“Do I need to remind you of your *little* problem?” she asked.

How could I forget? I was a *nosebleeder*. The moment something startled me or whenever I got overexcited

or spooked about any little thing blood would spray out of my nose holes like dragon flames.

“I know,” I said to her, and instinctively swiped a finger under my nose to check for blood. “You remind me of my *little* problem all day long.”

“You know the doctor thinks it’s the sign of a *bigger* problem,” she said seriously. “If you have iron-poor blood you may not be getting enough oxygen to your brain.”

“Can you just leave, please?”

“Don’t be disrespectful,” she said, reminding me of my manners, but I was already obsessing about my bleeding-nose problem. When Dad’s old Chevy truck backfired I showered blood across the sidewalk. When I fell off the pony and landed on my butt my nose spewed blood down over my chest. At night, if I had a disturbing dream then my nose leaked through the pillow. I swear, with the blood I was losing I needed a transfusion about every other day. Something had to be wrong with me, but one really good advantage about being dirt-poor is that you can’t afford to go to the doctor and get bad news.

“Jack!” my mom called, and reached forward to poke my kneecap. “Jack! Are you listening? Come into the house soon. You’ll have to get to bed early now that you have morning plans.”

“Okay,” I said, and felt my fun evening leap off a cliff as she walked back toward the kitchen door. I knew she was still soaking the dishes in the sink so I had a little more time. Once she was out of sight I turned back to what I had been planning all along. I lifted the binoculars and focused in on the movie screen. The Japanese hadn’t quite finished off all the marines and I figured I’d be a marine too and help defend them. I knew we wouldn’t be fighting the Japanese anymore because they were now our friends, but it was good to use movie enemies for target practice because Dad said I had to get ready to fight off the Russian Commies who had already sneaked into the country and were planning to launch a surprise attack. I put down the binoculars and removed the ammo clip on the sniper rifle then aimed it toward the screen where I could just make out the small images. There was no scope on the rifle so I had to use the regular sight—the kind where you lined up a little metal ball on the far end of the barrel with the V-notch above the trigger where you pressed your cheek and eye to the cool wooden stock. The rifle weighed a ton. I hoisted it up and tried to aim at the movie screen, but the barrel shook back and forth so wildly I couldn’t get the ball to line up inside the V. I lowered the rifle and took a deep breath. I knew I didn’t have all night to play because of Mom, so I gave it another try as the Japanese made their final “Banzai!” assault.

I lifted the rifle again and swung the tip of the barrel straight up into the air. I figured I could gradually lower the barrel at the screen, aim, and pick off one of the Japanese troops. With all my strength I slo...

Users Review

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Ruth Jones:

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