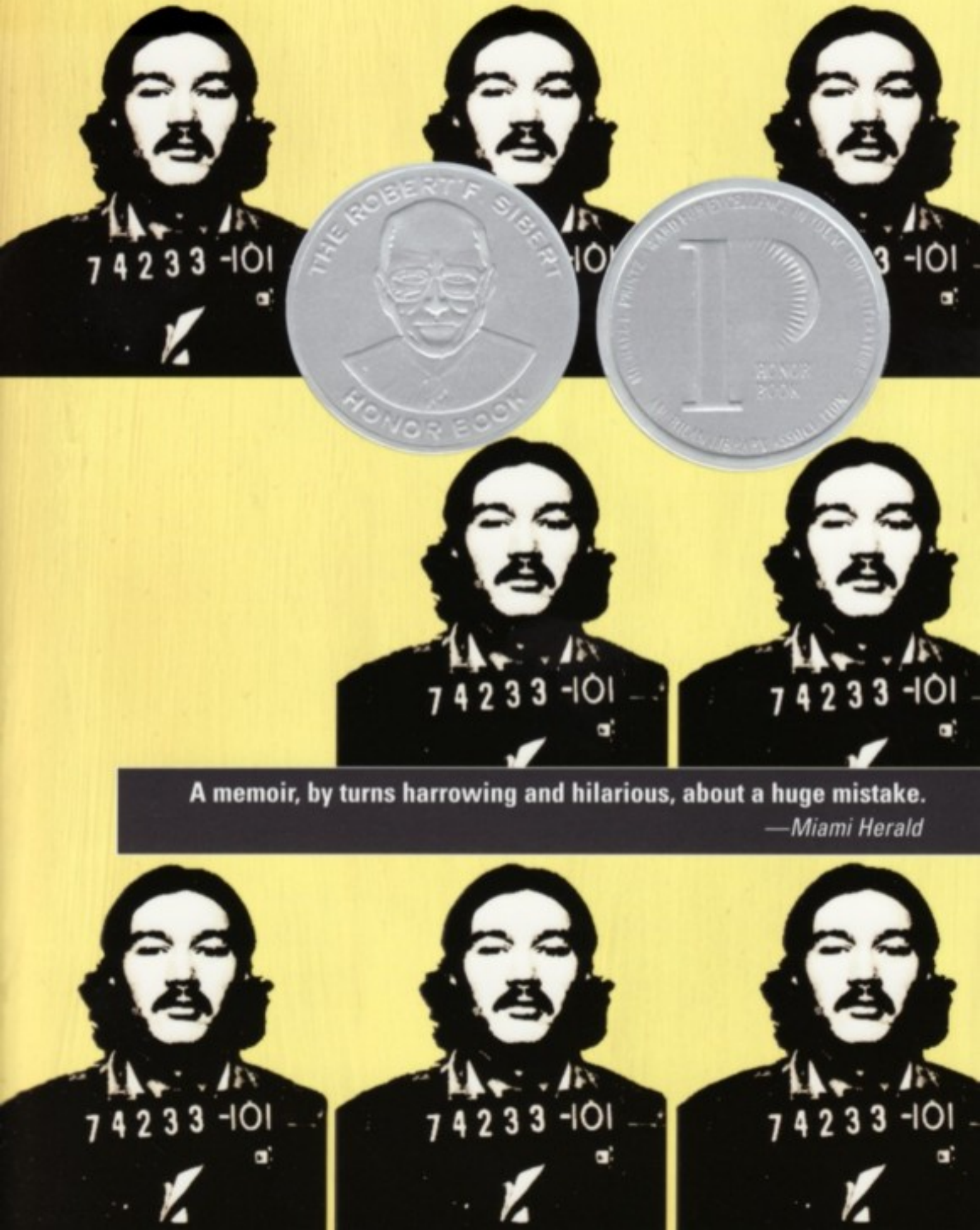
Jack Gantos

hole in my life



A memoir, by turns harrowing and hilarious, about a huge mistake.

—Miami Herald

1 / look straight ahead

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.

At the time this picture was taken I weighed 125 pounds. When I look at my face in the photo I see nothing but the pocked mask I was hiding behind. I parted my hair down the middle and grew a mustache in order to look older and tougher, and with the greasy prison diet (salted chicken gizzards in a larded gravy, chicken wings with oily cheese sauce, deep-fried chicken necks), and the stress, and the troubled dreams of capture and release, there was no controlling the acne. I was overmatched.

I might have been slight—but I was smart and cagey. I managed to avoid a lot of trouble because I knew how to blend in and generally sift through the days unnoticed by men who

spent the majority of their time looking to inflict pain on others. I called these men "skulls" and they were freaks for violence. Here we were, all of us living in constant, pissy misery, and instead of trying to feel more human, more free and unchained in their hearts by simply respecting one another and getting along, many of the men found cruel and menacing ways to make each day a walk through a tunnel of fear for others.

Fear of being a target of irrational violence haunted me day and night. The constant tempo of that violence pulsed throughout my body and made me feel small, and weak, and cowardly. But no matter how big you were, there was no preventing the brutality. I had seen the results of violence so often—with guys hauling off and smashing someone's face with their fists or with a metal tool, a baseball bat, a rock—and all for no other reason than some imagined offense or to establish a reputation for savagery. When I lived and worked in the prison hospital—especially after I had become the X-ray technician—I was part of an emergency medical response team. I was called on day and night to X-ray all types of ugly wounds to see if the bones behind the bruised or bleeding flesh had been cracked, chipped, or broken. As we examined them, the patients would be telling the guards, "I didn't even know the guy" or (my greatest fear) "I never heard 'em, never saw 'em."

It was this lottery of violence that haunted me. Your number could come up anywhere, anytime—in the dark of night

while you slept in a dormitory with a hundred other men, or in full daylight on the exercise field while you strolled in the sun. Once, in the cafeteria line, standing directly next to a guard, I watched a skinny black kid stab some other "blood" with a dinner fork. He drove it into the guy's collarbone so deep the doctor had to remove it with a pair of surgical pliers. AIDS wasn't a factor then. The blood that sprayed over the food trays was wiped off by the line workers and they kept spooning up our chow.

I wasn't raised around this level of violence. I wasn't prepared for it, and I've never forgotten it. Even now, when walking some of Boston's meaner streets, I find myself moving like a knife, carving my way around people, cutting myself out of their picture and leaving nothing of myself behind but a hole.

Like most kids, I was aware that the world was filled with dangerous people, yet I wasn't certain I could always spot them coming. My dad, however, was a deadeye when it came to spotting the outlaw class. He had never been in prison, but he always seemed to know who had spent time in the "big house" or who was headed down that path.

In his own way he tried to warn me about going in their direction. When I was young, he would drive the family from Florida back to our hometown in western Pennsylvania to visit relatives. Once there, he'd troll the streets with me in our big Buick and point to guys he knew and tell me something

In the summer of 1971, Jack Gantos was an aspiring young writer looking for adventure, cash for college tuition, and a way out of a dead-end job. For ten thousand dollars, he agreed to help crew a boat loaded with drugs from the Virgin Islands to New York City, setting sail on an ill-fated expedition that eventually landed him in federal prison.

Jack Gantos is not just a writer—something he dreamed about from childhood. He's a National Book Award finalist, a Newbery Honor medalist and a university writing instructor. In this tough, sad, funny memoir, he tells how he got there.

—*Washington Post Book World*

Brilliant and breathtaking in its candor and authenticity. —*Booklist*

His account is remarkably free of both self-pity and self-censorship . . . This is a tale of courage and redemption, proving that a bad start in life does not have to lead to a bad life story.

—*The New York Times Book Review*

A Michael L. Printz Honor Book / A Robert F. Sibert Honor Book / A *Booklist* Editors' Choice

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