



A JACK HENRY ADVENTURE

HEADS OR TAILS

STORIES FROM THE SIXTH GRADE



By Jack Gantos

I CREPT UP ON my diary. Carefully, I undid the lock with the small key I kept on a string around my neck, then slowly opened it.

“Ughhhh,” I moaned. The pages were filled with squished spiders. I slammed it shut like a tiny coffin.

It wasn’t the spiders that scared me. I had pressed them into the book. It was all those blank pages. For *three years* I had been trying to fill them, but I could never think of anything interesting to write. It was as though my brain stopped working if I even thought of my diary.

This didn’t make sense. Usually, I was pretty good at imagining things. When I looked at the picture of the sailboat on my wall, in my mind I could see Dad racing the Flying Dutchman yacht of his dreams. When I read a good book, like *The Feathered Serpent*, the words filled my brain with people, smells, and sounds. But when I opened my diary, my mind went as blank as the paper. I felt like a moron.

It started the afternoon Mom came home from work and gave my older sister, Betsy, a diary. The year was stamped in gold on the flowery front cover. The hundreds of pages were made of thick, glossy paper. But what amazed me most was the lock. A strap from the back cover fit into a lock sewn onto the front cover, and there was a tiny key that only Betsy would be able to use.

"You can write anything that comes to your mind in this book," Mom told her. "A diary is for keeping all your secrets, and nobody is allowed to read it but you."

I looked up at my mother. "Where's mine?" I asked.

"I'll get you one when you're old enough to have secrets," she said.

"I do have secrets," I shot back.

"Not *grownup* secrets," she replied.

"I *want* a diary," I shouted and stomped my foot as hard as I could.

Mom didn't budge so I had to go all the way. I threw myself down on the floor and cried and bucked up and down. "I *want* a diary! I *want* a diary!"

"Don't be such an immature little brat," Betsy said and walked off to her bedroom, probably to start filling her diary with secrets. I howled even louder and kicked the floor with my heels.

"Okay, cut the theatrics," Mom said. "I'll get you a diary, but you must promise to write in it every day."

I promised. But I did not keep my promise.

At first, I just wrote down what day it was and the weather. Then I started listing everything I ate. But when it came to writing about what I was doing or what I was thinking and feeling, I couldn't seem to get it down. I could

lie in bed and remember everything I had seen and said during the day, but when I opened the diary my thoughts vanished.

Still, I fought back and began to fill my diary with *stuff*. Each day, I searched for interesting things. I captured all kinds of bugs and squished them between the pages. I stapled in my baseball cards. I kept my stamp collection neatly arranged in rows. I used the diary as a photo album and mounted all my pictures inside. When I taped in my fortune-cookie fortunes, they looked like tiny telegrams from a foreign land. One of them read, "You Are Brave And Have Many Friends." I didn't believe it. I was covering over the empty white space of the pages in the same way I covered my eyes with my hands when I watched a monster movie.

It was no good. Even though the diary was filled with stuff, it was stuff someone else had thought up, someone else's *stuff*.

This evening was no different. Without writing much of anything, I locked the diary, grabbed a deck of cards and fled my bedroom. Betsy was sitting at the dining-room table playing a hand of solitaire. I sat down across from her and began to lay out my cards.

"Stop that," she said sharply.

"What?" I said.

"Stop copying me," she said. "Mom, tell him to stop copying me. He's driving me crazy."

"Leave your sister alone," Mom said, "and come help me work on this jigsaw puzzle. I'm having trouble."

Betsy slapped her cards down on the table. "Don't let him help you, Mom," she said. "Make him think of something to do on his own. Everything I do, he wants to do. Everything



THE JACK HENRY ADVENTURES

Jack Adrift • Jack on the Tracks • Heads or Tails

Jack's New Power • Jack's Black Book

In *Heads or Tails*, Jack has alligators in the canal behind his family's run-down rental home, a secret crush who's not impressed with his tricks, a pest for a little brother, an older sister who mocks his belief in UFOs, and *The Sound of Music* blaring every night from a nearby drive-in. He also has a diary in which he tries to make sense of his crazy up-and-down sixth-grade year.

Laugh-out-loud funny . . . The author has bull's-eye accuracy in capturing the private torments of a twelve-year-old.

—The Buffalo News

As real as it gets.

—The Book Report

THE AUTHOR
WHEN HE
WAS IN SIXTH
GRADE)



★ Jack's a survivor, an "everyboy" whose world may be wacko but whose heart and spirit are eminently sane . . . Gantos is a terrific writer.

—STARRED / School Library Journal

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