

Joey Pigza Swallowed a Key

written by Jack Gantos

1998, Harper Trophy/HarperCollins Publishing

During my Four-Blocks seminars, I usually ask teachers to share the names of chapter books that they feel they absolutely MUST read to their students during the school year. Intermediate teachers have been singing the praises of Jack Gantos' Joey Pigza stories. I had to admit that I surprisingly hadn't read any of these stories. I say surprisingly because I had the opportunity to meet this wonderful author last year at the Southeastern International Reading Conference at Hilton Head. He's a fabulous, must-hear speaker who is not only highly entertaining but also shares practical ideas for the classroom where writing is concerned. He brought with him that day a stack of his personal writing journals and talked about motivating students through having them keep journals. Unique to his journals were maps that he draws of places and events. After hearing some of his wild tales, I can imagine that many of Pigza's stories might be at least semi-autobiographical. That day, Gantos had us all in stitches! I wanted to read his stories, but just didn't get around it.

Anyway, during the Christmas holidays I decided to read one of the Pigza stories so that I would know what the intermediate teachers have been raving about. Now, I'm in **love** with Joey Pigza—heart and soul!! The story I started with is *Joey Pigza Swallowed a Key*. Joey's adventures—or, misadventures, I should say!—make you laugh out loud in one paragraph and cry in the next. I can't wait to get my hands on the next book. *Joey Pigza Loses Control* will be the next that I'll read. Joey is such a rich, vivid character that you actually miss him once you put the book down!

Here are some curricular connections for those of you who want to bring this delightful book into your classroom:

Guided Reading Block

Some of the skills that lend themselves well to this text are...

Cause and Effect – The events of this story provide an almost never-ending chain of cause and effect relationships. Because of Joey's inability to focus, it's often a strange chain of events that unfold! You might want to map out what happens and why it happens.

Compare and Contrast – Compare the good and bad traits demonstrated by Joey in this story.

Genre: The genre is fiction; however, it's conceivable that the events could really happen in any class or school. I would classify it realistic fiction, and it involves comedy and

some underlying tragedy as well. You've likely met students like Joey who must be medicated to function and to realize the consequences of their actions.

Sequence of Events – The story is arranged chronologically and lends itself well to a typical sequence map.

Character Development – It would be interesting to explore with your students just how Gantos has developed Joey. You might want students to look for evidence of these three ways Gantos has developed his main character, Joey:

What Joey says

What Joey does – his actions

What others say about Joey and how they react to him

You might give students three different colors of sticky notes to mark evidence from each of these three approaches. Or, you might assign different cooperative groups one of these approaches to allow them to gather all of the evidence they can throughout their reading.

Research – Students may want to research ADD or ADHD to find out more about it. They might want to compare what they find out with the way that Joey is treated in the story.

Predictions – The wild events of the story are often unpredictable. It might be fun to stop at strategic points of the story to find out what students anticipate will happen. It's the unexpected that makes this story so hilarious—and sometimes so sad, too!

Timelines – Placing the events of Joey's life before and during the story on a timeline to put it in perspective. There were events prior to the story that had an impact on his condition.

Discussions (if you dare!) - You might have some lively discussions about such topics as

Should all students receive the benefits of what is reserved for “gifted and talented” students' curriculum and programs?

Does the book share insight into what special programs offer students who are identified for those programs?

What things does Joey discover about himself throughout the book?

How much did “nature” impact Joey's life?

How much did “nurture” impact Joey's life?

Weigh the advice given to Joey by his mom, his teachers, Special Ed, the doctor, Mrs. Howard, and others

Weigh the good and bad traits demonstrated by Joey throughout the story

What can we all learn about ourselves from Joey?

Self-Selected Reading Block

This book would make a wonderful read-aloud. Teachers who've used it tell me that the students beg them not to stop each day! You'll definitely want to add this one to your collection for students to read during SSR.

Writing Block

Read aloud and discuss the way that Gantos has Joey describe his feelings. He's quite clever at giving concreteness to feelings.

Diversity

This is an excellent book to stimulate a discussion about diversity. Things are not always as they appear! I loved the story of the handicapped boy that Joey met on the special ed bus. At first Joey was frightened of even brushing up against the boy, but he was cheerfully shaking "hands" with the boy at the end and had established a strong relationship with him.

Hope you'll enjoy this book as much as I have!