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Dead End in Novelt

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Review

Twelve-year-old Jack Gantos has big plans for his summer vacation until he is grounded because of a feud between his parents. He resigns himself to a summer of reading history books and digging a bomb shelter for his dad. His only freedom away from the house is to help his elderly neighbor, Miss Volker. Miss Volker has arthritis in her hands and has an unusual task for Jack—writing and typing the obituaries for the town newspaper. Any time Jack gets nervous, scared or excited, his nose would bleed, which happens quite often. The two make quite the team: Jack driving Miss Volker around town, and Miss Volker assisting Jack with his nose bleeding problem. As the summer continues, Jack and Miss Volker are kept busy when the older ladies in town start dying off faster than expected. Jack wonders if there is a curse on the town.

Jack Gantos may have written Dead End in Norvelt as a sort of autobiography about his own childhood in Norvelt, Pennsylvania, a small town where not a lot happens until you start to look for it. The author has captured the simple basic lifestyle of a 1960’s ordinary small town, along with entertaining images of nose bleeds, arthritis hands, and dead people. The characters in the book are colorful in their own way: the likable, partly nerdy Jack, the endearing Miss Volker, the prankster Bunny (the daughter of the town’s mortician), the town busybody Mr. Spizz. The humor in this book comes at the right moments to keep the reader laughing at the antics of the young Jack. A coming of age fun yarn for intermediate boys who like history.