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Al Capone Does My Shirts

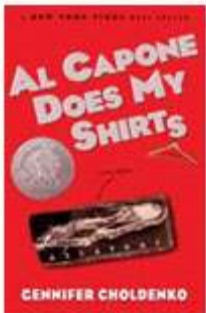
by Gennifer Choldenko

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Summary



The story revolves around 12-year-old Matthew "Moose" Flanagan, his autistic sister Nat (Natalie), and their life on Alcatraz Island, which has become their home because of their father's job as a prison electrician and guard. The Flanagans are trying to get Nat into a special-education school known as "the Esther P. Marinoff". Along the way, Moose meets the warden's mischievous daughter Piper, and Annie, Theresa and Jimmy. Moose has to juggle friends, school and family, all while living on "the Rock", the grimly affectionate name for Alcatraz Island. During his stay there, he and his friends have adventures and scheme to make money from the fact that they live on the infamous prison island, including starting a laundry service which revolves around the idea of the Alcatraz children collecting money and sending their schoolmates' clothes to be washed at "the Rock" where it is known that they would be handled by the notorious prisoners such as Al "Scarface" Capone and "Machine Gun Kelly."

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Capone_Does_My_Shirts



About the Author



I am the youngest child in a large, loud family. We are so loud, in fact, that strangers sometimes asked us if our parents were deaf. Our parents aren't deaf. They are as you can see one mushroom and one bunny rabbit. My nickname as a kid was "Snot-Nose." I spent most of my time on the back of a horse, exploring the craggy hills of Southern California. When I was six, our family went to visit some friends of my parents. During dinner at the kid's table, I was faced with the challenge of holding my own in a large group of older kids, some of whom I had never met before. That night, a peculiar slap happiness hit me and I began to make up jokes and stories, which made no sense whatsoever, yet were strangely funny. Since that time, my family has referred to these quirky nonsensical stories as Gennifer Jokes. Sometimes when I'm writing, I hear that weird humor again.

Al Capone Does My Shirts was the most challenging book I've yet to write. While I was working on the book, I stood on my tippy toes stretching to do more than I was quite able. I've never worked so hard on anything, not ever. But I've also never felt so proud of anything I've done before.

From the website: <http://www.choldenko.com/books/alcapone/gsays1.html>



Book Review

Booklist Review: Gr. 5-8. Twelve-year-old Moose moves to Alcatraz in 1935 so his father can work as a prison guard and his younger, autistic sister, Natalie, can attend a special school in San Francisco. It is a time when the federal prison is home to notorious criminals like gangster Al Capone. Depressed about having to leave his friends and winning baseball team behind, Moose finds little to be happy about on Alcatraz. He never sees his dad, who is always working; and Natalie's condition-- her tantrums and constant needs--demand all his mother's attention. Things look up for Moose when he befriends the irresistible Piper, the warden's daughter, who has a knack for getting Moose into embarrassing but harmless trouble. Helped by Piper, Moose eventually comes to terms with his new situation. With its unique setting and well-developed characters, this warm, engaging coming-of-age story has plenty of appeal, and Choldenko offers some fascinating historical background on Alcatraz Island in an afterword.
-- Ed Sullivan (*BookList*, 02-01-2004, p976)

School Library Journal Review: /* Starred Review */ Gr 6-8--In this appealing novel set in 1935, 12-year-old Moose Flanagan and his family move from Santa Monica to Alcatraz Island where his father gets a job as an electrician at the prison and his mother hopes to send his autistic older sister to a special school in San Francisco. When Natalie is rejected by the school, Moose is unable to play baseball because he must take care of her, and her unorthodox behavior sometimes lands him in hot water. He also comes to grief when he reluctantly goes along with a moneymaking scheme dreamed up by the warden's pretty but troublesome daughter. Family dilemmas are at the center of the story, but history and setting--including plenty of references to the prison's most infamous inmate, mob boss Al Capone--play an important part, too. The Flanagan family is believable in the way each member deals with Natalie and her difficulties, and Moose makes a sympathetic main character. The story, told with humor and skill, will fascinate readers with an interest in what it was like for the children of prison guards and other workers to actually grow up on Alcatraz Island.--
Miranda Doyle, San Francisco Public Library (Reviewed March 1, 2004)
(*School Library Journal*, vol 50, issue 3, p203)



Discussion Questions

Warning! Some of the questions contain key elements of the plot. Do not read if you don't want to know what happens!

1. During his first night on Alcatraz Island, how does Moose Flanagan sleep?
2. After Natalie has spent just one night at the Esther P. Marinoff School, Mr. Purdy calls the Flanagans to let them know that Natalie isn't ready for the school. What reason does he give for sending her back home?
3. Who is "105," and why does this person cause Moose so much anxiety?
4. Describe Moose's first contact with Piper Williams, the warden's daughter. What is Piper like, and how does Moose react to her?
5. What is it about Natalie's behavior that makes it difficult for her family to live with her?
6. Why do you think it is so important to Mrs. Flanagan to keep celebrating Natalie's tenth birthday? And how does Moose get her to change her mind about this?
7. Imagine that like Moose you had a sibling who lived with a significant disability or condition like autism. How would your life be different? Do you think you would relate to your sibling like Moose relates to Natalie?
8. Moose finds himself both attracted to Piper and very suspicious of her. If you could, give Moose some advice about how to handle Piper, what would you say? How do you think Moose ought to respond to her?
9. As Moose obediently helps his sister off the boat as they head to school, he thinks to himself, "Good Moose, obedient Moose. I always do what I'm supposed to do" (p. 28). Is this true?

10. Mrs. Flanagan tells Moose: "You're better with Natalie than I am." (p. 180) What does Moose do for Natalie that their mother does not? How does Moose treat Natalie? And how do Moose's friends on Alcatraz play a role in helping Natalie?

11. From the beginning to the end of the novel, which characters seem to show signs of changing? How do they change? Do you think these changes will last?

12. How did Natalie really get accepted to school? What made Mr. Purdy suddenly decide to open another school? Did Moose's letter to Al Capone make a difference?

13. Imagine the Flanagan family after Natalie has left to attend Mr. Purdy's new school. How will Moose's life change when Natalie is away at school? Will his relationship with his parents be different with Natalie out of the house?

14. Is Mrs. Flanagan a good mother to Moose? Is she a good mother to Natalie? Why does she treat her children so differently? Is she right in being this way?

15. Based on the title of the book, what did you think this book would be about before you read it? How was the story different from what you originally expected?

Source: <http://www.choldenko.com/books/alcapone/tguide1.html>



Author Interview

Q: What is your writing uniform? I'd love to tell you I wear purple polka-dot tights, lucky earmuffs and my old brownie uniform, but the truth is I get dressed up every morning like I'm going to work. People say you need to show up to write at the same time every day, so your muse knows where to find you. I dress the way I do to remind myself that writing is my job and it's very important that I perform to the best of my ability every day.

Q: Where do you write? I write in a tiny shoe box sized room in my home. The best thing about my writing space is my chair. I'm like the three little bears about my chair. It is neither too big or too small, too soft or too hard. It is my chair and it fits me just so. The second best thing about my writing space is my door. I keep it closed so my characters will stay inside with me and not wander all around the house.

Q: How do you develop a voice for your characters? Do you, or do they come to you full-blown? The voice for *Al Capone Does My Shirts* did not come easily. The early drafts of the manuscript sounded like every 1930's book, radio program or movie I'd ever heard all rolled into one. Then one day I realized there were millions and millions of people alive in 1935—each with his or her own voice. That was a breakthrough. Moose's voice came soon after that.

Q: Who is your favorite character in this book? I love all the characters in *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, but I guess if you're forcing me to pick, I'll go with Theresa, Piper and of course Moose. I love Theresa because she reminds me of me when I was seven. I was quirky and pesty and I had to be included in absolutely everything. I like Moose because he has a funny way of seeing the world. He's kind and intelligent and he tries so hard to do the right thing. And I like Piper because she's never apologetic. She's clever, callous and cunning, not to mention supremely self-centered. But she's also confident, extremely bright and full of great ideas. What I like best about Piper is how much she loves Moose. Something about the relationship between Moose and Piper fascinates me. There's a magnetic attraction which brings both their personalities into balance somehow.

Q: What was the most challenging thing about writing this book?

Writing *Al Capone Does My Shirts* seemed like trying to get 300 dogs to howl all at the same time. For a long time it felt like I was writing two different books. Book one was about Moose's exterior life, the life on the island and book two was about Moose's interior life, his life with his family. It was very challenging to weave both those books together and yet it seemed so important because, like all of us, Moose behaves differently among his friends than he does at home. It didn't seem possible to really see who he was unless we experienced both parts. I have, quite honestly, never worked on any one project as hard as I worked on *Al Capone Does My Shirts*. Luckily for me I have a world class editor in Kathy Dawson who really "got" the book. And she kept nipping at my heels until I wrote the book we knew *Al Capone Does My Shirts* could be.

Q: Where did you get the idea for *Al Capone Does My Shirts*? And what kind of research did you have to do for this book, if any?

I got the idea for *Al Capone Does My Shirts* when I read an article in the newspaper about kids who grew up on Alcatraz. These children were the sons and daughters of the guards who worked in the cell house that housed some of America's most notorious criminals. Within a week of reading the article, I signed up to work as a docent on Alcatraz.

From the website: <http://www.choldenko.com/books/alcapone/gsays1.h>



Further Reading

If you liked **AL CAPONE DOES MY SHIRTS** by Gennifer Choldenko, you might like to read the following books, too!

THE FIRE EATERS by David Almond

IF A TREE FALLS AT LUNCH PERIOD by Gennifer Choldenko

BUCKING THE SARGE by Christopher Paul Curtis

TALL TALES by Karen Day

PICTURES OF HOLLIS WOODS by Patricia Reilly Giff

WORLDS APART by Lindsay Lee Johnson

RULES by Cynthia Lloyd

NOBODY'S PERFECT by Marlee Matlin

LIZZIE BRIGHT AND THE BUCKMINSTER BOY BY Gary Schmidt

SO B. IT by Sarah Weeks