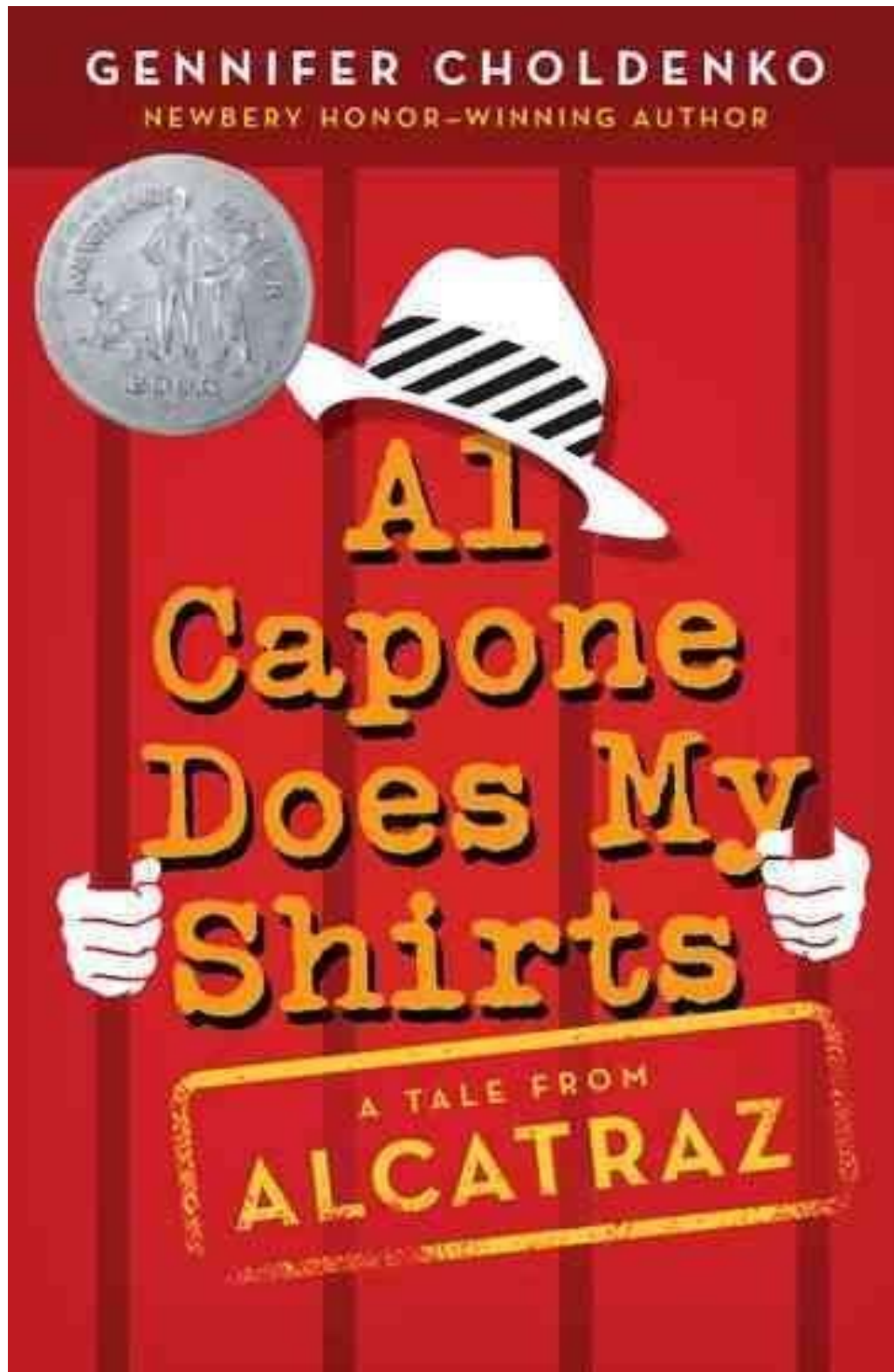


About the book...



It is 1935, and 12-year old Moose Flanagan has just moved with his family to Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay. With his father's new job at the notorious prison, Moose and his family are trying hard to fit in in the unusual surroundings. Most of Moose's time is spent caring for his autistic sister Natalie, who has just been declined admission to a special school in the city. But Moose's attention gets diverted when he falls for a scam hatched by the prison warden's comely daughter. Al Capone Does My Shirts by Gennifer Choldenko was a Newbery Honor Book, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, and the recipient of many other awards and honors.

About the Author...



Gennifer is the youngest child from a large, loud family. Her nickname as a kid was "Snot-Nose" and her best friend was an imaginary person named Bing.

When Gennifer was six, her family went to visit her parents' friends. During dinner at the kids' table, she was faced with the challenge of holding her own in front of a large group of older kids, some she had never met before. That night she began to make up jokes and stories, which didn't make any sense but were very funny. Since then, her family has referred to these stories as Gennifer Jokes. Sometimes when she is writing, she hears that weird humor.

One of Choldenko's sisters suffered from severe autism and inspired the character of Natalie in this book. Choldenko began her writing career with a job as a copywriter in a small ad agency. She began taking classes in illustration, and this eventually led to a full-time study of illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design. After becoming very successful in advertising, she began to pursue her real love children's books, and her first novel [*Notes from a Liar and Her Dog*](#) was chosen as a School Library Journal Best Book of the Year and won several other awards.

Choldenko is married with two children, and she lives in the San Francisco Bay area. Gennifer's books have been translated into 9 languages. She is currently hard at work on the last novel in the Al Capone trilogy.

For more information visit: www.choldenko.com

Selected Writings

- [*Al Capone Shines My Shoes*](#), Dial Books for Young Readers (New York) 2009.
- [*If a Tree Falls at Lunch Period*](#), Harcourt (Orlando, FL), 2007.
- [*No Passengers Beyond this Point*](#), Dial Books for Young Readers (New York) 2011.
- [*Notes from a Liar and Her Dog*](#), Putnam (New York, NY), 2001.

Awards

- Newbery Honor Book for "Al Capone Does My Shirts"
- American Library Association Notable Book for "Al Capone Does My Shirts"

Reviews

Booklist

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. Gr. 5-8.

Publishers Weekly

Set on Alcatraz Island in 1935, Choldenko's exceptionally atmospheric novel has equally unusual characters and plot lines. Twelve-year-old narrator Moose Flanagan has just moved to the island, where his father has been hired as an electrician and guard. At first Moose is spooked at being in such close proximity to the nation's most notorious criminals, and he doesn't know what to make of the all-powerful warden's bossy daughter, Piper, who flouts her father's rule about talking about the convicts ("You say [Al Capone's] name and hordes of reporters come crawling out of the

woodwork ready to write stories full of foolish lies," the warden explains). At school, on the mainland, Piper hatches a scheme to make money from classmates ("Once in a lifetime opportunity! Get your clothes laundered by Al Capone and other world-famous public enemies! ... Only costs 5 cents") and forces Moose to help her. Moose has reasons for staying on Piper's good side: his older sister, Natalie, has what would now be called autism, and Moose worries that her behavior will land the family in trouble with the warden.

(Natalie's condition is so poorly understood that an expert tells her desperate mother, "An interesting case ... you should consider donating her brain to science when she dies.") Choldenko captures the tense, nuanced family dynamics touched off by Natalie's disability as skillfully as she handles the mystique of Alcatraz and the exchanges between Moose and his friends. Fast-paced and memorable.

Kirkus Reviews

Moose's world is turned upside down when his family moves to Alcatraz Island where his Dad has taken a job as a prison guard. Super-responsible Moose, big for 12, finds himself caught in the social interactions of this odd cut-off world. He cares for

his sister who is older, yet acts much younger due to her autism and he finds his life alternating between frustration and growth. His mother focuses all of her attention on ways to cure the sister; his dad works two jobs and meekly accepts the mother's choices; his fellow island-dwellers are a funny mix of oddball characters and good friends. Basing her story on the actual experience of those who supported the prison in the '30s--when Al Capone was an inmate--Choldenko's pacing is exquisite, balancing the tense family dynamics alongside the often-humorous and riveting school story of peer pressure and friendship. Fascinating setting as a metaphor for Moose's own imprisonment and enabling some hysterically funny scenes, but a great read no matter where it takes place. (Fiction. 11-14)

Discussion Questions

(<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/al-capone-does-my-shirts-discussion-guide>)

1. How does Moose Flanagan sleep during his first night on Alcatraz Island?
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 change? 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? Describe two or three possible scenarios to explain what may have happened.

Activities

1. Research to learn more about Al Capone or another famous criminal mentioned in the novel who spent time at Alcatraz. Draw a timeline to depict the criminal's life, using drawings and descriptions to show important events.

2. If Moose believes that Al Capone is responsible for Natalie's admission into the school, how would he thank him? If he wrote a letter to Capone, what would he say? Write a thank you letter from Moose to Capone.

Read-Alikes

Cynthia Lord, [*Rules*](#) (2006)

Catherine wants to help her autistic brother, David. Thinking that what others see is important, she makes a list of rules for him so he won't embarrass her or himself, because while Catherine loves David she's also afraid that others won't understand him and will consequently tease him.

Catherine just wants to be normal. But normal becomes increasingly more difficult for her to explain, especially when she meets Jason, a paraplegic who only communicates by pointing at pictures. The two build up quite a picture vocabulary and communicate freely. Now Catherine has to look at all her rules. Were they made to help David or her? Is she afraid that by befriending Jason she'll be the "different" one?

Carolyn Coman, [*The Big House*](#) (2004)

When Ivy and Ray's parents are convicted of embezzlement, it's none other than their accuser, Marietta Noland, who decides to adopt them while their parents are in prison (which may be for a very long time). Although Ivy and Ray's parents have always skirted on the edge of the law, they've never been in this much trouble and never at the same time. But even though Marietta Nolan's house appears to be the lap of luxury, the rules are so strict that Ray and Ivy are in as much of a "Big House" as the one where their parents now reside. Other than the rules, though, something seems a little off at Marietta's house, and when the two discover that she may send Ray

off to boarding school (he wets his bed), they realize it's up to them to get out of that particular prison. Chances are that Ray and Ivy's release is tied to their parents'.

Nora Raleigh Baskin, [*Anything but Typical*](#) (2009)
Jason Blake is a sixth grader who has been diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder. He has dealt with teasing and bullying his whole life from those he calls "neurotypicals," and though he is on the high-functioning end of the autistic spectrum, he finds it extremely difficult to communicate with others face-to-face. Jason has a loving and supportive family, who encourage him in every way they can and discover that he is a gifted creative writer. Jason begins to participate in an online group called Storyboard, where he posts stories and develops a close friendship with a girl. When his parents decide to take him to a group meeting for Storyboard, Jason is horrified to realize that he will interact with his friend face-to-face. He has no choice but to deal with his life and his interactions the only way he knows how.

E.L. Konigsburg, [*Silent to the Bone*](#) (2000)
After finding his beloved baby sister in a coma, Branwell, aged thirteen, tries to call 911 but cannot speak. Nothing can break his silence.

Unjustly accused of seriously injuring the baby, Bran is sent to the Clarion County Juvenile Behavioral Center. His best friend finally breaks the silence by an ingenious method of communication.



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