



Al Capone Does My Shirts

Gennifer Choldenko

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Today I moved to a twelve-acre rock covered with cement, topped with bird turd and surrounded by water. I'm not the only kid who lives here. There's my sister, Natalie, except she doesn't count. And there are twenty-three other kids who live on the island because their dads work as guards or cook's or doctors or electricians for the prison, like my dad does. Plus, there are a ton of murderers, rapists, hit men, con men, stickup men, embezzlers, connivers, burglars, kidnappers and maybe even an innocent man or two, though I doubt it. The convicts we have are the kind other prisons don't want. I never knew prisons could be picky, but I guess they can. You get to Alcatraz by being the worst of the worst. Unless you're me. I came here because my mother said I had to.

Al Capone Does My Shirts Details

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Julia M says

I absolutely adore this book! Initially, I had to read it for a children's literature class two years ago, but I chose to pick it up again recently because I loved it so much. The story is about a young boy named Moose and his experiences growing up as a prison guard's son on Alcatraz during the 1930's. Moose's younger sister Natalie has special needs, and although her specific diagnosis is unknown, we as readers can assume that she is autistic. Moose's life is made even more interesting when he begins corresponding with Al Capone, one of the most notorious gangsters ever imprisoned on Alcatraz.

This is perhaps one of the most unique stories I have ever read, and I think that the whole coming-of-age theme ties in nicely with Moose's struggles to accept Natalie's differences. I am definitely planning on using this book in my classroom this year, and I can't wait to see what my students think!

Kristine says

I read this poolside during our SoCal vacation -- and I was pleasantly surprised.

Moose's family moves to Alcatraz where his dad has taken a job as an electrician. He has a "younger" sister who has autism and the family is trying to get her into a special school.

If you think about it there are so many parts of the story that are heart-wrenching . . . the author does an amazing job of making emotional connections with each character. You can see the grief cycle in each member: anger, denial, bargaining, etc. I also loved how she showed Natalie, the sister, as a real person -- one of the few books I've read with a disabled character that really shows you the person inside.

I really felt like I was on the island with them, as well. Having it set on Alcatraz is really cool and you learn a lot about the island in the 1930s -- and of course, it's funny!

After I read the book I just told Darik, "Wow. I love that children's literature can be this good and be entertaining and yet handle "adult issues" (autism, growing up, family relationships, etc.) better than adult literature can a lot of times."

Yasmin says

3.5 stars. Full review to come very soon!

Stephen says

Surprisingly upbeat for a book set in the Great Depression and dealing with the subject of autism. From the first paragraphs I realized that this was not the light-hearted, funny book that the title suggested. And yet it

was a good wholesome read that left one feeling better rather than worse. This book walks the fine line between tense and funny and yet has heart. It should be a good recommendation for reluctant readers, particularly of the young male persuasion.

Told from a young man's perspective, it in some ways it reminded me of a Walton's episode. Nevertheless, it was a fast engaging read that I'm glad I experienced. It certainly is worthy of the Newbury Honor that it received. It's entertaining and yet one somehow finds toward the end that the author has slipped you a nutritious book as well as an entertaining one.

One wonders what Dickens would have thought of the way convicts were portrayed here.

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

Interesting setting (Alcatraz, 1930s) and unusual characters (boy with autistic sister), but I wouldn't have given this the Newbery honor book award.

Jinky says

I don't agree with the enthusiasm for this book. A Newbery Honor, really? At least it didn't win.

I wanted to like this book. A story about families living on Alcatraz where the worst of the worst convicts reside was alluring. But this book just didn't cut it. The characters developments were horrid. Moose was wishy-washy, Piper incredibly reckless, and the adults were idiots. The only character that the author got right was Natalie. Plus, the whole 'let's see how close we can monopolize Al Capone' story line was weak in aligning with the characters. This is where I wish I was articulate because I want to spell out how the characters broke this book for me and therefore how silly the story became. ~Anyone out there that has read this book and see what I see and can help effectively describe the bazaarness? Oh well, maybe it's just me.

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Ensiform says

In 1935, 12-year-old Moose moves with his parents and autistic sister, Natalie, to Alcatraz Island. Despite his best intentions, Moose finds himself under the sway of the warden's conniving daughter, Piper, which distracts him from the important responsibility of caring for Natalie, and above all keeping her condition quiet. Piper ropes Moose into forbidden stunts like selling laundry done by the inmates to their school's non-prison-dwelling students. But when Natalie's condition threatens to end everything Moose cares about, Moose bucks the rules himself by trying to appeal to Al Capone himself for help.

This is a very well-written and enjoyable book. Moose's personality is complex and rich; he wants to be like the other kids, just playing ball and being "normal," but he fiercely defends family even as he resents Natalie for her special needs. Natalie, in turn, is painted very realistically; she is neither "high functioning" nor some stereotypical savant, but a young adult with a distinct personality, unable to express herself clearly and more comfortable in her own mind. Their mother is loving and self-sacrificing, but a product of her era, insisting

that 16-year-old Natalie is ten and trying everything and anything to make Natalie “normal” so that she will have the kind of future that is socially accepted. In short, Choldenko has created a story that is fantastic to today’s readers because of its setting (Moose cleans his teeth with tooth powder; there is no television; they live on a prison island), but that is also universal due to the familiar stresses and pains of growing up and trying to blend in. Really quite masterfully done.

Lily says

I did not like Al Capone Does My Shirts at all. I thought the plot was too unique to be believable. The characters had all the same traits and I thought the book was really slow. The only problem in the book was how Moose's sister, Natalie, had aspergers and was not being accepted to a special school to make her more socially comfortable. I could see the outcome of the book way before the ending. I did not enjoy this book at all. Overall, I gave Al Capone Does My Shirts one star.

Manybooks says

Now although I have indeed much enjoyed the historical San Francisco and Alcatraz setting of Gennifer Choldenko's Newbery Honour winning Al Capone Does My Shirts (and absolutely love the non fictional supplementals at the back of the book which truth be told have been my favourite parts of the book), personally I have found a few rather annoying and frustrating issues with the author's story-telling, with her narrative style, scenarios that have felt rather a bit "off" to and for me.

For one, with narrator Moose and actually with regard to many if not even most of the Alcatraz children presented (except for Natalie of course, but she is a special case), while I have most definitely enjoyed being taken into their world, their ways of expressing themselves and even many of their behaviour patterns often really do tend to feel rather anachronistic (as though instead of 1935, when Al Capone Does My Shirts is set, the novel reads more like it takes place much later, in say the 1950s or 60s). And yes indeed, even after now having finished Al Capone Does My Shirts, I keep having to check the Goodreads book description for the precise time period, as I still when I think of Al Capone Does My Shirts keep imagining and considering a post and not a pre WWII tale, for especially how the children, how Moose, Piper, Theresa, Annie, Jimmy etc. behave, act out and talk amongst themselves and with their parents, and even how many of the Alcatraz adults, but especially Moose's parents, tend to conduct themselves, sorry, but it just does not seem like typical 1930s America, and more like a considerably later time period (and while of course, the type of family dysfunction that is shown with the Flanagans and especially with regard to Moose's mother and her obvious favouritism of Natalie over Moose also existed in the 1930s and earlier, how overtly this is shown in Al Capone Does My Shirts and by the young twelve year old narrator at that, by Moose Flanagan himself, feels at least to and for me rather jarring and out of time, in other words, how Gennifer Choldenko has Moose narrate, just seems too annoyingly modern for a historical novel).

And for two, especially how Moose's mother is depicted (her clear favouritism of autistic Natalie over Moose, that the mother basically shoves almost ALL of the responsibilities for Natalie and for much of the household chores and such on Moose without even considering his feelings, often reacting very allergically and nastily if ANYONE even remotely tries to call her out, tries to be in any manner critical), while I do realise that persons like Mrs. Flanagan exist in real life, in Al Capone Does My Shirts, I have most certainly been left with the distinct impression that Moose's mother has been created and used by the author as

basically and mostly a rather one dimensional and yes almost stock witch-like fairy tale villain type, a character with no or at least hardly any personality and nuances, someone who reads like a blank slate of cardboard except with regard to being negative and grating. And really, even autistic Natalie, Moose's older sister, has much much more to her in every way than the mother, who just appears like an annoying buzzing mosquito but who also seems to rule the roost so to speak, a scenario that I for one have found not all that pleasurable to read, as while I do not at all mind negative characters appearing in my novels, and actually often welcome them, if I want to read about one dimensional negativity and nastiness, I will generally tend to peruse fairy and folktales (and unfortunately, especially how Mrs. Flanagan is textually depicted and featured by Gennifer Choldenko, it sure does makes Al Capone Does My Shirts feel a trifle on the surface at best, with the deus ex machina ending of Al Capone actually using his influence even whilst in prison on Alcatraz to get Natalie into that special school heightening my feelings of disbelief and of being in a novel that is not all always that realistic and rather majorly artificial in scope at times).

Rick Riordan says

I've been meaning to read this for a while, and I'm glad I finally got the chance. It tells the story of 12-year-old Moose Flanagan, whose family moves to Alcatraz in the 1930s when his dad takes a job as a prison guard. The first-person narration is beautifully done. I loved the humor and the relationships between the characters. We assume Al Capone will have a role to play in the book, but it's not clear what that role will be until the very end, when we get a Gangster ex Machina resolution. It certainly left me wanting to read the sequel, if only to see if we get more about Capone.

James says

I thoroughly was impressed and surprised by this book. I was afraid it would be a little "censored" and unintelligent. We all know those books. Overall location was a pretty good idea. The ending was perfect. Goes to show that some people can have insane amounts of power, no matter the challenges.

Ann says

This is a really great book. I'd been meaning to read it for years and finally got around to it! Moose Flanagan and his family move to Alcatraz Island where his father works as a guard so that his sister Natalie can go to a special school in San Francisco for kids with disabilities. Today, Natalie would have been diagnosed with autism, but back then they didn't know what to do with her. The author deals with this topic very sensitively and emotionally, because it's based on her own experiences with her sister.

Al Capone is imprisoned on Alcatraz at the time (the 1930's) and amazingly enough there were actually 50 or 60 families that made their residence on the island then. The warden wanted his guards to live close by in the event of a problem, and many of the families considered it a very safe place to live. I had no idea! Moose makes friends with some of the kids on the island, does a lot of growing up, and gets into some trouble. This is a very sweet story.

Carol says

With a name like Al Capone Does My Shirts, I was settled in for a good light read, not. Not that it isn't an easy read but there is pathos in this story of Moose Flannagan. Moose is the brother of a severely challenged sister, Natalie, who cannot function in society and is sometimes entombed in her own frightening world to the exclusion of even her family.

Moose's father is a prison guard/electrician on the island of Alcatraz. His mother takes a boat to San Francisco most days to teach piano and Moose is in charge of head strong, not to be sidetracked Natalie. How many ways can you spell trouble??? I identified in ways most readers wouldn't with this story because I am the mother of a disabled young adult. I never went through what Natalie's mother went through, looking for a cure, but I think I know that a disability effects everyone in the family. I spent weeks when Jami was little going to the doctor up to three times in a week. There is no way all that time and attention on one child does not take away from the others but you do what you have to do. I like to think that our experience has made our other six children more compassionate people. And a special note to Jeff, my knight in shining armor who spent most of his weekends his junior year babysitting so Mom could get out and socialize - you are my Moose, thank you for all your goodness, love, Mom

Jessica says

I had to read this book once I learned that it is about little kids who lived on Alcatraz in the 1930s. Ever since I was a little girl I've wanted to purchase Alcatraz Island and live there. (Plus, it's a Newberry Honor Book, so it sort of counts towards my goal.)

The book centers around a family: a mother, a father, a "ten" year old sister, and a twelve year old brother, our protagonist, Moose. The family has just moved to Alcatraz Island where the father works around the clock at two jobs so that the sister, Natalie, can attend a prestigious and expensive school for children with mental issues. Natalie has what would today be called autism.

Moose Flanagan's view of life perfectly depicts the struggle between loving someone and half wanting them to go away. He loves his sister, but she complicates his life in ways that most twelve year old boys don't have to deal with. Also, he illustrates the loneliness of the "okay" sibling. All of the family's resources and time seem to be poured into Natalie, leaving Moose with many responsibilities and few perks.

The feeling of this book stayed with me--mostly via the setting. The images of children on the island, taking a boat back and forth to school everyday, lingering just beyond the field where the prisoners play baseball, hoping to catch a ball, having their laundry done in the prisons.

So, the phrase is overused, but "heartwarming" definitely applies here.

Meghan says

I really enjoyed reading Al Capone Does My Shirts for a few reasons. First of all, it was a very quick read. The writing style was so simple, so it was a walk in the park to read on a Tuesday night. Secondly, the setting and the characters were very interesting. I think many of the characters had unique voices and mannerisms that made them memorable. However, some of the characters weren't very active in the plot and

it just left me with questions about their participation in the book. The underdeveloped characters only confused me.

This book really tugged at my heart strings. I couldn't help but feel for Moose's character as his mother forced him to mature sooner than he was ready for. For being so young, he was a huge help to Natalie and she seemed to improve when she was with him. Unfortunately, many parents focus too much on "fixing" their children instead of accepting and loving them for who they are. Because there wasn't a diagnosis for autism during the time period, I understand Moose's mother's frustration with Natalie's illness, but it was difficult to side with her on her actions. I wanted her to recognize Moose's participation in Natalie's improvement. I wanted her to show Moose her love. But it just didn't happen and I felt for him.

I think this book would be great to teach in middle school. The book is interesting enough to keep them engaged and has plenty of underlying themes to spark conversation in the classroom. Moose's relationship with Natalie alone could be a class-long discussion among the students. This book would also be a great history lesson for students who have never heard of Alcatraz. I love the idea of the map in the book to help readers visualize the events and places that Choldenko writes about.
