

Literature Circle Guide to
AL CAPONE DOES MY SHIRTS by Gennifer Choldenko

Summary

Moose Flanagan and his family have just moved to Alcatraz Island so that his father can take a job as a prison guard and his sister Natalie can go to a special school in San Francisco. Moose misses his old baseball team, and he struggles for recognition in his new school. Then his sister Natalie, who suffers from autism, is rejected from the Esther P. Marinoff School, crushing his parents' hopes for Natalie's education. Now Moose must take care of Natalie after school while his mother teaches music lessons, and he must find a way to deal with Natalie's screaming fits and constant needs. Complicating Moose's life even more is Piper, the daughter of the prison warden. Piper lures Moose into her scheme to make money by collecting laundry from their classmates with the promise that Al Capone is among the convicts assigned to laundry duty on Alcatraz. Gradually Moose adjusts to life on Alcatraz, even finding ways to help Natalie fit in with the other children on the island, and he is able to convince his mother that he really does have his sister's best interests in mind. After the Flanagans have tried repeatedly and unsuccessfully to enroll Natalie in the Esther P. Marinoff School, Moose secretly writes a note to Al Capone, asking him to help Natalie. Piper slips Moose's note into the prison's dirty laundry, and a few weeks later, Natalie is accepted to a brand-new school for older autistic children, to the delight of the entire Flanagan family.

Author Information

Gennifer Choldenko was born in Santa Monica, California, in 1957, the youngest child in a family of four children. 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.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

Use the questions and activities that follow to get more out of the experience of reading *Al Capone Does My Shirts* by Gennifer Choldenko.

1. During his first night on Alcatraz Island, how does Moose Flanagan sleep?
Feeling jumpy about living in the midst of convicted criminals, Moose sleeps wearing his clothes and shoes, and he keeps his baseball bat in his bed. (p. 7)

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?

Mr. Purdy is worried about the school's neighbors hearing Natalie's screaming. Her first morning at school, Natalie screamed "like a banshee" for an hour, and Mr. Purdy fears that this early morning noise will upset the school's relationship with its neighbors. (pp. 68-69)

3. Who is "105," and why does this person cause Moose so much anxiety?

AZ 105 is a convict who befriends Natalie while Moose is searching for a baseball. When Moose first glimpses 105, the convict is holding hands with Natalie and calling her "sweetie." The sight of this enrages Moose, who worries that the man has made friends with his sister in the short time that Moose had left her alone. (p. 149)

4. Describe Moose's first contact with Piper Williams, the warden's daughter. What is Piper like, and how does Moose react to her?

Moose is first struck by how pretty Piper is, but her first question to him is "What's the matter with your sister?" (p. 17) Feeling protective of his sister, Moose is immediately nervous about Piper's aggressive interest in Natalie. Piper flaunts her position as the warden's daughter and intimidates Moose by announcing that her father won't like the fact that Moose's sister is "crazy." (p. 20)

5. What is it about Natalie's behavior that makes it difficult for her family to live with her?

Especially in new or uncertain situations, Natalie is prone to screaming fits – temper tantrums. Because of her age (15 when the story begins) and her large size, she is especially difficult to handle during these fits, and no one can be sure what will start her off.

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?

Mrs. Flanagan keeps hoping that Natalie will get some assistance to help her condition, and she's well aware that there is much more help available for young children, who are considered more teachable, than for older children and adults. At Natalie's sixteenth birthday, Moose confronts his mother, insisting that they tell Natalie how old she really is. (pp. 192-3) After serious reflection, Mrs. Flanagan realizes that all along Moose has had Natalie's best interests in mind and that she should appreciate all that Moose has done for his sister. (p. 197)

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?

Moose is very responsible for his age, no doubt due to the responsibility of helping with his sister. Students will likely be impressed with Moose's thoughtful, kind ways with Natalie as well as his special insight into her behavior. At the same time, students might wonder why Moose is not more frustrated with the injustice in his situation. Because of Natalie, he has to give up much of his own time and accept responsibilities that seem far beyond his years.

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?

Students will sympathize with Moose's position: If he goes along with Piper, he will be breaking the warden's rules, and if he goes against Piper, he will make her mad. Either way, he jeopardizes his own father's job at Alcatraz. Students might counsel Moose to explain his situation to his father and ask for his intervention, or they may caution Moose to avoid Piper completely in the hope that she will leave him alone. Some students will suggest that Moose try to get the upper hand with Piper by confronting her directly, making it clear that he will not go against his conscience and the warden's rules.

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?

In many ways, this is true. Especially compared to his sister, Moose is an obedient, compliant child who lives up to his parents' expectations. Moose says of himself, "I don't like getting in trouble. I was born responsible." (p. 16) And Moose refuses (at first) to go along with Piper's plan to make money with laundry, because he doesn't want to disobey the warden's orders and cause trouble for his family. Later when it comes to his sister, Moose is willing to go against his mother's wishes, secretly at first and then directly in Chapter 35. Most significantly, Moose secretly defies the warden and the prison rules by writing to Al Capone to ask for his help for Natalie. (pp. 209-10)

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?

Through playing and talking, Moose is able to enter Natalie's world more than anyone else. He spends a lot of one-on-one time with his sister and seems to understand her. In time, the other children on Alcatraz follow Moose's example in relating to Natalie. Even Piper in time shows kindness to Natalie by collecting rocks under her command. (p. 186)

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?

Many of the characters show signs of changing. For example, Mrs. Flanagan becomes less rigid in her thinking about Natalie as she realizes how invested Moose is in Natalie's well-being. She learns to appreciate her son more and more. Mr. Flanagan becomes more willing to stand up to his wife and be more involved in family decisions. Natalie is improving verbally and relationally. And Moose is more willing to "break the rules" as evidenced by his going to the warden to ask him for a favor from Al Capone. Even Piper gains some sympathy and understanding for Moose and Natalie, and her curiosity about Natalie's "craziness" turns to genuine interest and a desire to help.

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. One possible explanation is that Piper delivers Moose's letter to the "censored" mail pile, and it then reaches Capone who uses his connections. Or maybe Piper, concerned that Moose's family might leave Alcatraz if Natalie isn't accepted, uses her influence with her father to work on Capone. Or possibly Mr. Purdy could simply have received funds to start a new school (maybe through Al Capone?) or had a change of heart all on his own.**

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? **Moose's life will likely be less complicated with Natalie at school. He will not be in the position of explaining his sister to other people, and he will not feel forced into the role of the always responsible, obedient son. He will also get more attention and time with his parents with Natalie away.**

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? **Mrs. Flanagan seems to have trouble relating to Moose, and most of her energy and attention goes toward parenting Natalie. The discrepancy between the ways she treats her children is related to the differences between parenting a "normal" son like Moose and an autistic daughter. Students will see the discrepancy as unjust, because Mrs. Flanagan seems to take advantage of Moose and because her expectations for her son seem impossibly high.**

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? **Students' interest in this book may have been originally piqued by the title, and some students may have been disappointed to find that this book was mostly about Moose Flanagan rather than Al Capone. Students may have been surprised to see that this novel is not a gangster story but rather a story about a boy's struggles with his family.**

Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-11; Synthesis: 12-13; Evaluation: 14-15.

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.

Many students may have first become interested in this book because of the title's mention of Al Capone, and will be interested in learning more about one of the criminals mentioned in the book. Students might want to research Al Capone, Machine Gun Kelly, Roy Gardner, or Bonnie and Clyde using the Internet or a children's encyclopedia. Students may wish to follow the format Theresa uses for her gangster information cards on pp. 14-15. With this activity, students will gain experience in researching a true crime story as well as an understanding of the social context of the novel.

2. If Moose believes that Al Capone is responsible for Natalie's admission in 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.

Moose is deeply grateful to Capone, who he believes is responsible for Natalie's acceptance by the school. This assignment gives students the opportunity to explore Moose's thoughts and feelings from his own perspective, and they may use his first letter to Capone (pp. 209-10) as a model for the second.

3. What is autism? Use the Internet or reference books to learn more about autism, and create a poster to help educate your fellow classmates about this disorder. Be ready to explain which signs of autism Natalie displays. Also, how has the treatment of autism changed since the 1930s?

This assignment helps students gain insight into both Natalie's character and the nature of autism. As part of their research on the topic of autism, students may use an encyclopedia or Internet site such as <http://pediatrics.about.com/library/blautism.htm>, or they may choose to interview a teacher who has taught students with autism. After researching autism, students should be able to match many aspects of Natalie's behavior in the novel to characteristics of autism in the descriptions that they have read.

4. Create a poster advertising Piper's laundry scheme as described on p. 75. If Piper came up with another money-making venture, what might it be? Would her next plan be as sneaky as the first? In a group, come up with a new idea that Piper might use to make money on Alcatraz Island, and create another poster advertising her new scheme.