

## **AL CAPONE DOES MY SHIRTS**

### **Louisiana Young Readers' Choice Award Nominee 2007 Grades 6-8**

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**Al Capone Does My Shirts** by Gennifer Choldenko. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2004. 215 p.

#### **Summary**

The year is 1935 and Moose Flanagan's father is desperate for a job. Consequently, he takes a job as an electrician and guard at the high-security prison on Alcatraz Island near San Francisco. The family must live on the island and obey numerous strict rules. Moose is fascinated by the fact that famous criminals, such as Al Capone, are in cells just feet beyond where he is walking. But Moose, who is twelve, is struggling with all the changes in his own life. He misses playing baseball with his friends, and he has difficulty adjusting to his new school. He must spend much of his free time taking care of his older sister, Natalie, who suffers from autism. Worst of all, the warden's daughter, Piper, who is constantly scheming and not to be trusted, is determined to get Moose into trouble. Moose does his best to do the right thing, but he is not always successful. The author interweaves the various issues in a thought-provoking story of a boy learning to cope with life in a most unusual and challenging environment.

#### **Awards**

Newbery Honor Book  
ALA Notable Book  
Parent's Choice Silver Medal  
School Library Journal Best Books of the Year

#### **Author's Biography**

Gennifer Choldenko lives in San Francisco. She says that she "loves writing" and that her inspiration to become a writer came from her father. Her nickname growing up was "Snot-Nose." She has always been known for her quirky sense of humor. When she is not writing, she enjoys drawing animals. Her first book was a picture book: *Moonstruck: The True Story of the Cow Who Jumped over the Moon*. Her books have won numerous awards.

#### **Other Titles by Gennifer Choldenko**

*Moonstruck: The True Story of the Cow Who Jumped over the Moon*  
*Notes from a Liar and Her Dog*  
*How to Make Friends with a Giant* (2006)

#### **Related Titles**

*Eyewitness on Alcatraz: True Stories of Families Who Lived on the Rock* by Jolene Babyak.

## **Classroom Connections**

See **Gennifer Choldenko's Web Site**

<http://www.choldenko.com/>

Author's website includes a Scholastic Literature Circle Guide with comprehension questions and curriculum-related activities.

See **Scholastic Literature Circle Guide**

[http://teacher.scholastic.com/clubs/pdfs/alcaponedoes\\_t.pdf](http://teacher.scholastic.com/clubs/pdfs/alcaponedoes_t.pdf)

[http://teacher.scholastic.com/clubs/pdfs/alcaponedoesmyshirts\\_g.pdf](http://teacher.scholastic.com/clubs/pdfs/alcaponedoesmyshirts_g.pdf)

These pdf files have an author biography, questions and activities for the class.

## **Language Arts**

- Write an ad in the paper for a job at Alcatraz. Include the description of the setting based on what you have learned from the story. Also include other jobs descriptions that you think might be necessary at Alcatraz.
- Journals: How would you feel if you were in Moose's shoes? What would you like most about living at Alcatraz? What would you like least? Why? What do you think happened after the story ended? Create the next chapter for the reader.

## **Social Studies**

- Research the floor plan of Alcatraz and figure out why they called this place the "inescapable prison."
- Have the students research and report on other famous prisons.

## **Biography/History**

- Research Al Capone and other famous criminals who spent time at Alcatraz.

## **Science: Autism**

- Have the student research autism. Compare current information about the disease with the information in the story and what was known in the 1930s.

## **Math/Business**

- Make a poster advertising Piper and Moose's laundry business. Calculate their earnings, based on the price given in the story, over a week, month, and 6 months.
- What other businesses could they have created that could be profitable? What would they have done and how much do you predict they could have made?

## **Connections by Elizabeth Dumas, Good Hope Middle School, West Monroe Grade 6**

While this book is a work of fiction, many of the details about life for the guards and their families on Alcatraz are true. This book is an example of how a book can sometimes be classified under more than one genre. In this instance, the book is both realistic and historical fiction. It would be interesting to extend its use for both of the following units in the Grade 6 ELA curriculum.

### ELA Unit 2: Fiction-Realistic Fiction

Activity 1: Characteristics of Fiction and Realistic Fiction. Excerpts from this novel can be read to illustrate some of the real-life issues found in realistic fiction.

An example is the description of what happened on the train when Moose's autistic sister became upset. (Chapter 2: "Errand Boy")

ELA Unit 3: Historical Fiction (Historical details used in this book are included in the "Author's Note" in the back of the book.)

Activity 4: Determine Influence of Setting on Characters.

The opening paragraph of this book is an excellent introduction to setting as a story element.

Activity 6: Similarities and Differences of Characters in Fiction/Nonfiction and People Today: Biographical Sketches. Al Capone can be included on the list of people to study.

### **Grade 8**

#### ELA Unit 5: Novel

Activity 1: Sustained Silent Reading. This book can be included on a recommended reading list that students will use to self-select a novel to be read independently. It can then be used for the other follow-up activities in this unit.

### **Web Links**

#### **Bloomsbury Author Information: Gennifer Choldenko**

<http://www.bloomsbury.com/childrens/microsite.asp?id=289&section=3>

Gives a short summary of the author, many questions and answers about the author, short extracts from the book, and a letter from the author to the readers.

#### **Gennifer Choldenko's Web Site**

<http://www.choldenko.com/>

Author's site contains brief summaries of her books, teacher ideas (comprehension questions and activities), a short biography with fun photos of Gennifer as a child, an interview, a list of awards, and a wonderful "kids only" section with questions from children.

#### **Nancy Keane's Booktalks**

[http://www.nancykeane.com/booktalks/choldenko\\_al.htm](http://www.nancykeane.com/booktalks/choldenko_al.htm)

This site includes two detailed booktalks.

#### **Scholastic Literature Circle Guide**

[http://teacher.scholastic.com/clubs/pdfs/alcaponedoes\\_t.pdf](http://teacher.scholastic.com/clubs/pdfs/alcaponedoes_t.pdf)

[http://teacher.scholastic.com/clubs/pdfs/alcaponedoesmyshirts\\_g.pdf](http://teacher.scholastic.com/clubs/pdfs/alcaponedoesmyshirts_g.pdf)

These pdf files have an author biography, plus questions and activities for the class.

#### **Autism**

<http://library.thinkquest.org/CR0213520/autismhome.htm>

Site includes symptoms, types, treatments and causes of autism.

#### **History Files: Al Capone**

<http://www.chicagohs.org/history/capone.html>

Brief biography and mug shot of Al Capone.

**AlcatrazHistory.com**

<http://www.alcatrazhistory.com/mainpg.htm>

This site is devoted to the “penitentiary years” of the island’s history. It features diagrams of the island and the prison cells, famous inmates, escape attempts, rules and regulations for inmates, and a mini photo tour.

**Alcatraz Official Web Page**

<http://www.nps.gov/alcatraz/>

Includes information on the island.

**Alcatraz: Where the Wicked Slept**

<http://students.cup.edu/mor2399/index.htm>

This site has information about what life was like on Alcatraz. It includes biographies of famous prisoners and a page about the children of guards: The Children of Alcatraz

<http://students.cup.edu/mor2399/children.htm>

One page about what life was like for the children who lived on Alcatraz.