



Al Capone Does My Shirts

Gennifer Choldenko

Teacher's Guide

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Synopsis

Chapter 1

The story opens on January 4, 1935. The narrator, twelve-year-old Matthew "Moose" Flanagan, has moved with his family from Santa Monica to Alcatraz Island, where his father Cam will work as an electrician and a prison guard.

They have moved there to save the money they need to send Moose's sister Natalie to the Esther P. Marinoff School. This residential school treats kids like Natalie, who has autism. In the 1930s, Alcatraz houses notorious criminals, including the gangster Al Capone. Moose is depressed about having to leave his friends and winning baseball team behind.

Chapter 2

The following day, Moose's mother goes to run errands, leaving Natalie in Moose's care. Although Natalie is older than Moose, their mother pretends that she is only ten years old. Moose recalls the previous day on the train, when Natalie's button collection had gone flying, causing her to become hysterical and have one of her common fits. Seven-year-old Theresa Mattaman comes to the house to show them around the island.

Chapter 3

Theresa takes them past the guard, Mr. Trixle, to see Piper, Warden Williams' daughter. Piper is beautiful but rude and arrogant. It emerges that Natalie is an idiot savant with numbers. Moose rarely sees his dad because he is always working.

Chapter 4

The entire family is upset at having to send Natalie away, but they are determined to try to help her.

Moose gently manages to get her on the boat without too much fuss. He is very good with his sister although he sometimes resents all the responsibility he has coping with her.

Chapter 5

Moose is upset that the school may not help Natalie after all. Moose has been summoned to visit the warden.

Chapter 6

The warden sternly ticks off the strict rules. He asks Moose to help his daughter in any way she wants. Ironically, the warden does not realize that his daughter is the biggest trouble-maker of all, brazenly flouting the rules to her own end.

Chapter 7

Moose starts at his new school. The teacher, Miss Bimp, mocks him for being so tall and mature-looking. Although it is against the rules, Piper tells wild stories about the notorious convicts in Alcatraz, pretending that she knows them all personally. She also enlists

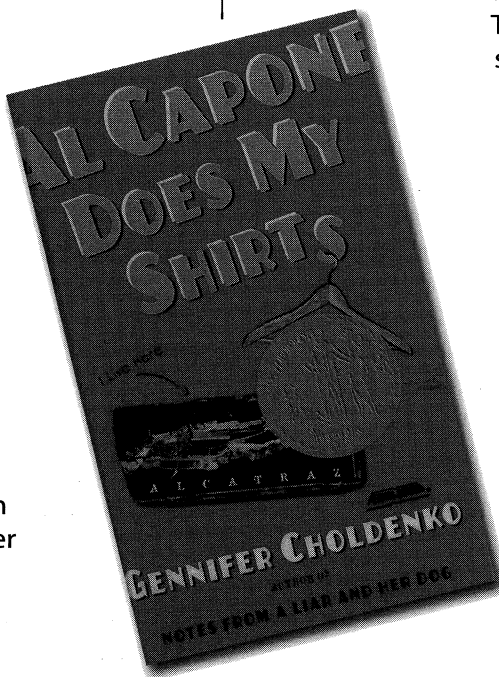
Moose in her latest illegal project: to sell the Alcatraz laundry service to the kids at school.

Chapter 8

After school, Moose is chosen to play baseball with a classmate named Scout. He plays very well, making a double-play, and thus winning instant popularity. He floats home, delighted to be able to play ball again.

Chapter 9

Moose meets some of the other kids. To his astonishment, Theresa's brother Jimmy can't play ball, but Annie can. Annie reveals that sometimes the



convicts hit baseballs over the fence. These are highly-coveted prizes. Piper enlists Moose in her laundry plan. He cannot resist Piper's beauty, even though he knows that getting involved with her is a very bad idea and might cost his father his job. He rationalizes his involvement by remembering that the warden wanted him to help Piper.

Chapter 10

Mr. Purdy calls from the Esther P. Marinoff School to say that Natalie is not adjusting and must be picked up that day. Moose regretfully tells his father, who will deal with the situation.

Chapter 11

The family is crushed that this latest effort to help Natalie has fallen through, as have all the others.

Chapter 12

Piper launches her laundry scheme in school.

Chapter 13

Because Natalie has been rejected by the school, Moose is unable to play baseball on the team anymore because he must take care of her. His mother gives music lessons on the mainland for extra money. Natalie's condition—her tantrums and constant needs—demand much of his mother's attention as well. However, everyone in the family is aware that Natalie is closest to Moose and that he handles her best.

Chapter 14

Moose tells Scout that he can't play baseball any more because he has to baby-sit.

Chapter 15

Natalie throws a fit and takes off all her clothes. Piper witnesses it.

Chapter 16

The kids at school feel cheated by the laundry scheme because there is no proof that the convicts actually did the work themselves.

Chapter 17

Scout has changed the day of the game to accommodate Moose, but his mother has also changed her work days, so Moose still can't be part of the baseball team. He understands the family situation but still feels great resentment.

Chapter 18

Scout is furious when Moose tells him that he can't play ball.

Chapter 19

The laundry scheme is revealed and all the kids get punished, even Moose, whom Piper had cheated out of his share of the money.

Chapter 20

Moose's father gently but firmly punishes him for his role in the laundry scheme.

Chapter 21

As her punishment, Piper has been sent off the island. She is living with her grandmother on Nob Hill. A few months later, she returns and comes up with a new scheme: hearing that Al Capone's mother is coming to visit her son, she decides they should get on the ferry to meet her first.

Chapter 22

On the ferry, Mrs. Capone totally ignores Piper but takes a shine to Theresa's screaming baby brother, whom Theresa has smuggled on the boat with them. Mrs. Capone gently holds baby Rocky and calms him.

Chapter 23

Scout and Moose become friends again. That afternoon, Moose leaves Natalie alone for a few minutes to look for convict baseballs.

Chapter 24

He is worried because Natalie keeps saying the number 105, but he can't link it to her activities.

Chapter 25

Everyday Moose plays baseball with Scout at lunch. One afternoon he goes looking for balls. When he returns, Natalie is gone.

Chapter 26

He finds Natalie with convict 105! Moose screams at the man, who calmly gives Natalie a baseball and walks away.

Chapter 27

Piper realizes what has happened, to Moose's horror.

Chapter 28

Moose tries to tell his parents that the island can be dangerous, but they won't hear of it. They want Natalie exposed to normal kids. They want her with Moose and his friends.

Chapter 29

Piper wants Moose to help her meet convict 105, and through him, Al Capone. Moose refuses.

Chapter 30

One afternoon, Natalie wants to go outside and meet convict 105. When Moose refuses, she throws a fit. Mrs. Caconi and Mrs. Trixie, neighbors, come to Moose's aid.

Chapter 31

Moose asks his father if Natalie became the way she is because of something he did. His father reassures Moose that he had nothing to do with her condition.

Chapter 32

Moose's parents talk about his concerns. His father tries to get his mother to see that Moose has needs as well as Natalie.

Chapter 33

Natalie and the convict meet again and hold hands, to Moose's horror. But for the first time, Natalie looks like a normal sixteen-year-old girl.

Chapter 34

Natalie has a birthday party. Finally, Moose admits her real age is sixteen, not ten.

Chapter 35

Moose and his mother have a confrontation about the age issue because she refuses to admit that Natalie isn't ten. Natalie says that she is sixteen, to her father's delight.

Chapter 36

Natalie is re-interviewed for the school and rejected once again.

Chapter 37

Moose asks the warden to ask Al Capone to pressure the school to admit Natalie. It is widely known that Capone has tremendous power, even from jail. The warden refuses.

Chapter 38

Piper and Moose write a letter to Capone, asking for his help.

Chapter 39

The school's owner, Mr. Purdy, calls to say that he has decided to open a new branch of the school for girls. Natalie will be the first student.

Chapter 40

The next day, Moose pulls on a clean shirt and finds a note in the pocket. The note reads, "Done."

Author's Note

The author explains that parts of the story are based on truth.

Timeline of Alcatraz

- 1933** Attorney General Homer Cummings decides to investigate Alcatraz as a possible location for the super prison he envisions. Secretary of War grants use of Alcatraz to the Federal Bureau of Prisons for five years. San Francisco citizens protest the choice of Alcatraz as the nation's maximum security prison. James A. Johnston, former warden of San Quentin, is appointed as Warden of Alcatraz.
- 1934** Johnston begins work as warden of Alcatraz. Johnston writes the Daily Routine, the procedure which will govern the lives of prisoners and guards. First civilian prisoners arrive. "Machine Gun" Kelly arrives in a shipment of "furniture" from Leavenworth.
- 1935** Accusations are made that life in Alcatraz is driving some men insane. The charges are denied. Criminal Henri Young arrives at Alcatraz and begins amassing a huge misconduct record. Weyerhauser kidnapper Harmon Waley arrives at Alcatraz. Correspondence courses through the University of California Extension begin. 81 prisoners enroll.
- 1936** Released counterfeiter Al "Sailor" Loomis tells the press about Alcatraz's dungeons. First General Strike begins in the laundry.

Johnston locks the strikers in their cells.
James Lucas attacks Al Capone in the prison basement with a pair of shears.
Joseph Bowers is shot while climbing the fence outside the incinerator.
Alvin Karpis arrives at Alcatraz.
Henry Larry publishes his inside account of life at Alcatraz.

- 1937** The *San Francisco News* publishes A.W. Davis' account of life at Alcatraz.
Paul Coy arrives on Alcatraz.
Second General Strike begins.
Burton Phillips attacks Warden Johnston in the mess hall. Johnston is knocked out, but saved by Officer Joe Steere.
Prisoners Ted Cole and Ralph Roe escape.
- 1938** Mail-robber Roy Gardner is released.
Bryan Conway's "20 Months in Alcatraz" appears in *The Saturday Evening Post*.
John Paul Chase, partner of "Baby Face Nelson," is taken to New York as a material witness against two Reno underworld figures. He returns uneventfully.
U.S. Supreme Court rules that prisoners in federal felony trials are entitled to a court appointed lawyer if they cannot otherwise afford one. Many Alcatraz prisoners compose writs of habeas corpus, trying to secure their release.
Whitney "Rufus" Franklin leads an escape attempt. An officer and a convict are killed in the attempt.
Al Capone develops paresis of the brain due to untreated syphilis.
Criminal Sam Shockley arrives on Alcatraz.
The prison's annual report shows that 53.2 percent of all prisoners are working in the industries.
P.W. "Pet" Reed's "Murder on Alcatraz" is published in *The Examiner*.
Al Capone is sent to Terminal Island to finish the last year of his sentence.
- 1939** Arthur "Doc" Barker is shot while trying to escape from Alcatraz.
James V. Bennett promises to install new safety equipment and hire more guards.
Attorney General Francis Murphy calls Alcatraz as a "horror spot" and promises it will be closed.

The Bureau of Prisons announces new standards for return addresses on outgoing mail from prisoners. Alcatraz inmates protest because they do not want their relatives shamed by public knowledge of their incarceration in Alcatraz.

Warden James Johnston is the keynote speaker at a national gathering of prison wardens and defends Alcatraz as a humane institution.

Former U.S. Attorney General Homer Cummings' "Why Alcatraz is a Success" appears in *Colliers*.

- 1940** Roy Gardner is found dead in a San Francisco hotel room. He has killed himself by using poisonous gas.
Joseph Paul Cretzer and Arnold Kyle arrive on Alcatraz after attempting escape from McNeil Island Penitentiary.
Theodore "Blackie" Audett returns to Alcatraz to begin a new sentence for "entering a bank to commit larceny."
- 1941** Guards find two home-made pistols. William J. Dainard is sent to solitary when a search of his mattress reveals holes cut to fit the guns.
Young is found guilty of manslaughter after his lawyers put Alcatraz on trial. His jury demands that conditions at Alcatraz be investigated.
Bureau of Prisons Director James Bennett issues a statement defending Warden Johnston.
Forrest Holiday wins his Supreme Court appeal contesting the use of the U.S. Commissioner to hear habeas corpus pleas at Alcatraz.
Floyd Barkdoll, Joseph Cretzer, and his brother-in-law Arnold Kyle lead an attempt to break through. They seize hostages while they attempt to saw through the tool-proof bars of the Mat Shop. Eventually, they surrender.
Frank Clarvoe writes "Alcatraz Debunked" for the *San Francisco News*.
John Bayless nearly drowns in an escape attempt from the Rock.
A perimeter fence now surrounds the entire residential area, separating it from the penitentiary portion of the island.

- Warden Johnston chooses to ignore a "lights-out" order from General John DeWitt of the Presidio, bringing a sharp rebuke from Department of Justice officials in Washington.
- 1942** Construction of the new D-Block "Treatment Unit" completed.
Conversion of prison industries to wartime production begins.
Supreme Court dismisses Bernard Paul Coy's Writ of Certiorari.
Federal Prison Industries is authorized to pay Alcatraz prisoners a small wage, ranging from 5 to 12 cents per hour, so that they might be stimulated to work harder for the war effort.
"Birdman" Robert Stroud is transferred to Alcatraz.
- 1943** Fred Hunter and Floyd Hamilton lead an escape attempt; James Boarman dies.
Hamilton is believed to have died until he turns up after having hidden in a sea cave.
Robert Stroud files a petition of Habeas Corpus, contending that he is being cruelly and unjustly treated by his continued confinement in solitary.
- 1944** Prison industries wages are increased two cents per hour to reward Alcatraz inmates for their contributions to the war effort.
Hugh Bowen again challenges the authority of the United States over crimes committed in National Parks, but his writ is again denied.
Cecil Wright is recommitted to Alcatraz.
The Alcatraz Argus publishes its first issue.
- 1945** Rufus Franklin stabs Henri Young in the recreation yard. Young is placed in solitary for his own protection.
Warden Johnston declares a work stoppage at the death of President Franklin Roosevelt.
Clarence Carnes, the "Chocktaw Kid," arrives and becomes Alcatraz's youngest prisoner at age 18.
John Giles nearly makes it off the Rock when he dons a uniform and boards the Army launch bound for Angel Island.
- 1946** James Grove murders Ben McMiller.
Marines come to the aid of the Bureau of Prisons when Bernard Paul Coy's attempt to break out of the Cell House turns into a bloody last stand for himself, Marvin Hubbard, and Joseph Cretzer. Two guards are killed.
James V. Bennett calls on Alcatraz prisoners and staff to voluntarily ration their food so that the excess might go to feed the hungry children of Europe and Asia.
U.S. Public Health Service's Dr. Marion King reports that 75 percent of the inmates at Alcatraz may be classed as "psychopathic" compared with 12 percent at other federal institutions.
- 1947** Gun ports and other riot prevention features are added to the Cell House.
Paul Madigan becomes the new Associate Warden.
Theodore "Blackie" Audett is conditionally released. He will return to Alcatraz in 1956 after spending time at McNeil Island and the Oregon State Penitentiary.
Robert Stroud is reported for Conspiracy in having an unnamed correctional officer carry out an unauthorized letter.
- 1948** Cecil Wright is released on a Writ of Habeas Corpus.
Warden Johnston retires at age 72.
James V. Bennett recommends replacing Alcatraz with a more centrally located prison.

Author Sketch

Gennifer Choldenko was born in 1957 in Santa Monica, California. She was the youngest child in a large, loud family. Like the main character Moose in her novel *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, Choldenko grew up with a sibling who had autism. As she noted in an interview: "But the fact that this book is 'close to home' gave it some additional baggage as well. It was extremely confusing and terribly frustrating to grow up with a sibling who had autism. I really wanted to reach out to other children who are the siblings of children with problems. It was very important to me that the book ring true to those kids."



Her strongest influence to become a writer was her father, who worked as a businessman but yearned to be writer. Although he made time to write everyday and was devoted to his craft, he was never able to get his work published, no matter how hard he tried.

An avid horseback rider, Choldenko enjoyed exploring the craggy hills of Southern California from atop her favorite horse. In fact, her first job was braiding manes and tails for horse shows. She soon moved up to become a riding instructor for blind and deaf children.

After completing college, Choldenko got a job as a copywriter in a small ad agency. In the evenings, she took classes in illustration at Pasadena's Art Centre, College of Design. This eventually led to a full-time study of illustration at Art Centre and Rhode Island School of Design. After completing the program at RISD, Choldenko set her sights on a career in children's literature.

She had a hit with her very first book, *Moonstruck: The True Story of the Cow Who Jumped over the Moon*. Her second book, *Notes from a Liar and Her Dog*, received equally positive reviews. Describing *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, Choldenko noted on her web page: "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." Today, Choldenko is married and has two children, Ian and Kai. She lives with her family in Tiburon, California.

Critic's Corner

Al Capone Does My Shirts received many awards. It is a Newbery Honor Medal winner, an ALA Notable Book, a *New York Times* Bestseller Best Book for Young Adults, a *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year, a *Publisher's Weekly* Best Book of the Year, a *Kirkus Reviews* Best Book of the Year, a Top Ten Children's Books of 2004, a San Francisco Chronicle Parents' Choice Silver Medal, a VOYA's Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers, a CBC-NCSS

Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People Special Needs Award (UK). In addition, the novel was a Children's Book of the Month Selection, a Junior Library Guild Selection, and a Scholastic Book Club (Literature Circle) Selection. Not surprisingly, reviews were enthusiastic. For example, *Kirkus Reviews*, giving the novel a starred review, noted that "Choldenko's pacing is exquisite" and called the book "a great read." *Publishers Weekly*, also giving the novel a starred review, said that it is "fast-paced and memorable." Time Out New York Kids said that *Al Capone Does My Shirts* has "The freshest voice since Gantos' *Joey Pigza*...the most inventive setting since, well, ever. Breezy with a solid gold center."

Buffalo News said that "Gennifer Choldenko offers a dazzling piece of work in this heartwarming, funny, and original story."

Miranda Doyle, writing in *School Library Journal*, praised the book by saying: "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.

Ed Sullivan, reviewing the novel for *Booklist*, was equally enthusiastic: "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."

Other Books by Gennifer Choldenko

Moonstruck: The True Story of the Cow Who Jumped over the Moon (1997)
Notes from a Liar and Her Dog (2001)

Bibliography

Booklist, March 1, 1997, p. 1169.
Publishers Weekly, February 10, 1997, review of *Moonstruck*, p. 83; May 14, 2001, review of *Notes from a Liar and Her Dog*, p. 82.
School Library Journal, April, 1997, Patricia Pearl Doyle, review of *Moonstruck*, p. 91; April, 2001, Connie Tyrrell Burns, review of *Notes from a Liar and Her Dog*, p. 139.

General Objectives

1. To analyze life on Alcatraz Island in the 1930s
2. To explore the Flanagan family structure
3. To assess each character's personality
4. To trace the sequence of events
5. To describe how Moose takes care of his sister
6. To appreciate the light, humorous style
7. To find examples of compassion
8. To understand autism
9. To recognize the significance of setting
10. To describe the novel's ending

Specific Objectives

1. To understand why prisoners were housed at Alcatraz Island
2. To understand the social, political, and economic realities of the time
3. To probe why Moose is attracted to Piper
4. To probe why Piper flouts her father's orders and gets into trouble
5. To describe how Moose takes care of Natalie
6. To appreciate Moose's maturity
7. To explore why Moose's mother pretends that Natalie is still ten years old
8. To understand why the Esther P. Marinoff School is so important to Mrs. Flanagan
9. To appreciate why baseball is so crucial to Moose
10. To understand Al Capone's role in the novel's ending

Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Gennifer Choldenko's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

description a word picture of what something or someone is like. Description is made up of sensory details that help readers form pictures in their minds. Gennifer Choldenko uses a lot of description in *Al Capone Does My Shirts* to help readers visualize the time and place. This is evident from the very first paragraph in the book: "Today I moved to a twelve-acre rock covered with cement, topped with bird turd, and surrounded by water." Notice how this description appeals to touch and smell as well as sight.

humor parts of a story that are funny. Humor can be created through sarcasm, word play, irony, and exaggeration. Choldenko creates humor most often through word play, as we see on page 56 when little Theresa is talking about her pregnant mother having to take it easy or the baby might fall out too soon. "It all depends on how long the American cord is..." she says, meaning the umbilical cord.

conflict in literature a struggle or fight. There are two kinds of conflict. In an external conflict, characters struggle against a force outside themselves. In an internal conflict, characters battle a force within themselves. *Al Capone Does My Shirts* has both internal and external conflicts. We see the external conflicts as the Flanagans struggle to get Natalie the education she requires. They battle the school authorities and even each other as they fight for her rights. We see the internal conflict as Moose struggles against his desire to help his sister and his desire to have his own life. As much as he resents his mother's demands that he watch his sister and keep her with him at all times, he understands Natalie's need to be with normal kids. This pull between what he feels he should do and what he wants to do creates his internal conflict.

The Importance of Setting

Alcatraz Island, located in the middle of San Francisco Bay, was formerly used as a military stockade and later as a maximum security prison. Today, the island is a historic site supervised by the National Park Service as part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area; the map on the facing page is used courtesy of NPS. Visitors can reach the island by a ferry ride from nearby Fishermans Wharf in San Francisco. A well-maintained nature preserve, the island is surprisingly beautiful, boasting many flowers, a seabird colony, and stunning views of the coastline.

Alcatraz Island is one of Golden Gate National Recreation Area's most popular destinations, offering a close-up look at the historic, infamous federal prison long off-limits to the public. Visitors to the island cannot only explore the remnants of the prison, but can also stroll the grounds. The island is also known as "The Rock."

From 1850 to 1933, Alcatraz served as a military fort. The U.S. Department of Justice acquired the Disciplinary Barracks on Alcatraz on October 12, 1933. The island became a federal prison on January 1st of the following year. During the 29 years it was in use, the jail held such notable criminals as Al Capone; Robert Franklin Stroud, the Birdman of Alcatraz; and Alvin Karpis, who served more time at Alcatraz than any other inmate. During its 29 years of operation, the penitentiary never logged any officially successful escapes. In all attempts, escapees were either shot dead or believed to be drowned in the frigid San Francisco Bay waters.

Three escapees, Frank Morris and brothers John and Clarence Anglin, disappeared from their cells on June 11, 1962. This attempt, popularized in the movie *Escape from Alcatraz*, was among the most intricate ever devised. Though only some evidence was found that the men died in their attempt, they are officially listed as missing and presumed drowned. The FBI found plywood paddles and parts of a raft made from raincoats on Angel Island, California. It is very likely that the escapees did die in their attempt as, after all these years, no one has surfaced claiming to be or even to have seen the escapees.

In 2003, Jamie Hyneman and Adam Savage, co-hosts of the TV series *Myth Busters*, sought to prove whether the escapees could have survived. Using similar materials to those used by the three convicts, they constructed an inflatable raft from a large quantity of rubber raincoats and made plywood paddles. Hyneman and Savage selected a date when the tide direction and rate matched that of the escape attempt. With another crew member standing in for the third prisoner, they were able to paddle with the outgoing tide to the Marin Headlands, near the North tower of the Golden Gate Bridge. In addition, tests using the Army Corps of Engineers scale model of San Francisco Bay indicated that paddles or other debris thrown into the water from the landing location would be carried by the returning tide to Angel Island. This proved that escape was possible with the resources available to the escapees and provided an explanation for the location of the escape debris found by the FBI.

The penitentiary was closed on March 21, 1963, because it was far more expensive to operate than other prisons of the time. It was easier to build a new, traditional land-bound prison than to pay for all the upkeep and support the Alcatraz prison required.

In 1969, a group of Native Americans affiliated with the American Indian Movement attempted to reclaim the land, saying that an 1868 federal treaty allowed Native Americans to use all federal territory that the government was not actively using. After nearly two years of occupation, the government forced the Native Americans off the island.

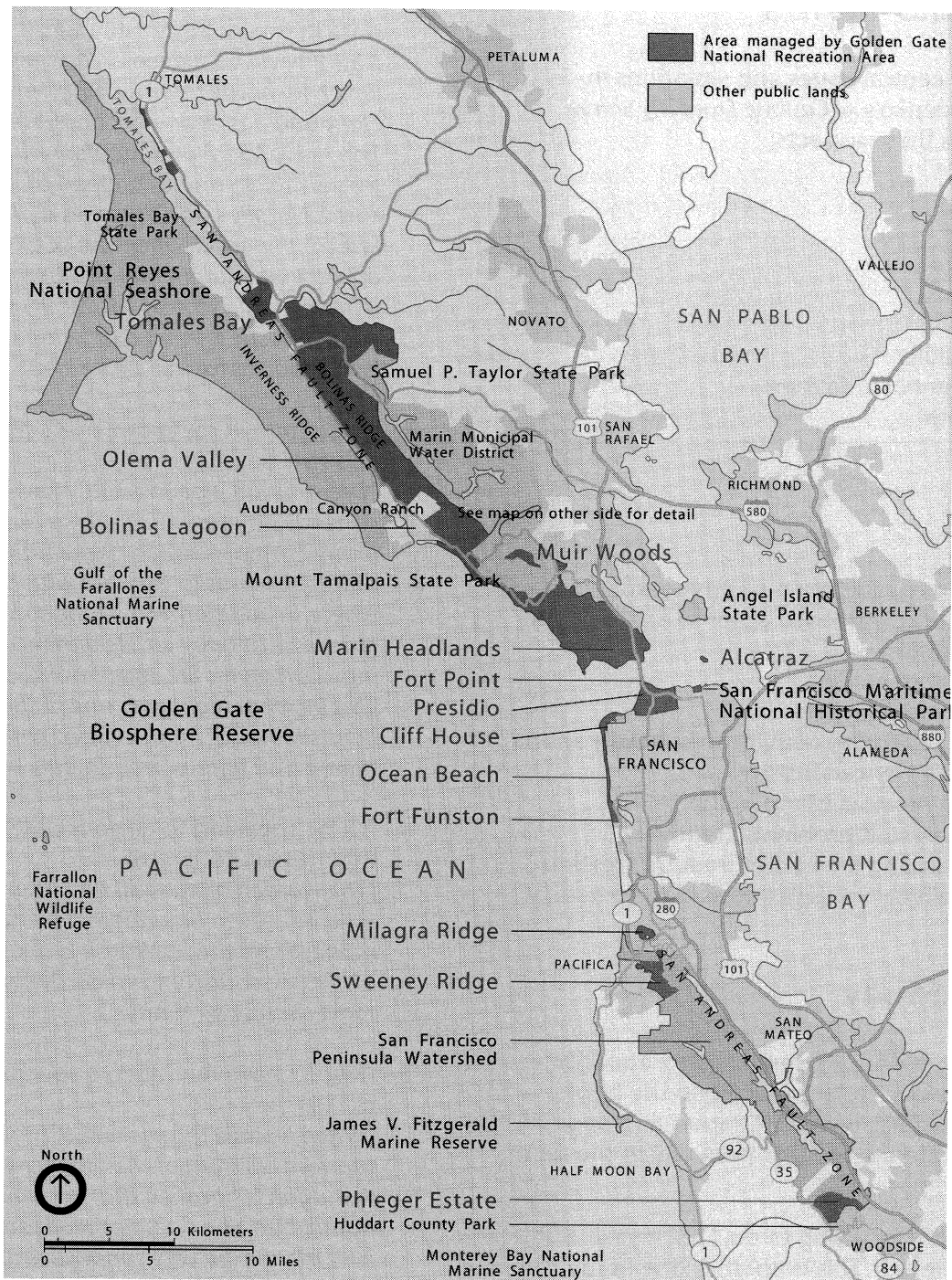
Cross-Curricular Sources

Books

- Richard Carlson, *Poems and Short Stories about My Brother Kevin*
Who Has Autism: Entertainment for Boys and Girls Ages 6 to 10.
Alexandra Day, *The Flight of a Dove*
Andrea Edwards, *Taking Autism to School*
Becky Edwards, *My Brother Sammy*
Leslie Ely, *Looking After Louis*
Illana Katz, *Joey and Sam: A Heartwarming Storybook about Autism, a Family, and a Brother's Love*
Laurie Lears, *Ian's Walk: A Story about Autism*
Ann M. Martin, *Kristy and the Secret of Susan*
Celia Rees, *The Truth Out There*
Colby Rodowsky, *Clay*
Mary Thompson, *Andy and his Yellow Frisbee*
Debi Tyree, *Jessica's Little Sister: A Story About Autism*
Nancy Werlin, *Are You Alone on Purpose?*

DVDs and Videos

- Alcatraz* (1980)
Alcatraz (1989)
Alcatraz (1994)
Alcatraz: American Justice (2000)
Alcatraz Remembered (1999)
The Birdman of Alcatraz (1962)
Escape from Alcatraz (1979)
Escapes from Alcatraz: The True Stories (2002)
Secrets of Alcatraz: Return to the Rock (1995)
Secrets of Alcatraz (1996)
Seven Miles from Alcatraz: Flight from Glory (undated)
Terror on Alcatraz (1990)



Audio

Notes from a Liar and Her Dog was adapted for audiocassette, Listening Library, 2001

Internet

Gennifer Choldenko Web site
<http://www.choldenko.com>
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www.choldenko.com/Pages/al_capone.html

Gennifer Choldenko Biographical Information
www.bloomsbury.com/childrens/microsite.asp?id=289§ion=3
 Gennifer Choldenko Biographical Information
www.iblist.com/author10543.htm
 Official Alcatraz Web site
<http://www.nps.gov/alcatraz/>

Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Gennifer Choldenko's *Al Capone Does My Shirts* should include these aspects:

Themes

- autism
- baseball
- buttons
- convicts
- coping skills
- life's essential unfairness
- friendship
- history
- luck
- schemes

Motifs

- adjusting to radically new environments
- cooperating with each other to ensure a successful family
- dealing with autism
- dealing with convicts
- enjoying everyday activities, especially sports
- learning American history
- living on Alcatraz Island in the 1930s
- solving difficult problems creatively
- understanding life in the Great Depression
- using political influence to achieve personal goals

Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the book. Explain the meaning of each. Chapter and page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. This is the right thing to do, I tell myself. But I don't believe it. This is another one of my mother's crazy ideas. (Chap. 4, p. 28)
(Moose's sister Natalie is autistic. This means that she suffers from a neurological disorder that causes communication, learning, and obsessive-compulsive problems. Here, Moose is tricking his sister into going on the boat that will take her to the mainland and the new school she is to attend. He feels bad about tricking his sister this way and realizes that there is little hope that Natalie will be cured.)
2. I don't remember when my mom decided Natalie was going to stay ten. (Chap. 11, p. 65)
(Natalie will be sixteen on her next birthday, which is shortly approaching. However, Mrs. Flanagan has frozen her daughter's age at ten. This helps Mrs. Flanagan deal with her daughter's disability and to pretend that she will be cured. Natalie's age becomes a pivotal issue later in the novel, when she acts in an age-appropriate manner for a teenager—falling for a man—which forces the family to acknowledge that she is indeed growing up and will be handicapped for her entire life.)
3. I'm so mad at my mom, that's all I can think about. (Chap. 14, p. 87)
(The woman working with Natalie, Mrs. Kelly, correctly advises the family to expose her to as many normal children as possible. This means that Moose has to take her with him everywhere. In addition, Mrs. Flanagan is working, so Moose must baby-sit. He bitterly resents this intrusion on his life, much as he loves his sister. This incident highlights one of the biggest problems siblings of handicapped children face, a theme that figures prominently in the novel.)
4. "I'll be speaking to all your parents about this." (Chap. 19, p. 116)
(The warden blames all the other kids for Piper's scheme—even Moose, who did not get any money from the scheme. It is another example of life's essential unfairness, the motif shown most sharply by Natalie.)
5. "I won't have her made a spectacle." (Chap. 20 p. 119)
(When Natalie throws one of her frequent tantrums in front of the other children, Mrs. Flanagan is horrified that her daughter is humiliated. She does not realize that Moose's new friends are very supportive and accepting of Natalie. Indeed, Natalie has become part of the group.)
6. "At home this never would have happened. At home I wasn't responsible for everyone in the world." (Chap. 20, p. 121)
(Mr. Flanagan explains the possible repercussions of Moose acting out: the loss of his job and the family's income. Since the story is set during the Depression, this is very serious.)

Moose feels overburdened by responsibility, as indeed he is.)

7. "How does he know?" I asked Piper. "About her?" Piper snorts. "The cons know everything about us." (Chap. 33, p. 185)
(This comment foreshadows the novel's ending, when Al Capone gets involved in establishing a new school for Natalie. It shows his power, even from behind bars.)
8. It's so strange, so awful, and so ..normal. (Chap. 33, p. 185)
(Natalie has fallen for one of the convicts. He is not much older than she is. Moose is so used to his sister acting like a child and being treated like one that he is shocked to see her acting in a mature way. This shows that she will mature, no matter how much her mother tries to hold her back.)
9. "Uh. Yeah. I need to talk to Warden Williams," I say. (Chap. 37, p. 201)
(Moose decides to ask Warden Williams, the most powerful man he knows, to help get Natalie admitted to the Esther P. Marinoff School. Moose wants the Warden to ask Al Capone to intercede on Natalie's behalf. This shows the lengths to which people will often go when they love someone. It shows how much Moose loves his sister.)
10. "Mr. Purdy called," my dad explains. "He's decided to open another branch of the Esther P. Marinoff school for older children and he wants Natalie to be the first student." (Chap. 39, p. 213)
(Thanks to Moose's bravery, Piper's cunning, and Al Capone's intercession, Natalie will get the education that Mrs. Flanagan so much wants for her. The book suggests that the education will help her make additional progress.)

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. When and where is the story set? Why is the setting important?
(The story takes place on Alcatraz Island in 1935. It is crucial to the novel because the entire plot revolves around Al Capone's power and his ability to influence people and call in favors, even from prison.)
2. What is wrong with Natalie?
(She is autistic, suffering from a neurological disorder.)
3. Why does Mrs. Flanagan make Moose babysit Natalie all the time?
(Mrs. Flanagan gives music lessons on the mainland so she is not home all the time. In addition, she wants Natalie around normal kids so she picks up positive behaviors.)
4. How do Moose and Natalie get a convict baseball?
(Convict #105 gives it to them because he fancies Natalie.)
5. How does Natalie get admitted to the newly-formed school?
(Al Capone intercedes on her behalf.)

Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. Why is it so important for Mrs. Flanagan to keep celebrating Natalie's tenth birthday?
(As long as Natalie is young, Mrs. Flanagan can pretend that she can still be helped by attending a special school. Once she reaches maturity, it is highly unlikely that her handicap can be corrected.)
7. Why do you think Piper misbehaves so much?
(It seems likely that she is rebelling against her father and her role as the perfect child.)
8. Why do you think the author chose this topic and wrote this book?

(The author had an autistic sister and very likely dealt with many of the same issues that Moose faced, such as having too much responsibility, having the family uprooted to accommodate one child, and explaining a sibling's handicap to new friends and acquaintances.)

Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. Did you find the ending logical and believable? Why or why not?

(The ending is both logical and believable because Al Capone would want to help a girl whom another convict liked. Also, he would want to exercise his power for good and thus burnish his reputation as a helpful, benevolent man.)

10. What parts of this book did you find especially humorous?

(Moose's asides are very witty, as is Theresa's misunderstandings with language.)

Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

11. Hold a roundtable discussion in which you debate whether or not families should have been allowed to live on Alcatraz Island in the 1930s.
12. Make a model of Alcatraz Island as it appears today, a wildlife preserve.

Across the Curriculum

Art/Music

1. Moose mentions the teacher's beautiful Palmer handwriting. Learn how to write script in Palmer. Download some samples from an online Palmer webpage. Then copy a paragraph from the book in Palmer script.
2. Make a large drawing of Alcatraz as it was in the 1930s and label each part. Use the picture that opens the book for ideas.
3. Using scenes from the novel, create a mural of the main events.
4. Draw or paint a new cover for *Al Capone Does My Shirts*.
5. Imagine you are creating a movie of *Al Capone Does My Shirts*. Choose background music for three especially dramatic scenes.

Language Arts

1. On her web page, the author says that her favorite character is Theresa. Choldenko says, "I love Theresa because she reminds me of me when I was seven. I was quirky and pesky and I had to be included in absolutely everything." Choose your favorite character from the novel and explain why you identify with him or her.
2. Moose writes a letter to Al Capone asking the gangster to help his sister. Imagine that Al Capone is still alive. Write a letter to him, asking him for a favor that is very important to you.
3. Write a letter from Moose to his friend back home. In the letter, explain what life is like on "The Rock."
4. Theresa has made a set of cards with each gangster's name, birthplace, family, crimes, and other relevant facts. Choose five famous criminals in the news today and make a set of cards about them.
5. Read *Jane Eyre*, a novel mentioned in *Al Capone Does My Shirts*. Summarize the plot for your classmates.

History/Social Studies

1. To do research for *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, Choldenko signed up to work as a docent on Alcatraz. Find out what a docent does. Then explain where you would like to be a docent.
2. Moose mentions Eleanor Roosevelt. Find out who she was and why she is so famous. Share your results in a report or poster.
3. The Warden is a member of the Rotary Club. Research the Rotary Club to see which chapters are active in your community. Visit one meeting and find out about the programs they sponsor, such as the "Gift of Life."
4. Al Capone lends his name to the book. Report on his life. Explain why he is still famous so many years after his death.
5. Learn more about prisons in America. Share your findings with the class as a speech or in a web page.

6. Choose any one of the historical figures in the book, such as Warden Williams, and write a report on his life.

Science/Math

1. Al Capone was a ruthless gangster and murderer, yet he was finally apprehended for tax evasion because it was the only crime the government could prove. Make a chart showing the tax rates currently being used in America.
2. Natalie has autism. Research the current thinking about the causes and treatments for this neurological condition.
3. Mrs. Trixie made a tray of manicotti for the Flanagan family. Moose does not think that he has ever tasted anything so good. Get a recipe for manicotti and make a tray to share with your classmates.
4. Moose and his friends adore baseball and lionize the great baseball players of the day. Choose one player from the 1930s such as Babe Ruth, and make a chart showing how his statistics compare to a ballplayer of equal rank playing today.

Speech/Drama

1. Moose says, "What they say about females being the weaker sex is the biggest lie in the world." Debate this issue.
2. Establish a set of class rules or laws to prevent the types of scams that Piper runs in her school.
3. In a speech, explain whether today's prisons seek to incarcerate or rehabilitate the inmates.
4. The novel is set during the Great Depression, when more than one-third of all Americans were out of work. As a result, Moose's father is especially concerned about keeping his job. Research the causes of an economic depression. Then explain in a speech whether or not you think that another worldwide economic depression could occur today. Give reasons for your conclusion.

5. Moose's parents give him a great deal of responsibility for Natalie. This is in addition to his regular responsibilities in school and home. Form two teams and debate how much responsibility Moose should have. Determine how his level of responsibility compares to yours.

Alternate Assessment

1. Discuss how the life of a teenager on Alcatraz in the 1935 was the same and different from your life today.
2. Make a list of actions that show that Moose is a good brother, son, and friend.
3. Write a new title for the book.

Vocabulary

Match each word to its meaning. Write the letter of your choice in the space provided.

- | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| ___ 1. asylum | a. hospital |
| ___ 2. ashen | b. murder |
| ___ 3. conniving | c. infamous |
| ___ 4. hordes | d. prisoner |
| ___ 5. notorious | e. tattler |
| ___ 6. gnome | f. glowing |
| ___ 7. replicate | g. prejudice |
| ___ 8. banshee | h. dance |
| ___ 9. mute | i. refuses |
| ___ 10. inmate | j. mobs |
| ___ 11. homicide | k. troll |
| ___ 12. radiant | l. tricks |
| ___ 13. obnoxious | m. annoying |
| ___ 14. elaborate | n. absurd, ridiculous |
| ___ 15. snitch | o. screaming creature |
| ___ 16. balks | p. cheating |
| ___ 17. preposterous | q. copy |
| ___ 18. jig | r. cannot talk |
| ___ 19. bias | s. very pale |
| ___ 20. shenanigans | t. very fancy |

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

Match each description with a name from the list. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at the left of each number.

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| A. Moose Flanagan | F. Cam Flaganan |
| B. Annie Bomini | G. Piper |
| C. Theresa Mattaman | H. Scout |
| D. Esther P. Marinoff | I. Natalie Flanagan |
| E. Mrs. Kelly | J. Al Capone |

- ____ 1. The seven-year old girl who is warm and friendly
- ____ 2. The warden's beautiful but sneaky daughter
- ____ 3. The most famous prisoner on Alcatraz
- ____ 4. An electrician and guard; he has two children
- ____ 5. The narrator, a tall, handsome, and smart twelve-year-old
- ____ 6. The school that Natalie eventually attends
- ____ 7. Moose's male classmate; a good baseball player
- ____ 8. The woman who works with Natalie to improve her social skills and speech
- ____ 9. Moose's handicapped sister
- ____ 10. The kindly girl who is an excellent baseball player

Part II: Identification (20 points)

Briefly describe each person, place, or thing and explain why it is important in the story.

1. buttons
2. beer
3. baseball
4. book index
5. laundry

Comprehension Test A (Page 2)

Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if all or part of the statement is false.

- ___ 1. The story opens on January 4, 2005.
- ___ 2. The Flanagans have moved to Alcatraz Island so Mr. Flanagan can work at the prison as an electrician and guard.
- ___ 3. Moose is delighted about starting a new life, making new friends, and joining a new football team at Alcatraz.
- ___ 4. The entire family is upset at having to send Natalie away to school, but they are determined to try to help her.
- ___ 5. The warden wants to see Moose, but Moose refuses to meet with him.
- ___ 6. Mrs. Flanagan gives music lessons on the mainland to make extra money.
- ___ 7. The kids feel cheated by the laundry scheme because there is no proof that the convicts actually did the work themselves.
- ___ 8. The laundry scheme is revealed but none of the kids get punished, even Piper, who took all of the money for herself.
- ___ 9. Natalie runs off with a convict, and they are discovered married and living in San Francisco.
- ___ 10. Piper and Moose write a letter to Al Capone, asking for his help getting Natalie into a special school.

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. From the beginning of the novel, which character changed the most? Do you think these changes will last? Why or why not?
- 2. Summarize the events in *Al Capone Does My Shirts*.
- 3. Moose's mother tells him that he is better with Natalie than she is. In what ways does Moose help Natalie?
- 4. What is it about Natalie's behavior that makes her so difficult to live with?

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Fill in the Blank (20 points)

Write in the term that best completes each of the following statements.

1. The story opens on January 4, (**1935, 1995**).
2. The Flanagans have moved from (**New York City, Santa Monica**) to Alcatraz Island.
3. Natalie suffers from a neurological condition called (**autism, cancer**).
4. Natalie is brilliant when she deals with (**numbers, colors**).
5. She is calmed by playing with (**stuffed animals, buttons**).
6. After school, Moose is chosen to play (**football, baseball**) with his classmates.
7. Annie reveals that sometimes the convicts send (**letters, baseballs**) over the fence. These are highly-sought-after prizes.
8. Piper launches her (**homework, laundry**) scheme in school.
9. On the ferry, Mrs. Capone totally ignores Piper but takes a shine to Theresa's screaming (**brother, puppy**) whom Theresa has smuggled on the boat with them.
10. At the end of the novel, Moose pulls on a clean shirt and finds a note in the pocket. The note reads, (**"Stop!, "Done."**)

Part II: Identification (20 points)

Briefly describe each person, place, or thing and explain why it is important in the story.

1. autism
2. Al Capone
3. #105
4. buttons
5. laundry

Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

Part III: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left. Use each name only once.

- | | |
|--|---------------------|
| ___ 1. Nicknamed Moose, he is the novel's narrator | A. Mr. Trixle |
| ___ 2. Moose's sister | B. Warden Williams |
| ___ 3. The man who rejects Natalie from the school | C. Miss Bimp |
| ___ 4. Piper's father | D. Matthew Flanagan |
| ___ 5. The girl behind the laundry scheme | E. Natalie Flanagan |
| ___ 6. Moose's close friend and fellow baseball player | F. Rocky Mattaman |
| ___ 7. The neighbor who brings the Flanagans manicotti | G. Mrs. Caconi |
| ___ 8. A prison guard | H. Mr. Purdy |
| ___ 9. Theresa's baby brother | I. Piper |
| ___ 10. Moose's teacher | J. Scout |

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Choldenko called this book *Al Capone Does My Shirts*. Argue that the title does or does not fit the action.
2. Is Mrs. Flanagan a good mother to Natalie? Is she a good mother to Moose? Why does she treat her children so differently? Evaluate her actions.
3. Analyze how the story would be different if it took place in a prison community today.
4. If you could give Moose some advice about dealing with Piper, what advice would it be and why?

Answer Key

VOCABULARY

- | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. a | 6. k | 11. b | 16. i |
| 2. s | 7. q | 12. f | 17. n |
| 3. p | 8. o | 13. m | 18. h |
| 4. j | 9. r | 14. t | 19. g |
| 5. c | 10. d | 15. e | 20. l |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. D |
| 2. G | 7. H |
| 3. J | 8. E |
| 4. F | 9. I |
| 5. A | 10. B |

Part II: Identification (20 points)

- Natalie collects buttons, which she counts as a way of self-soothing. Counting is typical for obsessive-compulsives, a classic symptom of autism.
- Moose's father gives Moose some beer at the end of chapter 31. It functions as a symbol of manhood, a recognition of Moose's maturity and his solidarity with his father.
- Moose is passionate about baseball. It is also a way for him to make friends with new kids, as is the case when he arrives on Alcatraz.
- Natalie likes to recite the numbers for different entries on a book index, and her family obliges by reading off the entries. It is another way that she self-soothes.
- Laundry is at the center of Piper's get-rich-quick scheme. The scheme fails and the kids are all punished, but it does serve to bring Piper and Moose closer together. Eventually, she helps him gain access to Al Capone and thus help his sister.

Part III: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. T |
| 2. T | 7. T |
| 3. T | 8. F |
| 4. F | 9. F |
| 5. F | 10. T |

Part IV. Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Fill in the Blank (20 points)

- | | |
|-----------------|--------------|
| 1. 1935 | 6. baseball |
| 2. Santa Monica | 7. baseballs |
| 3. autism | 8. laundry |
| 4. numbers | 9. brother, |
| 5. buttons | 10. "Done" |

Part II: Identification (20 points)

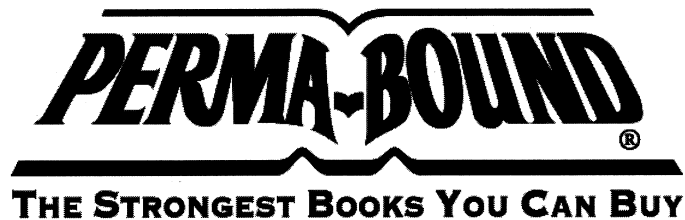
- Autism is the neurological condition that afflicts Natalie. Still poorly-understood, autism is called a "spectrum disorder" because those with the condition can be afflicted in different ways. On the lower end, autistic people can be totally non-functional; on the upper end, they may have some obsessive-compulsive symptoms and difficulty with social relationships but otherwise function relatively well. Natalie falls in the upper middle, as she can communicate and function relatively well. However, it seems likely that she would never be independent.
- Al Capone is the famous gangster incarcerated at Alcatraz in the 1930s. A vicious murderer and mobster, he nonetheless performed some acts of charity, as shown in this fictionalized account.
- #105 is the convict who gives Moose and Natalie a baseball. He and Natalie like each other, romantically.
- Natalie collects buttons, which she counts as a way of self-soothing. Counting is typical for obsessive-compulsives, a classic symptom of autism.
- Laundry is at the center of Piper's get-rich-quick scheme. The scheme fails and the kids are all punished, but it does serve to bring Piper and Moose closer together. Eventually, she helps him gain access to Al Capone and thus help his sister.

Part III: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. D | 6. J |
| 2. E | 7. G |
| 3. H | 8. A |
| 4. B | 9. F |
| 5. I | 10. C |

Part IV. Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.



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