

# Penguin's Classroom Classics

## Making Curriculum Connections!



## An Educator's Guide to



**Al  
Capone  
Does My  
Shirts**

**GENNIFER CHOLDENKO**

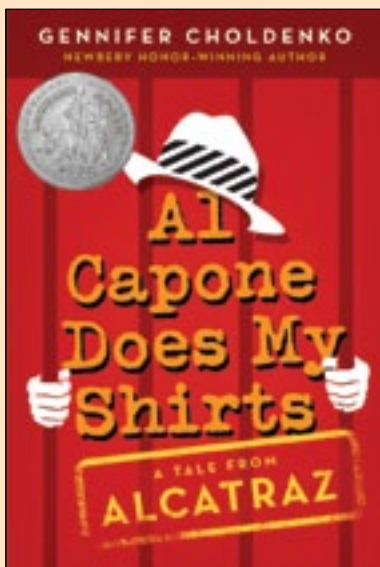
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The activities in this guide align with Common Core State Standards  
and fit into the curriculum for grades 4–6

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## Dear Educator:

*Al Capone Does My Shirts* is set on Alcatraz Island in 1935. This novel offers an excellent opportunity to explore the challenges of life during the Great Depression, and the further obstacle of living within the compound of a maximum-security prison. There are multiple themes to explore, such as parent and child relationships, peer relationships, bullying, and dealing with disabilities. Though some classes may read the book faster, this novel study offers discussion, research and writing activities, and speaking and listening lessons for a **three-week unit**. Some activities may require several days to accomplish. For this reason, teachers may wish to select activities that best suit the students in specific classes. Please note that activities for the third week may require reflection on the entire novel. Each of the suggested activities is aligned with the Common Core Standards for Language Arts for grades 4–6.



## About the Book:

It's 1935, and Moose Flanagan is twelve-years-old when his father takes a job as a prison guard on Alcatraz Island so that his autistic sister, Natalie, might have the opportunity to go to a special school in San Francisco. Moose is lonely on the island, and misses his winning baseball team in Santa Monica, his old gang, and family members who helped out with Natalie. The kids on Alcatraz must follow a strict set of rules, but Piper, the warden's daughter, is conniving and doesn't think that rules apply to her. Moose is soon lured into Piper's moneymaking scheme to operate an Alcatraz laundry service at their school in the city. Kids happily turn clothes over to the Alcatraz kids, with the idea that Al Capone, one of the most famous inmates at the prison, will do their laundry. When the Esther P. Marinoff School rejects Natalie, Moose makes a desperate attempt to assist by appealing to Al Capone for help. And Piper is there to deliver the note by slipping it into dirty laundry.

*Al Capone Does My Shirts* received a Newbery Honor Citation in 2005.



## About the Author:

**Gennifer Choldenko** is the youngest in a family of four kids, where her nickname growing up was "Snot-Nose." She was born in Santa Monica, has a BA from Brandeis University, a BFA from Rhode Island School of Design, and currently lives in San Francisco. Her first novel, *Notes from a Liar and Her Dog*, was chosen as a *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year, and was an IRA-CBC Children's Choice and won the California Book Award for children's books. *Al Capone Does My Shirts* received a Newbery Honor Citation in 2005 among other accolades.

This guide was created by Pat Scales, a former middle and high school librarian in Greenville, SC. Pat holds a BS in Elementary Education from the University of Montevallo, and an MLS from George Peabody College for Teachers. She has written columns for *Booklist*, *The Horn Book*, and *School Library Journal*, among other publications. She is currently a children's literature specialist and free-speech advocate. She is actively involved with the American Library Association, where she has served a number of leadership roles.



# PRE-READING ACTIVITY

## Teachers:

Introduce the novel by telling students that Alcatraz Island was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1986. The United States Department of the Interior manages applications for the National Register and uses the following criteria to determine which places merit such significance:

1. Places where a prominent person lived or worked
2. Icons of ideals that shaped the nation
3. Outstanding examples of design or construction
4. Places characterizing a way of life
5. Archeological sites able to yield information

Have students read about Alcatraz Island on the following website: <http://www.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/alca/overview.html>.

- Divide the class into small groups and ask them to discuss which of the five criteria best qualifies Alcatraz as a Historic Landmark.
- Review the proper form for a business letter.
- Instruct students to write a letter to the Department of Interior nominating Alcatraz Island for the National Register of Historic Places. Have them include specific reasons Alcatraz fits one or more of the required criteria.
- Encourage peer editing for grammar, clarity, and structure.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: W5.1, 5.2, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7, 5.8, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 6.7.

## **Awards and Honors for *Al Capone Does My Shirts***

2005 Newbery Honor Award

Carnegie Medal Short List (UK)

2005 California Young Reader Medal (California)

2005 Garden State Teen Book Award (New Jersey)

2005 California Library Association Beatty Award

2005 California Library Association Focal Award

2005 Capital Choices Noteworthy Books for Children (Washington, D. C.)

2005 Keystone State Reading Association YA Book Award (Pennsylvania)

2005 CBC-NCSS Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People

2005 American Literacy Corporation Literary Choice Award

2005 ALA Notable Book

2005 *Parents' Choice* Silver Medal

2004 VOYA's Top Shelf Fiction for Middle School Readers

2004 *School Library Journal* Best Books

2004 Chicago Public Library Best of the Best

2005 New York Public Library Best 100 Books for Reading and Sharing

2005 New York Public Library's Books for the Teen Age

2005 Bank Street College Best Children's Books of the Year

2005 Best Book for Young Adults



# Classroom Lesson Plans for *Al Capone Does My Shirts*

## Week 1: Part 1 (p. 3–122)

1. As students read the novel, encourage them to list unfamiliar words and make note of the page number where each word is located.
  - In small groups, share the paragraphs containing the words and try to figure out the meanings of the words from the context of the paragraphs. Look up words in the dictionary.
  - How did the group score? Take the activity a step further and have students use a thesaurus to supply a synonym and antonym for each word.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: RL 5.4.6.4; L 5.4, 6.4.
2. Natalie likes for her father to read the index of a book to her.
  - In class, brainstorm subjects, like Esther P. Marinoff School, guard tower, or Frank M. Coxe, that could be important in an index of the novel.
  - In small groups, make an index for Part 1 of the novel.
  - Compare and contrast each group's index in class. Discuss how the topics in the index contribute to the whole of the story.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: RL 5.5, 5.6; W 5.2, 6.2; SL 5.1, 6.1.
3. In Chapter 6, "Sucker," the warden relates four rules of the island to Moose.
  - As a class, discuss the importance of each rule, and the consequences for breaking a rule.
  - What is the first hint that "rules" don't apply to Piper?
  - Illustrate one of the rules in a four-frame comic strip.

\*\* Correlates to Common Core Standards: RL 5.1, 6.1; SL 5.1, 6.1; W 5.3, 6.3.
4. In Chapter 7, "Big for Seventh Grade," Miss Bimp, the teacher, asks each student to prepare an outline and deliver a speech called "What I Did Over Christmas Vacation."
  - Think about Moose's introduction to life on Alcatraz.
  - Prepare an outline and deliver a speech that Moose gives about his first impressions of living on Alcatraz.

\*\* Correlates to Common Core Standards: RL 5.6, 6.6; SL 5.4, 5.6, 6.4, 6.6.
5. Mrs. McGraw says that Moose's mom can't "see the forest for the trees" when it comes to Natalie.
  - In class, discuss what Mrs. McGraw means.
  - Cite passages that illustrate that Mrs. McGraw's assessment is true.
  - What advice might Mrs. McGraw give to Mrs. Flanagan regarding Natalie?
  - Why does Moose think that his mother would be a better jailer than his father?

\*\* Correlates to Common Core Standards: RL 5.1, 5.4, 6.1, 6.4; SL 5.1, 6.1.
6. Piper's biggest scheme is to convince classmates to get their laundry done by Al Capone.
  - Create an illustrated brochure for the Alcatraz laundry service.
  - Include the following information: a brief biography of Al Capone, the cost of each laundry item, and specific rules to follow.

\*\* Correlates to Common Core Standards: W 5.4 and 6.4.
7. Mr. Purdy, the headmaster at the Esther P. Marinoff School, says that Natalie isn't ready for the program (p. 61).
  - As a class, discuss why the school is more equipped to serve boys than girls, even though they have the same challenges.
  - Why is Mrs. Flanagan so appalled when Mr. Purdy suggests that they send Natalie to Deerham?
  - Explain the difference between an asylum and a school for children with challenges.
  - How does Moose have to assume responsibility for Natalie?
  - Allow students to work in pairs and role-play the conversation between Moose and his mother when she tells him that they can't manage Natalie without his help (p. 85).

\*\* Correlates to Common Core Standards: RL 5.2, 6.2, 6.3; SL 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.6, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.6.



# Classroom Lesson Plans for *Al Capone Does My Shirts*

## Week 2: Part 2 (p.125–175)

1. In Chapter 21, “It Never Rains on Monday,” Moose’s dad says, “Here comes trouble” when he sees that Piper is back.
  - Discuss Piper from Moose’s point of view. Support your opinion with specific examples from the book.
  - Cite evidence that Piper is up to her old schemes after the laundry incident.
  - How does Piper’s dad contribute to her behavior?
  - Write a brief essay titled “Piper: Daddy’s Little Girl.” Encourage peer editing for grammar, clarity, and structure.

\*\* Correlates to Common Core Standards: RL 5.1, 6.1; W 5.1, 5.3, 6.1 and 6.3.
2. Moose becomes a friend with Scout, and promises to find Scout a baseball that belonged to one of the prisoners.
  - How does Piper double-cross Moose out of a baseball for Scout?
  - Explain how it changes Moose and Scout’s friendship.
  - Draft a note that Moose might write to Scout explaining Piper’s schemes.
  - At what point does Scout see through Piper?
  - Draft another note that Scout writes back to Moose that lets him know that he “gets what Piper is like.”

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: RL 5.3, 6.3; W 5.3 and 6.3.
3. Moose has a good relationship with his father.
  - Why is Moose convinced that his father will understand how he became involved with the laundry service?
  - What prompts Moose to ask his father, “How come you always do what Mom tells you?” (p. 172)
  - Explain his father’s response.
  - How does the conversation between Moose and his father give his father the courage to confront Mrs. Flanagan regarding Moose’s needs?
  - Use books in the library to locate a poem that best expresses the relationship between Moose and his father.
  - Make a Father’s Day card that Moose gives his father and include the poem.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: RL 5.1, 5.2, 5.9, 6.1, 6.2, and 6.9.
4. Moose knows that he should tell his parents about finding Natalie with Con # 105, but he can’t seem to find the words.
  - Discuss possible words that Moose could use in explaining the situation to his mom and dad.
  - Debate whether Moose’s parents will actually listen to him.
  - Ask for volunteers to role-play the conversation that Moose might have with his parents.
  - Consider an apology for taking his eyes off Natalie.

\*\*Correlates with Common Core Standards: SL 5.4, 6.4.
5. In Chapter 32, “The Button Box,” Moose looks at Natalie when she is sleeping and says, “She’s so peaceful when she’s sleeps. So normal. This is the sister I might have had. I see now the person we missed” (p. 175).
  - Discuss how Natalie brings out the worst and the best in Moose.
  - How does Moose’s view of Natalie change after the Esther P. Marinoff School rejects her?
  - As a class, list the things that Moose thinks that he missed by having a sister with special challenges.
  - Write an essay titled “The Sister I Missed.” Encourage peer editing for grammar, clarity, and structure.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: 5.1, 5.3, 6.1, 6.3; W 5.1, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 6.1, 6.3, 6.4, and 6.5.
6. The Golden Gate Bride and the Bay Bridge are under construction in the novel.
  - Read about the history of The Golden Gate Bridge (<http://goldengatebridge.org/photos/history.php>) and the Bay Bridge (<http://baybridgeinfo.org/history>).
  - Write a feature story for a tourist magazine about the history of one of the bridges.
  - Copy and paste historic pictures into the article.
  - Include a memory about the building of the bridge from a grown-up Moose.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: W 5.7, 5.8, 5.9, 6.7, 6.8, 6.9.





# Classroom Lesson Plans for *Al Capone Does My Shirts*

## Week 3: Part 3 (p. 180–214)

1. Moose thinks that Natalie has had more of a life on Alcatraz than anywhere else.
  - As a class, discuss how Natalie’s life is better on the island. Give specific examples from the text.
  - What prompts Moose to ask Warden Williams for help in getting Natalie into school?
  - Explain why Moose thinks that Al Capone could help.
  - Analyze Natalie’s sudden acceptance to the Esther P. Marinoff School.
  - Debate whether it’s the influence of the warden, Al Capone, or both.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: RL 5.1, 6.1; SL 5.1, 5.3, 6.1, 6.3.
2. Choldenko uses figurative language to convey meaning.
  - Choldenko uses prison as a metaphor for Moose’s and Natalie’s struggles. Encourage your students to find examples in the text.
  - In class, explain the following simile: “A haze rises from the bay like a wall of gray closing me off from everything” (p. 10). What is Moose feeling?
  - Find other examples of similes and metaphors in the novel and share with the class.
  - Write a simile that conveys the same meaning as one of the similes in the novel.
  - Share with the class.

\*\* Correlates with Common Core Standards: RL 5.4, 6.4; W 5.3, 6.3.
3. Strong verbs provide more excitement and intensity to a sentence.
  - Identify the strong verb in the following sentence: “The foghorns bellow deep low notes” (p. 71).
  - Locate other examples in the novel of strong verb usage.
  - Write a sentence using a strong verb that best expresses the atmosphere in the Flanagan household at the end of the novel when the Esther P. Marinoff School rejects Natalie the second time.

\*\*Correlates with Common Core Standards: RL 5.4, 6.4; W 5.3, 6.3.
4. Moose is reading *David Copperfield* (p. 180).
  - Discuss the significance of the title of chapter one, “I Am Born.”

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: RL 6.7.
5. Alcatraz served as a maximum-security prison for 29 years. During those years, there were 36 men who attempted escape.
  - Research these attempts on the following website: <http://www.alcatrazhistory.com/>.
  - Write a front-page story for the *San Francisco Chronicle* about one of these men. Remember to include: Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why?
  - Use a catchy title for the story.
  - Encourage peer editing for grammar, clarity, and structure.

\*\* Correlates with Common Core Standards: W 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7, 5.8, 5.9, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 6.7, 6.8, 6.9.
6. A ballad is a poem that tells a story, and is often set to music.
  - Use books in the library to locate examples of ballads. Read them to understand the form.
  - Work with a partner and write a ballad about one of the characters in the novel.
  - Consider setting it to the music of a popular ballad.
  - Perform the ballad in class, either as a choral reading or a song.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: RL 5.7, 6.7; W 5.4, 6.4; SL 5.5, 6.5.

### Praise for *Al Capone Does My Shirts*

★ “Choldenko’s pacing is exquisite . . . [A] great read.”—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

7. The Autistic Society (<http://www.autism-society.org/living-with-autism/family-issues/siblings.html>) explains the following stress issues that siblings may experience:
- Embarrassment around peers
  - Jealousy regarding parental attention and time
  - Frustration about not getting a response from a sibling
  - Being the target of aggressive behavior
  - Concern regarding their parents' stress and grief

In class, discuss which of these stresses Moose experiences. Cite specific examples to support your opinion.

- Identify additional stresses that Moose feels from living with Natalie.
- Locate a direct quote from the novel that illustrates each of the stress factors that Moose feels.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: RL 5.1, 6.1.

8. Readers Theater is an excellent way to help students develop scripts, gain performance experience, and use their voices to depict characters in a novel.
- Explain Readers Theater to students
  - Establish the rules that normally apply to Readers Theater. For example, the voice is the most important element.
  - In small groups, select a favorite scene from the novel and prepare a script to be performed as Readers Theater.
  - Rehearse the script before performing it for the class.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: W 5.3, 6.3; L 5.3, 6.3.

9. Al Capone, Henri Young, Alvin "Creepy" Karpis, Machine Gun Kelly, Roy Gardner, and Robert Stroud (aka the Birdman of Alcatraz) are among the most famous inmates in Alcatraz Prison.

- Read about these men on the following website: <http://www.alcatrazhistory.com/famous.htm>.
- Write and illustrate their profile as a comic book to be sold to tourists in San Francisco.

\*\*Correlates to Common Core Standards: W 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.7, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.7.

### Additional Websites for Research

<http://www.nps.gov/alca/index.htm>  
The official website for Alcatraz Island.

<http://www.alcatrazhistory.com/>  
This website offers an in-depth history of Alcatraz.

[http://kidshealth.org/kid/health\\_problems/brain/autism.html](http://kidshealth.org/kid/health_problems/brain/autism.html)  
This site explains autism to children.

<http://www.autism-society.org/>  
This is the official website for the Autism Society.

<http://www.choldenko.com/>  
This is the official website for Gennifer Choldenko



# A Q&A with *Al Capone Does My Shirts* author **GENNIFER CHOLDENKO**



**Q: You mention that you had a sister who had a severe form of autism. How much of you is in the character of Moose?**

**A:** When I was a kid, not that many people had the diagnosis of autism and there was no such thing as an autism spectrum. And because so little was known about autism, the help available was primitive at best. I was jealous of her because she got so much attention, and then guilty for feeling jealous. I felt rejected by her when I made overtures of friendship that were spurned and devastated witnessing the unrelenting difficulty she had in life. My brother had a much better relationship with my sister Gina than I did. He is almost six years older than I am, so he was more mature in dealing with her and more patient. I wrote *Al Capone Does My Shirts* so I could have the kind of relationship with my sister that my brother did. And I wrote *Al Capone Does My Shirts* because I wanted to create the book I longed to read when I was twelve. How much of me is in Moose? I would say he is one-third me, one-third my brother, and one-third wholesale invention.

**Q: How long did it take you to do the research on Alcatraz?**

**A:** I have been researching Alcatraz on and off for the better part of thirteen years. For *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, I volunteered to work on the island for a year. That gave me access to a small library on Alcatraz that is only open to people who work on the island. It got me to the island during different seasons and all kinds of weather conditions. It helped me to connect with a whole host of people who had actually grown up on the island, who were incarcerated on the island, and who were guards on the island. I met all manner of Alcatraz heads who prided themselves in knowing every arcane detail about the island. It was a glorious experience.

**Q: At what point, did you decide that there would be a sequel to the novel?**

**A:** A month into researching the first book, I knew there was more than one novel in this idea. There was so much great information. And as I got to know the characters it became clear I had more to say about them than I could possibly communicate in one story. However, at the time I began *Al Capone Does My Shirts* I had had only one picture book published and had been trying for seven years to get something else published. I had no problem tackling yet another novel, but the idea of writing a trilogy of unpublished novels required more optimism than even I possessed.

**Q: How has winning a Newbery Honor citation changed who you are as a writer?**

**A:** I don't think winning the Newbery Honor has changed me as a writer, I still write the way I always have. I start over again at the beginning of each book. I try to reinvent myself, challenge old ideas, and push as hard as I can to produce the very best work I am capable of. I do think winning the Newbery Honor changed me as a person, though. I've never been a showy person. After winning that award, all of a sudden I was in the spotlight in a way I never had been before. The award upset the order of the universe as I knew it. At the same time, it was the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me and I wouldn't trade one second of that experience.

**Don't miss  
*Al Capone Shines My Shoes* and  
*Al Capone Does My Homework!***



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