

Teacher Guide

Grades 5–6

# Al Capone Does My Shirts

Gennifer Choldenko

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# AL CAPONE DOES MY SHIRTS

by  
Gennifer Choldenko

## Teacher Guide

Written by  
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### Note

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**Please note:** Please assess the appropriateness of this book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading and discussing it with them.

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## Skills and Strategies

### Thinking

Brainstorming, research,  
decision-making,  
compare/contrast

### Comprehension

Predicting, inferring,  
summarizing, cause/effect

### Writing

Poetry, letter, essay,  
persuasive writing, character  
sketches, short stories, book  
review

### Listening/Speaking

Oral presentation, discussion,  
mock trial

### Vocabulary

Definitions, parts of speech,  
synonyms/antonyms

### Literary Elements

Setting, conflict, theme,  
characterization, climax,  
plot, point of view, figurative  
language

### Across the Curriculum

Art—sketching, models,  
collages; History—Alcatraz,  
Great Depression, baseball,  
Golden Gate Bridge;  
Science—sun and moon,  
technology, geography



## Chapters 1–4

Twelve-year-old Matthew “Moose” Flanagan and his family move to Alcatraz, where Mr. Flanagan begins work as an electrician and prison guard. Moose is lonely and unhappy about the move. He becomes acquainted with spunky seven-year-old Theresa and the warden’s daughter, Piper, who seems like trouble. The entire family accompanies Natalie on the day she leaves for her new special school.

Vocabulary	
convicts	
buoy	
runt	
circuits	
affliction	
linebacker	
moose	
in and out	
heaving	
presumes	
peculiar	
cleat	

### Discussion Questions

1. Why did the Flanagan family move to Alcatraz? How does Moose feel about the move? How would you feel if you were in Moose’s place? (*Mr. Flanagan got a job working on Alcatraz so that the family could be close to the special school for Natalie. Moose wishes he were back in his old home close to his old friends. He is nervous about sharing his home with dangerous criminals. Answers will vary.*)
2. Describe Moose’s relationship with his father. (*Moose says his house is empty when his father is not around. He resents how much time his father must spend working at Alcatraz and is jealous of the attention his sister gets. Though Mr. Flanagan cares about Moose and wants to spend time with him, he must be diligent in his duties so that he can keep his job and give Natalie a chance at a better life.*)
3. Moose recalls when Natalie caused a scene on the train. Moose says he was embarrassed by both his mother’s and his sister’s behavior. How do you think Moose’s mother recalls the situation? How do you think Natalie felt as she threw the tantrum? (*Answers will vary. Her mother may have been most concerned about Natalie’s well-being or protecting her daughter’s dignity. Natalie was clearly upset about something but did not know how to express her emotion in a socially acceptable way.*)
4. What are your first impressions of Theresa? of Piper? What does the author do to make these characters seem realistic to the reader? (*Answers will vary. Theresa seems to be very insistent and strong-willed. Piper enjoys control and knows that being the warden’s daughter puts her in a position of power. She is insubordinate and does not seem to us to be very nice. The author uses dialogue and descriptions of body language and vocal inflection to reveal the characters’ personalities.*)
5. Is Natalie “stupid” as Piper claims? (*No. Natalie is not completely able to behave in socially acceptable ways and is delayed with regard to language development, but she is very intelligent. She has remarkable aptitude in math and is very aware of what is going on around her. When Natalie is able to tell Piper the day of the week on which Piper was born, Piper says that Natalie only has one trick. Natalie responds to this challenge by saying that 487 times 6,421 is 3,127,027” [p. 18].*)
6. Do you think the warden knows about Natalie? Why or why not? (*Answers will vary.*)
7. Describe Moose’s relationship with his mother. (*Answers will vary. While Mrs. Flanagan depends on him a great deal and has faith in him to watch his sister, she also seems preoccupied with Natalie’s special needs. Moose doesn’t always agree with his mother’s ideas of what is best for Natalie, and consequently, there is more conflict in Moose’s relationship with his mother than his father.*)

8. Do you think Natalie knows her new school will also be her new home? Why do you think she holds Moose's hand so tightly as they leave the ferry? (*Answers will vary.*)
9. **Prediction:** Will Moose get used to life on Alcatraz?

### Supplementary Activities

1. **Figurative Language:** Use the Metaphors and Similes chart on page 26 of this guide to write at least one simile and one metaphor from this section. Include an interpretation for each example. This is an ongoing assignment for each section and will include both similes and metaphors where applicable. Examples—**Similes**—"the red sounds like dozens of mice are dying" (p. 5); "haze rises...like a wall of gray" (p. 16); **Metaphors**—dock guard tower: a popcorn stand on stilts (p. 4), Natalie's stone (p. 22)
2. **History/Science:** Moose's father reads a newspaper article about the building of the Golden Gate Bridge. Research the Golden Gate Bridge and report on your findings. Inform your audience about when the bridge was built, where it was built, why it was needed, and/or how its structure is strong enough to support the weight that crosses it. Include a picture of the bridge, or create a model of it.
3. **History:** Theresa gives Moose a sheet of basic facts about Al Capone. Create a fact sheet of your own for Al Capone, Martin G. Kelly, Roy Gardner, or another criminal held at Alcatraz in the 1930s. Your fact sheet(s) should include the following information: the criminal's actual name, nicknames, date of birth, family, reason for fame, and crimes that caused his imprisonment at Alcatraz. (Note: if you write about Al Capone, conduct research to verify whether Theresa's facts are true or false.)
4. **Writing:** From Mrs. Flanagan's point of view, rewrite the part of the story where she returns from her errands and finds both of her children gone. What are her thoughts, and why is she so afraid or concerned?

### Chapters 5–8

Moose gets to spend some quality time with his father. Piper arranges for Moose to have a special meeting with her father, who informs Moose of the island rules and the importance of following them. The next day Moose attends his new school in San Francisco. There he discovers that Piper is intent on breaking her father's rules and getting Moose to follow her lead. Moose befriends a group of boys and joins them in a game of baseball.

Vocabulary	
	asylum
	ashen
	parallel
	louse
	civilians
	heinous
	hordes
	fashion
	fumbles

### Discussion Questions

1. Do you think her leaving Natalie at the orphan school was the right decision even though Natalie was very upset when her family left? (*Answers will vary. Note that the family refused to put Natalie in an asylum because they thought a better life for her. This is what motivates them to push her to the special school.*)
2. Why does the warden speak individually to Moose? Do you think this personal meeting is necessary? Why does Piper think it is? (*Answers will vary, but it seems that Piper told her father that Moose talked about Al Capone and needs to hear the rules from the warden personally. Thus far, Moose has shown himself to be a kid*

# Story Map

