

Teacher Guide

Grades 5–6

# Al Capone Shines My Shoes

Gennifer Choldenko

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# AL CAPONE SHINES MY SHOES

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

Research, brainstorming,  
decision-making, inferring,  
compare/contrast

### Comprehension

Predicting, summarizing,  
sequencing

### Writing

Poetry, journal, report,  
newspaper article, summary,  
letter, outline

### Listening/Speaking

Oral presentation, discussion,  
interview

### Vocabulary

Definitions, parts of speech,  
synonyms/antonyms

### Literary Elements

Setting, point of view, conflict,  
theme, characterization,  
figurative language,  
foreshadowing

### Across the Curriculum

Art—poster, caricature,  
diorama; History—Alcatraz,  
baseball, J. Edgar Hoover,  
vaudeville, Great Depression,  
technology; Health—CPR,  
autism; Science—scientific  
process, geography; Math—  
budget, wages

## Chapters 1–4

Moose explains how Natalie was admitted into the Esther P. Marinoff School. Natalie leaves for school, and Moose and Jimmy visit their secret crawlspace beneath 64 building. Moose receives a new note from Al Capone that Annie inadvertently intercepts. Annie learns about Moose’s involvement with Capone and insists that Moose tell what has happened. Moose refuses, and Annie in turn refuses to play baseball with him. Scout visits the island, and he and Moose meet the convicts working in the warden’s house.

Vocabulary	
	civilians
	menagerie
	notorious
	wheedles
	starboard
	gratitude
	wallow
	pleasing
	carping
	switchback

### Discussion Questions

1. Where does the narrator live? What does he think of his living situation? *(He lives on Alcatraz Island. Answers will vary. Moose is both fascinated by and fearful of Alcatraz. Also, while he realizes that there are rules he must follow, he is frustrated with how Darby Trixle treats him.)*
2. What happens as the Flanagan family sends Natalie off to her new school? How do Officer Trixle’s actions suggest about him, and what role do you think he will play in the story? *(The family tries to keep Natalie calm, but Trixle orders the tower to shoot at the water even though Carmel tells her not to and the only boat in sight is departing. Trixle then says that Natalie’s reaction warrants an incident report. Answers will vary. Trixle knew there was no reason to shoot and he also knew that the shots might hurt Natalie.*

*In addition, Trixle seems to delight in the possibility that Natalie might not return to Alcatraz. It is reasonable to say that Trixle enjoys feeling powerful, has something against Natalie, and will likely be an antagonist throughout the novel.)*

3. Do you think Al Capone would do something nice without asking for anything in return? *(Answers will vary, but Capone’s words, “Your turn,” seem to indicate that he will soon require a favor of Moose.)*
4. What does Moose tell Annie? How does she react? Do you think it is good or bad that Annie knows Moose’s secret? Explain. *(Moose tells Annie about his communications with Al Capone, and she is very alarmed at the possible consequences of Moose’s behavior. She pressures him to tell someone about what is happening. Answers will vary.)*
5. Explain whether you think it is a good or bad idea for Buddy Boy and Willy One Arm to be working in the warden’s house. *(Answers will vary. One view is that someone who breaks laws would probably have little respect for doing what is responsible and right and might be dangerous. On the other hand, working in the warden’s house offers them special treatment that they may not be willing to sacrifice by misbehaving.)*
6. What do you think of Scout’s system for categorizing girls? Do you think it is right to attempt to categorize people? Is there a way to do so accurately? Explain. *(Answers will vary, but note that Scout’s categories are subjective; Scout and Moose disagree where Annie fits. Additionally, it is shallow to attempt to put all girls into one of three categories. People are diverse and unique and what makes them valuable often extends far beyond their appearances. Moose seems to realize this, as, in addition to defending Annie’s looks, he points out Annie’s talents as a baseball player.)*

- Describe the relationships between some of the children in the novel—Moose, Annie, Scout, Piper, and Jimmy. (*Answers will vary. Moose and Jimmy are best friends on the island even though Jimmy is not a good baseball player, so Moose prefers to play ball with Scout, his friend from school. Scout realizes that Moose likes Piper but does not hesitate to tease him about it or flirt with Piper. Annie may be average-looking, but she is a responsible, honest friend and an excellent baseball player. She might have a crush on Moose but knows that Moose likes Piper.*)
- Prediction:** What will result from Moose’s communications with Al Capone?

### Supplementary Activities

- Figurative Language:** Begin a chart identifying the figurative language used in the novel. Continue adding to the chart as you read the novel. Example: **Similes**—“convicts...as slippery as eels in axle greas” (p. 1); “spray of firepower that pounds like fireworks exploding inside your head” (p. 7); “his face is pinched like his belt’s a notch too tight” (p. 7); **Metaphors**—convicts: rotten fruit (p. 1); Mrs. Bonham: talking machine (p. 13); Al Capone’s hit men: grill (p. 27)
- Comprehension:** Begin a character chart. As new characters are introduced, write down information about them. Add to the chart as you continue reading.
- Writing:** Moose describes the secret passageway he shares with Jimmy. In this passageway, they can talk to each other without being overheard. Write a poem that describes a place that is safe and protected where you feel free the way Moose feels in the passageway.
- Math:** Calculate how much it might cost to employ a personal cook for one month. Then calculate how much it might cost to hire a personal housekeeper for one month. In today’s world, approximately how much money do you think the warden could be saving by having two convicts work in his home?

### Chapters 5–8

Scout and Moose find Jimmy while Theresa convinces Annie to join the baseball game. Jimmy plays poorly and distances himself from the others after Scout says he throws like a “dead girl.” Annie, however, plays well enough to earn Scout’s respect. Later that night, Moose talks with his dad about how to interact with the convicts and finds a note from Capone in his pillowcase which he determines was sent by Seven Fingers. The next morning, Moose finds he has five open hives. Mrs. Flanagan seems happy to take care of Moose and even apologizes to Moose for focusing on Natalie so much. Moose goes to the canteen to make amends with Jimmy. However, Rocky begins suffocating while playing with Theresa, and Moose must rush Rocky to Doc Ollie, who extracts a penny from Rocky’s throat.

### Discussion Questions

- How does Scout treat Annie and Jimmy? What do you think of Scout? (*Scout patronizes Annie because she is a girl and assumes she will not be good at baseball. He mocks Jimmy’s throw during the ball game, angering Jimmy and causing him to quit. Scout then calls for Theresa to take his place. Answers will vary, but Scout is quite disrespectful and seems only to value others in proportion to their playing ability.*)

## Solving Problems

**Directions:** List six problems the characters in the novel face. Then complete the rest of the chart. For each problem, circle which solution you think is best—yours or the character’s.

Problem	Character Solution	Your Solution