

Title: *Al Capone Does My Shirts*
Author: Gennifer Choldenko
Perspectives Category: Different Abilities

Response Submitted By: Owen M., 9th Grade

Date Submitted: October 12, 2020

1. What is the main plot of this book?

The book, "Al Capone Does my Shirts" is a novel by Gennifer Choldenko about a young boy living in the time just before the second World War, during the era of gangsters and rum runners. The main character, Moose, and his family move to Alcatraz Island after his sister is admitted to a special help school in the area, his dad also has to find a new job as a security guard and electrician on Alcatraz which has the added bonus of free lodging on the island. The sister is sent to a school called Esther P. Marinoff, it is not actually on Alcatraz Island, but a little ways away. Moose is forced to uproot his entire life in order to do this, because his mother wanted help for his sister. Throughout the story, you see the mother become more and more desperate as she tries to "help" her daughter by torturing her through special schools that are supposed to help her. A large portion of the story is centered around Alcatraz and the inmates there. On the island the inmates do the chores including dishes and laundry, one of the children on the island decides to run a scam operation to have the convicts do the laundry of other school children for money.

2. Which character did you most identify with and why?

The main character, moose is the easiest to identify with, in my opinion. Moose just wants to make friends and not have to deal with his mother but after his sister is rejected from the special school, all his hopes of being normal are crushed when his mother tells him he has to drop everything to watch his sister because she can't. In the past his mother has ignored and neglected him because she believes her daughter needs all the attention. As the book progresses you see that his sister, Natalie is not as mentally deficient as his mother was making her out to be.

3. What do you believe is the main message of this book?

The main idea of this story is that a person doesn't need to be sheltered. All Moose's mother does is try and help her daughter by sending her away to schools and taking away what she likes.

4. Do you think the main message of this book was effectively integrated into the story, or did it come across as too "preachy"?

This main message was integrated perfectly. It wasn't all in your face or anything, just subtly there.

5. If two or more perspectives on an important topic were explored/presented in this book, which one did you agree with and why?

During the reading of this book, my opinions were not changed in any way because my beliefs already lined up with what was occurring, or my ideals went directly against others and I did not see any reason to change my standpoint, such as the idea of taking from mentally disabled children in the hopes to cure them.

6. In what ways (if any) were your beliefs about the topic changed or reaffirmed through reading this book?

My opinions were not changed while reading this book, only reaffirmed. While I did not think anything that was done to Natalie was right, they were only products of their time and there was no reason for me to call them out on it. I know that we have a much better idea of helping people with mental disabilities and in ninety years those will probably seem cruel and crude themselves. Everything is a product of its time, what is important is seeing the difference between keeping it in that time and bringing it forward with you.

7. What perspective, if any, do you think was missing from this book?

The way the book was written meant it only had a few viable viewpoints which were touched upon and perfectly used.

8. Did this book encourage you to pursue any topic further through more reading, research, action, etc., and if so, how?

This book made me want to do substantial research on Al Capone to find out as much as possible about him, for instance Al Capone was the first person to create a soup kitchen during the great depression.

9. What type of reader (based on age, interests, perspectives, etc.) would you suggest this book to?

I would recommend this book to anyone over the age of 12, who is into historical fiction. This is a really good book, but some may find it dull if they aren't interested in history.

10. What other book(s) have you read that you think would make a good addition to this category of the Perspectives Bibliography, and why?

This book is in its own category, one that I have not ventured into yet. I will look forward to reading further into this subject matter.

Reviewer Name and Grade: Tatjana T., 11th Grade

Date Reviewed: April 10, 2023

1. The main plot of "Al Capone Does My Shirts" by Gennifer Choldenko revolves around Moose Flanagan, a 12-year-old boy whose family moves to Alcatraz Island in the 1930s, where his father works as a guard. Moose's life is complicated by his sister Natalie, who has autism, and his efforts to balance his responsibilities, friendships, and challenges on the island.

2. I most identify with Natalie because, like her, I also grew up with special needs and speech delay. I can relate to her struggles with communication, social interactions, and the challenges she faces due to her autism.

3. The main message of this book is about understanding and accepting individuals with special needs, particularly autism, and the importance of empathy, patience, and inclusivity. It also touches on themes of family, friendship, and self-acceptance.

4. I believe that the main message of this book was effectively integrated into the story without coming off as preachy. The author portrays Natalie's experiences and challenges in a realistic and sensitive manner, showcasing her unique perspective and struggles without simplifying or patronizing her condition.

5. In "Al Capone Does My Shirts," multiple perspectives on the topic of autism are explored. I agree with the perspective that highlights the importance of understanding and accepting individuals with special needs, recognizing their unique strengths, and providing support and inclusivity. It resonates with my own experiences and beliefs about the value of diversity and inclusivity.

6. Reading this book reaffirmed my beliefs about the importance of empathy, patience, and inclusivity towards individuals with special needs, particularly those with autism. It deepened my understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with autism and their families, and the importance of creating an inclusive and accepting environment.
7. While the book provides valuable perspectives from Moose and his family, it could benefit from including perspectives from individuals with autism themselves, to provide a more firsthand account of their experiences and perspectives.
8. Yes, this book encouraged me to pursue further reading, research, and action on topics related to special needs, autism, and inclusivity. It inspired me to educate myself and engage in conversations and actions to promote understanding, empathy, and inclusivity towards individuals with special needs in my own community.
9. I would suggest this book to readers who are interested in historical fiction, stories about family, friendship, and special needs, particularly autism. It may particularly resonate with readers who have personal experiences with special needs or are interested in learning more about autism from a unique perspective.
10. Another book that would make a good addition to this category of perspectives biography is "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" by Mark Haddon, which is a novel narrated by a teenage boy with autism. It provides a first-person perspective on the challenges, strengths, and unique experiences of an individual with autism, and complements the themes explored in "Al Capone Does My Shirts."

Reviewer Name: William Squire

Date Reviewed: June 22, 2023

1. *What is the main plot of this book?*

The story revolves around twelve-year-old Moose Flanagan, who moves with his family to Alcatraz Island, where his father has landed a job as a prison guard. Moose's older sister, Natalie, is autistic and helping with Natalie is difficult. A friend, Piper, convinces Moose to help her with a questionable money-making scheme. Though Piper is bossy and not always nice, at the end of the book when Natalie is in trouble Piper helps out.

2. *Which character did you most identify with and why?*

I most identified with Moose. I have a cousin with special needs and grew up helping with him and seeing how difficult it is to help him while also trying to have friends and not always have him around.

3. *What do you believe is the main message of this book?*

The main message is to accept others and to stand up for what is right.

4. *Do you think the main message of this book was effectively integrated into the story, or did it come across as too "preachy"?*

The book was not at all preachy and the messages were integrated well as part of the story.

5. *If two or more perspectives on an important topic were explored/presented in this book, which one did you agree with and why?*

The book shows how difficult it is for the entire family when someone in the family is autistic. I agree with Moose at the end of the book who has grown personally and accepts and loves his family as they are.

6. *In what ways (if any) were your beliefs about a topic changed or reaffirmed through reading this book?*

The book reaffirmed my belief in accepting family, despite challenges and setbacks, and especially when friends put you in situations where you may not be doing something that is morally right. Piper's plan is questionable and while Moose wants a friend, he then sees how the plan is not morally right. Moose calls Piper "a looker" but she does not treat him well. He says she treats him like something "stuck to the bottom of your shoe."

7. *What perspective, if any, do you think was missing from this book?*

While not necessarily missing, it would be interesting to hear from the point of view of Moose's autistic sister Natalie.

8. *Did this book encourage you to pursue any topics further through more reading, research, action, etc., and if so, how?*

Yes, I would like to read more about how to support the family and siblings of those with autism and seek community service activities that help these groups.

9. *What type of reader (based on age, interests, perspectives, etc.) would you suggest this book to?*

This book is good for all middle school students.

10. *What other book(s) you have read that you think would make a good addition to this category of the Perspectives Bibliography, and why?*

I just read *The Outsiders*, which might be a good addition to the socio-economic differences category as the greasers come from poverty and are discriminated against because of their background.

Reviewer Name and Grade: Kylee K., 11th Grade

Date Reviewed: 8/14/2023

1. *What is the main plot of this book?*

The main plot of "Al Capone Does My Shirts" revolves around a young boy named Moose Flanagan, who moves to Alcatraz Island with his family in the 1930s, where his father works as a prison guard. Moose's struggles to navigate the challenges of adolescence while grappling with his sister Natalie's autism forms the central narrative arc. Early in the book, Moose reflects, "I feel like we're the ones doing time. Natalie's the warden's kid, but I'm doing time, too" (Choldenko, 11). This quote highlights the burden Moose feels due to his sister's condition and foreshadows the challenges he will face throughout the story.

2. *Which character did you most identify with and why?*

I most identified with Moose's sister, Natalie, because of her unique perspective and struggles with autism. Despite her challenges, Natalie displays moments of profound insight and empathy, such as when she comforts Moose by saying, "You're a good brother. Good brothers don't cry"

(Choldenko, 49). I also believe that I possess the ability to easily understand other's emotions and comfort them.

3. What do you believe is the main message of this book?

The main message of "Al Capone Does My Shirts" centers on the theme of acceptance and understanding of individuals with disabilities. As Moose grapples with his sister Natalie's autism, he learns to appreciate her for who she is rather than trying to change her. This is evidenced by Moose's realization that "the thing about Natalie is she can't help it" (Choldenko, 151). This quote underscores the importance of compassion and patience in fostering meaningful relationships with those who are different from us.

4. Do you think the main message of this book was effectively integrated into the story, or did it come across as too "preachy"?

The main message of acceptance and understanding towards individuals with disabilities was effectively integrated into the story, without feeling overly preachy. Through Moose's interactions with Natalie and his evolving attitudes towards her condition, readers are encouraged to reflect on their own biases and assumptions. This is exemplified when Moose acknowledges, "Natalie was something I didn't have a clue how to deal with, and I wanted to figure it out" (Choldenko, 82). This quote demonstrates Moose's willingness to confront his uncertainties and underscores the organic development of the book's message.

5. If two or more perspectives on an important topic were explored/presented in this book, which one did you agree with and why?

One perspective explored in the book is the societal stigma surrounding disabilities, as exemplified by the prejudices faced by Moose and Natalie. Despite these challenges, Moose ultimately embraces his sister's differences, realizing that "Natalie is Natalie, and it's enough" (Choldenko, 209). This perspective resonates with me because it highlights the importance of acceptance and celebrates the uniqueness of individuals with disabilities.

6. In what ways (if any) were your beliefs about a topic changed or reaffirmed through reading this book?

Reading "Al Capone Does My Shirts" reaffirmed my belief in the power of empathy and understanding in overcoming prejudice and discrimination. Through Moose's journey, I gained a deeper appreciation for the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and the importance of fostering inclusive communities. As Moose reflects, "Natalie is the best thing that ever happened to me" (Choldenko, 223). This quote encapsulates Moose's transformation and serves as a poignant reminder of the transformative potential of love and acceptance.

7. What perspective, if any, do you think was missing from this book?

While "Al Capone Does My Shirts" offers valuable insights into the experiences of individuals with disabilities, it could have delved deeper into the perspectives of characters from diverse backgrounds. Expanding the narrative to include voices from marginalized communities would have enriched the story's exploration of themes such as identity and belonging.

8. Did this book encourage you to pursue any topics further through more reading, research, action, etc., and if so, how?

This book inspired me to delve deeper into the history of autism awareness and advocacy, prompting further reading and research on the topic. Additionally, it motivated me to seek out

opportunities to volunteer and support organizations that promote inclusion and accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

9. What type of reader (based on age, interests, perspectives, etc.) would you suggest this book to?

I would recommend "Al Capone Does My Shirts" to readers of all ages who are interested in stories about family dynamics, resilience, and acceptance. Young adult readers, in particular, may find Moose's coming-of-age journey relatable and thought-provoking.

10. What other book(s) you have read that you think would make a good addition to this category of the Perspectives Bibliography, and why?

Another book that would complement "Al Capone Does My Shirts" in exploring themes of disability and acceptance is "Wonder" by R.J. Palacio. Like "Al Capone Does My Shirts," "Wonder" delves into the experiences of individuals with disabilities and the importance of empathy and kindness in overcoming prejudice. Both books offer valuable insights into the complexities of human relationships and the transformative power of acceptance.

Reviewer Name and Grade: Zahra V., Grade 9

Date Reviewed: August 25th, 2023

1. *What is the main plot of this book?*

This book follows Mathew "Moose" Flanagan and his family, who move from Santa Monica to Alcatraz Island when his father takes a new job as an electrician at the infamous Alcatraz Prison. Moose soon befriends Piper, the warden's daughter and learns about her money-making schemes. When his sister begins a relationship with an inmate, Moose is worried but sure that she will soon be heading off to the Esther P. Marinoff School for people with special needs when she is suddenly rejected. Desperate to help his sister, Moose and Piper team up with Al Capone in this wild tale.

2. *Which character did you most identify with and why?*

Although our experiences are different, I relate to Moose the most because of how he sees his mother look for a cure for Natalie. For example, I saw how hard my mom worked throughout the pandemic to help others and how viruses, or in Natalie's case, disabilities, can affect a family.

3. *What do you believe is the main message of this book?*

I believe the main message of this book is that autism is not a detriment to a person. Just because Natalie is autistic, does not mean she is any less of a human being and that she should not be belittled for her disability.

4. *Do you think the main message of this book was effectively integrated into the story, or did it come across as too "preachy"?*

I believe the main message of this book was effectively integrated into the story and that it was not "too preachy." I found this plot to be very unique, given its setting and prison characters. I also found this book incredibly balanced. For example, the author was able to maintain a humorous yet educational tone throughout the book, which helped normalize the subject line of people with different abilities.

5. *If two or more perspectives on an important topic were explored/presented in this book, which one did you agree with and why?*

The two perspectives seen in this book were those who are disabled and those who are not. I agree with Natalie's perspective because it allows people to accept themselves as who they are, and realize that their disability does not determine your worth as a person. Additionally, the author does not shy away from addressing the differences between her and other non-autistic characters and how people's attitudes towards the disabled changed throughout the book.

6. *In what ways (if any) were your beliefs about a topic changed or reaffirmed through reading this book?*

This book reaffirmed my belief that disabled people are just as worthy and deserving of being in places as non-disabled people. Reading about these different perspectives educated me on how such stories should be normalized so that readers can feel represented and relate to characters like them.

7. *What perspective, if any, do you think was missing from this book?*

I don't think any perspective is missing from the book. In fact, I like how this book describes a variety of perspectives. For example, Moose perfectly depicts the struggle between loving someone and half wanting them to go away. He loves his sister, but she complicates his life in ways that most twelve year old boys don't have to deal with. Also, he illustrates the loneliness of the "okay" sibling. All of the family's resources and time seem to be poured into Natalie, leaving Moose with many responsibilities and few perks.

8. *Did this book encourage you to pursue any topics further through more reading, research, action, etc., and if so, how?*

Yes, this book encouraged me to pursue the topic of autism. Reading this book gave me better insight on autism and how it affects both sides of a family: the person with autism, and their family members.

9. *What type of reader (based on age, interests, perspectives, etc.) would you suggest this book to?*

I would recommend this book to people who are in 8th grade and up as it discusses mature topics that should be understood and be taken seriously.

10. *What other book(s) have you read that you think would make a good addition to this category of the Perspectives Bibliography, and why?*

Another book that I think would make a good addition to this category is *Something More Book* by Jackie Khalilieh. This is a contemporary teen romance novel featuring a Palestinian-Canadian girl trying to hide her autism diagnosis while navigating her first year of high school. It contains similar themes to this book and is another wonderful read!

Reviewer Name and Grade: Kate G., 10th Grade

Date Reviewed: March 8, 2024

1. What is the main plot of this book?

The main plot of the book *Al Capone Does My Shirts* by Gennifer Choldenko is that Moose and his family move to Alcatraz Island when Moose's father gets a job as an electrician. Moose's

sister Natalie is removed from the special school that she attends because she is autistic; although not diagnosed at this time. Moose needs to find a way to help her get readmitted so he comes up with a plan to write a powerful letter to the inmate at Alcatraz, Al Capone, asking for his help.

2. Which character did you most identify with and why?

I most identified with the main character, Moose. Moose and I have a lot in common. Like Moose, I love my sibling very much and often help my parents look after and take care of him. I also am a rule follower, the same way that Moose is, and make the choice to do the right thing even when I might not want to.

3. What do you believe is the main message of this book?

I believe the main message of this book is that all people, whether they are disabled or convicts, are worthy of love and human connection. Rather than marginalizing others based on their disability or their poor choices, we need to remember that they too are human and deserve respect, dignity, and purpose in their lives.

4. Do you think the main message of this book was effectively integrated into the story, or did it come across as too "preachy"?

I thought that the main message of this book was effectively integrated into the story and was something that your average reader would be able to understand and relate to. Moose goes through a range of emotions when it comes to moving, his sister's disability, his family dynamics, and his friendship with Piper and I think that most teens could connect to his feelings and experiences.

5. If two or more perspectives on an important topic were explored/presented in this book, which one did you agree with and why?

Moose and his mother had different perspectives on how Natalie should be treated. While Moose's mother wanted to protect Natalie, by telling everyone she was 10 instead of her real age 16, Moose realizes that this is a disservice to Natalie and that it is more important she be accepted for who she truly is. While I think that Moose's mother was acting from a place of love and protection for her daughter, I agree with Moose's perspective towards Natalie. When he acknowledges her true age and includes her with the other kids, it does wonders for Natalie and she begins to improve in areas that were challenging for her.

6. In what ways (if any) were your beliefs about a topic changed or reaffirmed through reading this book?

My beliefs about how to treat those with disabilities was reaffirmed through reading this book. Moose's mom believes that it is easier to explain Natalie's behavior if people think that she is a young child so she tells everyone that she is 10 rather than 16. However, this strips Natalie of the dignity and respect that she deserves. Moose thankfully realizes that Natalie deserves to be recognized for who she truly is by acknowledging her correct age and letting her be a part of the group of children on Alcatraz. When he does this, Natalie has friends, activities and a purpose which ultimately helps her improve her skills and communication with others and be accepted to the Esther P. Marinoff school where she will continue to work with experienced teachers.

7. What perspective, if any, do you think was missing from this book?

I think it would have been interesting to include Moose's sister Natalie's perspective in this book. The book is written as though it is a journal written by Moose and we learn about the

events that transpire through Moose's observations, thoughts and feelings. It would be interesting to learn about the same from Natalie's perspective.

8. *Did this book encourage you to pursue any topics further through more reading, research, action, etc., and if so, how?*

Prior to reading this book, I did not know much about who Al Capone was or Alcatraz. This book piqued my interest and I did more research on both; particularly on the types of criminals that are sent to Alcatraz and the history of the prison.

9. *What type of reader (based on age, interests, perspectives, etc.) would you suggest this book to?*

I would suggest that readers ages 7th grade - 9th grade who enjoy realistic fiction might enjoy this book. While the reading level is appropriate for elementary age readers, I think the content is definitely more appropriate for middle school readers with references to rape and sex.

10. *What other book(s) have you read that you think would make a good addition to this category of the Perspectives Bibliography, and why?*

The book *Rules* by Cynthia Lord would be a good addition to the Different Abilities category of the Perspectives Bibliography because it is about Catherine, a 12 year old girl, who has an autistic brother, David. Catherine struggles with her brother's disability until she realizes that her true friends are those that accept her, her family, and her friends for who they are.

Reviewer Name and Grade: Kevin D., 9th Grade

Date Reviewed: May 28, 2024

1. *What is the main plot of this book?*

"Al Capone Does My Shirts" by Jennifer Choldenko follows the story of Moose Flanagan, a twelve-year-old boy who moves with his family to Alcatraz Island in 1935 because his father gets a job as a prison guard and electrician. Moose tries to adjust to his new life, making friends, and taking care of his autistic sister, Natalie. However, the plot thickens as Moose becomes involved in a scheme involving Al Capone, one of the most notorious criminals of all time, to help his sister get into a special school.

2. *Which character did you most identify with and why?*

The character I most identified with/related to was Moose Flanagan because of his sense of responsibility and care for his family, especially his dedication to his sister Natalie. His struggle to balance his own wants with the needs of his family/relationships is very relatable in my opinion.

3. *What do you believe is the main message of this book?*

I think the main message of "Al Capone Does My Shirts" is about the importance of family and acceptance. Moose shows a lot of devotion to his sister Natalie, who has autism, which highlights the family's struggle to find acceptance for her in a society that does not understand her condition. Additionally, the book shows how the family members support each other, such as when Moose's mother tirelessly advocates for and helps Natalie despite numerous setbacks.

4. *Do you think the main message of this book was effectively integrated into the story, or did it come across as too "preachy"?*

I think that main message was effectively integrated into the story. The themes of family, acceptance, and dealing with autism are written naturally into the plot through Moose's experiences and interactions, making the lessons feel genuine rather than preachy.

5. If two or more perspectives on an important topic were explored/presented in this book, which one did you agree with and why?

The book presents multiple perspectives on handling Natalie's autism, primarily through Moose and his mother. Moose takes a protective and proactive approach, often trying to include Natalie in everyday activities and treating her with the same respect he shows to others. For example, he carefully watches over her while balancing his own desires to play baseball and make friends. On the other hand, Moose's mother often resorts to desperate measures, such as using unproven treatments and constantly pushing to get Natalie into a special school, despite repeated rejections. I mostly agree with Moose's perspective because he seeks practical and compassionate solutions to help Natalie, instead of trying to force anything upon her.

6. In what ways (if any) were your beliefs about a topic changed or reaffirmed through reading this book?

My beliefs about the challenges families face when caring for a child with special needs were definitely solidified. The book highlights the importance of empathy, patience, and advocating for more help and resources for those with autism or any other disorders/diseases.

7. What perspective, if any, do you think was missing from this book?

I think one perspective the book could have additionally included was those from professionals, such as doctors or educators, who work with children with autism and other disorders. This could provide additional insight into the challenges and advancements in understanding and treating disorders during the 1930s.

8. Did this book encourage you to pursue any topics further through more reading, research, action, etc., and if so, how?

Not really, but it was interesting reading about the perspectives of different people/situations in history.

9. What type of reader (based on age, interests, perspectives, etc.) would you suggest this book to?

I would suggest this book to middle to high school readers, particularly those interested in history or those who have an interest in understanding autism or other disorders. The book provides an expansive historical context, engaging characters, and a great narrative that can interest readers exploring these themes, making it both educational and emotionally impactful.

10. What other book(s) you have read that you think would make a good addition to this category of the Perspectives Bibliography, and why?

"Wonder" by R.J. Palacio would make a good addition to this category because it also deals with themes of acceptance, understanding, and empathy for individuals with differences. Both books convey the importance of kindness and the impact of supportive relationships in overcoming challenges.