

# **Al Capone Does My Shirts Study Guide**

**Al Capone Does My Shirts by Gennifer Choldenko**

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# Plot Summary

*Al Capone Does My Shirts* is a novel by award-winning author Gennifer Choldenko. In this novel, Moose Flanagan and his family move to Alcatraz Island, where Moose's father has gotten a job as both electrician and prison guard for the federal prison situated on the island. Moose misses his friends back home and resents his mother for uprooting the family for another of her schemes to help his sister Natalie be normal. Almost immediately, Moose finds himself in trouble when the daughter of the warden, Piper, draws him into a scheme to make money off of the name of the most famous prisoner at Alcatraz, Al Capone. However, Moose soon learns he does not need Piper to find trouble. *Al Capone Does My Shirts* is a humorous novel that can also bring a tear to the reader's eye as Moose learns that family is worth fighting for.

Moose Flanagan is unhappy with the move to Alcatraz because he misses his friends and grandmother back in Santa Monica. To make matters worse, Moose's father is working so much that he does not have time to toss the ball with Moose. However, his father does have time to take Natalie for a walk to give his mother a break. It is all because of Natalie they are there in the first place, so she can attend the Esther P. Marinoff School in San Francisco.

Theresa Mattaman comes by the apartment their first morning there and takes Moose and Natalie on a short tour of the island. They run into Piper, the warden's daughter, who immediately asks uncomfortable questions about Natalie. Moose does not like it when people assume Natalie is stupid simply because she is different. Piper's questions just make Moose dislike her.

The next morning, Moose and his family take Natalie to her new school. Natalie is aware something is happening and nearly refuses to get off the boat, but Moose manages to convince her to go. Back on Alcatraz, Moose thinks about all the other attempts his mother has made to fix Natalie, including a study at UCLA that ended with the doctors telling his mother there was nothing they could do for Natalie. Moose thinks it was then when his mother insisted that Natalie was only ten, each and every birthday since.

The first day of school in San Francisco is exciting for Moose, who discovers a group of boys who organize a baseball game every Monday. Moose is riding high as he makes his way home, but his bubble burst when he receives a phone call from the Esther P. Marinoff School asking his parents to come pick up Natalie immediately. Moose goes with his mother to the school where they are told that Natalie is simply not ready for their program. The dean of the school gives Moose's mother the name of a woman he claims will help, another dead end road as far as Moose is concerned.

Piper comes up with a scheme to have kids at school pay to have their clothing washed in the prison laundry for a nickel each. Piper wants Moose's help, but he repeatedly refuses, afraid of compromising his father's job after the warnings the warden gave him.

Piper persists, however, eventually getting caught and causing not only Moose, but Annie, Jimmy, and Theresa to get in trouble as well.

As part of Natalie's new therapy, Moose is required to keep her with him during the afternoons, even when he goes out to play ball. Moose decides to search for a ball hit over the wall by the prisoners to give to his new school friend, Scout. Moose leaves Natalie to count rocks or buttons as he searches. One day, Moose discovers that a prisoner working as a gardener in the area has befriended his sister. Moose becomes frightened that this criminal has done something unspeakable to his sister and refuses to take Natalie out of the apartment again. However, Natalie is able to communicate to her her desire to see her friend again. This time, Moose allows it as long as he can see what is happening.

It has become clear to Moose that Natalie has made progress with her new therapist. Moose can also see how important it is to his mother that Natalie gets into the school. When Natalie is turned down once again, Moose goes to the warden to ask for help. When the warden refuses, Moose sneaks a letter into the prison to Al Capone. A short time later, Moose learns that the Esther P. Marinoff School has created a new program for older children and Natalie is to be their first student.

# Part 1: Chapters 1-3

## Part 1: Chapters 1-3 Summary

Alcatraz is an island off of San Francisco, California that functioned as a federal prison 1934-1963. Al Capone was a prisoner there from 1934 to 1939. This novel is set in 1935. Natalie, Moose's sister, would be diagnosed as autistic in modern times, but autism was not a recognized medical disorder until 1943.

Chapter 1. Moose Flanagan, christened Matthew, has just moved into an apartment on Alcatraz Island where his father has beaten out hundreds of candidates for a job as electrician and prison guard. Moose's mother forced the move so that Moose's sister, Natalie, can attend a school in San Francisco called Esther P. Marinoff, a school to help emotionally and mentally impaired children.

Chapter 2. Moose has slept with all his clothing on out of fear of a midnight attack by convicts, but feels dumb for doing it the following morning. When Moose gets up, he discovers that his father is about to go to work. Moose is disappointed because he has not had any time alone with his father in months. This disappointment is compounded when Moose realizes his father had time to take Natalie for a walk that morning. Later in the morning, while Moose's mother is in the city shopping, a girl from downstairs comes to show them around the island. The girl, Theresa Mattaman, is bossy, but she is accepting of Natalie.

Chapter 3. Theresa walks Moose and Natalie up the island and around the prison to the morgue. The whole way Theresa talks about Al Capone and some of the other famous inmates. When they reach the morgue, which is locked, they meet Piper. Piper is the warden's daughter and is pushy as well as bossy. Piper makes comments about Natalie, suggesting she is stupid. Moose proves Natalie is not stupid by showing off her unique numerical skills. Piper then threatens to tell her father about Natalie, making Moose wonder if this could cause his father to lose his job. Natalie becomes agitated from all the tension and refuses to leave. Moose's mother finds them on the hill and is visibly upset. Moose attempts to comfort her.

## Part 1: Chapters 1-3 Analysis

In these first chapters of the book, the reader meets Moose Flanagan and his family. Moose is a twelve-year-old boy who is tall for his age. Moose has spent all his life in one place, but now finds himself transplanted to Alcatraz Island, a famous prison for famous inmates, just so his sister can attend a special school. Natalie is special, trapped inside herself as what modern readers will recognize as an autistic. Natalie's situation has become the focus of the Flanagan family, directing the actions of everyone in the family, from day-to-day activities to precipitating this move to Alcatraz.

Moose meets Piper, a strong-willed, determined young girl who attempts to upset his world from their first meeting with her threats to go to her father about Natalie's obvious condition. This suggests to the reader that Piper will be a problem for Moose as the novel continues to develop. One bright spot in the Moose's current situation is Theresa. Theresa is also bossy and strong willed for a seven-year-old, but she is open and accepting of Natalie.

# Part 1: Chapters 4-7

## Part 1: Chapters 4-7 Summary

Chapter 4. The Flanagans have a family breakfast together before taking Natalie to her new school. Natalie walks painfully slow as they go to meet the boat. When the boat reaches San Francisco, Natalie refuses to move. Afraid she will have a tantrum or the boat will return to Alcatraz before they can get off, Moose tricks Natalie into moving by reading a books index incorrectly, distracting her.

Chapter 5. Moose thinks back over the years, how people tried to convince his mother to have Natalie placed in an asylum. These thoughts disappear when Moose gets home and finds a note inviting him to meet with the warden later in the day. Moose and his father play catch for a few minutes before the meeting, asking him about Natalie. Moose's father refuses to discuss Natalie with him, however.

Chapter 6. Moose walks up to the mansion that is the warden's home on Alcatraz. As they begin to talk, Moose and the warden are joined by Piper. The warden lectures Moose on the rules of living on Alcatraz, stressing that he is not to talk about Alcatraz and specifically Al Capone to anyone. The warden also makes Moose promise to help Piper with her school projects since they are both to attend a school in San Francisco.

Chapter 7. On the first day at his new school, Moose is embarrassed when the teacher, influence by his height, asks if he failed seventh grade the first time around. The class is then to give an oral report on their Christmas vacation. Piper gets up and talks about Alcatraz, placing Moose in a position where he feels he must talk about it too, but afraid to because of the warden's warnings. After English class, Piper tells Moose she wants to sell laundry service by Al Capone to the students and she wants his help. Moose refuses to help.

## Part 1: Chapters 4-7 Analysis

Moose and his family take Natalie to school. This is clearly a difficult thing to do. Moose blames his mother, thinking she is placing the family in danger simply to participate in one more scheme to fix Natalie. This is clearly a sore spot in the family, based on the fact that the father will not talk about it with Moose. It is becoming clear to the reader that Natalie's struggles are taking their toll, not just on the parents, but on Moose as well.

Moose not only has trouble at home to think about, but he finds himself placed between a rock and a hard spot with Piper. The warden has told Moose not to talk about the prison and Al Capone in particular with anyone. Piper wants to sell laundry done by Al Capone. Now Moose must make a choice between keeping the peace with this overbearing young lady and staying on the right side of her father, who has the power to fire his father.

# **Part 1: Chapters 8-11**

## **Part 1: Chapters 8-11 Summary**

Chapter 8. After school, Moose joins a baseball game with a boy from his English class, Scout. The game goes well, with Moose making a triple play.

Chapter 9. Moose gets home to learn his mother is getting her hair done for a party that night at the Officers' Club. Moose goes out to the parade grounds to play ball and discovers the only child his age who can toss a ball is a girl, Annie. Annie and Jimmy, Theresa's brother, tell Moose how the inmates play ball behind the prison gates and occasionally a ball will come over the wall. Everyone has one and Moose imagines it would be cool to have one. Then they are joined by Piper, who once again pushes Moose to join her laundry scheme.

Chapter 10. When Moose goes back to his apartment, Mrs. Caconi comes to tell him they have a phone call. Moose takes the call since his mother is still gone and his father is asleep. The call is from the Esther P. Marinoff School. Mr. Purdy, the headmaster, wants Moose's parents to come get Natalie as soon as possible. Moose reluctantly tells his father the bad news.

Chapter 11. Moose goes with his mother to pick up Natalie. On the way, Moose remembers all the other attempts his mother has made to help Natalie, including a special diet, another school, and a study at UCLA. Moose thinks it is the UCLA study that caused his mother to insist Natalie is still ten even though she is now fifteen. At the school, Moose's mother attempts to convince Mr. Purdy to keep Natalie, but he insists she is not ready. Mr. Purdy gives them the name and number of a therapist and promises to revisit Natalie's application in May.

## **Part 1: Chapters 8-11 Analysis**

Natalie's school kicks her out after only thirty-six hours because she has a screaming fit in the aftermath of being left by her family. This causes great turmoil in Moose's family, causing him to think back to similar situations in the past. It is clear to the reader at this point that Moose's mother is frightened about Natalie's future. Moose's mother will clearly try anything to save her daughter from her own private mental world, including pretending that teenaged Natalie is only ten. It is a difficult situation and it can only get worse from here.



# **Part 1: Chapters 12-15**

## **Part 1: Chapters 12-15 Summary**

Chapter 12. Piper again pushes Moose to join her laundry scheme, but Moose again refuses. Moose does, however, talk about the prison when pushed in front of other students at school. Moose then sits back and watches as Piper takes nickel after nickel from their fellow students, along with various pieces of their clothing.

Chapter 13. The next morning, Moose catches Piper putting some of the students' laundry in his family's laundry bag. Back in the apartment, Moose learns that Natalie's new therapist, Carrie Kelly, wants Natalie to stop playing with her button box and that she thinks Natalie should spend more time with Moose, acting like a normal girl. Moose hates this idea, especially when he learns his mother is giving piano lessons again so he will have to give up Monday afternoon baseball. Moose's mother tells him to ask Scout to change the game to Tuesdays.

Chapter 14. Despite being mad at his mother, Moose asks Scout to change the day of the baseball game. Scout does not think it is possible. Scout then asks Moose about the balls that the convicts hit over the wall.

Chapter 15. When Moose gets home, it is hot, so he puts on his swim trunks. Natalie puts on her bathing suit, but Moose cannot let her go out that way because of the rules laid out by the warden. Natalie refuses to change and for a time walks around in the nude. Moose finally gets Natalie dressed and takes her out as promised. They run into Piper and Annie, who are sneaking behind one of the fences to get a closer look at the inmates as they are taken back to the prison after the work day. Moose finds it boring after a short time and Natalie does not seem to notice the men at all.

## **Part 1: Chapters 12-15 Analysis**

Piper proves to be quite stubborn, carrying on with her laundry scheme despite her father and Moose's warnings against it. Piper proves to have quite a talent when it comes to getting herself and all the other children in trouble. This includes sneaking through a fence to get a glimpse at the inmates, hoping to see Al Capone himself. This, in combination with the laundry scheme, shows the reader how curious people were about this famous criminal, including children.

Moose's mother takes a job in the city that leaves Moose in charge of Natalie in the afternoons. Moose is less than thrilled with this, especially when he realizes it means he will have to miss out on the weekly baseball game. Moose is struggling to be a normal child. It is ironic that his mother is making it difficult for Moose to be normal in her attempts to make Natalie normal.

# **Part 1: Chapters 16-20**

## **Part 1: Chapters 16-20 Summary**

Chapter 16. Moose reluctantly helps Piper carry the laundry into their school. Immediately, the students who paid to have their clothes laundered at Alcatraz express disappointment in the fact that the clothing has simply come back clean.

Chapter 17. After Scout agrees to change the ballgame to Tuesday, Moose learns his mother has had a student change piano days to Tuesday.

Chapter 18. Moose tries to tell Scout that he cannot play ball on Tuesdays, but they are interrupted by Piper. Moose finally tells him after school, causing Scout to become angry.

Chapter 19. Theresa comes to get Moose and Natalie when she learns that Piper is dividing up the laundry money. Natalie helps figure out how much each person should get. One of the guards comes and tells them they are all wanted by the warden. It turns out one of the students' mothers wrote to the warden complaining about the laundry scheme. The warden threatens each child involved, including Moose, even though he was not really involved, with the dismissal of their father's from their jobs.

Chapter 20. In the aftermath of their lecture from the warden, the kids are playing on the dock. Moose accidentally knocks over Natalie's buttons, causing her to freeze. Moose's mother arrives and sends the other children away, clearly embarrassed by Natalie's frozen stature. Back at the apartment, Moose's father lectures Moose about not telling him about Piper's laundry scheme. Moose's father takes away Moose's baseball and gloves, warning him not to make any more mistakes.

## **Part 1: Chapters 16-20 Analysis**

Touching again on the children's obsession with Al Capone, the students are disappointed when their Al Capone laundered clothing is not covered with blood when they get it back. Later, Piper, Annie, Jimmy, and Moose are all punished by the warden for their actions. Not only this, but their fathers' jobs are threatened. This places not only the children in jeopardy, but whole families during a time period when jobs were difficult to come by. This places yet more strain on Moose and his family.

Natalie freezes, disappearing inside her mind, when Moose accidentally knocks over her buttons. This is an example of common behavior in children with autism. Moose and his friends try to bring Natalie back out as though this is common behavior in their world. However, when Moose's mother arrives, it is clear she is concerned. Moose's mother does not want anyone to see Natalie this way, afraid perhaps that they will make fun of Natalie. It is this that causes Moose's mother to work so hard to find answers for Natalie.

## **Part 2: Chapters 21-25**

### **Part 2: Chapters 21-25 Summary**

Chapter 21. Almost two months have passed. Moose has settled in on Alcatraz, despite his homesickness. Late one afternoon, Piper tells everyone that Al Capone's mother is coming to Alcatraz and she wants them all to be with her on the boat the day she comes.

Chapter 22. Annie, Piper, Jimmy, and Moose all board the boat together the morning of Mrs. Capone's visit. After the boat begins its journey, they discover that Theresa has snuck aboard with her baby brother Rocky, but Rocky is not happy. After Mrs. Capone boards the boat, she ignores Piper's attempts to talk to her, but she takes control of Rocky and sings him to sleep. When the boat lands at the dock at Alcatraz, there is some trouble with Mrs. Capone as she attempts to go through the metal detector. The guards call Mrs. Mattaman down to speak to her in Italian, but Mrs. Capone is so angry at having to be strip searched, she decides to leave immediately.

Chapter 23. Moose and Scout rekindle their friendship while working on an English project together. Scout expresses a great desire to have one of the convict baseballs. At the same time, Scout seems to be spending a great deal of time with Piper, something that upsets Moose for reasons he does not understand. After school, Moose takes Natalie along as he searches for a ball for Scout.

Chapter 24. Moose slips through a fence close to the edge of the prison wall to search for a ball, leaving Natalie just out of sight on the side of the hill where she is playing with her buttons. When Moose returns, Natalie repeatedly says the number 105 for unknown reasons.

Chapter 25. Several weeks have passed. Now Moose and Scout play baseball almost every day at lunch. Moose continues to look for a convict ball for Scout, but has little success. Moose again leaves Natalie alone while he slips under the fence near the wall of the prison. When he returns, Natalie is nowhere to be found.

### **Part 2: Chapters 21-25 Analysis**

Time has passed and Moose has settled down to life on Alcatraz, despite his deep homesickness and his anger at his mother for forcing him to give up certain aspects of his childhood to be with Natalie. However, Moose has made amends with Scout and found a way to work around his family obligations to still indulge in childhood activities, so it seems everything is beginning to work out.

Moose has become obsessed with finding a convict ball, a ball the inmates have hit over the wall during a ballgame, for Scout. Part of this obsession stems from Moose's jealousy that Scout seems interested in Piper. Despite Piper's continued attempts to get

Moose in trouble, Moose has a crush on her. The only problem is, Moose does not understand this himself. For this reason, Moose is continually leaving Natalie alone as he searches for the ball he wants to give Scout, leaving her vulnerable to whatever might happen. In these chapters she disappears, reminding both the reader and Moose just how vulnerable Natalie truly is.

The author has injected some true history in this section of the novel as well. Moose and his friends travel on a boat with Mrs. Capone, Al Capone's mother. When Mrs. Capone is strip searched because she set off the metal detectors due to metal in her stays, she leaves without seeing her son. The author tells the reader at the end of the novel that this really happened on Alcatraz during Al Capone's imprisonment there. It is a bit of history mixed with the fictional story of Moose Flanagan.

## **Part 2: Chapters 26-32**

### **Part 2: Chapters 26-32 Summary**

Chapter 26. Moose finds Natalie talking with a convict whose number is 105. Moose becomes upset and quickly rushes Natalie away, despite the kindness the criminal shows in giving Moose a convict baseball.

Chapter 27. Moose rushes Natalie back to the apartment, trying to tell himself there was not enough time for anything bad to have happened between Natalie and the inmate. Piper is waiting at the apartment and refuses to allow Moose and Natalie to pass until she learns where they got the baseball from. Natalie reveals a few details despite Moose's denials, leading Piper to figure out what has happened.

Chapter 28. Moose attempts several times that night to tell his parents what happened with Natalie and convict 105. Moose's mother is focused on an article in the paper about the Esther P. Marinoff School and refuses to listen. When Moose reads the article, he focuses on the fact that they only provide services to children under twelve. Finally, Moose is able to tell his parents some of what happened, but his mother refuses to alter Natalie's routine.

Chapter 29. Piper has given Scout the convict baseball 105 gave Natalie. Scout then stops spending so much time with Piper. Piper tries to talk Moose into taking Natalie to see 105 again so they can convince him to get Al Capone to sign a ball. Moose refuses.

Chapter 30. Natalie repeatedly talks about 105. Moose keeps her in the apartment most days to keep her safe until the day she refuses to play with her buttons. Natalie has a fit that brings adults from the apartments downstairs. Moose manages to calm her by wrapping her in a rug.

Chapter 31. Moose takes Natalie outside to play. Natalie quickly falls asleep from the exhaustion of her tantrum. As Moose takes her home, he runs into his father. Moose's father shares a beer with him. Moose asks if his birth somehow caused Natalie's problems and his father assures him he had nothing to do with it.

Chapter 32. Moose overhears his parents arguing over the mother's obsession with Natalie to the exclusion of Moose.

### **Part 2: Chapters 26-32 Analysis**

Moose discovers that Natalie has been spending time with a convicted criminal. This causes him to worry immediately that the convict might have injured Natalie in some way. It is immediately clear to the reader that Moose has realized just how vulnerable Natalie is and how much he wants to protect her. Moose clearly loves his sister despite

the turmoil she has brought to the family and he does not want to do anything to hurt her.

Moose takes his concerns to his parents, but his mother is so obsessed with fixing Natalie that she cannot even consider anything that might make that difficult. Not only does this include lying about Natalie's age, but it includes ignoring Moose's fears that Natalie is not safe on Alcatraz. This seems to highlight the mother's inability to see what Natalie's situation and her own narrow focus is doing to her other child.

## Part 3: Chapters 33-36

### Part 3: Chapters 33-36 Summary

Chapter 33. The day before Natalie's interview at the Esther P. Marinoff School, Moose is instructed to keep her especially calm. That day also happens to be Natalie's birthday. Piper comes by and says something to Natalie that causes her to want to see convict 105. Moose reluctantly allows her to go and is awed by how normal the meeting seems.

Chapter 34. Moose's mother invites Piper to stay for Natalie's birthday party. Moose's father teases him about all the girls in his life. As the party begins, Natalie asks for Theresa. The party expands to include Jimmy and Annie as well. Moose is embarrassed when his friends notice the ten his mother has put on Natalie's cake. When Moose walks Piper home, he finds himself telling her that Natalie has really just turned sixteen, not ten.

Chapter 35. Back at their apartment, Moose talks to his mother about her insistence on Natalie being ten. They argue until Moose's dad intervenes. Moose's father takes his son's side, causing his wife to collapse into near hysteria.

Chapter 36. Moose's mother is convinced the interview at Esther P. Marinoff went really well, that Natalie got in this time. Moose's mother later talks to him, coming close to apologizing for her anger the night before. That night, the family learns that Natalie has not been accepted to the school.

### Part 3: Chapters 33-36 Analysis

Moose confronts his mother on her insistence that Natalie is only ten. Finally, Moose learns that his mother has done this because she believes there is still hope as long as Natalie remains a child. However, Moose's mother has been forced to see what her obsessions are doing to the family when her husband chooses Moose's side. It is a difficult time for the family, but it is also a time that shows how important Natalie is to everyone and how maturely young Moose is able to deal with the situation. Moose seems to be the only member of the family at this point with enough objective to see the situation for what it really is.

Natalie has grown and changed through the course of the novel, interacting more with the people around her. This becomes so very clear when she specifically asks for Theresa to be at her birthday party. The reader becomes hopeful alongside the family as Natalie makes another attempt to enter the Esther P. Marinoff School and is disappointed along with the family when she does not.

## **Part 3: Chapters 37-40**

### **Part 3: Chapters 37-40 Summary**

Chapter 37. The following morning, Moose calls Carrie Kelly and thanks her for all the work she did with Natalie. Moose asks Ms. Kelly why she thinks Natalie did not get in. Ms. Kelly admits that Mrs. Flanagan's insistence that Natalie is only ten might have had something to do with her inability to get into the school. That same morning, Moose asks the warden to use his influence to help Natalie. Moose also asks him to ask Al Capone to pull some strings for Natalie, but the warden outright refuses.

Chapter 38. Moose's mother falls into a depression and refuses to get out of bed for several days. Moose decides he must take things into his own hands. Moose talks Piper into helping him write a letter to Al Capone and slip it in with the already censored inmate mail.

Chapter 39. On the last day of school, Moose comes home to find his whole family waiting for him at the dock along with the warden and Theresa. Theresa announces that Natalie got into the Esther P. Marinoff School after all. Mr. Purdy called and said he had wanted to start a program for older students for some time and he has decided to do so now with Natalie as the first student.

Chapter 40. Moose is putting on a shirt laundered in the prison and finds a note that simply says, "Done".

### **Part 3: Chapters 37-40 Analysis**

Moose shows a great deal of development in this chapter. Moose decides he must save the family as his mother suffers depression and his father removes himself from the family. Moose asks Al Capone for help, aware that Capone has often showed that he has a generosity of heart, as exemplified by the soup kitchens he opened in Chicago years before. A short time later, Natalie gets into the Esther P. Marinoff School just as her family has so desperately wanted. Moose believes it was Capone who did it for him, especially when he gets a note in one of his shirts. The reader wonders if it was truly Capone who got Natalie into the school or if Mr. Purdy really just happened to pick now to start a program for older students.



# Characters

## Matthew "Moose" Flanagan

Matthew Flanagan, known as Moose, is a twelve-year-old boy when his family moves from Santa Monica to Alcatraz Island off of San Francisco. Moose has a sister who suffers from a mental disability. For this reason, Moose's mother encouraged her husband to find a job at Alcatraz as an electrician and prison guard so that their daughter might be able to enroll in a new school that is rumored to be able to help children like Natalie to function out in the real world. No one asked Moose if he wanted to move and he is homesick for everyone who was important in his life before now.

Moose struggles to fit in not only in a new school, but with the kids who have been living on Alcatraz for nearly a year. Not only this, but Moose finds himself in a position to cause his whole family to be homeless when the warden tells him any misdeeds on his part can cause his father to be fired without severance. To add to his troubles, Moose's sister is dismissed from the school and forced to work with a therapist to help her become better able to deal with the school environment. For this reason, Moose finds himself in charge of his sixteen-year-old sister every day after school. Now Moose must come home to babysit rather than play baseball with the other kids at school.

Life is more difficult for Moose Flanagan than the average twelve-year-old, but he manages to survive the tension and even learn from it. In fact, it is Moose's actions that help solve his family's most immediate problems.

## Natalie Flanagan

Natalie Flanagan is the sixteen-year-old sister of Moose Flanagan. Natalie was a normal baby, but around the time Moose was born she became withdrawn. Natalie has temper tantrums and she does not communicate properly with anyone. Natalie lives in her own world. In modern times, Natalie would be diagnosed as autistic, but in 1935 autism is not a recognized medical disorder.

Natalie's mother tries constantly to find a way to help Natalie function as a normal person. Moose tells the reader of all the things Mrs. Flanagan has done from special diets, creams, and a UCLA study. Natalie remains oblivious to all of this, continuing to live in her own little world, counting her buttons. Natalie is unaware the impact her condition has on the entire family, but Moose is all too aware of it. In the beginning, Moose resents Natalie, but in time he comes to understand his special sister.

## Cam Flanagan

Cam Flanagan is Moose's father. Cam is an electrician who has taken a job as both electrician and prison guard on Alcatraz Island, where there is a new federal prison.

Cam has taken this job in order to move his family to San Francisco where there is a school that could potentially help his daughter, Natalie.

Cam is a good husband who bends to his wife's will wherever the children or the home are concerned. However, after arriving on Alcatraz, Cam begins to recognize the toll his wife's obsession with helping their daughter is taking on their son. Cam comes down on Moose's side in an argument with his wife, showing his son that he matters in the family and to him.

## **Mrs. Flanagan**

Mrs. Flanagan is Cam's wife and Moose's mother. Mrs. Flanagan loves both her children, but Natalie's special needs scare Mrs. Flanagan. Mrs. Flanagan is fighting to help her daughter, determined to never see her in a mental asylum. Among the things Mrs. Flanagan has tried in the past is a study at UCLA and another special school. Mrs. Flanagan does not want her daughter to withdraw inside her own mind, unable to communicate with the outside world at all. To this extent, Mrs. Flanagan has decided that her daughter will always remain ten years old so that her chances of finding help will continue to increase, not decline.

Mrs. Flanagan is determined to get Natalie into the Esther P. Marinoff School for the Mentally Disabled. For this reason, Mrs. Flanagan has uprooted her entire family to bring them close to the school. When Natalie is kicked out of the school, Mrs. Flanagan becomes determined to help Natalie improve so that she can get in later. When this still does not help, Mrs. Flanagan becomes darkly depressed. This is Mrs. Flanagan's whole purpose in life, to help her daughter become more normal. It is this obsession that causes Moose to feel pushed aside and uncared for. In the end, Mrs. Flanagan will come to see this, though change is slow in coming.

## **Piper Williams**

Piper Williams is the warden's daughter. Piper is a strong, determined young woman who is always coming up with schemes to use her home on Alcatraz to her advantage. Piper comes up with a scheme to sell laundry services by Al Capone to the kids at school, resulting in punishment not only for herself, but for four of the other children on the island. Moose is fascinated by Piper, but at the same time he dislikes her because Piper is beautiful and she has a mind of her own. Piper proves to be a problem for Moose in more ways than one.

## **Mrs. Carrie Kelly**

Mrs. Carrie Kelly is a therapist that the headmaster of the Esther P. Marinoff School recommends for Natalie. Mrs. Kelly works with Natalie several times a week and in time helps her come out of her own world, to learn to communicate with the outside world better. Mrs. Kelly also encourages Natalie to spend more time living as a normal child,

spending time after school with Moose. This restricts Moose's ability to be a normal child, but also fosters a close relationship between brother and sister.

## **Theresa Mattaman**

Theresa Mattaman is a neighbor of the Flanagans. Theresa is only seven, but she is bossy enough to force herself into Moose and Natalie's lives. Theresa is a lot like Piper, but she is nicer in her methods. Theresa is also good with Natalie, often helping when Natalie is having a crisis.

## **Annie**

Annie is another girl who lives on Alcatraz. Annie is about Moose's age and she is the only child on the island who can play ball with Moose on his level. Annie tells Moose everything honestly. Annie is one of the only kids who stands up to Piper until Moose comes along. Annie is a strong, independent girl who becomes a good friend to Moose.

## **Scout**

Scout is a boy who attends Moose and Piper's school. Scout likes to play baseball and Moose quickly befriends him over an informal game. Later, Moose finds himself forced to ask Scout to change the day he and his friends play ball only to be forced to miss the game. In the end, Scout and Moose work out their differences and become good friends.

## **Al Capone**

Al Capone is a famous gangster who was arrested and charged with tax evasion in the early thirties. Al Capone was a prisoner at Alcatraz from 1934 to 1939, including the time in which Moose and his family live on the island. As one of the most famous prisoners on Alcatraz, Capone causes a great deal of curiosity in the children who attend school with Moose and Piper. Later, when Moose needs to get his sister into a special school, it is Al Capone he turns to. Besides his famous crimes, Capone was also known as a man with a big heart.

# **Objects/Places**

## **Snitch Box**

The Snitch Box is a metal detector that visitors to and residents of Alcatraz must walk to in order to gain access to the island and/or prison.

## **Box of Buttons**

Natalie is calmed by counting and objects. Natalie has a collection of buttons that she likes to fondle and count. When Natalie begins seeing Mrs. Kelly, her mother is told to take the buttons from her. Moose, however, allows Natalie to play with her buttons until his mother quietly takes the buttons away.

## **Laundry Bags**

Each family living on Alcatraz has their laundry done in the prison laundry. Piper sneaks some clothes from her school classmates in the Flanagan family, Mattaman family, and Annie's family laundry bags in a scheme to make money.

## **Convict Ball**

The convicts often play baseball in the prison exercise yard. When a ball goes over the wall, the batter is automatically out. These balls are popular with the kids living on Alcatraz. Moose spends a great deal of time searching for one of these balls to give to his friend Scout.

## **Letter to Capone**

Moose writes a letter to Al Capone asking him to use his influence to get Natalie into the Esther P. Marinoff School.

## **Note from Capone**

Moose finds a note in a shirt laundered in the prison laundry that says, "Done". Moose believes this is an answer to his letter to Capone.

## **Frank M. Coxe**

The Frank M. Coxe is the name of the old army steamship used to transport people from San Francisco to Alcatraz.

## **Golden Gate Bridge**

The Golden Gate Bridge is a bridge that spans over the San Francisco Bay within sight of Alcatraz. This bridge is being constructed in the time period in which the novel takes place.

## **Bay Bridge**

The Bay Bridge in San Francisco is being constructed during the time period in which this novel takes place. Moose mentions seeing the bridge from Alcatraz.

## **Esther P. Marinoff School**

The Esther P. Marinoff School is a school where they have had some success in helping mentally disabled children function as adults in the real world.

## **Alcatraz Federal Prison**

Alcatraz Federal Prison is a prison in the San Francisco Bay that was in operation from 1934-1963.

## **San Francisco, California**

San Francisco is a port city in northern California. It is near this city where Alcatraz is located.

# Themes

## Impact of Disability on Family

The Flanagan family consists of parents and two children. One of those children happens to have a mental disability that causes her to need more attention than her younger brother, Moose. Natalie has temper tantrums, she does not interact with people, and she needs constant attention. Mrs. Flanagan is obsessed with finding ways to help Natalie become more like children unaffected by mental disability. Mrs. Flanagan is so obsessed that she often forgets the impact Natalie has on her unaffected son Moose.

Moose is a twelve-year-old who wants to spend time with his friends and play baseball. First, his mother takes away his friends by forcing the move to Alcatraz so that Natalie can go to a special school. Then Moose's mother takes away Moose's baseball day by forcing him to come home from school every day to spend time with Natalie. Moose becomes frustrated by his mother's actions even as he comes to know Natalie better and sees the improvement Natalie is making in her therapy.

Moose's father is also affected by Natalie. Not only is his wife obsessed with healing their eldest child, Cam must deal with Moose's feeling of being overlooked and underappreciated. Cam comes to see what his wife's actions are doing to their son and he takes up Moose's side against his own wife. In the end, Cam forces change for the entire family even though change is slow in coming.

## Creating Trouble

Piper Williams is a young woman who likes to come up with ways to get into trouble. Piper feels that because her father is warden at Alcatraz, she should be the leader of the children as well. Piper strongly encourages the other kids to participate in her many schemes, often forcing the other kids to do things she knows will cause them to get in trouble with her father. Among these schemes is one in which she sells laundry service by the criminals of Alcatraz for the kids at school. Piper charges a nickel per article of clothing, selling enough of the service to make more than three dollars. However, the kids get caught and they are all punished. Moose, Jimmy, and Annie are threatened with the possibility of their father's losing their jobs in a time when jobs are few and far between, while Piper is shuttled off to live with her grandmother for two months.

After getting in trouble over the laundry scheme, Piper continues to cause trouble for the kids of Alcatraz. Piper tries to see Al Capone as the prisoners are led to the prison after work. Piper also tries to get Moose to use Natalie to have an inmate get Al Capone to sign a baseball she can sell. Piper is constantly looking for trouble and constantly getting Moose, Annie, Jimmy, and Theresa to help her. For this reason, creating trouble is a theme of the novel.

## History

This novel has a great deal of history as the background of the plot. Alcatraz Island is the setting of this novel. In history, Alcatraz is an island in San Francisco Bay that has a federal prison on it. As part of the prison, there is also an apartment building where the guards who work at the prison live with their families. It is here that the author has set her novel, and here that the main character Moose lives.

The prison houses dangerous criminals who have attempted escape from other federal prisons. For this reason, many of these prisoners have been sent to Alcatraz because it is an island and is thought to be inescapable. Also among these prisoners is Al Capone, a gangster who was famous for his cruel acts against his own lieutenants and rival gangsters. Also at Alcatraz at this time was Machine Gun Kelly and famous kidnapper Roy Gardner. These criminals are quite famous in this time period and cause a great deal of curiosity among Moose's new classmates.

The author relies on history as the backdrop of her novel. This history enhances the plot and makes the story seem more realistic for author's intended audience. The author also includes in her plot actual events that have been slightly altered to include the characters of this novel. For this reason, history is a theme of the novel.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is told in a first person point of view. The novel is written as though it is a journal written by Moose Flanagan, the main character of the novel. Moose tells the story of his family's move to Alcatraz and the events that transpire over the following six months. The author never deviates from Moose's point of view, keeping a tight narration with only one narrator.

The point of view of this novel works well with the structure of the novel. While the first person point of view can often restrict the reader's understanding of the plot, this novel is structured in such a way that the reader learns all they need to know from Moose's careful observations. The point of view of this story also works well with the plot of the novel because the only narrator is a twelve-year-old boy, a boy who is about the same age as the intended audience of the novel. Reader can identify with Moose quite easily, making this point of view the best choice for this particular novel.

## Setting

The novel is set in 1935 in both San Francisco and the island of Alcatraz, where the federal prison has only been in operation for a year. Moose, the main character, is a twelve-year-old boy whose family has recently moved to Alcatraz so that his father might work there as both an electrician and a prison guard. Moose finds the island scary at first because of the closeness of the prison and the dangerous prisoners housed there. However, as time passes, Moose comes to see the island as a small town that is just as safe as any other town, perhaps more so because of the caution taken by the prison staff.

The setting of this novel is fascinating because it is taken straight out of the history books. Alcatraz is a real island where there was a working federal prison for nearly thirty years. By using this setting as a part of the plot, the author offers the reader a snap shot of history through the eyes of a child the same age as the intended audience. Not only this, but by using Alcatraz as a setting, the author is also able to use several famous criminals of the time period, including Al Capone, to become characters of her novel.

## Language and Meaning

The novel is written for young readers, namely children between the ages of eight and fourteen. For this reason, the language of the novel is simple. However, the novel is also set in 1935; therefore, there are some words and phrases that might be unfamiliar to modern readers because they are specific to the setting of the novel. These phrases are few and far between and therefore cause little trouble for the readers to comprehend.



The language of the novel is appropriate to the novel because it fits the plot and the characters. The characters are mostly twelve year old children; therefore, most of the language is language they might use, not language filled with metaphor and other literary flourishes. The language also fits well in the setting because it has a certain antiquity to it that fits with the time period in which it is set. Finally, the language of this novel is appropriate to the plot because it easily tells the story of Moose Flanagan and his family without big confusing words that would make it inappropriate for the intended audience.

## Structure

This novel is divided into thirty parts and contains forty chapters. Each chapter is separated by a unique title and date that allow the reader to know when each event has taken place. The novel begins with the Flanagan family's move to Alcatraz in order for Natalie Flanagan to attend a special school and ends nearly six months later when she is finally accepted into that same school. This plot is told in a linear fashion with only a few flashbacks and no confusing time lines.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows Moose Flanagan as he attempts to adjust to the changes taking place in his life. This begins with a move to Alcatraz Island and ends with Moose's understanding that his family will remain on the island for unforeseen future. One subplot follows Moose as he attempts to help his mother accept the limitations his sister will forever face. Another subplot follows Moose's love-hate relationship with the warden's daughter, Piper. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.

# Quotes

"Today I moved to a twelve-acre rock covered with cement, topped with bird turd and surrounded by water. Alcatraz sits smack in the middle of the bay—so close to the city of San Francisco, I can hear them call the score on a baseball game on Marina Green. Okay, not that close. But still."

Part 1: Chap. 1, p. 3

"Okay, that's it. I'm sleeping with my clothes on. Who wants to face a convicted felon in your pajamas?"

Part 1: Chap. 1, p. 6

"Good Moose. Obedient Moose. I always do what I'm supposed to do."

Part 1: Chap. 4, p. 28

"Piper waves like she is the sweetest girl next door. For a second I almost believe her. That's how good she is. And then I realize she is the girl next door...the girl next door to Al Capone."

Part 1: Chap. 6, p. 41

"My mom is like a one-woman commando unit. She could win land battles, air battles, water battles, outer space battles too, probably."

Part 1: Chap. 13, p. 85

"On Alcatraz there's nothing to do, no one to do it with and nothing to look forward to either."

Part 2: Chap. 21, p. 125

"Later we learn that Mrs. Capone had been strip-searched to find her weapons. There were none. The metal stays on her old-fashioned corset set the snitch box off. And try as she might, Mrs. Mattaman could not convince the terrified Mrs. Capone that this humiliation was the last."

Part 2: Chap. 22, p. 134

"'I don't know,' he says, taking a teary breath, 'what caused Natalie to be sick. I don't think anyone knows that. But I do know this.' He bites his lip, his voice so full of feelings, he's having trouble speaking. 'Absolutely...absolutely for sure it had nothing, nothing at all to do with you.'"

Part 2: Chap. 31, p. 173

"As the day of Nat's interview approaches, my mother behaves as if her nerves have rotted and fallen apart like old rubber bands."

Part 3: Chap. 33, p. 179



"Natalie is holding hands with a man convicted of some awful crime. It's so strange, so awful and so...normal. Natalie doesn't look weird. She's my older sister. A sixteen-year-old girl holding hands with a man not much older than she is. This is terrible. This is good."

Part 3: Chap. 33, p. 185

"When I hang up, I know I have to do something. Have to. I have no idea what. I wonder if this is how my mother feels. How she has always felt."

Part 3: Chap. 37, p. 201

"Life is amazing, isn't it? You can't ever tell what will happen. Nobody knows until they go ahead and play the game."

Part 3: Chap. 40, p. 215

## Topics for Discussion

What is Alcatraz? Why has the Flanagan family moved there? What purpose does the island serve? For what purpose does the Flanagan family move there? Who is housed on that island? What is famous about some of the inhabitants of the island? Where is Alcatraz? Is it still there? In what capacity?

Who is Moose Flanagan? Why is he unhappy living on Alcatraz? Why does Moose want to return to his old home? Why can he not do this? How does Moose feel when he begins school? How does Moose feel when Piper accuses his sister of being stupid? How does Moose feel about Piper? How do these feelings change over the course of the novel? How does Moose change over the course of the novel?

Who is Natalie Flanagan? Why is she special? What school does her mother want her to attend? For what reason? What kind of trouble does Natalie have as the novel progresses? Why does Moose not want Natalie to spend time with Onion, prisoner 105? Why does Natalie want to be with Onion? What item does Natalie like to count? Why does someone try to take these away? How might Natalie be treated in the modern world? How is this different from the setting of the novel?

Who is Theresa Mattaman? Why does she force herself on the Flanagan children? Is she a good person? What does Theresa do for Natalie? How does Moose feel about Theresa? Who is Rocky? How does Theresa treat Rocky? Why? Why does Theresa take Rocky on the boat without her mother? What happens when Theresa does this?

Who is Piper Williams? How does Piper treat the other children? For what reason? How does Moose feel about Piper? Why does Moose become upset when he realizes Piper and Scout are spending a great deal of time together? Why does Piper steal the convict baseball from Moose? Who does she give it to? What does she want to do with the baseballs? Who does she try to get to help her? Why does Piper sell laundry services to the kids at school? What happens when she does this?

Who is Al Capone? Why does the author make Capone a peripheral character of this novel? What did Capone do to be in Alcatraz? What good deeds did he do before his arrest? Why does Moose think of Capone when he needs help getting Natalie into school? Why would Capone help Moose and his family? Does he?

What is autism? How does it affect those afflicted with it? How does the author get across Natalie's problems without saying what it is she has? Why does the author not mention autism in the plot of the novel? Is there help for those with autism? Was Natalie's mother correct in insisting that she did not need a mental institution? Is it possible a place like the Esther P. Marinoff School could help Natalie?