



## Book Reviews by Anna Stewart

### *Al Capone Does My Shirts*

Gennifer Choldenko

Ages: 12 and up

Challenges: Sibling with autism spectrum disorder

This book works on many levels. It's a glimpse into a unique period of American history when the employees of Alcatraz prison (in the San Francisco bay) lived with their families on the same island prison as the convicts. It's a story of a boy, Moose Flanagan, who wanted to please his parents and do the right things. It's also the story of what having a disability was like in 1935.

Moose's sister Natalie, presented to the world as younger than him, but really three years older, has an autism spectrum disorder though no one had a name for her 'condition' back then. She's obsessed with her button collection and indexes. She communicates with very few words and has very little social interactions. Seventy years ago no one understood her disorder or knew how to treat it. She's one of the lucky ones you lived with her family. Since most kids like her are institutionalized and not seen, much less included, no one questions the assumption that she cannot go to public school. The author wisely doesn't make this a political statement but just a fact of the times.

Choldenko centers her story on Moose and his struggles to find a place for himself in his new life as an "Alcatraz boy." His nemesis is not Nat but the warden's precocious and trouble-making daughter, Piper. She's constantly pushing the other kids on the island to get close to the convicts. It's Piper who schemes to sell convict laundry services to her classmates for a nickel a shirt – (hence the title) as the famous gangster Al Capone is on laundry duty. He was really there. It's Piper who intercepts Al Capone's mother as she takes the ferry to visit her infamous son.

Moose's parents are both working to try and save enough money to send Nat to a private school in San Francisco. When she finally goes, the director calls for them to come get her after the first day. Then it's Moose's job to watch Nat every afternoon, interfering with his desire to play baseball with his tenuous new friends.

After Natalie gets rejected from the school again, Moose decides to take action. He wants Nat to get the help she needs. His creative solution allows several key players to get to do the right thing. It's a satisfying conclusion to a top-notch story.

Choldenko depicts Nat as a whole person. She has interests, likes and dislikes, and the ability to connect to the people she chooses. Her autism makes her behavior challenging and she has fits that leave her exhausted for days. But she has self-awareness and when allowed to sink into her autism, is easy to be with.

Moose is at times embarrassed by her, as is his mother. He also accepts her as part of his family and truly wants her to be all she can be. Moose transcends the time; he is just a 12-year-old kid with a kooky sister and a dad who works too much. He is a very accessible character.

*Al Capone Does My Shirts* reflects a new trend in children's novels with characters that have disabilities. The people are not defined by their disabilities; they are complex individuals. They are part of the story, like they are part of society and not pitied or feared.

As a story about a fascinating time in history, with interesting characters and delightful twists in plot, this terrific new book deserves to be on every kids reading list (and parents will want to read it too!)