

**CYRM Resource Book
Middle School/
Junior High Nominees
(Grades 6-8)
2006-2007**

Al Capone Does My Shirts

by Gennifer Choldenko

Putnam's, 2004

Becoming Naomi León

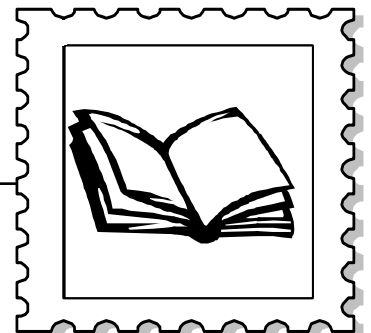
by Pam Muñoz Ryan

Scholastic Press, 2004

Letters from Wolfie

by Patti Sherlock

Viking, 2004



California Young Reader Medal
**Middle School/Junior High
Ballot**
2006-2007

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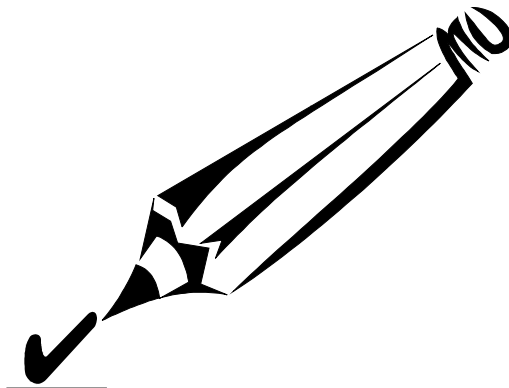
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Al Capone Does My Shirts

by Gennifer Choldenko



Synopsis

It's 1935 and 12-year-old Moose and his family move from Santa Monica to Alcatraz Island where his father will be employed as an electrician and prison guard. Moose is not happy about this move--he will be leaving his good friends and baseball team. But he also understands that there is a special school in San Francisco that will help his older sister, Natalie, who is autistic. The story revolves around Moose, Natalie, his family, and the new people he meets on Alcatraz Island. For example, there's Piper, the pretty warden's daughter, who develops a scheme to have students' shirts washed by the Alcatraz Laundry with the come-on, "Have your shirts cleaned by famous Alcatraz convicts." Many similar stories run throughout the book, giving an historical look at what it was like to have lived on Alcatraz Island.



Hooks

- Al Capone was a notorious gangster who was imprisoned on Alcatraz Island for five years in the 1930s. What do you think this book is about with a title like, *Al Capone Does My Shirts*?
- She counts buttons all day long. She can multiply any two multiple digit numbers in her head. She remembers page numbers of references read to her from an index of a book. She doesn't like to be touched. This is Natalie, Moose's 15-year-old autistic sister. Read *Al Capone Does My Shirts* and find out more about Natalie and how Moose, his family, and his friends deal with her condition on a daily basis.
- Towards the end of the book, 12-year-old Moose writes to Al Capone asking for a special favor. Do you think Capone writes back? Does he carry out Moose's favor? Read *Al Capone Does My Shirts* to find out.

Meet the Author—Gennifer Choldenko



Gennifer Choldenko has been honored by awards committees for *Al Capone Does My Shirts* and for her first children’s book, *Moonstruck: The True Story of the Cow Who Jumped over the Moon*. In between these two books, she wrote *Notes from a Liar and Her Dog*, the story of what it’s like to be the middle child in the family. Before finishing *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, Ms. Choldenko, who lives in California, had to do a lot of research to make the novel historically accurate. You can read more about her at:
<http://www.choldenko.com>





Alcatraz Island/Prisons

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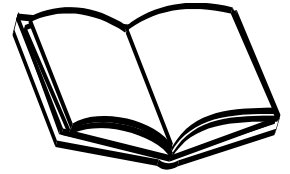
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Brothers & Sisters

- Lamstein, Sarah. *Hunger Moon*. Front Street Books, 2004.
- Naisoo, Beverley. *The Other Side of Truth*. Harper Collins, 2001.
- Ryan, Pam Munoz. *Becoming Naomi León*. Scholastic, 2004.
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Center Activities for *Al Capone Does My Shirts*



- **Map and Chart Work:**

Generate a list in class of the prisons and penitentiaries that are known by the students. If the students get stuck, do a search through the internet (i.e. via Google.com) for a broader list of prison names and locations. Then, on a map of the United States, identify the names and locations of the major prisons and penitentiaries found in our country. Make a chart indicating the following: the date the prison was established; the average size of the prison population; the type of prisoners kept there; and any other interesting aspects about the history of the site (i.e. any riots experienced, famous prisoners kept there, or type of death sentences carried out there.)

- **Research – Federal Prisons:**

Using the MAP and CHART WORK activity listed above, assign groups of students to research further the various individual prison and penitentiaries sites for a formal report. Encourage them to elaborate on the general information gathered for the map and chart making. Some of the well-know prisons include: San Quentin, Fort Leavenworth, and Attica.

- **Fictional Diary Writing:**

Imagine that you were a person spending time on Alcatraz Island. Your "time" may be either "voluntary" or "enforced." Select from one of the following suggested categories of island inhabitants:

- a prisoner incarcerated on Alcatraz during the time of the story
- one of the guards who works on the island in some capacity
- a member of one of the families living on the island
- the warden – or the warden's wife.

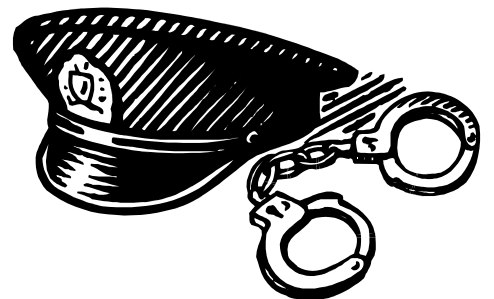
In a series of 8-10 entries, write about life on the island, your impressions and experiences, your unique challenges and concerns, the people with whom you interact, or the activities of a typical day in your life.

- **Interview a Classroom Guest:**

Invite a person from a local law enforcement agency (police department, county sheriff's office, juvenile detention center, etc.) to speak to the class. Ask the guest to specifically talk about the differences between felonies and misdemeanors, and what types of court judgments might be rendered by a judge and jury for various crimes committed.

Teachers: Prior to the arrival of the law enforcement guest, put students into discussion groups of 3-4 students and have them generate questions to ask the officer. Once groups have generated some questions, have each group share what they consider their most significant questions with the class. Refine the questions to be asked and assign various students to ask the questions.

After the guest has presented, have students write a short paper – or create a poster or graphic organizer about things they learned from the presentation. Have them generate questions they now have AFTER the conversation with the law enforcement official.



Writing Prompts / Discussion Questions for *Al Capone Does My Shirts*



- Why is Natalie's behavior so difficult for her family? What reasons does Mr. Purdy of the Esther P. Marinoff School give for sending Natalie home after just one night? Why does Mrs. Flanagan say that Moose is better with Natalie than she is?
- How would your life be different if you lived with a sibling with a significant disability or a condition like Natalie's? How well do you think you would relate to your sibling?
- Do Moose's parents expect too much from him? Have you ever felt that you had too many responsibilities for your age? If so, what did you do to live up to your duties or get help? What advice would you offer someone in Moose's position?
- Was there any slang used in 1934 that you didn't understand? What slang do you and your friends use that Moose and his friends wouldn't understand?
- Why is Al Capone a prisoner on Alcatraz? Research why Capone was infamous, as well why he went to prison. How does his presence on the island affect the kids who live there?
- How does Natalie's situation change? Why does Mr. Purdy suddenly decide to open a new school? Explain what you think may have happened.
- Research autism; what have we learned about it since the 1930's? Why does Mrs. Flanagan continue to celebrate Natalie's 10th birthday over and over? Does that seem like a good idea to you?
- Moose finds he both attracted to Piper and suspicious of her. Describe a person you have known that inspired conflicting feelings in you. Which side won out in the end? How well did Moose deal with Piper?
- Would you enjoy living on Alcatraz Island? Does the notoriety of living near Al Capone make up for the fear Moose often feels when on the island?

Becoming Naomi León

by Pam Muñoz Ryan



Synopsis

Eleven-year-old Naomi and eight-year-old Owen live with their great-grandmother, Mary Outlaw, in a trailer park in California near the Mexican border. Their alcoholic mother, Skylar, left them with Grams seven years ago while their father, Santiago Leon, lives in Mexico and has not had contact with them either, only because Skylar would not allow him to see the children. Suddenly, Skylar and her boyfriend show up at the trailer park with gifts and the idea that they will take Naomi with them to Las Vegas in order to collect government support checks. Owen is physically disabled and Skylar doesn't want to take him with them. Naomi doesn't want to go and Gram hatches a plot to take the kids to Mexico to find their father in Oaxaca City during the Night of the Radishes Festival where people come to carve scenes from large radishes. Their father always attends this event because he is a wonderful carver, just like Naomi, who carves animals from soap bars. The children finally find their father and he helps them with a letter to the judge explaining the wonderful home that Grams has provided for the children. In the end, Naomi stands up for herself and tells the judge the truth about Skylar and how she has treated them since she has been back and that the only home they have known is with Grams.



Hooks

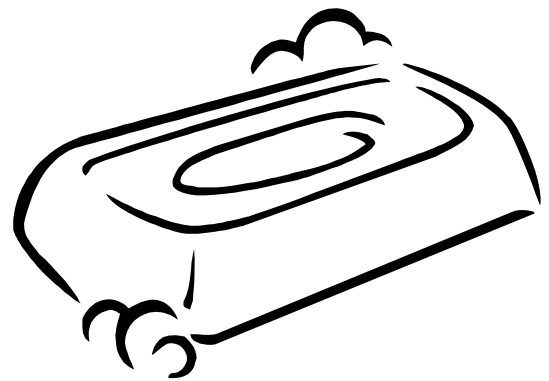
- Naomi and Owen were only four and one when their mother dropped them off with their great-grandmother and abandoned them. Seven years later, she shows up at their trailer park. Is she here to take them back and make a family? Will they finally have the mother they never had?
- Eleven-year-old Naomi and eight-year-old Owen haven't seen their mother in seven years. When she shows up one day, her mother wants to take Naomi with her to Las Vegas, but not Owen. Why not? Why would a mother want one child and not the other? Read *Becoming Naomi León* to find out why.
- La Noche de los Rábanos (Night of the Radishes) is a radish-carving festival in Oaxaca City, Mexico, where large radishes are carved into a variety of scenes. Read *Becoming Naomi León* to find out how 11-year-old Naomi helps her team carve a very special scene of radishes to win second place at the festival and how this leads to finding a father she has not seen in seven years.

Meet the Author—Pam Muñoz Ryan



Pam Muñoz Ryan was born and grew up in Central California, the oldest of three sisters. As a girl, she spent a lot of time at the library becoming a dedicated reader because that building was air conditioned. After university, she became a school administrator and then took up writing. *Becoming Naomi León* is her latest novel. In *Esperanza Rising*, Ms. Ryan develops a story based on her grandmother's life. She has also written picture books for younger readers, including *Nacho and Lolita* and *Mice and Beans*. In addition to writing, Ms. Ryan works with new writers who want to begin a career as a children's author. You can find out more about Ms. Ryan at:

<http://www.pammunozryan.com>





Family Problems

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Mexican Americans

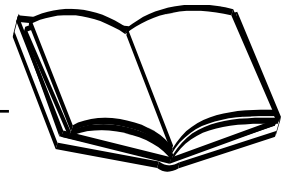
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Carving/Sculpture

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Center Activities for *Becoming Naomi León*



- **List Making:**

Naomi loved making lists of things. Using one of her list suggestions, create your own response to: "Things I'm Good At." Make sure you identify at least 10 items in your list. Be ready to share one of these with the class or in a cooperative share group.

Teachers: Naomi also made lists of "Unusual Names" and "Splendid Words." Have the class start a class list of these two categories also. Provide bulletin board space to create these two list-making "opportunities." As students are adding "splendid words" to the list, encourage them to cite also the location and page number for the words. They should be ready to use the word in a sentence if asked.

- **Soap Carving:**

Using bars of IVORY soap, have students experience the creative process that Naomi naturally felt and had – i.e. the artist inside her. With the help of non-cutting tools (like plastic knives, and carving tools used with lino-type boards for print making, have students carve an animal of their choice – as was done for the display created by Naomi's friends in Oaxaca for *La Noche de los Rébanos*. Make a display of the carvings once they are completed – using placards to identify the "carver."

Teachers: You may want to follow up the carving activity with a reflective writing activity in which students write about the process of doing a soap sculpture and how they would assess their "creative process" as a novice carver and artist. What challenges did they experience? What aspects of the carving were gratifying and pleasurable?

- **Research:**

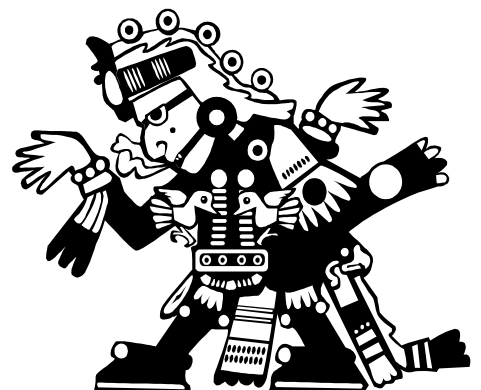
Rodin's *The Thinker* and Michelangelo's *David* are examples of famous pieces of sculpture. They are magnificent works of art. Have students generate a list of well-known, and less well-known sculptors. With the help of various resources (including the Internet), have students find biographical information about the artist's work, life, and contributions to the field of art – from classical forms to highly modern ones. With the aid of art books, have students give oral reports to the class in which they show some of the sculptor's greatest pieces as well as discuss the contributions made by this person in the art field.

- **Exploring Cultural Art Forms:**

Just as Naomi learned about the wood carvers of Oaxaca and the cultural art forms of that region of Mexico, have students brainstorm and identify other cultural art forms – rug weaving of the Navajos, pottery of the Zunis, story cloths of the Hmong, paper silhouette puppets of Burma and Indonesia, drinking steins of the Germans and Bavarians, origami of the Japanese, lace of the Irish, Dutch, and Danish, pewter work from England and Scotland. Other cultural art forms could include bead work or basket weaving, etc. If samples (or actual artifacts) are available to be brought to class, arrange for parents or relatives to share these treasures with the students.

Then as an art activity, have students make paper puppets out of construction paper. You may want to have a sample to show them, or some patterns they can trace and transfer. Other materials to have available are some tongue depressors and sticks (like inexpensive chop sticks). Many import/export shops (like Cost-Plus) frequently have puppets similar to this for purchase. It is helpful to have a model for students to examine. This gives them a sense of the mechanical nature of the puppets.

Or using scraps of construction paper and other paper remnants, students could create a story cloth out of paper to represent some key events in their life – or the lives of their family. This form of paper appliqué is a way of simulating the intricate work done with needle, thread, and actual cloth.



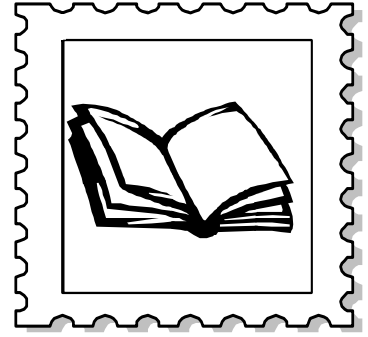
Writing Prompts / Discussion Questions for *Becoming Naomi León*



- Many books for young readers are written in the first person. How would Naomi's story differ if it were told from an adult's point of view or in the third person?
- What is good about Skylar coming back into Naomi and Owen's lives? What are the negatives? Did anything good come out of her return?
- Hopefully, parents are there to keep their kids safe. How are Skylar and Clive dangerous?
- Naomi kept many lists of things that were important or interesting to her. Make a list of things you are good at, words you enjoy, or something else that interests you.
- Naomi thinks of the kids who spend lunchtime in the library as "leftovers." Owen stands out because of both his physical appearance and his intelligence. Even the name Outlaw implies that the family lives outside of average society. What makes a story about outsiders more interesting than one about "perfect" people? Tell a story about a person or family you've known that seemed strange at first, but became more interesting as you got to know them.
- What role does soap carving play in Naomi's life? Do you have a talent or a skill that you learned from a family member? Tell about something a relative has shared with you.
- Talk about how the author shows, with her words, the difference between life in California and life in Mexico.
- For the Night of the Radishes in Oaxaca, Naomi carves a lion to complete the tree of animals. What does the lion mean to her? What would you create to represent yourself or your family?

Letters from Wolfie

by Patti Sherlock



Synopsis

Stationed in Vietnam during the war, Danny writes a letter to his 13-year-old brother, Mark, telling him about the service dog program there. Soon after, Mark donates his beloved dog, Wolfie, to the Army. Mark, then, receives a letter from Danny telling him not to send Wolfie after all. Mark finds out that the dogs are treated as disposable “army equipment.” Thus, begins Mark’s campaign to bring Wolfie home. During this time, Mark learns about the situation in Vietnam through letters from Wolfie, written by Wolfie’s handler. When Danny arrives home from Vietnam, severely injured and disillusioned with the war, Mark’s patriotic father has a difficult time. As the prospect of Wolfie coming back home gets closer to reality, Mark learns of Wolfie’s last heroic deed as a scout.



Hooks

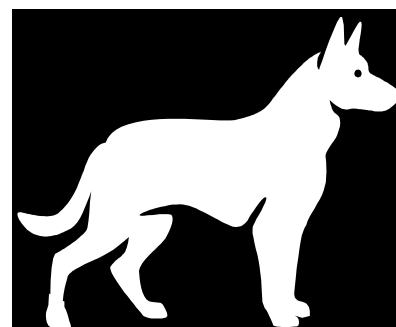
- When his brother, Danny, writes from Vietnam that the army is looking for German Shepherds to become scouts, 13-year-old Mark definitely says, “No,” to the idea of sending his beloved dog, Wolfie. Soon after, he changes his mind. Read *Letters from Wolfie* to find out why.
- Have you ever wondered what dogs would say if they could talk? What if they could write? Read the wonderful letters from Wolfie, a German Shepherd mix, who is in Vietnam as a military dog. He writes letters to his owner, 13-year-old Mark, in *Letters from Wolfie*.
- Did you know dogs saved more than 10,000 soldiers’ lives during the Vietnam War? They were used as scouts, walking point at the front of patrols, saving many soldiers from ambushes. In *Letters from Wolfie*, a German Shepherd mix writes letters through his handler to 13-year-old Mark who donated him to the Army.

Meet the Author—Patti Sherlock



Patti Sherlock began writing when she was a young girl. She wrote sad stories and, when she was in sixth grade, tried her hand at writing a stage comedy. In high school, she used writing as an excuse to get out of class. After college, Ms. Sherlock worked as a newspaper journalist. She considered becoming a cartoonist, but, after becoming a mother of twins, settled on writing fiction for children. Like *Letters from Wolfie*, her books almost always feature an animal as a central character.

You can read more about Patti Sherlock in:
Something about the Author, volume 71 (Gale, 1993).





Animals and War

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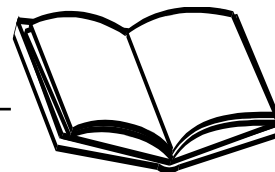
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Vietnam Conflict

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Center Activities for *Letters from Wolfie*



- **Animal Heroes:**

Have students create a fictional story in which an animal of their choice serves as a "hero" in helping someone in a tough situation or in saving someone's life. Encourage the students to STORYBOARD their ideas first, or do a series of thumb-nail sketches, before launching into the actual writing.

Have students read each other's rough drafts before the final drafts are prepared. Have them look for authentic settings, plausible problematic situations in which people can find themselves, a likeable animal "hero," and the use of conversation or dialogue as a way of moving the story forward. Upon final re-write of the stories, have students share their stories in class as a week-long "Author's Chair" event. If displaying the stories on a bulletin board, consider having each student draw a picture of what their animal hero looks like – and post it next to the story.

- **Dog Roles:**

In cooperative student study teams, have students research further the various roles that dogs have played in helping others throughout history. Have students look into the following aspects:

- Guide Dogs for the Blind
- K-9 Squads that assist with Police Enforcement
- Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) dogs used for drug detection and bomb detection
- Avalanche Rescue dogs used in mountainous areas
- Other Search and Rescue situations as in earthquakes or mudslides
- Other aspects not identified above

Have students create a poster board (like the tri-fold models used in science fairs) on this aspect of "Dogs to the Rescue" with pictures, charts, graphs, significant data or articles of interest. Display them around the room and allow each "team of experts" to share the information they found on the topic. You may want to establish a presentation "rubric" to help assess the poster-sharing.

- **Thoughts on War:**

Students are asked to take the role of Mark, the original owner of Wolfie, and write a eulogy (a statement of high praise) for his dog who served in Vietnam.

Students could then take the eulogy and modify it to fit the format for "human interest story" about Wolfie intended for a local newspaper.

- **Other "Dog" Literature:**

Divide the class into various reading teams, to explore the appearance of "dogs" as major characters in stories. Make a chart to identify what information the reading teams should generate. Aspects to consider are:

- setting of the story (time, place, conditions);
- name of the dog's owner;
- heroic or courageous actions taken by the dog;
- what becomes of the dog; and
- what becomes of the owner.

As the students read their various novels, the chart can grow and information be filled in as the reading groups discover the identified information.

Novels that are excellent for strong dog characters are:

Old Yeller

Souder

Call of the Wild

Lassie Come Home

Stone Fox

Where the Red Fern Grows

Because of Winn Dixie

Each Little Bird that Sings



Writing Prompts / Discussion Questions for *Letters from Wolfie*



- What motivates Mark to send his beloved dog to Vietnam? Do you agree with his decision?
- What do the letters “from” Wolfie mean to Mark?
- As time passes, Mark and his family start to feel differently about the war in Vietnam. How does this affect the family? Has your family (or a group of friends) ever had a difference of opinions on an important topic? How was this resolved?
- Eve, Mark’s mother, goes through many changes over the course of the story. How is she different at the end? How does her experience reflect what was going on in America in the late 1960’s?
- How does Eve help Tucker?
- How does his friend Rick’s home life affect Mark?
- Wolfie’s story is based on real dogs that served in foreign countries; research military dogs to find out how accurate the author’s portrayal was. How do you feel about the practice of using dogs and other animals in war?
- Why is the Vietnam War such an important part of U.S. history? What made the soldiers’ experiences different than previous wars? Why was public opinion so divided?