

## Escaping the Island Prison in Gennifer Choldenko's Alcatraz Novels

Alcatraz Island during the 1930s is the setting for Gennifer Choldenko's series of children's historical novels. Seizing on the fact that guards lived on the island with their families, Choldenko ironically presents the prison as a refuge from the Great Depression. Moreover, the guards imagine that their children's innocence can be preserved by the island. Even though they share the island with some of the most dangerous criminals in the United States, the families feel safe keeping their doors unlocked because all the criminals are already locked up. However, the children test this idea of refuge as they daily cross the San Francisco Bay to attend school. They literally ferry parts of the island's criminal culture back and forth to the mainland.

The most protected child is Natalie Flanagan, the narrator's sister who has autism. Although she is 16, her mother tells everyone that she is only ten, hoping they will expect less of and do more for her. This extreme protectiveness precipitates the first novel's crisis when it becomes clear that Natalie is no longer a child who can be trapped on the island.

The island prison is also a metaphor for Natalie's autism. Choldenko has described how working as a docent on the island led her to reflect on her own autistic sister Gina: "Alcatraz is a lonely block of concrete plunked down in the middle of the spectacular San Francisco Bay, . . . a prison in paradise. Gina was beautiful and oddly perceptive but . . . locked in her own tormented world." My presentation draws on disability studies to argue that Choldenko uses the metaphor of the island prison to explore how autism is conceptualized—by children, doctors, teachers and parents. By setting her series a few years before autism was formally diagnosed, she imagines a historical moment and space before our contemporary understanding of autism solidified.