



Maya Angelou

Biography

Born April 4, 1928 in Saint Louis, Missouri, Maya Angelou's given name was Marguerite Johnson. In her early twenties she was given the name Maya Angelou after her debut performance as a dancer at the Purple Onion cabaret. The author's father, Bailey Johnson, was a naval dietician, and her mother was Vivian Johnson. She has one sibling, a brother named Bailey after their father. When she was about three years old, their parents divorced and the children were sent to live with their grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas. Angelou claims that her grandmother, whom she called "momma, had a deep-brooding love that hung over everything she touched." Growing up in Stamps, Angelou learned what it was like to be a black girl in a world whose boundaries were set by whites. She learned what it meant to have to wear old hand me downs from a white woman. And she also learned the humiliation of being refused treatment by a white dentist. As a child she always dreamed of waking to find her "nappy black hair" metamorphosed to a long blond bob because she felt life was better for a white girl than for a black girl. Despite the odds, her grandmother instilled pride in Angelou with religion as an important element in their home.

After five years of being apart from their mother the children were sent back to Saint Louis to be with her. This move eventually took a turn for the worst when Angelou was raped by her mother's boyfriend. The devastating act of violence committed against her caused her to become mute for nearly five years. She was sent back to Stamps because no one could handle the grim state Angelou was in. With the constant help of a woman named Mrs. Flowers, Angelou began to evolve into the young girl who had possessed the pride and confidence she once had.



Quick Facts

- * 1928-2014
- * African-American poet, playwright, and memoirist
- * Civil rights activist

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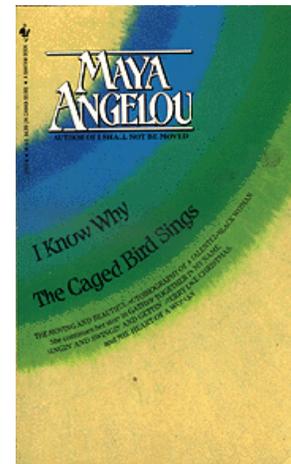


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Again in 1940, her brother and her were sent to San Francisco to live with their mother. Life with her mother was constant disorder. Living with her mother soon became too much for her so she ran away to be with her father and his girlfriend in their rundown trailer. Finding that life with him was no better, she ended up living in a graveyard of wrecked cars that mainly housed homeless children. It took her a month to get back home to her mother. Angelou's dysfunctional childhood spent moving back and forth between her mother and grandmother caused her to struggle with maturity. She became determined to prove she was a woman and began to rush toward maturity. Angelou soon found herself pregnant, and at the age of sixteen she delivered her son, Guy.

Angelou's first work of literature, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, is an autobiography. Angelou's sometimes disruptive life inspired her to write this book. It truly reflects the essence of her struggle to overcome the restrictions that were placed upon her in a hostile environment. Angelou writes with a twist of lyrical imagery along with a touch of realism. The title of this book is taken from the poem "sympathy" by the great black poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar. Sidonie Ann Smith praised Angelou for the book, saying that, "like Richard Wright, she opens with a primal childhood scene that brings into focus the nature of the imprisoning environment from which the self will seek escape" (Smith 10). The work displays an impulse towards transcendence.



Her second book, *Gather Together in My Name*, centers on Angelou and her brother's move away from their grandmother. This transition takes place from her later teen years through her mid twenties, focusing on her experiences as a mother, a Creole cook, a madam, a tap dancer, a prostitute and a chauffeurette. Also in the novel, Angelou writes about an affair with a customer at a restaurant and her brief experience with drugs. Annie Gottlieb states that Angelou "writes like a song, and like the truth" (Gottlieb 23). Another reader, Doris Grumbach, states, "it is apparent that Angelou is keen, sharp, earthy, imaginative, lyrical, spiritually bold, and seems destined for distinction" (Grumbach 12). But according to Frank L. Phillips, "Maya Angelou is not the stylist that Himes is, nor a Richard Wright" (Phillips 12). Angelou concludes this book with an appeal to her audience for forgiveness for the accounts of her wretched past.



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Angelou's third novel, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, covers about five years of her life from the ages of twenty-two to twenty-seven. During this period she was married to Tosh Angelos, a white man and an ex-sailor, who she shows to be intelligent, kind, and reliable. He was a temporary source of stability for herself and her son, but after five years of marriage she found that she wasn't suited for it. She divorced him and returned to her career as a dancer. Shortly afterwards she joined the European touring production of *Porgy and Bess*. She devotes over half the book to describing the tour. She talks about how the guilt over her neglect of her son nearly drove her to suicide, but her love of life, motherhood, and dancing sent her running home. June Jordan states that this novel "frequently borders on a light and fantastical style of comic opera. . . .that is sometimes delightful reading, and sometimes not" (Jordan 13). In Alleen P. Nilsen's opinion "this book might make an exciting introduction to Angelou's poetry" (Nilsen 14).

The title of her fourth novel, *The Heart of a Woman*, comes from a poem that was written during the Harlem Renaissance by the poet Georgia Douglas Johnson. Once again, in this book, Angelou is in search of her identity and place. The book is told from a perspective that matches that of her first novel and has a similar psychological depth. Narrating her thirties, Angelou reflects on her son Guy, the civil rights movement, marriage, and her own writing. During this period, she became more committed to her writing and was inspired by her friend, John Killens, a distinguished social activist author. Also, during that time she made a commitment to promote black civil rights and examine the nature of racial oppression, racial progress and racial integration. Adam David Miller states that this is a book that "covers one of the most exciting periods in recent African and Afro-American history" (Miller 23).

Angelou's fifth autobiography, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, shows her to have developed an even greater sense of connection with her African past. She dedicates this book to Julian Mayfield and Malcolm X, who both were passionately and earnestly in search of their symbolic home.



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After her visit to Ghana, she was swept into adoration for the country and adopted it as her homeland. She states “our people had always longed for home . . . In the yearning, heaven and Africa were inextricably combined . . . So I had finally come home” (19). Barbara T. Christian describes the book as “a thoughtful yet spirited account of one Afro-American woman’s journey into the land of her ancestors.” She goes on to say that it is “an important document drawing more much needed attention to the hidden history of a people both African and American.” Also, according to Christian, Angelou’s sojourn in Africa strengthens her bond to her ancestral home even as she concretely experiences her distinctiveness as an Afro-American” (Christian 23).

Maya Angelou speaks numerous languages fluently and has traveled abroad to Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. She has worked as a journalist for foreign publications and has been honored by the academic world. She received the Yale University Fellowship and was named a Rockefeller Foundation Scholar in Italy. She has taught at the University of Ghana and the University of Kansas and holds a lifetime chair as Z. Smith Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University. Among her many accomplishments are the Woman of the Year Award in Communications of the *Ladies’ Home Journal* and nominations for the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Awards. Maya Angelou is a wonderful speaker and is highly sought after on the lecture circuit.

The life and work of Maya Angelou are fully intertwined. Angelou’s poetry and personal narratives form a larger picture wherein the symbolic Maya Angelou rises to become a point of consciousness for African-American people, especially black women seeking to survive masculine prejudice, in addition to whites’ hatred of blacks and blacks’ lack of power. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has generated a wealth of critical literature as well as solid recognition for Maya Angelou. Many liked *The Heart of a Woman*; it has also received critical acclaim. All of Maya Angelou’s autobiographical novels are widely read and taught in schools and universities and continue to inspire lively critical responses. Angelou’s poetry and screenplays are less well known, and for the most part critics have not been generous toward them. Some have referred to her poetry as “too simple” and suggested that it is unworthy of inclusion in the canon of American poetry. But Angelou’s audience isn’t affected by what those critics have to say about her work. Angelou’s response to those critics may be, “If that canon, that body of literature written largely by white men, acknowledges my work, then well and good. I accept this honor” (7).



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Poetry

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Shaker, Why Don't You Sing? (Random House, 1983)
And Still I Rise (Random House, 1978)
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Plays

- And Still I Rise* (1976)
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The Least of These (1966)
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