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MAYA ANGELOU

Born: St. Louis, Missouri; April 4, 1928

Died: Winston-Salem, North Carolina; May 28, 2014

Primarily known for her series of autobiographies, Angelou was also a poet, dancer, singer, actress, producer, director, and scriptwriter.

BIOGRAPHY

Born Marguerite Annie Johnson on April 4, 1928, Maya Angelou is the daughter of Vivian Baxter and Bailey Johnson. When her parents' marriage ended in divorce, she was sent to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with her paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson. Maya was three years old, and she was joined by her brother Bailey, who gave her the name Maya.

Angelou graduated with top honors from the Lafayette County Training School in 1940 and was sent to the San Francisco Bay Area, where her mother had moved. Continuing her education at George Washington High School, she also attended evening classes at the California Labor School, where she had a scholarship to study drama and dance. Shortly after receiving her high school diploma, she had a son, Guy Bailey Johnson. She began a career as a professional entertainer in the 1950's as a singer-dancer at the Purple Onion, a cabaret in California. She was invited to audition for a production of *Porgy and Bess* (1935) and did, in fact, receive a part in that George Gershwin musical, giving her the opportunity to travel widely with the cast in 1954 and 1955. In 1957, she appeared in the Off-Broadway play *Calypso Heatwave* and recorded "Miss Calypso" for Liberty Records.

Three years later, Angelou and her son moved to New York, where she joined the Harlem Writers

Guild and collaborated to produce, direct, and star in *Cabaret for Freedom*, which raised funds for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Upon the close of that show, she became Northern coordinator for the SCLC at the invitation of Martin Luther King, Jr., with whom she worked.

Inspired by King and other civil rights leaders, she decided to move to Africa, ostensibly so that her son could be educated in Ghana. While living there, she served as assistant administrator of the University of Ghana's School of Music and Drama and also worked for the Ghanaian Broadcasting Corporation and as a freelance writer for the *Ghanaian Times*.

In subsequent years, Angelou performed in various theater productions, adapted plays for the stage, and contributed to the performing arts in multiple ways. She performed in Jean Genet's *The Blacks* in 1960 (joining a cast of stars that included James Earl Jones and Cicely Tyson) and adapted Sophocles' *Ajax* for its 1974 premiere performance at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. She also wrote the screenplays *Georgia, Georgia* (1972) and *All Day Long* (1974). Her television appearances include playing the role of Kunta Kinte's grandmother in 1977's *Roots*, serving as a guest interviewer on *Assignment America*, and appearing in a special series on creativity hosted by Bill Moyers.

Her most important contributions, however, are her writings. In 1970, she began a series of autobiographies with her book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which was followed by subsequent autobiographies and several volumes of poetry. In 1993, she became only the second poet to read at a presidential inauguration when

she read her poem “On the Pulse of Morning” at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration ceremony. Since then, she has written more poems and books, including children’s books, a cookbook, and *Elder Grace: The Nobility of Aging* (2005). She has appeared in numerous television programs. Currently, she is a coveted speaker and gives numerous interviews in which she promotes her activism.

Angelou is the recipient of more than four dozen honorary degrees and numerous literary awards, among them the North Carolina Award in Literature and a lifetime appointment as the Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Other honors include an appointment by Present Jimmy Carter to the commission of the International Women’s Year; her recognition by *Ladies’ Home Journal* as Woman of the Year in communications in 1975; and her reception, in 1983, of the Matrix Award in the field of books from the Women in Communications. Her additional awards include the Medal of Distinction from the University of Hawaii Board of Regents in 1994; a Gold Plaque Choice Award from the Chicago International Film Festival in 1998 for *Down in the Delta*; an Alston/Jones International Civil and Human Rights Award in 1998; a Sheila Award from the Tubman African American Museum in 1999; recognition as one of the one hundred best writers of the twentieth century from *Writer’s Digest* in 1999; a National Medal of the Arts in 2000; and a Grammy Award in 2002 for her recording of *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*. Various buildings have been named after her, including the Maya Angelou Public Charter School Agency in Washington, D.C., and the Maya Angelou Southeast Library in Stockton, California. On May 6, 2005, Angelou delivered the commencement address at Michigan State University’s undergraduate convocation ceremony, at which she was also awarded an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree.

ANALYSIS

In an interview, Angelou described her autobiographical style in the following way: “I’ve used, or tried to use, the form of the Black minister in storytelling so that each event I write about has a

beginning, middle, and an end. And I have tried to make the selections graduate so that each episode is a level, whether of narration or drama, well always dramatic, but a level of comprehension like a staircase.” Angelou’s autobiographies surely demonstrate this narrative and dramatic approach, and her poems also suggest the narrator and playwright at work.

Her six volumes of autobiography reveal a narrator’s strong voice as well as a playwright’s ability to set a stage, introduce characters, and portray the conflicts and tensions among those characters as they interact with one another and deal with their own internal conflicts and challenges. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published in 1970 and has been followed by subsequent self-portraits, including *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002). Each volume has the Angelou touch of storytelling and dramatic rendition, and each also has the incremental sense of movement toward Angelou’s idea of “a level of comprehension like a staircase.”

Additionally, the volumes deal with an important theme for Angelou: survival. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, for example, narrates the placement and displacement of the author as a southern black girl and demonstrates that her experiences of racial discrimination, rape, and numerous other victimizations did not destroy her; on the contrary, they emboldened and strengthened her, thus committing her to survival at all costs.

In her second volume of autobiography, *Gather Together in My Name*, the scene shifts, but the message remains the same: Young mother though she is, seventeen-year-old parent though she is, she must survive and triumph over the various discriminations, mostly racial, that she endures. In a book that has a beginning, middle, and end—a structure that Angelou claims exists in all of her autobiographies—the end is an especially poignant reminder of survival. Learning a lesson from a drug addict, Angelou proclaims: “I had walked the precipice and seen it all; and at the critical moment, one man’s generosity pushed me safe-

ly away from the edge. . . . I had given a promise and found my innocence. I swore I'd never lose it again."

The following four autobiographies continue this emphasis upon survival—whether it is viewed through Angelou's experiences traveling with the *Porgy and Bess* production throughout Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, as narrated in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*; through her experiences in New York coordinating the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for Martin Luther King, Jr., as narrated in *The Heart of a Woman*; or through Angelou's quest to find her identity in Africa, as narrated in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*. Seeking survival, physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, in all six volumes of autobiography, Angelou as narrator and playwright tells her stories and sets the stage for her dramatic productions.

While it might seem that Angelou's poetry departs from these narrative and dramatic impulses, as the volumes are, after all, verse and not prose, the opposite is actually true. Like her autobiographical narratives and dramas, the poems also tell stories and present scenes from human dramas. Perhaps the best example of this appears in Angelou's fourth volume of poetry, a collection of songlike poems published in 1983 titled *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* The poem "Caged Bird," an obvious echo of Angelou's best-known autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, narrates the story of a free bird and a caged bird, the latter singing a song of freedom and survival that is the same song sung by Angelou in all of her works. The caged bird's song is a protest, as are Angelou's autobiographies, and it is also a song of hope, still another characteristic of Angelou's self-portraits. Taken together, the ten volumes of prose and poetry are narrative dramas, portraits of a woman and her culture, songs of survival at all costs. In later years, Maya Angelou's role as "rags-to-riches" survivor has been spiced with outspoken activism regarding the disadvantaged of any race. She is no longer a singing caged bird, but one who swoops and dives in her efforts toward opening the cages for the rest of humanity.

I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

First published: 1970

Type of work: Auto

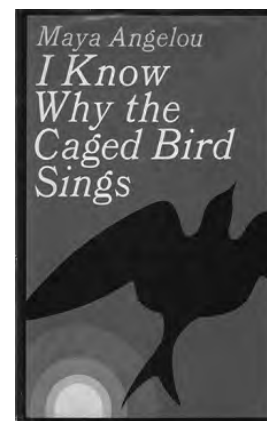
BIOGRAPHY

In this self-portrait, Maya Angelou narrates her childhood in Stamps, Arkansas, and her adolescent years in California.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Angelou's first autobiography, is a story of a child becoming an adolescent, a story of a victim who comes to realize that all people are, to some extent, victims, and a story of survival. It is a lyrical narrative—almost a prose poem in some places—in which the autobiographer's voice is strong and musical, just as the title conjures up musical imagery.

Maya Angelou as a child is a displaced person, separated from her mother and father at the age of three and moved around almost as frequently as a chess piece. Her earliest memories are of Stamps, where she and her brother Bailey are raised by their grandmother, a woman of remarkable strength and limitless love for her grandchildren. This grandmother, known as Momma, provides security for Maya and Bailey and also offers a role model for the young girl, who is beginning to understand the role of victim to which black children—and especially black girls—are subjected.

Momma owns the general store in Stamps and is respected as a businesswoman, a citizen of the community, and an honest and straightforward person. She represents the qualities that will eventually define her granddaughter, and she demonstrates those qualities on a daily basis, most especially when dealing with members of the white



community. In a significant incident, she reveals the ability to survive that her granddaughter will eventually develop herself.

Three young white girls come to Momma's property to taunt Momma through various antics, including one of the rudest acts possible in the South of the 1930's: calling an adult by her first name. Throughout this series of insults, Momma does not react to the girls and, instead, stands on the porch, smiling and humming a hymn. While the granddaughter is outraged by this incident, wanting to confront the girls, the grandmother remains impervious and unwilling to demean herself by responding to her attackers—except when they leave, at which point she courteously bids them farewell, calling each by her first name preceded by "Miz." The young Angelou comes to realize that Momma had won the battle by rising above the pettiness and rudeness of her inferiors. She was superior, and she had survived. She had also taught her granddaughter a lesson for all time.

Most lessons, however, need to be learned and relearned, and so Angelou faces that uphill battle when, at the age of eight, she is displaced again, this time to be returned to her mother in St. Louis. Whereas Stamps represents security and orderliness, St. Louis symbolizes its opposites. The most dramatic example of this insecure, disorderly, frightening world is the rape of eight-year-old Maya by her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. Confused and terrified by this act and the subsequent murder of Freeman—a murder that the child mistakenly thinks she has caused—Angelou becomes a voluntary mute and lives in a world of silence for nearly five years. She is healed by Bertha Flowers, a woman in Stamps, to which Maya returns. Flowers extends friendship to the mute Maya, a friendship that beckons the young girl to leave her self-imposed silence and embrace a new world of words, poems, songs, and a journal that chronicles this new stage in her life.

Moving to Oakland and then San Francisco in 1941, at the age of thirteen, Maya rejoins her mother and deals with dislocation and displacement still again. At this point in her life, however, she is maturing and learning that the role of victim, while still a role to which she is assigned, is also a role played by others—blacks and whites. She learns that the human challenge is to deal with,

protest against, and rise above the trap of being victimized and exploited. In the final scene of the novel, Angelou is not merely a young woman coming to this realization for herself; she is a young mother who has just borne a son and who is therefore struggling to see how she can be responsible not only for herself but also for another. The book ends with this sense of mutual responsibility and mutual survival: Mother and child know why the caged bird sings, and they will sing their song together.

ALL GOD'S CHILDREN NEED TRAVELING SHOES

First published: 1986

Type of work: Auto

BIOGRAPHY

In her fifth autobiography, Angelou relates her pilgrimage to Ghana, where she seeks to understand her African roots.

All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes is about hopelessness and repeats the theme of displacement. However, in this instance, the sense of displacement is more complex than in *I Know Where the Caged Bird Sings*. In the 1960's, Angelou travels to what she believes is the place of her African roots, hoping that this country will fill the vacuum she feels for home. By returning to the land of her ancestors, where all are black regardless of color, she hopes to find and perhaps recognize "home." She joins other black Americans also questing for identity and security, and, like most of them, Angelou discovers that the geographical search is a misleading one. The source of security, she comes to learn, is not in a place but within oneself.

Angelou chooses to live in Ghana following the end of her marriage. Kwame Nkrumah is Ghana's beloved ruler five years after its independence from Britain, and there is a sense of pride in the new country. Angelou joins a group of black Americans who have come to Ghana to be part of the great experiment. Angelou hopes that she and her son will find a land freed of the racial bigotry she has faced wherever she has lived

or traveled. Hopeful and idealistic, she sets herself up for disappointment and disillusion. During her three-year stay in Africa, she is not welcomed as she has expected to be; even more painful, she is frequently ignored by the very people with whom she thinks she shares roots, the Africans. As she tries to understand this new kind of pain and homelessness, she also struggles with the sense of having two selves, an American self and an African self.

A stunning example of this struggle occurs when the black American community in Ghana, together with some sympathetic Ghanaians, decides to support the August 27, 1963, March on Washington—the march led by Martin Luther King, Jr.—by leading a demonstration at the U.S. Embassy in Accra. The march does not have the impact its participants hope it will have because the demonstrators, including Angelou, are ambivalent about who they are, where they are, and where their quest for security is leading them. This ambivalence is dramatized when one of the marchers jeers a black soldier who is raising the American flag in front of the American embassy, prompting Angelou to reflect on the fact that the Stars and Stripes was the flag of the expatriates and, more important, their only flag. The recognition of her divided self continues during the remainder of her stay in Africa, including during time spent with Malcolm X. The volatile activist has a profound impact upon Angelou, who had met him two years earlier but who sees him and hears his words from her current context of an orphan looking for a home and looking for reasons to stay in that home. As she observes the various personalities Malcolm X exhibits—from big brother adviser to spokesperson against oppression and for revolutions—she reflects upon his commitment to changing the status quo in the United States. As she leaves, she observes that Malcolm's presence had elevated the expatriates but that his departure left them with the same sense of displacement with which they had arrived in Africa.

Ultimately, Angelou is compelled to return to the United States. She leaves, having become aware that home is not a geographical location but a psychological state. She leaves having learned that her survival depends upon finding herself within herself, wearing her traveling shoes, like all God's children.

A SONG FLUNG UP TO HEAVEN

First published: 2002

Type of work: Auto

BIOGRAPHY

Angelou experiences the Watts riots and the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., and finally learns to deal with them through writing.

A Song Flung Up to Heaven begins in 1964 with Angelou returning to the United States from Ghana in order to help with the Civil Rights movement, specifically to write and organize for Malcolm X. Shortly after she lands in California, he is assassinated before her work with him can begin. Her brother takes his grief-stricken sister to Hawaii, where she sings in nightclubs, with no notable success. Returning to California, she works as a door-to-door surveyor in the Watts District of Los Angeles, thus getting to know the people's poverty and anger. Therefore, she is not surprised by the outbreak of violence and senses the riots before she learns of them.

We smelled the conflagration before we heard it, or even heard about it. . . . Burning wood was the first odor that reached my nose, but it was soon followed by the smell of scorched food, then the stench of smoldering rubber. We had one hour of wondering before the television news reporters arrived breathlessly.

After a stormy encounter with her former lover, Angelou returns to New York, where she meets Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and agrees to promote the movement. However, history repeats itself. Before she can go south for the movement, King also is assassinated. Again devastated, Angelou becomes a recluse until writer James Baldwin invites her to a dinner with glittering New York literati that reawakens her passion for writing. Friends encourage her to write and to begin by writing her life. Eventually, Angelou moves back to California and, in an effort to make spiritual sense of and triumph over her experiences, begins to write. *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* ends with her writing the

first few lines of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, opening the gate to her most important career and yet circling back nicely to her first, most beloved book.

A Song Flung Up to Heaven engrosses the reader with its portrait of a sensitive woman caught up in some of the most important events of the twentieth century. It is also compelling because



of its simple yet poetic and intimate style. Angelou recounts her story as if confiding to a friend. She intersperses narration with heartrending scenes, such as when a phone caller indirectly reveals Malcolm X's assassination by remarking that New York blacks are crazy because they murdered one of their own kind.

Her literary devices enliven the prose, such as when she personifies the strangling effect of hopelessness: "Depression wound itself around me so securely I could barely walk, and didn't want to talk . . ." Angelou's mundane yet refreshing similes are juxtaposed with tumultuous events, as in her response to her lover's remark that he needs her: "Needed? Needed like an extra blanket? Like air-conditioning?"

Like more pepper for soup? I resented being thought of as a thing. . . ."

By the time the book ends, the reader is touched and sad, yet inspired. *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* somehow suggests that if Angelou can transcend such dire circumstances, perhaps others can too.

"ON THE PULSE OF MORNING"

First published: 1993

Type of work: Poem

This poem speaks of the importance of human beings joining together, in hope, to create and greet the future.

"On the Pulse of Morning" was read at President Bill Clinton's inauguration ceremony in January, 1993. Only the second poet to read at a presidential inauguration, Angelou has said this about her poem: "In all my work, what I try to say is that as human beings we are more alike than we are unlike." This piece celebrates that sense of similarity, connectedness, and human solidarity.

Beginning with the recognition that rocks, rivers, and trees have witnessed the arrival and departure of many generations, "On the Pulse of Morning" proceeds to have each of these witnesses speak to the future, beginning with the Rock, which announces that people may stand upon its back but may not find security in its shadow. On the contrary, says the Rock, humans must face the future, their "distant destiny," boldly and directly.

The River sings a similar song, calling humans to its riverside but only if they will forego the study of war. If human beings will come to the River, "clad in peace," this ageless body of water will sing the songs given to it by the Creator, songs of unity and songs of peace.

The Tree continues this hymn of peace and hope, reminding humankind that each person is a "descendant of some passed-on traveler" and that each "has been paid for." Pawnee, Apache, Turk, Swede, Eskimo, Ashanti—all are invited by the Tree to root themselves beside it. Thus united with Rock, River, and Tree, the poem announces, the human race can look toward a future of peace and connections and away from a past of brutality and discontinuity. In the final stanza, this paean of praise is most lyrical:

Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes, into
Your brother's face, your country
And say simply
Very simply
With hope
Good morning.

Like Angelou's autobiographies and like her volumes of poetry, "On the Pulse of Morning" speaks of survival. Lyrical and inspirational, it calls human beings to have the imagination and courage to build up instead of tear down, and it echoes the titles of Angelou's other works, especially

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. If all caged birds sing together, this poem asserts, then the human race will indeed survive.

SUMMARY

Maya Angelou's many achievements in diverse fields testify to the breadth of her talent, the strength of her character, and the power of her vision. As an actress, singer, activist, playwright, poet, and, especially, a compelling autobiographer, she has succeeded in communicating her remarkable experiences and perspective to an appreciative and ever-growing audience. Now in speeches and in interviews, Angelou criticizes the class system that keeps its heel on the poor, and she exhorts people to action, both for themselves and for others. The bird, finally out of its cage, swoops toward those still caged with cries of protest and relentless pecking at the gates of oppression.

Marjorie Smelstor; updated by Mary Hanford Bruce

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By the Author

NONFICTION:

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(autobiography)

Gather Together in My Name, 1974 (autobiography)

Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like

Christmas, 1976 (autobiography)

The Heart of a Woman, 1981 (autobiography)

All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes, 1986

(autobiography)

Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now, 1993 (autobiographical essays)

Even the Stars Look Lonesome, 1997

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Hallelujah! The Welcome Table: A Lifetime of Memories with Recipes, 2004 (cookbook)

Elder Grace: The Nobility of Aging, 2005

Letter to My Daughter, 2008

autobiography

Me & Mom & Me, 2013

POETRY:

Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie, 1971

Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well, 1975

And Still I Rise, 1978

Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?, 1983

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DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Is there a shift in tone between Maya Angelou's early and late works? If so, what is it, and why do you think the change occurred?
- Strong women are portrayed in Angelou's works. Are there strong men too? If so, who are they? Are their strengths different from those of the women? If so, how?
- Trace the theme of transcendence in Angelou's works. How do her characters "rise above" their circumstances?
- Angelou has been criticized, sometimes by African American critics, that her works are simply "uplift" works and not genuine art. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- At least three volumes of Angelou's autobiographies detail a loss of innocence. What are these major disillusionments? Which is the most complex?
- How is the mother figure enshrined in Angelou's works?
- Does Angelou's faith influence her work? How?
- Although Angelou writes almost exclusively about African Americans, her books and poetry are popular with all races. Why?

Maya Angelou

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"Steady Going Up," 1972

"The Reunion," 1983

DRAMA:

Cabaret for Freedom, pr.1960 (with Godfrey Cambridge; musical)

The Least of These, pr. 1966

Encounters, pr. 1973

Ajax, pr. 1974 (adaptation of Sophocles' play)

And Still I Rise, pr. 1976

King, pr. 1990 (musical; lyrics with Alistair Beaton, book by Lonne Elder III; music by Richard Blackford)

SCREENPLAYS:

Georgia, Georgia, 1972

All Day Long, 1974

TELEPLAYS:

Black, Blues, Black, 1968 (ten episodes)

The Inheritors, 1976

The Legacy, 1976

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Sister, Sister, 1982

Brewster Place, 1990

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My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken, and Me, 1994

Kofi and His Magic, 1996

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