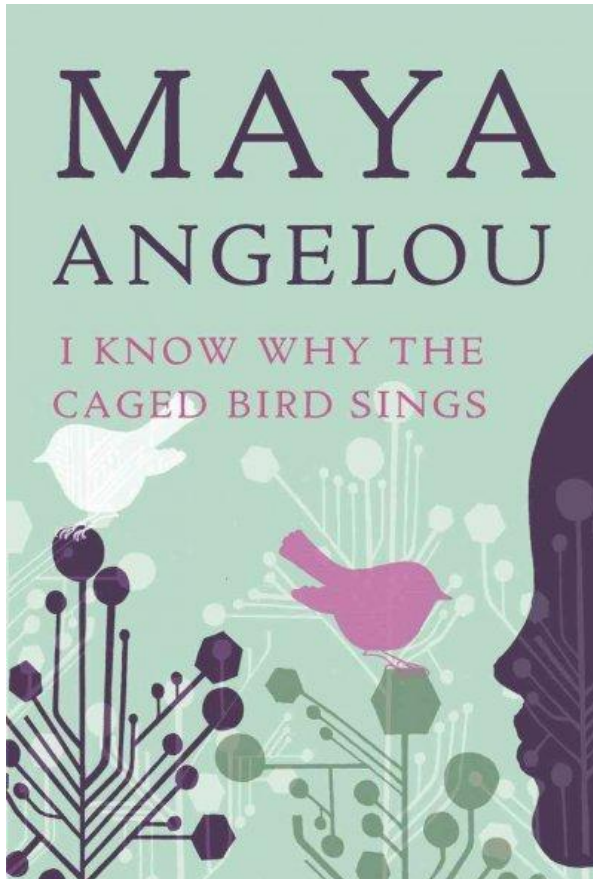


## About the book...



A phenomenal #1 bestseller that has appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nearly three years, this memoir traces Maya Angelou's childhood in a small, rural community during the 1930s. Filled with images and recollections that point to the dignity and courage of black men and women, Angelou paints a sometimes disquieting, but always affecting picture of the people—and the times—that touched her life.

## About the author...

(<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/printmember/ang0bio-1>)



Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson (April 4, 1928) in St. Louis, Missouri. Her parents divorced when she was only three and she was sent with her brother Bailey to live with their grandmother in the small town of Stamps, Arkansas. In Stamps, the young girl experienced the racial discrimination that was the legally enforced way of life in the American South, but she also absorbed the deep religious faith and old-fashioned courtesy of traditional African American life.

She credits her grandmother and her extended family with instilling in her the values that informed her later life and career. She enjoyed a close relationship with her brother, who gave her the nickname Maya when they were very young.

At age seven, while visiting her mother in Chicago, she was sexually molested by her mother's boyfriend. Too ashamed to tell any of the adults in her life, she confided in her brother. When she later heard the news that an uncle had killed her attacker, she felt that her words had killed the man. She fell silent and did not speak for five years.

Maya began to speak again at 13, when she and her brother rejoined their mother in San Francisco. Maya attended Mission High School and won a scholarship to study dance and drama at San Francisco's Labor School, where she was exposed to the progressive ideals that animated her later political activism. She dropped out of school in her teens to become San Francisco's first African American female cable car conductor. She later returned to high school, but became pregnant in her senior year and graduated a few weeks before giving birth to her son, Guy. She left home at 16 and took on the difficult life of a single mother, supporting herself and her son by working as a

waitress and cook, but she had not given up on her talents for music, dance, performance and poetry.

In 1952, she married a Greek sailor named Tosh Angelos. When she began her career as a nightclub singer, she took the professional name Maya Angelou, combining her childhood nickname with a form of her husband's name. Although the marriage did not last, her performing career flourished. She toured Europe with a production of the opera *Porgy and Bess* in 1954 and 1955. She studied modern dance with Martha Graham, danced with Alvin Ailey on television variety shows and recorded her first record album, *Calypso Lady* (1957).

She had composed song lyrics and poems for many years, and by the end of the 1950s was increasingly interested in developing her skills as a writer. She moved to New York, where she joined the Harlem Writers Guild and took her place among the growing number of young black writers and artists associated with the Civil Rights Movement. She acted in the historic Off-Broadway production of Jean Genet's *The Blacks* and wrote and performed a *Cabaret for Freedom* with the actor and comedian Godfrey Cambridge.

In New York, she fell in love with the South African civil rights activist Vusumzi Make and in 1960, the couple moved, with Angelou's son, to Cairo, Egypt. In Cairo, Angelou served as editor of the English language weekly *The Arab Observer*. Angelou and Guy later moved to Ghana, where she joined a thriving group of

African American expatriates. She served as an instructor and assistant administrator at the University of Ghana's School of Music and Drama, worked as feature editor for *The African Review* and wrote for *The Ghanaian Times* and the Ghanaian Broadcasting Company.

During her years abroad, she read and studied voraciously, mastering French, Spanish, Italian, Arabic and the West African language Fanti. She met with the American dissident leader Malcolm X in his visits to Ghana, and corresponded with him as his thinking evolved from the racially polarized thinking of his youth to the more inclusive vision of his maturity.

Maya Angelou returned to America in 1964, with the intention of helping Malcolm X build his new Organization of African American Unity. Shortly after her arrival in the United States, Malcolm X was assassinated, and his plans for a new organization died with him. Angelou involved herself in television production and remained active in the Civil Rights Movement, working more closely with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who requested that Angelou serve as Northern Coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. His assassination, falling on her birthday in 1968, left her devastated. With the guidance of her friend, the novelist James Baldwin, she found solace in writing, and began work on the book that would become *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The book tells the story of her life from her childhood in Arkansas to the birth of her child. *I Know Why the*

*Caged Bird Sings* was published in 1970 to widespread critical acclaim and enormous popular success. Seemingly overnight, Angelou became a national figure. In the following years, books of her verse and the subsequent volumes of her autobiographical narrative won her a huge international audience. She was increasingly in demand as a teacher and lecturer and continued to explore dramatic forms as well. She wrote the screenplay and composed the score for the film *Georgia, Georgia* (1972). Her screenplay, the first by an African American woman ever to be filmed, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Angelou has been invited by successive Presidents of the United States to serve in various capacities. President Ford appointed her to the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission and President Carter invited her to serve on the Presidential Commission for the International Year of the Woman. President Clinton requested that she compose a poem to read at his inauguration in 1993. Angelou's reading of her poem "On the Pulse of the Morning" was broadcast live around the world.

Since 1981, Angelou has served as Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She has continued to appear on television and in films including *Poetic Justice* (1993) and the landmark television adaptation of *Roots* (1977). She has directed numerous dramatic and

documentary programs on television and directed her first feature film, *Down in the Delta*, in 1996. The list of her published works now includes more than 30 titles. These include numerous volumes of verse, beginning with *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die* (1971). Books of her stories and essays include *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now* (1993) and *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (1997). She has continued the compelling narrative of her life in the books *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* (1987) and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002).

In 1991, 1994 and 1997, Maya Angelou participated in a series of live broadcasts for Achievement Television in which she took questions submitted by students from across the United States. The interview with Maya Angelou on this web site has been condensed from these broadcasts.

## **Reviews**

### *School Library Journal*

Miss Angelou writes with conviction, some anger, much humor and a good deal of frankness about her girlhood in a small Arkansas town, St. Louis and San Francisco. The characters of Maya and her brother Bailey are

lovingly shaped by Momma, their grandmother, a truly remarkable woman of strength, virtue and black dignity. The whites of Stamps, Arkansas live in another world and are creatures to be feared because of their power. Even Momma bows to them, and Maya deeply resents this because she knows Momma is, at the least, the equal of any person and better than most. Then, the children live for a time with their mother in St. Louis, where Maya, at age eight, is raped by her mother's boyfriend (a realistically handled scene). The children return to Stamps and their grandmother, finish grammar school, and move to San Francisco when Maya is 14. She goes through the usual adolescent changes, worries and doubts, and the book ends with her graduation from high school and the birth of her illegitimate son. Miss Angelou is a poet, and this is apparent in the flow and style of her writing. Hers is a moving, very real, most evocative story, which will be enlightening to whites who know little or nothing of the world Miss Angelou describes.

### *Booklist*

A well-written, honest, and moving episodic autobiographical account of the growing-up years of a Southern black girl. The author describes her early years living with her indomitable grandmother, who owned the only Negro general merchandise store in Stamps, Arkansas; a stay with her mother in St. Louis that ended when the then eight-year-old Maya was raped; the resumption of life in Stamps; and her

eventual return to her mother in California, ending the narrative when at sixteen, and unmarried, she gives birth to a son. She elicits the reader's empathy by effectively evoking the harshness of black Southern life and yet recalling good times as well as bad and bringing to life the people who played a part in her life.

### *Kirkus Reviews*

Maya Angelou is a natural writer with an inordinate sense of life and she has written an exceptional autobiographical narrative which retrieves her first sixteen years from "the general darkness just beyond the great blinkers of childhood." Her story is told in scenes, ineluctably moving scenes, from the time when she and her brother were sent by her fancy living parents to Stamps, Arkansas, and a grandmother who had the local Store. Displaced they were and "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat." But alternating with all the pain and terror (her rape at the age of eight when in St. Louis with her mother) and humiliation (a brief spell in the kitchen of a white woman who refused to remember her name) and fear (of a lynching—and the time they buried afflicted Uncle Willie under a blanket of vegetables) as well as all the unanswered and unanswerable questions, there *are* affirmative memories and moments: her charming brother Bailey—her own "unshakable God"; a revival meeting in a tent; her 8th grade graduation; and at the end, when she's



sixteen, the birth of a baby. Times when as she says "It seemed that the peace of a day's ending was an assurance that the covenant God made with children, Negroes and the crippled was still in effect." However charily one should apply the word, a beautiful book—an unconditionally involving memoir for our time or any time.

## Literary Criticism

Title: Critical Essay on "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings"

Author(s): Edward E. Eller

Source: ***Nonfiction Classics for Students: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Nonfiction Works***. Ed. David M. Galens, Jennifer Smith, and Elizabeth Thomason. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 2001. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Critical essay

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Encouraged by her editor and family to remember and write about her childhood, Maya Angelou produced the first of five autobiographies and the literary work for which she is probably best known, ***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings***. She acknowledges them by writing, "I thank my mother, Vivian Baxter, and my bother, Bailey Johnson, who encouraged me to remember. And a final thanks to my editor at Random House, Robert

Loomis, who gently prodded me back into the lost years." Perhaps those memories have assisted her in her diverse and incredibly productive career. In addition to the autobiographies generally recognized as a sort of "never-finished canvas," Angelou has published volumes of poetry, composed musical scores, and worked as a freelance writer and editor in America and abroad. She has also written, directed, and acted on stage and screen, and recited for the world her poem *On the Pulse of the Morning* for President Bill Clinton's 1993 inauguration.

' . . . I was no longer simply a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race.' She has resolved the conflict of white perceptions and actions with the reality and the triumphant spirit of her community's endurance.

Whatever the medium or type of artistic endeavor, Angelou most often celebrates the endurance and triumph of the individual over adversity. As Angelou says, "I speak to the black experience but I am always talking about the human condition--about what we can endure, dream, fail at, and still survive." When we read ***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings***, we may at first wonder how anyone could survive that childhood, but we come to realize the answers to that survival.

Of course, there are many ways to interpret this book. Some critics look for its formal literary devices such as imagery or symbols. Most recognize it as a type of

*bildungsroman* or a "coming of age" book that traces individual, social, and intellectual development. Others take the book's organization and link that to a more personal, coming to political-social awareness on Angelou's part. One critic, Pierre A. Walker, maintains that the structure "reveals a sequence that leads Maya progressively from helpless rage and indignation to forms of subtle resistance, and finally to outright and active protest." In other words, Maya starts out helpless and angry about social injustices, then learns how to resist without confrontation, and finally actively and vocally protests racism and oppression.

All these interpretations make valid points, as do many others. However, Angelou herself points us to one of the most important aspects of the book. In an interview from *Conversations with Maya Angelou*, she relates how many people come up to her and say, "I just wrote, I mean, I just *read* your book." Angelou understands these slips of the tongue to mean that the readers identify with her in the book, as if it were their own autobiography. In fact, if we focus on the contrasts in ***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings***, then we see a young, black girl's coming-of-age in the America of the 1930s and 1940s that shows us what it means, or can mean, to be human.

Contrasts and opposites fill the book, and many are quite obvious. Over and over again, the girl Marguerite (Maya) compares herself to her brother Bailey. While he is handsome, quick, and glib, she refers to herself as ugly, awkward, and tongue-tied. In Stamps, Arkansas,

where the children spend much of their childhood, nothing much happens except the same rounds of chores, schoolwork, church, and helping Momma and Uncle Willie in the Store. Maya says of this sameness, "The country had been in the throes of the Depression two years before the Negroes in Stamps knew it." The town was so segregated that the children can hardly believe that whites are real.

On the other hand, St. Louis and San Francisco teem with activities and peoples. There are bars and restaurants and music and dancing with their mother in St. Louis and the boom of wartime later in San Francisco where the streets are crowded with soldiers and workers of all nationalities. Momma may be strong and smart, but her darkness and countrified speech sometimes make Maya cringe. Grandmother Baxter, though, is "nearly white," a trained professional nurse, with a German accent. Other contrasts, however, come upon us more subtly, in part because of the *episodic* structure of the book. Almost every chapter reads as a complete short story or episode that doesn't need all the other details of the book to be understood. Every episode contains its contrasts as well.

How many of us have not imagined ourselves different than the way we are, especially when we're young? This sort of imagining on the part of young Maya opens ***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*** and shows us the first of many contrasts. The young girl stands before the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church congregation in Stamps, Arkansas. She wears a cut-down, redone white

woman's dress. It is made of taffeta, however, and the girl feels that this material makes up for its "awful" lavender color. She just knew that when people saw her in that dress that her grandmother, Momma, had done over by hand, that they would recognize her real self. Her "real hair, which was long and blonde, would take the place of that kinky mass, and her light blue eyes would hypnotize them." They would come to understand why she didn't pick up a southern accent or the common slang, and why she had to be "forced to eat pigs tails and snouts." She "was really white" and self-assured as a movie star, just now under "a cruel fairy stepmother's spell" that had turned her into "a too-big Negro girl with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number two pencil." But here on Easter morning she ends up mumbling her lines and running out. Angelou ends this episode, "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her own displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult." It is painful to be aware. It is painful to be separate.

The reality of herself, the imagined self, and this sense of displacement must eventually be reconciled. As she matures, she sheds the notion of becoming white and comes to be proud of her race and her heritage. After her period of silence and under the tutelage of the gentlewoman, Miss Bertha Flowers, "our side's answer to the richest white woman in town," she learned she must "always be intolerant of ignorance, but

understanding of illiteracy." She learned from Miss Flowers that mute words on a page take life when "infused" with the human voice. She takes extreme pride in Momma's standing up and speaking out to the white dentist (the only dentist in Stamps) who wouldn't treat Maya's toothache because he'd "sooner stick his hand in a dog's mouth." Although her imaginings of that "showdown" are quite different than the reality, Maya knows the difference this time, liking her own version better.

Maya wrestles to come to terms with other contradictions that do not make sense. Joe Louis successfully defends the heavyweight championship title, yet the people listening to the fight on the Store's radio must stay with friends close by. "It wouldn't do for a Black man and his family to be caught on a lonely country road on a night when Joe Louis had proved we were the strongest people in the world." She feels anger at her grammar school graduation when the white school official, Donleavy, speaks of the future for the white and black schools. The white school will get "new microscopes and chemistry equipment" while the black students will get a playing field. "The white kids were going to have the chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies" while we would be athletes, "maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen." The man with his "dead words" had killed the promise and hope of the occasion. But she then revels in the triumph as the valedictorian, Henry Reed, gives his address, "To Be or Not to Be," and turns to the class, leading them in

"Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" so that the time was theirs again, or as Maya says, "We were on top again. As always, again. We survived. The depths had been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls. I was no longer simply a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race." She has resolved the conflict of white perceptions and actions with the reality and the triumphant spirit of her community's endurance. However, the hardest to reconcile surely comes with the brutal rape of her as a child.

When Angelou writes about the rape she suffered from her mother's boyfriend in St. Louis, she describes this horrible violation with a reference to a biblical passage. "The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator can't." The biblical language and reference connect this horrifying episode to a spiritual tent revival she later attends in Stamps. She relates, "Hadn't He Himself said it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven?" This connection seems impossibly contradictory. One act is of violation and oppression that results in Mr. Freeman's death and five years of fearful silence for Maya. The other act involves redemption and affirmation of life everlasting. How does one reconcile brutality here and the promise of milk and honey?

Just as the child had to give in to her rapist because she had no choice but to endure and survive, the blacks had no choice. The songs at the revival and songs heard from the honky-tonk as people walked home "asked the same questions. How long, oh God? How long?" How many times would black men have to hide in the cellars because some crowd is out for blood? How long would Momma bear with stoic composure white girls' insults? How long must any of us try to reconcile the contradictions of bigotry or sexism? Or any of the injustices people seem so intent on inflicting on another? Surely, Angelou's answer would be, as long as necessary for survival and not a moment longer. When we resolve those contradictions in our own lives, those opposites that exist simultaneously, we find the courage to be human. As we overcome those conflicts, we learn to survive because we must. Because we are human. Because Angelou shows us we can do more than endure. We can triumph. "Can't do is like Don't Care. Neither of them have a home."

### **Source Citation**

Eller, Edward E. "Critical Essay on 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings'." *Nonfiction Classics for Students: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Nonfiction Works*. Ed. David M. Galens, Jennifer Smith, and Elizabeth Thomason. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 2001. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 19 July 2011.



## **Discussion questions: (Boston Area Rape Crisis Center)**

1. The race/ethnicity of the perpetrator or survivor often plays a role in how people respond to sexual violence. How does the town react to a white woman being assaulted? How is this different from Maya's experiences?
2. What role does vigilante justice play in the novel? Knowing that very few reports of sexual assaults or rape lead to convictions, why might vigilantism hold an appeal?
3. Maya describes a desire to feel loved and a desire for closeness that she uses to justify being victimized. Do you feel that this is a common sense that children might blame themselves for a sexual assault because of a wanting to feel loved or be close to an adult?
4. Maya suffers two experiences, one of rape the other of knowing her rapist was killed (hinted that family and friends carried out this action), which of these do you believe Maya is most traumatized by? Why?
5. Survivors of sexual violence cope with their experiences in a variety of ways. How do you feel about Maya's decision to stop talking for a time after her experience? How do others, such as her

school teacher and grandmother, react to her silence?

6. What role do Maya's early encounters with sex and sexuality play in her views of sex as a young adult? Draw on her sexual assault as well as her views around her brother's early escapades.

7. Does Maya develop trust and love at the end of the book, or does she just realize she has always had the gifts and just needed confidence to use them?

### **Discussion questions: *Litlovers***

([http://www.litlovers.com/guide\\_iknowwhy.html](http://www.litlovers.com/guide_iknowwhy.html))

1. The memoir opens with a provocative refrain: "What you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay ... " What do you think this passage says about Ritie's sense of herself? How does she feel about her place in the world? How does she keep her identity intact?

2. Upon seeing her mother for the first time after years of separation, Ritie describes her as "a hurricane in its perfect power." What do you think about Ritie's relationship with her mother? How does it compare to her relationship with her grandmother, "Momma"?

3. The author writes, "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat." What do you make of the author's portrayal of race? How do

Ritie and her family cope with the racial tension that permeates their lives?

4. Throughout the book, Ritie struggles with feelings that she is "bad" and "sinful," as her thoughts echo the admonitions of her strict religious upbringing. What does she learn at the end of the memoir about right and wrong?

5. What is the significance of the title as it relates to Ritie's self-imposed muteness?

## **Multimedia**

Author interview available through National Public Radio  
"At 80, Maya Angelou Reflects on a Glorious Life"  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89355359>

## **Readalikes**

*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

The story of Celie, a poor black woman from the south, whose friendship with two women helps her overcome the brutality of her father and husband.

*Push* by Sapphire

Precious is a 16-year-old who has never left Harlem. Her story is one of neglect and abuse and a fierce determination to acquire an education. Pregnant by her own father, she is forced to leave school. Her defenses and her world unravel as she struggles to gain control of her own life.

## **More Readalikes** (<http://www.allreaders.com>)

### *Soldier: A Poet's Childhood* by June Jordan

"The African-American poet June Jordan describes the first twelve years of her life as her Jamaica-born father prepares her for life as an African-American as he has experienced it. Through Jordan's description of her experience, we also see the early development of a poet's sensibility."

### *What Becomes of the Brokenhearted* by E. Lynn Harris

"E. Lynn Harris reveals the ups and downs of his life on his road to success as a best-selling author. Harris begins with his humble Arkansas beginnings as the only son in a family of six. The author opens up in detailing his early years that were filled with physical abuse from his stepfather, trying to be accepted by peers, and jockeying questions about his own sexuality. The writer also tells about his severe depression, conflicts with work, bouts with alcoholism, and attempts at suicide.

Harris's ongoing quest for love and acceptance is a central focus in much of this eye-opening memoir."

### *Breaking Apart: A Memoir of Divorce* by Wendy Swallow

"Swallow was a writer for the Washington Post, then a professor of journalism at American University, and married to a man 10 years older who was prey to depressions, with two young sons, when she decided to separate from her husband. Her memoir of that period -

- thoughtful, honest, unhysterical -- is about as fair as it could possibly be to all parties, and discusses the larger picture of divorce in the United States as well as her own experience. The account is not particularly bloody; so far, her sons seem to have come through okay, and she and her ex have managed an equitable arrangement of joint custody. But the pain, confusion, ambivalence, and vengefulness are all there, and beautifully described. I've never been divorced, and expect never to be, but I understood and liked this book very much for its delicacy and great humanity."

## **Activity**

Have each member of the group write a four line poem starting with the line "I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings." Once completed go around and have each person read their piece out loud.



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