

## ***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings***

### **Author Biography**

#### **Maya Angelou**



Dr. Maya Angelou is widely known around the world as a “Renaissance Woman” due to her outstanding contribution to the arts. She is a celebrated author, poet, actress, filmmaker, film producer, historian, and Civil Rights activist. Angelou is most famous for her autobiographical piece entitled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in which she uses her unique voice to tell the story of her childhood. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is first in a series of six autobiographical memoirs written by Angelou.

Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1928. She spent her early years in Long Beach, CA, where Angelou’s father, Bailey, worked for the Navy as a dietician, and her mother, Vivian, worked as a nurse. Angelou was the younger of two children. Angelou and her older brother Bailey Jr. were incredibly close. He is said to have given her the nickname “Maya” as a shortened version of “my sister.” At age three, when her parents split up, Marguerite and Bailey were sent to live with their maternal grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas. While in Stamps, Angelou experienced the racial discrimination that pervaded Southern culture, which helped her to develop her strong sense of African American culture and pride.

After living in Stamps for four years, Angelou and her brother returned briefly to St. Louis to live with their mother once again. It was during this time, at around the age of seven, that her mother’s boyfriend sexually abused her. A few days after the incident, the mother’s boyfriend was found dead. He was thought to have been murdered by Angelou’s uncles as vengeance for his crime. This horrifying experience caused Angelou such pain and distress that she became mute, not speaking to anyone for more than five years. Angelou and her brother then returned to Stamps for a short period, where a woman Maya thought of as “the aristocrat of Black Stamps,” Bertha Flowers, introduced her to the works of such authors as Edgar Allen Poe, William Shakespeare, and Charles Dickens, and eventually helped Angelou begin to speak and interact again after a long period of silence.

Soon afterwards, Angelou moved from Stamps to San Francisco to be with their mother. It was during this time that her interest in the arts flourished. She attended the Labor School of San Francisco on a scholarship for dance and drama. She dropped out of school at age 14 and soon became the first African American woman to operate a cable car. This career was brief, however, and not long afterwards she returned to high school. Angelou became pregnant while still in high school and gave birth to her son, Guy, just a few weeks after graduating.

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Angelou supported Guy and herself by working in various positions as a waitress and cook. She married Anastasios Angelopoulos, a Greek sailor, but the marriage lasted less than two years. Angelou went on to excel in various artistic endeavors, including touring with the opera *Porgy and Bess*, studying with famed dancer/choreographers Alvin Ailey and Martha Graham, and releasing her first album, *Calypso Lady*, in 1957.

In 1958, Angelou moved to New York City, where she became a member of the Harlem Writer's Guild. While living in New York, Angelou continued to experience success as an actor. She performed in an off-Broadway play entitled *The Blacks*, as well as *Cabaret for Freedom*, which Angelou organized as a benefit for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a civil rights organization in which Angelou held the position of Northern Coordinator. This organization was led by Dr. Martin Luther King.

Angelou left the United States in 1960 to work abroad, first in Cairo, Egypt as the editor for the *Arab Observer*, then in Ghana as a writer for *The Ghanaian Times*, as a feature editor for *The African Review*, and later as professor at the University of Ghana's School for Music and Drama. Angelou returned to the United States in 1964, with plans to devote her life to the Civil Rights Movement by helping her friend, Malcolm X, with his Organization of African Unity. However, this plan was halted when Malcolm X was assassinated in early 1965.

The assassinations of both Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. affected Maya greatly. She vowed to continue to tell the story of African Americans, and to strive to eliminate racial inequality. She chose to do this through her writing. Her friend and mentor James Baldwin encouraged her to tell her story in writing, which led to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She later wrote *Georgia, Georgia*, which was the first screenplay written by an African American woman that went on to be filmed. Additionally, Angelou was personally selected by President Bill Clinton to compose an original poem for the 1993 Presidential Inauguration. Angelou's poem for this occasion, "On the Pulse of Morning," was broadcast live worldwide and is considered one of her best works.

Angelou has won many awards and been given many honors. Her most notable honors include serving on two presidential committees, the Presidential Medal of Arts (2000), and the Lincoln Medal (2008). She has won three Grammy awards, thirty honorary doctoral degrees, two NAACP Image Awards, and was on the New York Times Bestseller's List for two years straight, which is the record for the longest run ever to be on the chart.

Angelou currently lives in Harlem, NY and Winston-Salem, North Carolina, but travels the world and continues to inspire millions with her art and literature. She works as a Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University, and has a radio show on Oprah Winfrey's XM radio station. Angelou has changed the face of literature, and continues to be a voice for the African American culture.