

Who Was Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou

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Maya Angelou (AN-jə-loh; born Marguerite Annie Johnson; April 4, 1928 – May 28, 2014) was an American memoirist, poet, and civil rights activist. She published seven autobiographies, three books of essays, several books of poetry, and is credited with a list of plays, movies, and television shows spanning over 50 years. She received dozens of awards and more than 50 honorary degrees. Angelou's series of seven autobiographies focus on her childhood and early adult experiences. The first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), tells of her life up to the age of 17 and brought her international recognition and acclaim.

She became a poet and writer after a string of odd jobs during her young adulthood. In 1982, Angelou was named the first Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Angelou was active in the Civil Rights Movement and worked with Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Beginning in the 1990s, she made approximately 80 appearances a year on the lecture circuit, something she continued into her eighties. In 1993, Angelou recited her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" (1993) at the first inauguration of Bill Clinton, making her the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost at the inauguration of John F. Kennedy in 1961.

With the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou publicly discussed aspects of her personal life. She was respected as a spokesperson for Black people and women, and her works have been considered a defense of Black culture. Her works are widely used in schools and universities worldwide, although attempts have been made to ban her books from some U.S. libraries. Angelou's most celebrated works have been labeled as autobiographical fiction, but many critics consider them to be autobiographies. She made a deliberate attempt to challenge the common structure of the autobiography by critiquing, changing, and expanding the genre. Her books center on themes that include racism, identity, family, and travel.

Poetry of Maya Angelou

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Maya Angelou, an African-American writer who is best known for her seven autobiographies, was also a prolific and successful poet. She has been called "the black woman's poet laureate", and her poems have been called the anthems of African Americans. Angelou studied and began writing poetry at a young age, and used poetry and other great literature to cope with trauma, as she described in her first and most well-known autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She became a poet after a series of occupations as a young adult, including as a cast member of a European tour of *Porgy and Bess*, and a performer of calypso music in nightclubs in the 1950s. Many of the songs she wrote during that period later found their way to her later poetry collections. She eventually gave up performing for a writing career.

Despite considering herself a poet and playwright, she wrote *Caged Bird* in 1969, which brought her international recognition and acclaim. Many of her readers consider her a poet first and an autobiographer second, but she is better known for her prose works. She has published several volumes of poetry, and has experienced similar success as a poet. Early in her writing career, she began alternating a volume of poetry with an autobiography. In 1993, she recited one of her best-known poems, "On the Pulse of Morning", at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton.

Angelou explores many of the same themes throughout all her writings, in both her autobiographies and poetry. These themes include love, painful loss, music, discrimination and racism, and struggle. Her poetry cannot easily be placed in categories of themes or techniques. It has been compared with music and musical forms, especially the blues, and like the blues singer, Angelou uses laughter or ridicule instead of tears to cope with minor irritations, sadness, and great suffering. Many of her poems are about love, relationships, or overcoming hardships. The metaphors in her poetry serve as "coding", or litotes, for meanings understood by other Blacks, but her themes and topics apply universally to all races. Angelou uses everyday language, the Black vernacular, Black music and forms, and rhetorical techniques such as shocking language, the occasional use of profanity, and traditionally unacceptable subjects. As she does throughout her autobiographies, Angelou speaks not only for herself, but for her entire gender and race. Her poems continue the themes of mild protest and survival also found in her autobiographies, and inject hope through humor. Tied with Angelou's theme of racism is her treatment of the struggle and hardships experienced by her race.

Many critics consider Angelou's autobiographies more important than her poetry. Although her books have been best-sellers, her poetry has been studied less. Angelou's lack of critical acclaim has been attributed to her popular success and to critics' preferences for poetry as a written form rather than a spoken, performed one.

List of Maya Angelou works

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The works of Maya Angelou encompass autobiography, plays, poetry, and teleplays. She also had an active directing, acting, and speaking career. She is best known for her books, including her series of seven autobiographies, starting with the critically acclaimed *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969).

Angelou's autobiographies are distinct in style and narration, and "stretch over time and place", from Arkansas to Africa and back to the US. They take place from the beginnings of World War II to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Angelou wrote collections of essays, including *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (1993) and *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (1997), which writer Hilton Als called her "wisdom books" and "homilies strung together with autobiographical texts". Angelou used the same editor throughout her writing career, Robert Loomis, an executive editor at Random House, until he retired in 2011. Angelou said regarding Loomis: "We have a relationship that's kind of famous among publishers."

She was one of the most honored writers of her generation, earning an extended list of honors and awards, as well as more than 30 honorary degrees. She was a prolific writer of poetry; her volume *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* (1971) was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, and she was chosen by President Bill Clinton to recite her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" during his inauguration in 1993.

Angelou's successful acting career included roles in numerous plays, films, and television programs, such as in the television mini-series *Roots* in 1977. Her screenplay *Georgia, Georgia* (1972) was the first original film script by a black woman to be produced, and she was the first African-American woman to direct a major motion picture, *Down in the Delta*, in 1998. Since the 1990s, Angelou participated in the lecture circuit, which she continued into her eighties.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

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I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is a 1969 autobiography describing the young and early years of American writer and poet Maya Angelou. The first in a seven-volume series, it is a coming-of-age story that

illustrates how strength of character and a love of literature can help overcome racism and trauma. The book begins when three-year-old Maya and her older brother are sent to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their grandmother and ends when Maya becomes a mother at the age of 16. In the course of *Caged Bird*, Maya transforms from a victim of racism with an inferiority complex into a self-possessed, dignified young woman capable of responding to prejudice.

Angelou was challenged by her friend, author James Baldwin, and her editor, Robert Loomis, to write an autobiography that was also a piece of literature. Reviewers often categorize *Caged Bird* as autobiographical fiction because Angelou uses thematic development and other techniques common to fiction, but the prevailing critical view characterizes it as an autobiography, a genre she attempts to critique, change, and expand. The book covers topics common to autobiographies written by black American women in the years following the Civil Rights Movement: a celebration of black motherhood; a critique of racism; the importance of family; and the quest for independence, personal dignity, and self-definition.

Angelou uses her autobiography to explore subjects such as identity, rape, racism, and literacy. She also writes in new ways about women's lives in a male-dominated society. Maya, the younger version of Angelou and the book's central character, has been called "a symbolic character for every black girl growing up in America". Angelou's description of being raped as an eight-year-old child overwhelms the book, although it is presented briefly in the text. Another metaphor, that of a bird struggling to escape its cage, is a central image throughout the work, which consists of "a sequence of lessons about resisting racist oppression". Angelou's treatment of racism provides a thematic unity to the book. Literacy and the power of words help young Maya cope with her bewildering world; books become her refuge as she works through her trauma.

Caged Bird was nominated for a National Book Award in 1970 and remained on The New York Times paperback bestseller list for two years. It has been used in educational settings from high schools to universities, and the book has been celebrated for creating new literary avenues for the American memoir. However, the book's graphic depiction of childhood rape, racism, and sexuality has caused it to be challenged or banned in some schools and libraries.

And Still I Rise

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And Still I Rise is author Maya Angelou's third volume of poetry, published by Random House in 1978. It was published during one of the most productive periods in Angelou's career; she had written three autobiographies and published two other volumes of poetry up to that point. Angelou considered herself a poet and a playwright, but was best known for her seven autobiographies, especially her first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, although her poetry has also been successful. She began, early in her writing career, alternating the publication of an autobiography and a volume of poetry.

And Still I Rise is made up of 32 short poems, divided into three parts. The poems' themes focus on a hopeful determination to rise above difficulty and discouragement, and on many of the same topics as Angelou's autobiographies and previous volumes of poetry. Two of her most well-known and popular poems, "Phenomenal Woman" and "Still I Rise", are found in this volume. She speaks for her race and gender in many of the poems, and again emphasizes the strength and resiliency of her community. Like her previous volumes of poetry, the reviews of *And Still I Rise* were mixed.

The collection's title poem, "Still I Rise", was the center of an advertising campaign for the United Negro College Fund. Two others, "Phenomenal Woman" and "Just For a Time", were previously published in *Cosmopolitan*. "Phenomenal Woman" was one of Angelou's poems featured in the film *Poetic Justice*.

Themes in Maya Angelou's autobiographies

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The themes encompassed in African-American writer Maya Angelou's seven autobiographies include racism, identity, family, and travel. Angelou (1928–2014) is best known for her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). The rest of the books in her series are *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), *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002), and *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013).

Beginning with *Caged Bird* and ending with her final autobiography, Angelou uses the metaphor of a bird (which represents the confinement of racism and depression) struggling to escape its cage, as described in the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem "Sympathy". Angelou's autobiographies can be placed in the African-American literature tradition of political protest. Their unity underscores one of Angelou's central themes: the injustice of racism and how to fight it. According to scholar Pierre A. Walker, all of Angelou's books describe "a sequence of lessons about resisting racist oppression". In the course of her autobiographies, her views about Black-white relationships changed and she learned to accept different points of view. Angelou's theme of identity was established from the beginning of her autobiographies, with the opening lines in *Caged Bird*, and like other female writers in the late 1960s and early 1970s, she used the autobiography to reimagine ways of writing about women's lives and identities in a male-dominated society. Her original goal was to write about the lives of Black women in America, but it evolved in her later volumes to document the ups and downs of her own personal and professional life.

The theme of family and family relationships—from the character-defining experience of Angelou's parents' abandonment in *Caged Bird* to her relationships with her son, husbands, friends, and lovers—are important in all of her books. As in American autobiography generally and in African-American autobiography specifically, which has its roots in the slave narrative, travel is another important theme in Angelou's autobiographies. Scholar Yolanda M. Manora called the travel motif in Angelou's autobiographies, beginning in *Caged Bird*, "a central metaphor for a psychic mobility". Angelou's autobiographies "stretch time and place", from Arkansas to Africa and back to the US, and span almost forty years, beginning from the start of World War II to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

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Maya Angelou Academy

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The Maya Angelou Academy at New Beginnings, renamed from Oak Hill Academy in May 2009, is an alternative school operated by the non-profit See Forever Foundation which manages Maya Angelou Schools. Named after American poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou, the school is located east of Laurel, Maryland in Anne Arundel County. It is at the New Beginnings Youth Development Center, the District of Columbia's secure facility for youth who are adjudicated as delinquent and committed to its Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS).

The See Forever Foundation began management of the academy in June 2007 upon winning a three-year \$12 million contract. Founding principal David Domenici is the son of former New Mexico senator Pete Domenici. Domenici subsequently led the Consortium for Educational Excellence in Secure Settings. Maya Angelou visited the school on April 30, 2009, when it had 90 students, ranging from 14 to 19 years old.

While the See Forever Foundation operates other schools under the authority of the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board, Maya Angelou Academy is not affiliated with the DC PCSB.

Chelsea Clinton profiled the academy in 2012 for a video segment on NBC's Rock Center with Brian Williams. In 2014, a report by the Southern Education Foundation highlighted Maya Angelou Academy as a "successful model for teaching in locked facilities"; tests taken before and after students' 9-month incarceration at the school showed an average of 1.3–1.4 years of improvement.

In 2016, twice as many students who completed the program at Maya Angelou Academy at New Beginnings were working or attending school compared to records from 2007.

Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women

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The poems in this short volume were published in Angelou's previous volumes of poetry. "Phenomenal Woman," "Still I Rise," and "Our Grandmothers" appeared in *And Still I Rise* (1978) and "Weekend Glory" appeared in *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* (1983). The volume was published a year after Random House published *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*, Angelou's first collection of poetry, and two years after she read her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at President Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993.

List of awards and honors received by Maya Angelou

African-American writer and poet Maya Angelou (1928–2014) was honored by universities, literary organizations, government agencies, and special interest

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She served on two presidential committees – for Gerald Ford in 1975 and for Jimmy Carter in 1977. In 2000, she was awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Bill Clinton. In 2010, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the U.S., by President Barack Obama. More than thirty health care and medical facilities have been named after Angelou. She was awarded more than 50 honorary degrees.

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