Maya Angelou

About the author

Born on April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, Maya Angelou was originally named Marguerite Ann Johnson by her parents, but her brother, who was one at the time, gave her the name “Maya” when he was first learning how to speak. Her father worked as a doorman and then as a naval dieterian, and her mother spent time as a nurse, a real estate agent and a merchant marine. When Angelou was three years old, her parents got divorced. Her father sent her and her brother to live with his mother in Stamps, Arkansas. Angelou’s first book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1969 and nominated for the National Book Award, is an account of her life up to the age of seventeen. It was Angelou’s first of six autobiographical books.

Four years later, Angelou’s father showed up in Stamps unexpectedly and took her and her brother back to St. Louis, where they lived with their mother. When Angelou was eight years old, she was sexually abused by her mother’s boyfriend. She told her brother about the abuse, and he eventually shared the information with the rest of the family. Angelou’s mother’s boyfriend was arrested and put in jail for a day, and four days later, he was found dead after being severely beaten. Shortly after the incident, Angelou stopped speaking completely because she believed that if she spoke, her mouth would produce “something that would kill people randomly.” Believing that it was better not to talk, she maintained her silence for nearly five years.

Angelou and her brother returned to their grandmother’s house in Stamps. She made a close friend in town, a teacher named Bertha Flowers, who helped her start speaking again. Flowers also inspired her to start reading classical literature. A few years later, Angelou and her brother went to San Francisco to live with their mother. During World War II, Angelou studied dance and drama via a scholarship at the California Labor School. She also got a job as the first black female streetcar conductor in San Francisco’s history. Shortly after graduating from the California Labor School, she had a son, whom she named Guy Johnson. He would also grow up to be a poet.

*Gather Together in My Name*, which was Angelou’s second autobiography, was published in 1974. It tells the story of her life between the ages of seventeen and nineteen, revealing the hardships involved in being a single mother living in poverty. During this time, Angelou struggled to raise her son. Her relationships, jobs and cities changed regularly, and at one point, she even worked as a prostitute, which led to her son being kidnapped. However, in the end, despite the many hardships, she managed to survive, relying on her instincts and inner strengths. Eventually, she learned to embrace the fact that she was a black woman, and to define herself in those terms.

In 1962, Angelou moved to Ghana, West Africa, where she became close friends with the famous Civil Rights leader, Malcolm X. Two years later, she returned to America to help Malcolm X found the Organization of African American Unity. However, the other famous Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King, Junior, who was also her close friend, was assassinated on her birthday in 1968. King’s death affected Angelou deeply. In fact, she didn’t celebrate her birthday for many years afterward. She tried to overcome her sadness by writing *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which went on to become an international success.

Nowadays, Angelou is a famous African-American author, poet, historian, actress, playwright, civil rights activist, producer and director. She is often asked to speak or read from her writings for important occasions. For example, in 1993, she wrote the poem *On the Pulse of Morning* for former U.S. president Bill Clinton to be read at his inauguration as the forty-second president of the United States. She is also a regular member of the lecture circuit, earning tens of thousands of dollars per appearance. In 2002, she sold the use of her name and poems to the world’s biggest greeting card company, Hallmark, and in 2008, she was the focus of the television series *African American Lives 2*.
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Summary

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* recounts the trials and tribulations of Maya Angelou’s life growing up as an impoverished black woman in the southern United States. Its story focuses on Angelou’s childhood during the depressed times of the 1930s and the war-torn times of the 1940s. Her heartbreaking story reveals the prejudice, poverty, segregation and hardship that almost all African-Americans suffered at that time.

**Chapters 1–4:** The story starts by highlighting the personal suffering of an innocent little girl and her older brother, whose parents end up getting divorced and abandoning them. When their parents’ marriage ends, three-year-old Maya (whose real name is Marguerite) and four-year-old Bailey are sent by train from Long Beach, California to Stamps, Arkansas, where they live with their paternal grandmother, whom they call “Momma.” Their parents have given up on their marriage, and, more importantly, they have given up on their children and being parents to them. Marguerite’s life has just gotten harder.

**Chapters 5–8:** When Marguerite turns eight years old, her father reappears on the scene and takes her and her brother back to St. Louis to meet up with their mother. He leaves them with her—a decision that eventually leads to Marguerite’s being raped by her mother’s boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. After Mr. Freeman is convicted of rape—a crime for which he serves one day in jail—he is found murdered in an alley. Marguerite blames herself for the man’s death and stops talking to everyone except Bailey.

**Chapters 9–15:** Later, she finds a true friend, Louise, and begins to talk and smile again. The anger, frustration and hopelessness felt by an intelligent, hardworking black female student with no possibility to use her talents and no prospects for the future is painfully described when Angelou writes about her graduation from high school. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is her story of childhood, adolescence—and loss of innocence.

Background and themes

**Segregation:** In the 1930s and 1940s, African-Americans living in the southern United States were treated with contempt by the majority of white people. The country was divided by segregation—a formal policy in which black people weren’t allowed to attend good schools, get high-paying jobs, live in valuable houses or receive proper medical treatment for their ailments. They weren’t even allowed to sit among white people on public buses, or drink from the same water fountains, as they were considered to be unworthy of equality. They weren’t slaves anymore—the Civil War brought an end to that inhumanity and social injustice—but they were still thought to be “sub-human.” In short, the policy of segregation did everything within its power to ensure that black people remained poor and ignorant—and most importantly, below white people on the hierarchy of power and privilege.

**The Ku Klux Klan:** During the times depicted in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, black people had to treat white people with respect and display great humility in their presence. They were employed by white people, who paid them very little for their services. The Ku Klux Klan, which still exists in the southern United States today, was a dominant organization of white men who didn’t hesitate to take the law into their own hands. They attacked and killed black people, whom they thought deserved to be treated like animals. The Klan members always attacked at night. They wore long white robes and tall white hats, and they carried burning torches. They often burned down black people’s houses while the families were still inside them. For example, if a white woman claimed that she had been raped by a black man, there was no need for a trial—the Klan “took care” of the alleged rapist themselves. If the black man said that he was innocent, he was likely to be tortured before being killed.

**Living at the bottom of society:** Segregation bred superiority and inferiority—a causal relationship that ultimately led to hostility, fear and hatred. During the time depicted in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, black children feared white people, and in fact, as in the case of the author, they often didn’t view them as human beings. They were something else entirely—something that could seriously hurt and even kill them for no reason other than the fact that they had been born with dark skin. At that time in America, women—both black and white—held a lower place in society than men did, so being a black woman was as low in society as one could be. They weren’t white, and they weren’t men; the only creature they had superiority over was the family dog. Black women like Marguerite (and by implication, Angelou) were servants to white people and black men. They received no respect, and as a result, they had no hope for the future. They existed within society, but they had no opportunity of
improving their positions within it. If black men were seen as sub-human by white people, black women were considered to be sub-sub-human by white and black people alike.

**Life in the north:** Life was cruel and unjust for black people living in the south, but fortunately things were different in the north. Black people living in the north had a much easier time than those in the south. The north wasn’t completely free from segregation, but black people certainly had more opportunity of bettering themselves in the north. For example, if they worked hard, they could get respectable jobs and earn a decent living. They had better housing options, and they had access to proper medical care. They could afford to wear stylish clothes and carve out identities for themselves and their cultures. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Marguerite moves at the age of eight from Arkansas to St. Louis, and she finds the lifestyle of her relatives living in the north completely different from that of her relatives living in the south. For her, the north is a completely different world. It isn’t a perfect world, but at least it is a world with hope.

**Discussion activities**

**Chapters 1–3**

**Before reading**

1. **Discuss:** Ask students to look at the picture on the cover of the book. *What does the woman in the picture look like? What kind of clothing is she wearing? What is she holding? What is she doing in the picture? Who do you think she is? Why do you think this? What do you think she is like? Why do you think this? Do you like the picture? Why/why not? Does it make you want to read the book? Why/why not?*

2. **Discuss:** Put students into small groups and get them to read the description on the back cover of the book. Then get them to look at the front cover of the book and think about the title. Finally, get them to discuss the following questions:
   - What do you know about Maya Angelou?
   - How is Angelou’s life as an adult different from her life as a child?
   - How is her life as an adult the same as her life as a child?
   - What do you think the book will be about? Why do you think this?
   - What do you think the title of the book means? Why do you think this?
   - Why do you think the author chose to use this title?
   - Do you like the title of the book? Why/why not?
   - Does the title make you want to read the book? Why/why not?

3. **Pair work:** Put students into pairs and get them to read the introduction to the book. Then get them to imagine that the author is going to give a lecture at their school. Ask the pairs to write ten questions that they would like to ask her. Note that the questions should be about Angelou, her life or *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. (After they read the book, they can come back to the list of questions and then write answers that they imagine Angelou would give.)

4. **Research:** Ask students to bring information about the Ku Klux Klan to class. Put a large piece of paper on the wall and then get students to attach their information to the piece of paper to make a wall display.

**After reading**

5. **Discuss:** Put students into groups and get them to discuss the ways in which Marguerite’s childhood was different from the childhood of a black girl living in the southern United States nowadays. Then get them to discuss the ways in which her childhood was the same. Finally, after the groups have discussed the issue for fifteen minutes, ask the students to return to their seats and have a class discussion.

6. **Pair work:** Write the following adjectives on the board: affectionate, ambitious, ashamed, protective, superstitious and vicious. Then put students into pairs and get them to match each adjective with a character in the story and give reasons to justify their choices. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the class and read the adjective-character pairings and their reasons to their classmates.

**Chapters 4–6**

**Before reading**

7. **Research:** Put students into pairs and get them to look up the words discrimination and segregation in a dictionary or on the Internet. Make the exercise into a competition—the first pair of students to find the definitions wins. They should stand up and read the definitions out loud to the rest of the class. Finally, they should use the words in sentences as examples.

**After reading**

8. **Pair work:** Write the following columns of words and phrases on the board. Put students into pairs and get them to work together to match the words and phrases from each column in order to make phrases that appear in Chapter 4. After you write the correct phrases on the board so that the pairs can check their answers, get them to write their own sentences using each of the phrases. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the class and read the sentences to their classmates.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>a</th>
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<tr>
<td>poor white</td>
<td>big, white</td>
<td>did a</td>
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<tr>
<td>wear</td>
<td>woman</td>
<td>court</td>
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</tbody>
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Teacher’s notes

LEVEL 6

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

9 Discuss: Put students into small groups and get them to discuss the following questions:
Why do you think Grandmother Baxter chooses to help the gamblers and whiskey salesmen?
Do you think she is right or wrong to help them? Why do you think this?
How do you think the other characters feel about her decision to help the gamblers and whiskey salesmen?
Why do you think they feel this way?

10 Artwork: Put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture to describe a scene from Chapters 4 to 6. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class, and the class should guess which scene the picture illustrates.

11 Discuss: Put students into small groups and get them to discuss the effects of the following things on Marguerite:
a her father's way of speaking
b her mother’s beauty
c Mr. Freeman’s attention
d Mr. Freeman’s death

Chapters 7–9

Before reading
12 Research: Put students into small groups and get them to look for information about Stamps, Arkansas, in the library, on the Internet, etc. Then get them to make a travel brochure to promote the city. When they have finished, the groups should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their travel brochure to the rest of the class.

13 Guess: Ask students to predict what will happen to Marguerite and the other characters in Chapters 7 to 9.

14 Discuss: Ask students to think about why Chapter 8 is called Two Women. Who do you think the two women in the title are? Why do you think this? Do you think they are important to the story? Why/why not? What do you think the two women will do in the chapter? Why do you think this? Do you like the title of the chapter? Why/why not?

After reading
15 Check: Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Marguerite and the other characters in Chapters 7 to 9. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.

16 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture of one of the characters in Chapters 7 to 9. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class, and the class should guess which character the picture illustrates.

17 Discuss: Put students into small groups and get them to discuss the following questions:
How does Marguerite feel when Mrs. Flowers says her name? Why does she feel this way?
How does she feel about being called “Margaret” and “Mary?” Why does she feel this way?
What other names do people call her? Why do they call her these names?
How does she feel about being called these names? Why does she feel this way?
Do you think names are important? Why/why not?
Have you ever been called names other than your real name? If so, what name(s) have you been called? How did you feel when you were called a different name? Why did you feel this way?

18 Write: Write the following combinations of letters on the board—they are anagrams of words that can be found in Chapters 7 to 9. Put students into groups and get them to work together to find the words in the story and spell them correctly. Note that one person in the group should write the words on a piece of paper. When they have finished, some of the groups should stand at the front of the class and read the list of words to their classmates.

19 Artwork: Get students to draw a picture to describe how Marguerite feels about Tommy Valdon at the end of Chapter 9. When they have finished, they should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class. The class should draw the picture as it is being described and then compare the pictures.

Chapters 10–12

Before reading
20 Discuss: Ask students to think about why Chapter 10 is called Graduation. What is a graduation? Who do you think graduates in the chapter? Why do you think this? What do you think he or she graduates from? Why do you think this? Do you like the title of the chapter? Why/why not?

21 Research: Put students into small groups and get them to look for information about San Francisco, California in the library, on the Internet, etc. Then get them to make a travel brochure to promote the
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

city. When they have finished, the groups should stand at the front of the classroom and present their travel brochure to the rest of the class.

After reading
22 Role play: Put students into pairs and get them to imagine the conversation that Marguerite might have had with her friend Louise after the graduation ceremony. Get them to write out and practice the conversation. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and role play the conversation in front of the class.

23 Artwork: Put students into pairs and get them to draw a picture to describe a scene from Chapters 10 to 12. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and describe their picture to the rest of the class, and the class should guess which scene the picture illustrates.

24 Write: Point out to students that in Chapter 11, Marguerite has to write a number of letters to her parents explaining to them that she and Momma are on their way to California, and that Bailey will come later on. Put students into pairs and get them to write one of these letters. Student A is Marguerite and Student B is Momma. Momma should tell Marguerite what to write in the letter, and Marguerite should carry out her requests. When they have finished, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and read their letter to the rest of the class.

25 Write: Put students into small groups and get them to write a sentence to describe what happens in Chapter 12. Point out that the sentence needs to be concise while expressing the main event(s) in the chapter. When they have finished, the groups should read their sentence to the rest of the class. Finally, take a vote to find out which group wrote the best sentence.

26 Pair work: Put students into pairs and get them to write three questions that they have regarding Chapters 10 to 12. When they have finished, ask them to exchange their list with another group and write answers to the other group’s questions. Finally, some of the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and read their questions and the answers they have been provided with to the rest of the class.

27 Discuss: Put students into small groups and get them to discuss the following questions:

How is Marguerite’s and other black students’ education different from that of white students?
Why do you think black students and white students received different educations at the time in the story?

Chapters 13–15

Before reading
28 Research: Put students into pairs and get them to look up the word maturity in a dictionary or on the Internet. Make the exercise into a competition—the first pair of students to find the definition wins. They should stand up and read the definition out loud to the rest of the class. Finally, they should use the word in a sentence as an example.

29 Guess: Ask students to predict what will happen to Marguerite and the other characters in Chapters 13 to 15.

After reading
30 Check: Review students’ predictions about what would happen to Marguerite and the other characters in Chapters 7 to 9. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.

31 Pair work: Put students into pairs and get them to make a list of the events described in Chapter 13. Then get them to discuss how they would behave if they were in the same situation that Marguerite is in. Would they react the same way that Marguerite does to the situation? Why/why not? Point out to students that they should choose one event from the chapter and write about how they think they would react if they were in Marguerite’s place.

32 Pair work: Write the following columns of words and phrases on the board. Put students into pairs and get them to work together to match the words and phrases from each column in order to make phrases that appear in Chapters 13 to 15. After you write the correct phrases on the board so that the pairs can check their answers, get them to write their own sentences using each of the phrases. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the class and read the sentences to their classmates.

| a nervous | 1 of town |
| b outskirts | 2 papers |
| c talent | 3 encouragement |
| d insurance | 4 to worry about |
| e screaming like a | 5 with a foreign language |
| f hopelessly | 6 diploma |
| g positive | 7 in love |
| h application | 8 crazy person |
| i pay | 9 with excitement |
| j high school | 10 form |
| k nothing | 11 thinking |
| l without | 12 for what you get |

33 Pair work: Put students into pairs and get them to discuss what Marguerite might write in her diary on the day that she gets the job as the first female black conductor in San Francisco. After their discussion, they should work together to write the diary entry. When they have finished, the pairs should stand at the front of the classroom and read their diary entry to the rest of the class.

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.