

Maya Angelou - Biography

Maya Angelou was a civil rights activist, poet and award-winning author known for her acclaimed 1969 memoir, 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings', and her numerous poetry and essay collections.

Who Was Maya Angelou?

Maya Angelou was an American author, actress, screenwriter, dancer, poet and civil rights activist best known for her 1969 memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which made literary history as the first nonfiction bestseller by an African American woman. Angelou received several honors throughout her career, including two NAACP Image Awards in the outstanding literary work (nonfiction) category, in 2005 and 2009.

Early Life

Angelou was born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. Angelou had a difficult childhood. Her parents split up when she was very young, and she and her older brother, Bailey, were sent to live with their father's mother, Anne Henderson, in Stamps, Arkansas.

As an African American, Angelou experienced firsthand racial prejudices and discrimination in Arkansas. She also suffered at the hands of a family associate around the age of 7: During a visit with her mother, Angelou was raped by her mother's boyfriend. As vengeance for the sexual assault, Angelou's uncles killed the boyfriend.

So traumatized by the experience, Angelou stopped talking. She returned to Arkansas and spent years as a virtual mute.

Education

During World War II, Angelou moved to San Francisco, California. There she won a scholarship to study dance and acting at the California Labor School.

Also during this time, Angelou became the first Black female cable car conductor — a job she held only briefly — in San Francisco.

Acting and Singing Career

In the mid-1950s, Angelou's career as a performer began to take off. She landed a role in a touring production of *Porgy and Bess*, later appearing in the off-Broadway production *Calypso Heat Wave* (1957) and releasing her first album, *Miss Calypso* (1957).

A member of the Harlem Writers Guild and a civil rights activist, Angelou organized and starred in the musical revue *Cabaret for Freedom* as a benefit for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, also serving as the SCLC's northern coordinator.

In 1961, Angelou appeared in an off-Broadway production of Jean Genet's *The Blacks* with [James Earl Jones](#), Lou Gossett Jr. and [Cicely Tyson](#).

Angelou went on to earn a Tony Award nomination for her role in the play *Look Away* (1973) and an Emmy Award nomination for her work on the television miniseries *Roots* (1977), among other honors.

Time in Africa

Angelou spent much of the 1960s abroad, living first in Egypt and then in Ghana, working as an editor and a freelance writer. Angelou also held a position at the University of Ghana for a time.

In Ghana, she also joined a community of "Revolutionist Returnees" exploring pan-Africanism and became close with human rights activist and Black nationalist leader [Malcolm X](#). In 1964, upon returning to the United States, Angelou helped Malcolm X set up the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which disbanded after his assassination the following year.

Screenplay Author and Director

After publishing *Caged Bird*, Angelou broke new ground artistically, educationally and socially with her drama *Georgia, Georgia* in 1972, which made her the first African American woman to have her screenplay produced.

In 1998, seeking new creative challenges, Angelou made her directorial debut with *Down in the Delta*, starring Alfre Woodard.

Accomplishments and Awards

Angelou's career has seen numerous accolades, including the Chicago International Film Festival's 1998 Audience Choice Award and a nod from the Acapulco Black Film Festival in 1999 for *Down in the Delta*.

She also won two NAACP Image Awards in the outstanding literary work (nonfiction) category, for her 2005 cookbook and 2008's *Letter to My Daughter*.

Famous Friends

Martin Luther King Jr., a close friend of Angelou's, was assassinated on her birthday (April 4) in 1968. Angelou stopped celebrating her birthday for years afterward, and sent flowers to King's widow, [Coretta Scott King](#), for more than 30 years, until Coretta's death in 2006.

Angelou was also good friends with TV personality [Oprah Winfrey](#), who organized several birthday celebrations for the award-winning author, including a week-long cruise for her 70th birthday in 1998.

Maya Angelou's Son and Husbands

In 1944, a 16-year-old Angelou gave birth to a son, Guy (a short-lived high school relationship led to the pregnancy). After giving birth, she worked a number of jobs to support herself and her child. A poet himself, Angelou's son now goes by the name Guy Johnson.

In 1952, Angelou wed Anastasios Angelopoulos, a Greek sailor from whom she took her professional name — a blend of her childhood nickname, "Maya," and a shortened version of his surname. The couple later divorced.

Notoriously secretive about her marriages, Angelou was likely married at least three times, including in 1973 to a carpenter, Paul du Feu.

Maya Angelou Death

After experiencing health issues for a number of years, Angelou died on May 28, 2014, at her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The news of her passing spread quickly with many people taking to social media to mourn and remember Angelou. Singer [Mary J. Blige](#) and politician [Cory Booker](#) were among those who tweeted their favorite quotes by her in tribute.

President [Barack Obama](#) also issued a statement about Angelou, calling her "a brilliant writer, a fierce friend, and a truly phenomenal woman." Angelou "had the ability to remind us that we are all God's children; that we all have something to offer," he wrote.

Growing Up Maya Angelou

Turning 75 this month, Maya Angelou has led many lives. She is best known as a writer, for her numerous books of poetry and her six poignant memoirs, including the masterful 1969 *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In February, she won a Grammy for the recorded reading of her most recent memoir, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*. Her works have earned her more than 30 honorary degrees as well as nominations for a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize. She wrote “On the Pulse of Morning” for the 1993 swearing-in of President Bill Clinton, becoming only the second poet in U. S. history—Robert Frost was the first, for John F. Kennedy— invited to compose an inaugural poem.

Less well known are Angelou’s other lives: as a singer; as a composer; as a dancer in *Porgy and Bess*; as an actor in the Obie-winning play *The Blacks* and in films such as *Calypso Heat Wave* and *How to Make an American Quilt*; as a civil rights worker with Martin Luther King, Jr.; as a journalist in Egypt and Ghana; as a writer for television and Hollywood; as director of the 1998 film *Down in the Delta*. Angelou is the Reynolds Professor of American Studies at North Carolina’s WakeForestUniversity in Winston-Salem. She is constantly on the lecture circuit and a regular guest on talk shows; she recently created a line of greeting cards for Hallmark. And there is little sign of her slowing down.

But when we met recently in her art-filled home in Winston- Salem, it was her family, not her varied career, that she most wanted to discuss. Our conversation often returned to the loved ones who helped her triumph over the tragedies of her childhood and made her believe she could meet whatever challenge life threw in her path.

Her grandmother Annie Henderson was one of the most important, a pious woman who ran a general store in Stamps, Arkansas. Angelou lived most of her childhood with her grandmother, whom she called “Momma.” Angelou’s sometimes-absentee mother, Vivian Baxter, had a steel will and several careers of her own. She was an inadvertent player in an early, formative trauma in Angelou’s life. When Angelou was 8 and briefly living with Baxter in St. Louis, her mother’s boyfriend raped Angelou. The man was arrested, convicted and released; soon after, he was found beaten to death. Believing she had caused the killing because she had told of the rape, Angelou refused to speak for several years; only her beloved older brother, Bailey, could coax her to talk. He remained a source of support throughout her life until his death more than a year ago. And there is Angelou’s son, Guy Johnson, 57, author of *Echoes of a Distant Summer* and one other novel. He is, she says, her “monument in the world.”

You’ve said that society’s view of the black woman is such a threat to her well-being that she will die daily unless she determines how she sees herself. How do you see yourself?

I just received a letter yesterday from the University of Milan. A person is doing a doctoral dissertation on my work. It's called Sapienza, which means wisdom. I'm considered wise, and sometimes I see myself as knowing. Most of the time, I see myself as wanting to know. And I see myself as a very interested person. I've never been bored in my life.

You have never been bored? How is that possible?

Oh God, if I were bored, now that would interest me. I'd think, my God, how did that happen and what's going on? I'd be caught up in it. Are you kidding? Bored?

I realized when I was about 20 that I would die. It frightened me so. I mean, I had heard about it, had been told and all that, but that I . . . ? [She points at herself and raises her brows as if in disbelief.] It so terrified me that I doublelocked the doors; I made certain that the windows were double-locked—trying to keep death out—and finally I admitted that there was nothing I could do about it. Once I really came to that conclusion, I started enjoying life, and I enjoy it very much.

Another occurrence took place at about the same time— maybe about a year later—and the two occurrences liberated me forever.

I had two jobs. I was raising my son. We had a tiny little place to live. My mother had a 14-room house and someone to look after things. She owned a hotel, lots of diamonds. I wouldn't accept anything from her. But once a month she'd cook for me. And I would go to her house and she'd be dressed beautifully.

One day after we'd had lunch, she had to go somewhere. She put on silver-fox furs—this was when the head of one fox would seem to bite into the head of the other—and she would wear them with the tails in front; she would turn it around with the furs arching back. We were halfway down the hill and she said, "Baby"—and she was small; she was 5- feet-4 1/2 and I'm 6 foot—"You know something? I think you're the greatest woman I've ever met." We stopped. I looked down at this pretty little woman made up so perfectly, diamonds in her ears. She said, "Mary McLeod Bethune, Eleanor Roosevelt, my mother and you—you are the greatest." It still brings me to te—. [Her eyes tear up.]

We walked down to the bottom of the hill. She crossed the street to the right to get into her car. I continued across the street and waited for the streetcar. And I got onto the streetcar and I walked to the back. I shall never forget it. I remember the wooden planks of the streetcar. The way the light came through the window. And I thought, suppose she's right? She's very intelligent, and she's too mean to lie. Suppose I really am somebody?

Those two incidents liberated me to think large thoughts, whether I could comprehend them or not [she laughs], but to think. . . .

One of your large thoughts must have been about planning to have a diverse life and career. How do you move so easily from one thing to another?

I have a theory that nobody understands talent any more than we understand electricity. So I think we've done a real disservice to young people by telling them, "Oh, you be careful. You'll be a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none." It's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. I think you can be a jack-of-all-trades and a mistress-of-all-trades. If you study it, and you put reasonable intelligence and reasonable energy, reasonable electricity to it, you can do that. You may not become Max Roach on the drums. But you can learn the drums. I've long felt that way about things. If I'm asked, "Can you do this?" I think, if I don't do it, it'll be ten years before another black woman is asked to do it. And I say, yes, yes, when do you want it?

My mom, you know, was a seaman. At one point, I was in Los Angeles. I called her in San Francisco and said, I want to see you, I'm going to New York and I don't know when I'll be back, so let's meet mid-state. She said, "Oh, baby, I wanted to see you, too, because I'm going to sea." I said, going to see what? She said, "I'm going to become a seaman." I said, Mother, really, come on. She said, "No, they told me they wouldn't let women in their union. I told them, 'You wanna bet?' I put my foot in that door up to my hip so women of every color will get in that union, get aboard a ship and go to sea." She retired in 1980, and Asian, white and black women gave a party for her. They called her the mother of the sea.

So, yes, we cripple our children, we cripple each other with those designations that if you're a brick mason you shouldn't love the ballet. Who made that rule? You ever see a person lay bricks? [She moves her hands in a precise bricklaying manner.] Because of the eye and the hands, of course he or she would like to see ballet. It is that precise, that established, that organized, that sort of development from the bottom to the top.

Do you resent the fact that your mother wasn't there for much of your childhood?

Oh, yes. Yes. I was an abandoned child as far as I was concerned, and Bailey also. We didn't hear from her— we heard maybe twice in seven years or something. And then I realized that she was funny and loving and that there are certainly two different kinds of parents. There is the person who can be a great parent of small children. They dress the children in these sweet little things with bows in their hair and beads on their shoestrings and nice, lovely little socks. But when those same children get to be 14 or 15, the parents don't know what to say to them as they grow breasts and testosterone hits the boy.

Well, my mom was a terrible parent of young children. And thank God—I thank God every time I think of it—I was sent to my paternal grandmother. Ah, but my mother was a great parent of a young adult. When she found out I was pregnant, she said, “All right. Run me a bath, please.” Well, in my family, that’s really a very nice thing for somebody to ask you to do. Maybe two or three times in my life she had asked me to run her a bath. So I ran her a bath and then she invited me in the bathroom. My mother sat down in the bathtub. She asked me, “Do you love the boy?” I said no. “Does he love you?” I said no. “Well, there’s no point in ruining three lives. We’re going to have us a baby.”

And she delivered Guy—because she was a nurse also. She took me to the hospital. It was during one of the Jewish holidays, and my doctor wasn’t there. My mother went in, told the nurses who she was, she washed up, they took me into the delivery room. She got up on the table on her knees with me and put her shoulder against my knee and took my hand, and every time a pain would come she’d tell a joke. I would laugh and laugh [she laughs uproariously] and bear down. And she said, “Here he comes, here he comes.” And she put her hand on him first, my son.

So throughout her life she liberated me. Liberated me constantly. Respected me, respected what I tried to do, believed in me. I’d go out in San Francisco—I’d be visiting her, I was living in Los Angeles—and stay really late at some afterhours joint. Mother knew all of them and knew all the bartenders. And I’d be having a drink and laughing, and the bartender would say on the phone, “Yeah, Mama, yeah she’s here.” She’d say to me: “Baby, it’s your mother. Come home. Let the streets know you have somewhere to go.”

It seems your mother and Bailey always came to your rescue. Were they more vigilant, do you think, because you didn’t speak for so long?

All those years ago I’d been a mute, and my mother and my brother knew that in times of strife and extreme stress, I was likely to retreat to mutism. Mutism is so addictive. And I don’t think its powers ever go away. It’s as if it’s just behind my view, just behind my right shoulder or my left shoulder. If I move quickly, it moves, so I can’t see it. But it’s always there saying, “You can always come back to me. You have nothing to do—just stop talking.” So, when I’ve been in stress, my mother or my brother, or both sometimes, would come wherever I was, New York, California, anywhere, and say, “Hello, hello, talk to me. Come on, let’s go. We’ll have a game of Scrabble or pinochle and let’s talk. Tell me a story.” Because they were astute enough to recognize the power of mutism, I finally was astute enough to recognize the power of their love.

What went through your mind during the years you were mute?

Oh, yes, I memorized poetry. I would test myself, memorizing a conversation that went by when I wasn’t in it. I memorized 60 Shakespearean sonnets. And some of the things I memorized, I’d never heard them spoken, so I memorized them according to the cadence

that I heard in my head. I loved Edgar Allan Poe and I memorized everything I could find. And I loved Paul Laurence Dunbar—still do—so I would memorize 75 poems. It was like putting a CD on. If I wanted to, I'd just run through my memory and think, that's one I want to hear.

So I believe that my brain reconstructed itself during those years. I believe that the areas in the brain which provide and promote physical speech had nothing to do. I believe that the synapses of the brain, instead of just going from A to B, since B wasn't receptive, the synapses went from A to R. You see what I mean? And so, I've been able to develop a memory quite unusual, which has allowed me to learn languages, really quite a few. I seem to be able to direct the brain; I can say, do that. I say, remember this, remember that. And it's caught! [She snaps her fingers as if to emphasize "caught."]

You lived with your grandmother during your silent years. How did she respond?

She said, "Sister, Momma don't care what these people say, that you must be an idiot, a moron, 'cause you can't talk. Momma don't care. Momma know that when you and the good Lord get ready, you gon' be a teacher."

If your mother liberated you to think big, what gifts did your grandmother give you?

She gave me so many gifts. Confidence that I was loved. She taught me not to lie to myself or anyone else and not to boast. She taught me to admit that, to me, the emperor has no clothes. He may be dressed in the finery of the ages to everybody else, but if I don't see it, to admit that I don't see it. Because of her, I think, I have remained a very simple woman. What you see is all there is. I have no subterfuge. And she taught me not to complain.

My grandmother had one thing that she would do for me about twice a year. Shall I tell you? [She laughs loudly.] Momma would see a whiner, a complainer come down the hill. And she would call me in. She'd say, "Sister, Sister, come out here." I'd go and look up the hill and a complainer was trudging. And the man or woman would come into the store, and my grandmother would ask, "How you feel today?"

"Ah, Sister Henderson, I tell you I just hate the winter. It makes my face crack and my shins burn."

And Momma'd just say, "Uh-huh," and then look at me. And as soon as the person would leave, my grandmother would say, "Sister, come here." I'd stand right in front of her. She'd say, "There are people all over the world who went to sleep last night who did not wake again. Their beds have become their cooling boards, their blankets have become

their winding sheets. They would give anything for just five minutes of what she was complaining about.”

Did you write during your childhood?

Well, I've always written. There's a journal which I kept from about 9 years old. The man who gave it to me lived across the street from the store and kept it when my grandmother's papers were destroyed. I'd written some essays. I loved poetry, still do. But I really, really loved it then. I would write some—of course it was terrible—but I'd always written something down.

I read that you wrote the inaugural poem, “On the Pulse of Morning,” in a hotel room. Were you on the road when you composed it?

I keep a hotel room here in Winston when I'm writing. I take a room for about a month. And I try to be in the room by 6 a.m., so I get up, make coffee and keep a thermos and I go out to the hotel. I would have had everything removed from the room, wall hangings and all that stuff. It's just a bed, a table and a chair, Roget's Thesaurus, a dictionary, a bottle of sherry, a yellow pad and pens, and I go to work. And I work 'til about twelve or one; one if it's going well, twelve if it isn't. Then I come home and pretend to operate in the familiar, you know?

Where does writing rank in your accomplishments?

I'm happy to be a writer, of prose, poetry, every kind of writing. Every person in the world who isn't a recluse, hermit or mute uses words. I know of no other art form that we always use. So the writer has to take the most used, most familiar objects—nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs—ball them together and make them bounce, turn them a certain way and make people get into a romantic mood; and another way, into a bellicose mood. I'm most happy to be a writer.

Maya Angelou - Poet, Author, Civil Rights Activist (1928-2014)

Charismatic and passionate, warm and wise, formidable without being forbidding, American author and poet Maya Angelou died last year aged 86. She was a role model and an activist who recorded and celebrated the experience of being Black in the United States.

Black History Month looks back at the life of this extraordinary and inspirational woman. Maya was born Marguerite Johnson in St Louis, Missouri, on 4 April 1928, the daughter of a nurse and nightclub habituee, Vivian Baxter Johnson, and a doorman and Navy cook, Bailey Johnson. Her parents soon divorced and her mother, unable to cope with two small children, sent Maya and her brother Bailey Junior to live with their grandmother, who kept a general store in the Black section of Stamps, Arkansas. The name Maya came from her brother's childish way of saying "My-a sister".

Personal trauma

Angelou spent much of the next 10 years growing up in one of America's poorest regions, experiencing first-hand the racial segregation and prejudice of the Deep South: an experience brought vividly to life in her first volume of autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1970. At the age of seven, on a visit to St Louis, she was raped by her mother's boyfriend. When she told her family what had happened the man was arrested, tried, released from jail and shortly afterwards murdered – probably by her uncles, her mother's brothers. For the next five years she didn't speak.

"I was a volunteer mute. I had voice but I refused to use it," she later recalled. "When I heard about his murder, I thought my voice had killed a man and so it wasn't safe to speak. "After a while, I no longer knew why I didn't speak, I simply didn't speak."

Extraordinary career

But, though mute, she read voraciously and was ultimately persuaded to speak again by a friend of her grandmother who recognised her passion for poetry and told her that, to be experienced fully, it had to be spoken aloud. Angelou later recalled her saying: "You will never love poetry until you actually feel it come across your tongue, through your teeth, over your lips." Later she went to live with her mother in San Francisco (and renewed her relationship with her father, also living in California). At the age of 15 she badgered one of San Francisco's streetcar companies into making her the city's first female cable car conductor. At the age of 16 she gave birth to her only child, a son, after a loveless one-night stand undertaken largely in a spirit of inquiry. Before long she had embarked on an extraordinary career that included stints as a dancer, waitress, prostitute and pimp. She became an actress and singer, recorded an album of Calypso songs, appeared on Broadway and travelled to Europe in a touring production of *Porgy and Bess*.

Along the way she acquired two or possibly three husbands (she was always a little vague about the facts), and took her surname from the first, an aspiring Greek musician called Enistasio Angelos.

In 1961 she worked for a time as northern co-ordinator for Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, then followed a South African freedom fighter, Vusumzi Make, to Cairo, where she became a journalist. Later she took her son to Ghana, where she met the Black activist Malcolm X. She returned to the United States in 1965 to work with him, but he was killed shortly afterwards. A few years later Martin Luther King too was assassinated.

"I along with a number of young people at the time had been disenchanted, and felt angry and protested inequality," she later told the BBC when she recalled her time with Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

"But until the Civil Rights movement came along there was no clear way to oppose the inequities. "I was very sure that between the two men, and the women, between the followers of both groups, we would certainly have a land where all the people, all the faith groups, all the Adams and Eves would have a chance to stand for a while in the sun. When those two men were killed we all stumbled about like blinded moles. It was really disastrous for Black Americans."

Academic career

It was around this time that her friend, the writer James Baldwin, helped persuade her to write her first volume of autobiography. It was a best seller, and six more volumes followed over the decades.

She began publishing poetry as well, wrote a feature film screenplay, wrote and presented a 10-part TV series about the Blues and Black Americans' African heritage, and played Kunte Kinte's African grandmother in the ground-breaking TV series *Roots*, about the Black experience of slavery.

In the 1980s she added another string to her bow, becoming an academic and professor of American studies at Wake Forest University in North Carolina, a prestigious white university. In the kitchen of her home there (one of several she maintained, including one in New York's Harlem) she practised another skill for which she was renowned, cookery.

By now she was perhaps the world's best-known Black female writer and one of America's best-known Black women.

Bill Clinton acknowledged her status when he asked her to read a poem at his inauguration in 1993. *Called On The Pulse of the Morning*, it included the lines: "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived/But if faced with courage need not be lived again."

In 2010, Barack Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Shortly afterwards she recalled that Martin Luther King, in the 1960s, had predicted that America would have a Black president in 40 years: she hadn't believed it possible and had supported Hillary Clinton's bid for the Democratic nomination (the two were long-standing friends). Throughout her life she was a superb phrase-maker, on the page and in the flesh.

She had the knack of speaking – in the Southern accent she retained all her life and with a characteristic slow, deliberate delivery – in complete and grammatically perfect sentences.

She was a commanding figure, standing six feet tall, and immensely striking.

Of all her achievements, perhaps the most impressive was her own character. Life, she believed, was to be lived. “The excitement is not just to survive,” she once said, “but to thrive, and to thrive with some passion, some compassion, some humour and some style.”

Source #1 (Website)

Title: Maya Angelou Biography
Date of Publication: February 28th, 2018
Retrieval Date: October 15th, 2020
Name of Website: Biography
URL:<https://www.biography.com/writer/maya-angelou>

Source #2 (Website)

Title: Growing Up Maya Angelou
Author: Lucinda Moore
Date of Publication: April 2003
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Name of Website: Smithsonian Magazine
URL:<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/growing-up-maya-angelou-79582387/>

Source #3 (Website)

Title: Maya Angelou – Poet, Author, Civil Rights Activist (1928–2014)
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Name of Website: Black History Month
URL:<https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/poets-corner/maya-angelou-poet-author-civil-rights-activist-1928-2014/>