**MAYA ANGELOU**

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**Maya Angelou** was born Marguerite Annie Johnson 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. Unable to pronounce her name because of a stutter, Bailey called her “My” for “My sister.” A few years later, when he read a book about the Maya Indians, he began to call her “Maya,” and the name stuck.

At 13, Maya 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 Anastasios Angelopulos. 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,* in 1957.

Maya 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 views 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 was the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost at President John F. Kennedy’s 1961 inauguration***.*** She was 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.

Beginning in 1981, Angelou served as Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She continued to appear on television and in films including *Poetic Justice* (1993) and the landmark television adaptation of *Roots* (1977). She directed numerous dramatic and documentary programs on television and directed a feature film, *Down in the Delta*, in 1996.

The list of her published works 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 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 2000, Angelou was honored with the Presidential Medal of the Arts; she received the Ford’s Theatre Lincoln Medal in 2008. The same year, she narrated the award-winning documentary film *The Black Candle* and published a book of guidance for young women, *Letter to My Daughter*. In 2011, President Barack Obama awarded her the nation’s highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.