



American Ethnic Writers

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Maya Angelou (Courtesy, Central Arkansas Library)

Maya Angelou

(Marguerite Johnson)

Born: St. Louis, Missouri; April 4, 1928

African American

Through poems and autobiographical narratives, Angelou describes her life as an African American, single mother, professional, and feminist.

Principal Works

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: *Mrs. Flowers: A Moment of Friendship*, 1986 (illustrated by Étienne Delessert); *Life Doesn't Frighten Me*, 1993 (poetry; illustrated by Jean-Michel Basquiat); *Soul Looks Back in Wonder*, 1993; *My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken, and Me*, 1994; *Kofi and His Magic*, 1996; *Angelina of Italy*, 2004; *Izak of Lapland*, 2004; *Mikale of Hawaii*, 2004; *Renie Marie of France*, 2004

DRAMA: *Cabaret for Freedom*, pr. 1960 (with Godfrey Cambridge; musical); *The Least of These*, pr. 1966; *Encounters*, pr. 1973; *Ajax*, pr. 1974 (adaptation of Sophocles' play); *And Still I Rise*, pr. 1976; *King*, pr. 1990 (musical; lyrics with Alistair Beaton, book by Lonne Elder III; music by Richard Blackford)

POETRY: *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*, 1971; *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*, 1975; *And Still I Rise*, 1978; *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?*, 1983; *Poems: Maya Angelou*, 1986; *Now Sheba Sings the Song*, 1987 (Tom Feelings, illustrator); *I Shall Not Be Moved: Poems*, 1990; *On the Pulse of Morning*, 1993; *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*, 1994; *Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women*, 1994; *A Brave and Startling Truth*, 1995; *Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem*, 2005; *Mother: A Cradle to Hold Me*, 2006

SCREENPLAYS: *Georgia, Georgia*, 1972; *All Day Long*, 1974

SHORT FICTION: "Steady Going Up," 1972; "The Reunion," 1983

TELEPLAYS: *Black, Blues, Black*, 1968 (10 episodes); *The Inheritors*, 1976; *The Legacy*, 1976; *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1979 (with Leonora Thuna and Ralph B. Woolsey); *Sister, Sister*, 1982; *Brewster Place*, 1990

NONFICTION: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1970 (autobiography); *Gather Together in My Name*, 1974 (autobiography); *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, 1976 (autobiography); *The Heart of a Woman*, 1981 (autobiography); *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, 1986 (autobiography); *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, 1993 (autobiographical essays); *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*, 1997; *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, 2002 (autobiographical essays); *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table: A Lifetime of Memories with Recipes*, 2004 (memoir and cookbook)

Born Marguerite Johnson, rechristened Maya, and taking the professional name Angelou (an adaptation of the name of her first husband, Tosh Angelos), Maya Angelou studied music and dance with Martha Graham, Pearl Primus, and Ann Halprin. Her early career was as an actress and singer, to which she quickly added the roles of civil rights worker (as the northern coordinator for the SCLC, 1959-1960), editor (as associate editor for the *Arab Observer*, 1961-1962), educator (beginning with the School of Music and Drama at the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies, 1963-1966), and finally writer--first as a reporter for the *Ghanaian Times* (1963-1965). During the late 1960's and 1970's she taught at many colleges and universities in California and Kansas. Since joining the faculty at Wake Forest University in 1981, she has been a sought-after speaker and is in many respects regarded as America's unofficial poet laureate, although she has yet to receive that honor.

Undoubtedly, Angelou's legacy will be her writings: Although the best-selling *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was censored, her excellent work as an author in all genres has kept her story before the world. Angelou's early years have been burned into the minds of numerous readers. An image from this work centers on three-year-old Marguerite and four-year-old Bailey Johnson aboard a train, alone, traveling from California to their grandmother's home in Stamps, Arkansas, after the breakup of their parents' marriage. The two children wore their names and their destination attached to their clothes. This locomotive quest for family is both a factual part of and an apt metaphor for the life of the world-famous poet. Her first feeling of being truly at home, she has said, came in Africa, after she accompanied her second husband to Egypt and then traveled to Ghana.

A second image from Angelou's childhood involves the seven-year-old's rape by her mother's boyfriend. When no legal punishment followed, the rapist was murdered, possibly by the victim's uncles. Guilt following this incident drove Angelou inward, and she began reading the great works of literature. Reading her way through the Stamps library, she fell in love with William Shakespeare and Paul Laurence Dunbar, among others. The child of a fractured nuclear family came to see herself as a child of the fractured human family.