

Marguerite Annie Johnson aka Maya Angelou:

(April 4, 1928 to May 28, 2014: Poet Laureate, Memoirist, Essayist, and Civil Rights Activist)

"The blues may be the life you've led
Or midnight hours in
An empty bed. But persecuting
Blues I've known
Could stalk
Like tigers, break like bone,

Pend like rope in
A gallows tree
Make me curse
My pedigree,

Bitterness thick on
A ranking tongue,
A psalm to love that's
Left unsung,

Rivers heading north
But ending South,
Funeral music
In a going-home mouth,

All riddles are blues,
And all blues are sad,
And I'm only mentioning
Some blues I've had."

-A *Good Woman Feeling Bad* by Maya Angelou

The name Maya Angelou is most synonymous with her 1969 autobiographical work, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." Told through the eyes of Angelou in a rural setting, the work captures the pained upbringing that Angelou experienced up until the age of 17. Vivid, powerful and jarring, almost 60 years later, the book remains required reading in American schools and universities.

To say that Angelou's life was full and captivating, would be an understatement. Over the span of 50 years, she would write 7 memoirs/autobiographies. At each turn, Angelou sought to teach and pass on her wisdom to others, as can be seen in the following quote:

"I wrote about my experiences because I thought too many people tell young folks, 'I never did anything wrong. Who, Moi? -never I. I have no skeletons in my

closet. In fact, I have no closet.’ They lie like that and then young people find themselves in situations and they think, ‘Damn I must be a pretty bad guy. My Mom or dad never did anything wrong. They can’t forgive themselves and go on with their lives.’”

Marguerite Annie Johnson aka Maya Angelou, was born on April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri. Her father, Bailey Johnson was a navy dietician; and her mother, Vivian Baxter Johnson was a nurse and card dealer. Angelou was the younger of two children, she had an older brother named Bailey Johnson Jr.

Interesting Fact: Angelou went from Marguerite to Maya because of her brother Bailey. Mya was his childhood nickname for his little sister, it was short for Marguerite and “my sister. “

When her parents’ marriage came to an end, she and her brother re-located. At the age of 3 and 4, Angelou and her brother were sent on a train by themselves to Stamps, Arkansas to live with their paternal grandmother. Their grandmother owned a profitable general store. This was remarkable at the time, because of her race and her gender. It was even more impressive because the business was successful throughout the Great Depression and World War II.

At the ages of 7 and 8, Angelou and Bailey would be forced to re-locate for a second time. This time, they would return to live with their mother in St. Louis. Unfortunately, the move would lead to a traumatically pivotal event in Angelou’s life: she would be raped by her mother’s boyfriend Freeman.

Rape and its traumatic repercussions was an intergenerational reality for Angelou. Two generations before her own experience, her great grandmother Mary Lee had been raped by her former owner, John Savin. The brutal union would produce Angelou’s mother, Marguerite Lee Baxter.

Savin would insist that Lee lie about who sired their child. Lee refused and Savin was indicted for perjury. The evidence was irrefutable that Baxter was the product of rape. Nevertheless, Savin was eventually acquitted and Lee was made to pay a devastating price. Lee was sent to the Clinton County poorhouse in Missouri to live with Angelou’s mother.

By contrast, unlike her great-grandmother, a seven and a half year old Angelou did not remain silent. Angelou told her brother Bailey, who assured her that everything would be alright. However, when Bailey told the adults in their house hold, the reprisal was swift. Freeman was reported to the authorities, and upon his release was murdered shortly thereafter.

Angelou has written and discussed the rape and its aftermath at length. Often times reflective, usually in a soft yet deep pitched voice, Angelou recalled the effect the rape had on her in the years that followed. Speculation abound as to who killed her rapist. In several interviews, it was said that her uncles murdered him. However, Angelou has never confirmed either way

what actually led to Freeman's death; the most she has ever said on any platform: " he was dealt with."

Freeman's murder may have had an even more profound impact on Angelou than the rape itself. Both in her writings and in interviews, Angelou has shared that the trauma caused her to become a mute for a period of time. The quote below, described Angelou's belief that her words, her voice, had the ability to kill. It was this revelation that prompted Angelou to make the deliberate decision to remain silent:

"I thought my voice had killed him; I killed that man, because I told his name. And then I thought, I would never speak again, because my voice would kill anyone."

Angelou's silence placed a strain on the relationship between she and her mother. Her mother made extensive overtures to get Angelou to speak again. Eventually exasperated, Angelou recalled that her mother determined that "there was nothing she could do with her." Her parents' solution was to send Angelou and her brother back to Stamps to live with their grandmother.

Of course, Angelou was not the child her grandmother remembered. The rape and the trauma it inflicted on Angelou were profound. She remained mute for five years. Some have speculated that this silent period allowed Angelou to develop: an extraordinary memory , a love of books; and her ability to observe her environment in vivid detail.

Stigmatization became Angelou's reality in Stamps upon her return. People in the town either said she had psychological issues, while others attributed her mutism to an intellectual disability. They were ignorant as to what had happened to Angelou prior to her return. Insistent in her love and belief in Angelou, her grandmother made extensive efforts to pour into her. Both her grandmother and a woman by the name of Mrs. Bertha Flowers, would encourage Angelou to read.

In interviews, Angelou fondly reminisced about this time in her life. Smiling widely, Angelou shared that Ms. Flowers, brought her books pinned by Charles Dickens, Douglas Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Shakespeare. It was the loving doting of these women and their belief in her, to which Angelou attributed her recovery. Little did she know that one day, she too would be amongst a pantheon of literary greats.

Angelou's teenage years were characterized by another major move and further self-discovery. At age 14, she and her brother again moved back with their mother to Oakland, California. Not too long after the move, Angelou would become fascinated with streetcar conductors. At age 16, she would become the first black female streetcar conductor in San Francisco.

At 17, Angelou would experience another life altering event. She would become a mother to her only child, Guy Johnson. Not too long after, Angelou joked about her brief stint as a madam

for a whorehouse that catered to lesbians. During this period she studied dance and drama at a local school before she eventually dropped out.

Interesting Fact: During this period, Angelou would meet and perform with world renowned dancer, Alvin Ailey. Angelou was 6 feet tall and light on her feet.

In 1949, Angelou entered into a taboo interracial marriage to Anastasios Angeloupoulos, who was a Greek sailor. They would divorce in 1952, however Angelou would keep his last name but shorten it... The Maya Angelou, the literary writer the world would come to know was born.

Angelou would then move to New York in 1959, where she would begin to focus on her writing. She would become published for the first time in 1960. In or around this time, she first heard Martin Luther King speak and she became politically active. In concert with author John Oliver Killens, Angelou organized the Cabaret for Freedom for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She was subsequently named SCLC's Northern Coordinator.

The 60s and 70s saw the global reach of Angelou's activism. She supported Castro in Cuba, protested apartheid in South Africa, and in 1961 moved to Egypt. Angelou and her son remained in Ghana until 1965, which was when she met Malcolm X. She agreed to return to the states to help him form the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Sadly, not too long after she returned, Malcolm X was assassinated.

Despite the devastating impact of the assassination, Angelou continued her activism. In 1968, she agreed to organize a march for Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. She postponed, and on her 40th birthday, King would be assassinated. King's death in 1968, led her to write her most famous work: "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." This seminal work was published in 1969.

In 1972, Angelou married her second husband, Paul du Feu, a Welsh Carpenter. This marriage lasted a bit longer, but in 1981 it too ended in divorce. In the meantime, Angelou continued to write books, plays, screenplays and poems.

Interesting Fact: Although she never obtained a college degree, Angelou taught at several universities. She had a lifetime professorship at Wake Forest University, she also taught at the University of California, the University of Kansas and the University of Ghana.

Throughout the 80s and 90s, Angelou's work transcended the pages of books. Her poems would be recited as words of strength and resilience. She would also go on to produce screenplays, as well as Grammy award winning music with Ashford and Simpson. Way too lengthy to list, Angelou would receive an endless array of awards and honors. Amongst the most notable of her achievements was her reading of "On Pulse of Morning," at President Bill Clinton's 1993 inauguration.

Interesting Fact: In 2022, Angelou became the first Black woman to be on the back of US quarters.

Words cannot fully capture the impact that Angelou's life and resilience have had on the hearts of millions of Black girls and women. Regal, resilient and resplendent are only a few of the superlatives that come to mind, when she smiles and when she speaks. Although her poetry does not receive the same recognition as her memoirs, "Still I Rise" has been taught and recited by Black children throughout the country and globe. A testament of strength, resilience and perseverance, Angelou reminds all who encounter her words never to give up on themselves and or Black people.

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise

That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

-Still I Rise, by Maya Angelou, 1978

Notable Works:

- I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, (1969)
- Gather Together in My Name, (1974)
- Singing and Swinging and Getting Merry Like Christmas, (1976)
- The Heart of a Woman, (1981)
- All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes, (1986)
- Down in the Delta, (film) (1996)
- A Song Flung Up to Heaven, (2002)
- Mom & Me & Mom, (2013)

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZsng0OUopg>
- And Still I Rise,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fz-53G8O-VU>
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