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Maya Angelou

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Maya Angelou (born Marguerite Annie Johnson ; April 4, 1928 – May 28, 2014) was an American author, poet, dancer, actress, and singer. She published seven autobiographies, three books of essays, and several books of poetry, and was credited with a list of plays, movies, and television shows spanning over 50 years. She received dozens of awards and more than 50 honorary degrees. Angelou is best known for her series of seven autobiographies, which focus on her childhood and early adult experiences. The first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), tells of her life up to the age of 17 and brought her international recognition and acclaim.

She became a poet and writer after a series of occupations as a young adult, including fry cook, prostitute, nightclub dancer and performer, cast member of the opera *Porgy and Bess*, coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and journalist in Egypt and Ghana during the decolonization of Africa. She was an actor, writer, director, and producer of plays, movies, and public television programs. In 1982, she earned the first lifetime Reynolds Professorship of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She was active in the Civil Rights movement, and worked with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Beginning in the 1990s, she made around 80 appearances a year on the lecture circuit, something she continued into her eighties. In 1993, Angelou recited her poem “On the Pulse of Morning” (1993) at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration, making her the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost at President John F. Kennedy’s inauguration in 1961.

With the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou publicly discussed aspects of her personal life. She was respected as a spokesperson for black people and women, and her works have been considered a defense of Black culture. Attempts have been made to ban her books from some U.S. libraries, but her works are widely used in schools and universities worldwide. Angelou’s major works have been labeled as autobiographical fiction, but many critics have characterized

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them as autobiographies. She made a deliberate attempt to challenge the common structure of the autobiography by critiquing, changing, and expanding the genre. Her books center on themes such as racism, identity, family, and travel.

Early years

Marguerite Annie Johnson was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on April 4, 1928, the second child of Bailey Johnson, a doorman and navy dietitian, and Vivian (Baxter) Johnson, a nurse and card dealer. Angelou's older brother, Bailey Jr., nicknamed Marguerite "Maya", derived from "My" or "Mya Sister". When Angelou was three and her brother four, their parents' "calamitous marriage" ended, and their father sent them to Stamps, Arkansas, alone by train, to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson. In "an astonishing exception" to the harsh economics of African Americans of the time, Angelou's grandmother prospered financially during the Great Depression and World War II because the general store she owned sold needed basic commodities and because "she made wise and honest investments".

Four years later, the children's father "came to Stamps without warning" and returned them to their mother's care in St. Louis. At the age of eight, while living with her mother, Angelou was sexually abused and raped by her mother's boyfriend, a man named Freeman. She told her brother, who told the rest of their family. Freeman was found guilty but was jailed for only one day. Four days after his release, he was murdered, probably by Angelou's uncles. Angelou became mute for almost five years, believing, as she stated, "I thought, my voice 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 ..." According to Marcia Ann Gillespie and her colleagues, who wrote a biography about Angelou, it was during this period of silence when Angelou developed her extraordinary memory, her love for books and literature, and her ability to listen and observe the world around her.

Shortly after Freeman's murder, Angelou and her brother were sent back to their grandmother. Angelou credits a teacher and friend of her family, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, with helping her speak again. Flowers introduced her to authors such as Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, Douglas Johnson, and James Weldon Johnson, authors

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who would affect her life and career, as well as black female artists like Frances Harper, Anne Spencer, and Jessie Fauset.

When Angelou was 14, she and her brother moved in with their mother once again, who had since moved to Oakland, California. During World War II, Angelou attended the California Labor School. Before graduating, she worked as the first black female streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Three weeks after completing school, at the age of 17, she gave birth to her son, Clyde (who later changed his name to Guy Johnson).

Adulthood and early career: 1951–61

In 1951, Angelou married Greek electrician, former sailor, and aspiring musician Tosh Angelos, despite the condemnation of interracial relationships at the time and the disapproval of her mother. She took modern dance classes during this time, and met dancers and choreographers Alvin Ailey and Ruth Beckford. Angelou and Ailey formed a dance team, calling themselves “Al and Rita”, and performed modern dance at fraternal black organizations throughout San Francisco, but never became successful. Angelou, her new husband, and her son moved to New York City so she could study African dance with Trinidadian dancer Pearl Primus, but they returned to San Francisco a year later.

After Angelou’s marriage ended in 1954, she danced professionally in clubs around San Francisco, including the nightclub the Purple Onion, where she sang and danced to calypso music. Up to that point she went by the name of “Marguerite Johnson”, or “Rita”, but at the strong suggestion of her managers and supporters at the Purple Onion she changed her professional name to “Maya Angelou”, a “distinctive name” that set her apart and captured the feel of her calypso dance performances. During 1954 and 1955, Angelou toured Europe with a production of the opera *Porgy and Bess*. She began her practice of learning the language of every country she visited, and in a few years she gained proficiency in several languages. In 1957, riding on the popularity of calypso, Angelou recorded her first album, *Miss Calypso*, which was reissued as a CD in 1996. She appeared in an off-Broadway review that inspired the 1957 film *Calypso Heat Wave*, in which Angelou sang and performed her own compositions.

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Angelou met novelist John Oliver Killens in 1959 and, at his urging, moved to New York to concentrate on her writing career. She joined the Harlem Writers Guild, where she met several major African-American authors, including John Henrik Clarke, Rosa Guy, Paule Marshall, and Julian Mayfield, and was published for the first time. In 1960, after meeting civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. and hearing him speak, she and Killens organized “the legendary” *Cabaret for Freedom* to benefit the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and she was named SCLC’s Northern Coordinator. According to scholar Lyman B. Hagen, her contributions to civil rights as a fundraiser and SCLC organizer were successful and “eminently effective”. Angelou also began her pro-Castro and anti-apartheid activism during this time.

Africa to Caged Bird: 1961–69

In 1961, Angelou performed in Jean Genet’s play *The Blacks*, along with Abbey Lincoln, Roscoe Lee Brown, James Earl Jones, Louis Gossett, Godfrey Cambridge, and Cicely Tyson. Also in 1961, she met South African freedom fighter Vusumzi Make; they never officially married. She and her son Guy moved with Make to Cairo, where Angelou worked as an associate editor at the weekly English-language newspaper *The Arab Observer*. In 1962, her relationship with Make ended, and she and Guy moved to Accra, Ghana, he to attend college, but he was seriously injured in an automobile accident. Angelou remained in Accra for his recovery and ended up staying there until 1965. She became an administrator at the University of Ghana, and was active in the African-American expatriate community. She was a feature editor for *The African Review*, a freelance writer for the *Ghanaian Times*, wrote and broadcast for Radio Ghana, and worked and performed for Ghana’s National Theatre. She performed in a revival of *The Blacks* in Geneva and Berlin.

In Accra, she became close friends with Malcolm X during his visit in the early 1960s. Angelou returned to the U.S. in 1965 to help him build a new civil rights organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity; he was assassinated shortly afterward. Devastated and adrift, she joined her brother in Hawaii, where she resumed her singing career, and then moved back to Los Angeles to focus on her writing career. She worked as a market researcher in Watts and witnessed the riots in the summer of 1965. She acted in and wrote plays, and returned to New York in 1967. She

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met her lifelong friend Rosa Guy and renewed her friendship with James Baldwin, whom she had met in Paris in the 1950s and called “my brother”, during this time. Her friend Jerry Purcell provided Angelou with a stipend to support her writing.

In 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. asked Angelou to organize a march. She agreed, but “postpones again”, and in what Gillespie calls “a macabre twist of fate”, he was assassinated on her 40th birthday (April 4). Devastated again, she was encouraged out of her depression by her friend James Baldwin. As Gillespie states, “If 1968 was a year of great pain, loss, and sadness, it was also the year when America first witnessed the breadth and depth of Maya Angelou’s spirit and creative genius”. Despite having almost no experience, she wrote, produced, and narrated *Blacks, Blues, Black!*, a ten-part series of documentaries about the connection between blues music and black Americans’ African heritage, and what Angelou called the “Africanisms still current in the U.S.” for National Educational Television, the precursor of PBS. Also in 1968, inspired at a dinner party she attended with Baldwin, cartoonist Jules Feiffer, and his wife Judy, and challenged by Random House editor Robert Loomis, she wrote her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1969, which brought her international recognition and acclaim.

Later career

Angelou’s *Georgia, Georgia*, produced by a Swedish film company and filmed in Sweden, the first screenplay written by a black woman, was released in 1972. She also wrote the film’s soundtrack, despite having very little additional input in the filming of the movie. Angelou married Welsh carpenter and ex-husband of Germaine Greer, Paul du Feu, in San Francisco in 1973. Over the next ten years, as Gillespie has stated, “She [Angelou] had accomplished more than many artists hope to achieve in a lifetime”. Angelou worked as a composer, writing for singer Roberta Flack, and composing movie scores. She wrote articles, short stories, TV scripts, documentaries, autobiographies, and poetry, produced plays, and was named visiting professor at several colleges and universities. She was “a reluctant actor”, and was nominated for a Tony Award in 1973 for her role in *Look Away*. As a theater director, in 1988 she undertook a revival of Errol John’s play *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* at the Almeida Theatre in London.

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In 1977, Angelou appeared in a supporting role in the television mini-series *Roots*. She was given a multitude of awards during this period, including over thirty honorary degrees from colleges and universities from all over the world. In the late 1970s, Angelou met Oprah Winfrey when Winfrey was a TV anchor in Baltimore, Maryland; Angelou would later become Winfrey's close friend and mentor. In 1981, Angelou and du Feu divorced. She returned to the southern United States in 1981 because she felt she had to come to terms with her past there, and despite having no bachelor's degree, accepted the lifetime Reynolds Professorship of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where she was one of only a few full-time professors. From that point on, she considered herself "a teacher who writes". Angelou taught a variety of subjects that reflected her interests, including philosophy, ethics, theology, science, theater, and writing. *The Winston-Salem Journal* reported that even though she made many friends on campus, "she never quite lived down all of the criticism from people who thought she was more of a celebrity than an intellect...[and] an overpaid figurehead". The last course she taught at Wake Forest was in 2011, but she was planning to teach another course in late 2014. Her final speaking engagement at the university was in late 2013. Beginning in the 1990s, Angelou actively participated in the lecture circuit in a customized tour bus, something she continued into her eighties.

In 1993, Angelou recited her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton, becoming the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost at President John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961. Her recitation resulted in more fame and recognition for her previous works, and broadened her appeal "across racial, economic, and educational boundaries". The recording of the poem won a Grammy Award. In June 1995, she delivered what Richard Long called her "second 'public' poem", entitled "A Brave and Startling Truth", which commemorated the 50th anniversary of the United Nations.

Angelou achieved her goal of directing a feature film in 1996, *Down in the Delta*, which featured actors such as Alfre Woodard and Wesley Snipes. Also in 1996, she collaborated with R&B artists Ashford & Simpson on seven of the eleven tracks of their album *Been Found*. The album was responsible for three of Angelou's only Billboard chart appearances. In 2000, she created a successful collection of products for Hallmark,

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including greeting cards and decorative household items. She responded to critics who charged her with being too commercial by stating that “the enterprise was perfectly in keeping with her role as ‘the people’s poet’”. Over thirty years after Angelou began writing her life story, she completed her sixth autobiography *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, in 2002.

Angelou campaigned for the Democratic Party in the 2008 presidential primaries, giving her public support to Senator Hillary Clinton. In the run-up to the January Democratic primary in South Carolina, the Clinton campaign ran ads featuring Angelou’s endorsement. The ads were part of the campaign’s efforts to rally support in the Black community; but Obama won the South Carolina primary, finishing 29 points ahead of Clinton and taking 80% of the Black vote. When Clinton’s campaign ended, Angelou put her support behind Senator Barack Obama, who went on to win the election and become the first African-American president of the United States. She stated, “We are growing up beyond the idiocies of racism and sexism.”

In late 2010, Angelou donated her personal papers and career memorabilia to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. They consisted of over 340 boxes of documents that featured her handwritten notes on yellow legal pads for *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a 1982 telegram from Coretta Scott King, fan mail, and personal and professional correspondence from colleagues such as her editor Robert Loomis. In 2011, Angelou served as a consultant for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C. She spoke out in opposition to a paraphrase of a quotation by King that appeared on the memorial, saying, “The quote makes Dr. Martin Luther King look like an arrogant twit”, and demanded that it be changed. Eventually, the paraphrase was removed.

In 2013, at the age of 85, Angelou published the seventh autobiography in her series, titled *Mom & Me & Mom*, that focuses on her relationship with her mother.

Works

Angelou wrote a total of seven autobiographies. According to scholar Mary Jane Lupton, Angelou’s third autobiography *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* marked the first time a well-

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known African-American autobiographer had written a third volume about her life. Her books “stretch over time and place”, from Arkansas to Africa and back to the U.S., and take place from the beginnings of World War II to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. She published her seventh autobiography *Mom & Me & Mom* in 2013, at the age of 85. Critics have tended to judge Angelou’s subsequent autobiographies “in light of the first”, with *Caged Bird* receiving the highest praise. Angelou wrote five collections of essays, which writer Hilton Als called her “wisdom books” and “homilies strung together with autobiographical texts”. Angelou used the same editor throughout her writing career, Robert Loomis, an executive editor at Random House; he retired in 2011 and has been called “one of publishing’s hall of fame editors.” Angelou said regarding Loomis: “We have a relationship that’s kind of famous among publishers”

Angelou’s long and extensive career also included poetry, plays, screenplays for television and film, directing, acting, and public speaking. She was a prolific writer of poetry; her volume *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Diiie* (1971) was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, and she was chosen by President Bill Clinton to recite her poem “On the Pulse of Morning” during his inauguration in 1993.

Angelou’s successful acting career included roles in numerous plays, films, and television programs, including her appearance in the television mini-series *Roots* in 1977. Her screenplay, *Georgia, Georgia* (1972), was the first original script by a black woman to be produced and she was the first African-American woman to direct a major motion picture, *Down in the Delta*, in 1998.

Chronology of autobiographies

- *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969): Up to 1944 (age 17)
- *Gather Together in My Name* (1974): 1944–48
- *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* (1976): 1949–55
- *The Heart of a Woman* (1981): 1957–62
- *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986): 1962–65
- *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002): 1965–68

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· Mom & Me & Mom (2013): overview

Personal life

Evidence suggests that Angelou was partially descended from the Mende people of West Africa. A 2008 PBS documentary found that Angelou's maternal great-grandmother Mary Lee, who had been emancipated after the Civil War, became pregnant by her white former owner, John Savin. Savin forced Lee to sign a false statement accusing another man of being the father of her child. After indicting Savin for forcing Lee to commit perjury, and despite discovering that Savin was the father, a jury found him not guilty. Lee was sent to the Clinton County poorhouse in Missouri with her daughter, Marguerite Baxter, who became Angelou's grandmother. Angelou described Lee as "that poor little Black girl, physically and mentally bruised."

The details of Angelou's life described in her seven autobiographies and in numerous interviews, speeches, and articles tended to be inconsistent. Critic Mary Jane Lupton has explained that when Angelou spoke about her life, she did so eloquently but informally and "with no time chart in front of her". For example, she was married at least twice, but never clarified the number of times she had been married, "for fear of sounding frivolous"; according to her autobiographies and to Gillespie, she married Tosh Angelos in 1951 and Paul du Feu in 1973, and began her relationship with Vusumzi Make in 1961, but never formally married him. Angelou had one son Guy, whose birth was described in her first autobiography, one grandson, and two great-grandchildren, and according to Gillespie, a large group of friends and extended family. Angelou's mother Vivian Baxter died in 1991 and her brother Bailey Johnson, Jr., died in 2000 after a series of strokes; both were important figures in her life and her books. In 1981, the mother of her son Guy's child disappeared with Angelou's grandson; it took four years to find him. In 2009, the gossip website TMZ erroneously reported that Angelou had been hospitalized in Los Angeles when she was alive and well in St. Louis, which resulted in rumors of her death and according to Angelou, concern among her friends and family worldwide.

She did not earn a university degree, but according to Gillespie it was Angelou's preference that she be called "Dr. Angelou" by people outside of her family and close friends. She owned two homes in Winston-Salem,

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North Carolina, and a “lordly brownstone”^[1] in Harlem, which was purchased in 2004 and was full of her “growing library” of books she collected throughout her life, artwork collected over the span of many decades, and well-stocked kitchens. Younge reported that in her Harlem home resides several African wall hangings and Angelou’s collection of paintings, including ones of several jazz trumpeters, a watercolor of Rosa Parks, and a Faith Ringgold work entitled “Maya’s Quilt Of Life”. According to Gillespie, she hosted several celebrations per year at her main residence in Winston-Salem; “her skill in the kitchen is the stuff of legend—from haute cuisine to down-home comfort food”. *The Winston-Salem Journal* stated, “Securing an invitation to one of Angelou’s Thanksgiving dinners, Christmas tree decorating parties or birthday parties was among the most coveted invitations in town”. *The New York Times*, describing Angelou’s residence history in New York City, stated that she regularly hosted elaborate New Year’s Day parties. She combined her cooking and writing skills in her 2004 book *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table*, which featured 73 recipes, many of which she learned from her grandmother and mother, accompanied by 28 vignettes. She followed up with her second cookbook, *Great Food, All Day Long: Cook Splendidly, Eat Smart* in 2010, which focused on weight loss and portion control.

Beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou used the same “writing ritual” for many years. She would wake early in the morning and check into a hotel room, where the staff was instructed to remove any pictures from the walls. She would write on legal pads while lying on the bed, with only a bottle of sherry, a deck of cards to play solitaire, *Roget’s Thesaurus*, and the Bible, and would leave by the early afternoon. She would average 10–12 pages of written material a day, which she edited down to three or four pages in the evening. Angelou went through this process to “enchant” herself, and as she said in a 1989 interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation, “relive the agony, the anguish, the *Sturm und Drang*.” She placed herself back in the time she wrote about, even traumatic experiences like her rape in *Caged Bird*, in order to “tell the human truth” about her life. Angelou stated that she played cards in order to get to that place of enchantment and in order to access her memories more effectively. She stated, “It may take an hour to get into it, but once I’m in it—ha! It’s so delicious!” She did not find the process cathartic; rather, she found relief in “telling the truth”.

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Death

Angelou died on the morning of May 28, 2014. She was found by her nurse. Although Angelou had reportedly been in poor health and had canceled recent scheduled appearances, she was working on another book, an autobiography about her experiences with national and world leaders. During her memorial service at Wake Forest University, her son Guy Johnson stated that despite being in constant pain due to her dancing career and respiratory failure, she wrote four books during the last ten years of her life. He said, "She left this mortal plane with no loss of acuity and no loss in comprehension".

Tributes to Angelou and condolences were paid by artists, entertainers, and world leaders, including President Bill Clinton, and President Barack Obama, whose sister was named after Angelou. Harold Augenbraum, from the National Book Foundation, said that Angelou's "legacy is one that all writers and readers across the world can admire and aspire to."

On May 29, 2014, Mount Zion Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, of which Angelou was a member for 30 years, held a public memorial service to honor Angelou. On June 7, a private memorial service was held at Wait Chapel on the campus of Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem. The memorial was shown live on local stations in the Winston-Salem/Triad area and streamed live on the university web site with speeches from her son, Oprah Winfrey, Michelle Obama, and Bill Clinton. On June 15, a memorial was held at Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco, where Angelou was a member for many years. Rev. Cecil Williams, Mayor Ed Lee, and former mayor Willie Brown spoke.

REFERENCES

- Angelou wrote about Vivian Baxter's life and their relationship in *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013), her final installment in her series of seven autobiographies.

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- According to Angelou, Annie Henderson built her business with food stalls catering to black workers, which eventually developed into a store.
- The correct Greek spelling of Angelou's husband name is probably "Anastasios Angelopoulos".
- Reviewer John M. Miller calls Angelou's performance of her song "All That Happens in the Marketplace" the "most genuine musical moment in the film".
- In Angelou's third book of essays, *Letter to My Daughter* (2009), she credits Cuban artist Celia Cruz as one of the greatest influences of her singing career, and later, credits Cruz for the effectiveness and impact of Angelou's poetry performances and readings.
- Guy Johnson, who as a result of this accident in Accra and one in the late 1960s, underwent a series of spinal surgeries. He, like his mother, became a writer and poet.
- Angelou called her friendship with Malcolm X "a brother/sister relationship".
- Angelou did not celebrate her birthday for many years, choosing instead to send flowers to King's widow Coretta Scott King.