



Maya Angelou

(4th April 1928 – 28th May 2014)

Marguerite 'Maya' Angelou (nee Johnson) was born in St Louis, Missouri, the child of a doorman and a nurse. She was given the nickname 'Maya' (meaning 'my' or 'mya sister') by her older brother. After her parent's marriage broke down, she was taken to live with her grandmother.

Later, aged eight, her father sent her to her mother, whose boyfriend abused her, and was murdered soon after. Shock made her mute for almost five years, but she developed a prolific memory and love of literature. Sent back to her grandmother, it was a beloved teacher who coaxed her to find her voice again.

Maya's varied life is a perfect example of how a person can overcome personal and institutional adversity to discover their skills and succeed in life: "I would like to be known as an intelligent woman, a courageous woman, a loving woman a woman who teaches by being." She certainly achieved that. The author of over thirty books and recipient of over fifty honorary degrees, she had many careers before becoming a writer, all before the age of 40. TIME Magazine pointed out in her 2014 obituary, Maya's jobs included cook, waitress, sex-worker, dancer, actor, playwright, editor at an English-language newspaper in Egypt, Calypso singer, and cast member of the opera Porgy and Bess.

She is best known for her 1969 memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the first non-fiction best-seller by an African-American woman. Maya achieved many firsts; the first black female cable car conductor, Hollywood's first female black director, and the first black woman to read her own poetry at a presidential inauguration - Bill Clinton's in 1993. Americans watched enthralled as she recited "On the Pulse of Morning," which begins "A Rock, a River, a Tree" and calls for peace, racial and religious harmony, and social justice for people of different origins, incomes, genders, and sexual orientations. It won a Grammy.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is the first of six autobiographies. It is widely taught in schools, but has faced controversy over its portrayal of race, sexual abuse and violence. Her use of fiction-writing techniques like dialogue and plot was innovative for its time. Describing her work, Maya said, "Once I got into it I realised I was following a tradition established by Frederick Douglass - the slave narrative - speaking in the first-person singular; talking about the first-person plural (saying 'I', meaning 'we'). And what a responsibility; trying to work with that form, the autobiographical mode, to change it, to make it bigger, richer, finer, and more inclusive in the twentieth century has been a great challenge for me."

Given the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement it seems appropriate to feature a writer who has clearly dealt with and challenged both racism and homophobia. Her work has inspired so many writers and celebrities including Oprah Winfrey and President Barack Obama, who presented her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian Honour in the U.S. in 2011.



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