

Maya Angelou

Early Life

Born Marguerite Johnson April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, MO

Father - Bailey Johnson – not involved in her life

Mother – Vivian Baxter – trained as a nurse but worked as professional gambler

Older Brother Bailey (1 year older)

Her parents divorced when she was three, and she and Bailey were sent to live with their maternal grandmother – Annie Henderson, whom she called “Momma,” in rural Stamps, Arkansas. From the Dictionary of Literary Biography: “Momma, head of one of the few black families ‘not on relief’ during the Depression, was an honest but shrewd business-woman...From her Angelou learned common sense, practicality, and the ability to control one’s own destiny that comes from constant hard work and courage, ‘grace under pressure.’ She learned, sometimes forcibly, the literature of black writers: ‘Bailey and I decided to memorize a scene from *The Merchant of Venice*, but we realized that Momma would question us about the author and that we’d have to tell her that Shakespeare was white, and it wouldn’t matter to her whether he was dead or not. So we chose *The Creation* by James Weldon Johnson instead.’” (DLB).

At age eight, while visiting her mother, she was sexually molested by her mother’s boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. You will be reading about this experience in the selection I have chosen. **If sexual assault/rape is triggering for you, you may skip this reading.** She confided in her brother, who told the family, and then she had to testify in court. She did not admit that he had fondled her twice before the rape, and she felt responsible when he was then beaten to death, presumably by the men in her family. She decided her words had killed him, so she stopped talking. She didn’t speak for five years. Her family got tired of dealing with her, and sent her back to “Momma” in Arkansas, which turned out to be the best thing for her.

There she was nurtured by her grandmother and by an educated black woman in town, Mrs. Flowers. When she was 13, she and Bailey moved to San Francisco to live with her mother. She attended high school and took dance and drama lessons at the California Labor School. Her mother ran a boarding house, and there she met a lot of colorful characters. She was sent to spend a summer with her father in southern California, and was told to stay a month. She left her father’s home almost immediately, and because she couldn’t go home, she spent weeks living in a junk yard with homeless kids. She dropped out of school and got a job as San Francisco’s first female street car conductor. When she tired of that, she returned to school. At sixteen, she decided she should have sex. She went to the boy down the street and asked him if he wanted to

have sex. He said yes. It was not a very satisfactory experience. She got pregnant, and gave birth to her son Guy one month after graduating from high school at age 16.

Adulthood

She worked as a waitress and a cook, worked briefly as a Madame, and dabbled in drugs. Her brother helped her get out of that life before it was too late. Unfortunately, he himself then got into drugs. In 1952 she married a Greek sailor named Tosh Angelos. She started a career as a nightclub singer and changed her name to Maya Angelou (Maya had been Bailey's nickname for her). Her marriage lasted three years.

She joined the European touring cast of *Porgy and Bess*. Before long she returned to the states because she felt guilty for neglecting her son. She began writing at age 30. She moved to NY and joined the Harlem Writers Guild. She then fell in love with a South African Civil Rights Activist – Vusumzi Make (1960). They moved to Cairo together, but they never officially wed. He didn't bring in enough money for them to live on, and he cheated on her, and when she got a job to support her son, he got angry. She and Guy then moved to Ghana. She worked at the University of Ghana's School of Music and Drama, and met with Malcolm X during his visits to Ghana. She returned to US in 1964 with the intention of working with Malcolm X, but he was assassinated.

She then began working with Martin Luther King, Jr. She served as the northern Coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Then King was assassinated on her birthday in 1968. She found solace in writing. Guided by novelist James Baldwin, she started *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which was published in 1970. She became a famous figure almost overnight. She then wrote the screenplay and composed the musical score for the film *Georgia, Georgia* in 1972. It was the first screenplay by an African American woman ever to be filmed, and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. From 1973 – 1981 she was married to Paul du Feu, a French writer and cartoonist. Although they divorced, they remained friends.

Later Life

Maya served in various capacities for a number of US presidents. President Ford appointed her to the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission. President Carter invited her to serve on the Presidential Commission for the International Year of the Woman. President Clinton asked her to compose a poem to be read at his inauguration, "On the Pulse of the Morning." (If you haven't heard her read that, google it. It is stunning). She served as the Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in NC. She also appeared in television and films, and directed a feature film in 1996, *Down in the Delta*.

Maya Angelou published 35 books, including autobiography and memoir, numerous essays, collections of poetry, children's books, and cookbooks.

She was quick to credit the strong women in her life: “In describing her development in her autobiographies, Angelou gives generous credit to the influences of dominant women during her childhood. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* focuses on three impressive female role models: ‘Momma’ Henderson, her powerful, enterprising, righteous, religious grandmother; Mrs. Flowers, beautiful, cultivated, and pridefully black; and her mother, the sexy, sassy, and savvy embodiment of black mores....Men, however, get little credit for who she is and how she got that way. During Angelou’s childhood, adult black men were either absent (her father), weak (her disabled uncle), subservient to women (her uncle and her mother’s boyfriends), sexually abusive (the man who raped her), or lazy and hedonistic (her father when she met him again in her teenage years)” (DLB).

I was lucky enough to hear Maya Angelou speak twice—both times in Denver. Each time before she started to speak, she would sing: This little heart of mine, I’m gonna let it shine. This little heart of mine, I’m gonna let it shine....” There are few writers who have had a greater impact on my life. Here is a woman who was brutally victimized as a child. She had every reason to give up and give in. Yet she didn’t. When I think about the incredible woman she became, I am simply amazed. Her poem “Phenomenal Woman” is my favorite poem. I encourage you to print it out and post it somewhere that you will see it and ‘read it like you mean it’ each day before you leave the house. If you are interested in seeing the tribute I wrote following her death in 2014, you can find it in the blog posts on my website, www.iamsubject.com. I also encourage you to google her, as you can find many videos of her reading her works. One of her last projects included creating an album that blended her poems with hip hop beats, titled *Caged Bird Sings*. I downloaded the album after her death, and when I heard it, I couldn’t stop smiling and laughing. I played it for everyone who would listen.