

Maya Angelou: Aspects of a Genius

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Maya Angelou's signature book I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings burst upon the American literary landscape in 1970, becoming an immediate best-seller. It has retained its position as a treasured work in the thirty-five years which since elapsed, never going out of print, capturing the loyalty of successive generations of readers, remaining a constant recourse for those who early on were enraptured by its story of a girl growing up in rural Arkansas amid the tensions of America's black-white divide. Caged Bird is an intriguing narrative of the ability of the human spirit to surmount adversity especially in its portrayals of Grandmother Henderson, Uncle Willie, and the indomitable protagonist, the child Maya.

Writing in the turbulent Civil Rights period in the midst of the Black Arts Movement, Angelou was very much a participant in both. Her active membership in the Harlem Writers Guild had begun a decade before Caged Bird was written and therein her focus had been poetry and drama. Ironically Caged Bird has towered over other works of the Black Arts Movement and is not particularly identified as a product thereof. In fact it grew less out of the original literary ambitions of its author than from her marvelous skills as a raconteur. So profoundly did these impress her friend James Baldwin that he urged her to write an account of her childhood in Stamps, Arkansas. At first she resisted, not wishing to interrupt her poetry, but challenged by the hint that perhaps, after all, she lacked the skill to transpose her scintillating oral narration to print, she produced Caged Bird.

The title of the book comes from the poem "Sympathy" by the African American poet laureate of the late nineteenth century, Paul Laurence Dunbar. The poem is a meditation on the struggles of a bird to escape its cage, an analogy frequently invoked to describe an oppressed people. It also speaks to the supposed contradiction of the bird singing in the midst of its struggle.

Angelou was to continue the narrative of her fascinating quest for fulfillment and completion in a succession of books which have established her as a major autobiographical voice of the time and which have made her work a subject of literary discourse. A notable critical work, published both in Britain, where Angelou is well-known, and the U.S. is Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou, by Dolly A. McPherson (1990).

In 2004 the Modern Library, an imprint of Angelou's publisher Random House, issued The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou, making the six narratives, written over a period of three decades, available in a single volume. Caged Bird was followed after a lapse of four years by Gather Together in My Name (1974); then came Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas in 1976; The Heart of a Woman in 1981; and All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes in 1986. Sixteen years were to elapse before the appearance of the sixth and final volume of the series in 2002.

A Song Flung Up to Heaven takes the protagonist to the threshold of her literary career, ending with her picking up the pen to begin writing I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. Angelou has explained that the writing of the book took so long because of the painful journey it required her to repeat through the Civil Rights years and the discomfort of having to re-live the traumatic assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., with both of whom she had established ties in their respective undertakings.