

# ***Maya Angelou, Lyrical Witness of the Jim Crow South, Dies at 86***

Maya Angelou, the memoirist, poet and author of “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” died Wednesday. Her manuscripts are being preserved at the Harlem-based branch of the New York Public Library.

By [Margalit Fox](#) May 28, 2014

Maya Angelou, whose landmark book of 1969, “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” — a lyrical, unsparring account of her childhood in the Jim Crow South — was among the first autobiographies by a 20th-century black woman to reach a wide general readership, died on Wednesday at her home in Winston-Salem, N.C. She was 86.

Her death was confirmed by her literary agent, Helen Brann. The cause was not immediately known, but Ms. Brann said Ms. Angelou had been frail for some time and had heart problems.

In a statement, President Obama said, “Today, Michelle and I join millions around the world in remembering one of the brightest lights of our time — a brilliant writer, a fierce friend and a truly phenomenal woman,” adding, “She inspired my own mother to name my sister Maya.”

Though her memoirs, which eventually filled six volumes, garnered more critical praise than her poetry did, Ms. Angelou (pronounced AHN-zhe-low) very likely received her widest exposure on a chilly January day in 1993, when she delivered her inaugural poem, “[On the Pulse of Morning](#),” at the swearing-in of Bill Clinton, the nation’s 42nd president. He, like Ms. Angelou, had grown up in Arkansas.

It began:

A Rock, A River, A Tree

Hosts to species long since departed,

Marked the mastodon,

The dinosaur, who left dried tokens

Of their sojourn here

On our planet floor,

Any broad alarm of their hastening doom

Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,

Come, you may stand upon my

Back and face your distant destiny,

But seek no haven in my shadow,

I will give you no hiding place down here.

Long before that day, as she recounted in “Caged Bird” and its sequels, she had already been a dancer, calypso singer, streetcar conductor, single mother, magazine editor in Cairo, administrative assistant in Ghana, official of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#) and friend or associate of some of the most eminent black Americans of the mid-20th century, including James Baldwin, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

Afterward (her six-volume memoir takes her only to age 40), Ms. Angelou was a Tony-nominated stage actress; college professor (she was for many years the Reynolds professor of American studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem); ubiquitous presence on the lecture circuit; frequent guest on television shows from “Oprah” to “[Sesame Street](#)”; and subject of a string of scholarly studies.



Maya Angelou in 1969, the year of her landmark memoir. Credit...Chester Higgins, Jr.

In February 2011, Mr. Obama [presented her](#) with the [Presidential Medal of Freedom](#), the country’s highest civilian honor.

Throughout her writing, Ms. Angelou explored the concepts of personal identity and resilience through the multifaceted lens of race, sex, family, community and the collective past. As a whole, her work offered a clear-eyed examination of the ways in which the socially marginalizing forces of racism and sexism played out at the level of the individual.

“If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat,” Ms. Angelou wrote in “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.”

Hallmarks of Ms. Angelou’s prose style included a directness of voice that recalls African-American oral tradition and gives her work the quality of testimony. She was also intimately concerned with sensation, describing the world around her — be it Arkansas, San Francisco or the foreign cities in which she lived — with palpable feeling for its sights, sounds and smells.

“I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” published when Ms. Angelou was in her early 40s, spans only her first 17 years. But what powerfully formative years they were.

Marguerite Johnson was born in St. Louis on April 4, 1928. (For years after Dr. King’s assassination, on April 4, 1968, Ms. Angelou did not celebrate her birthday.) Her dashing, defeated father, Bailey Johnson Sr., a Navy dietitian, “was a lonely person, searching relentlessly in bottles, under women’s skirts, in church work and lofty job titles for his ‘personal niche,’ lost before birth and unrecovered since,” Ms. Angelou wrote. “How maddening it was to have been born in a cotton field with aspirations of grandeur.”

Her beautiful, volatile mother, Vivian Baxter, was variously a nurse, hotel owner and card dealer. (Ms. Angelou’s 2013 account of life with her mother, “Mom & Me & Mom,” became a best seller.) As a girl, Ms. Angelou was known as Rita, Ritie or Maya, her older brother’s childhood nickname for her.

After her parents’ marriage ended, 3-year-old Maya was sent with her 4-year-old brother, Bailey, to live with their father’s mother in the tiny town of Stamps, Ark., which, she later wrote, “with its dust and hate and narrowness was as South as it was possible to get.”

Their grandmother, Annie Henderson, owned a general store “in the heart of the Negro area,” Ms. Angelou wrote. An upright woman known as Momma, “with her solid air packed around her like cotton,” she is a warm, stabilizing presence throughout “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.”

Maya Angelou, the memoirist and poet whose landmark book of 1969, “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” was among the first autobiographies by a 20th-century black woman to reach a wide general readership, died on Wednesday in her home. She was 86 and lived in Winston-Salem, N.C.

The children returned periodically to St. Louis to live with their mother. On one such occasion, when Maya was 7 or 8 (her age varies slightly across her memoirs, which employ techniques of fiction to recount actual events), she was raped by her mother's boyfriend. She told her brother, who alerted the family, and the man was tried and convicted. Before he could begin serving his sentence, he was murdered — probably, Ms. Angelou wrote, by her uncles.

Believing that her words had brought about the death, Maya did not speak for the next five years. Her love of literature, as she later wrote, helped restore language to her.

As a teenager, living with her mother in San Francisco, she studied dance and drama at the California Labor School and became the first black woman to work as a streetcar conductor there. At 16, after a casual liaison with a neighborhood youth, she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. There the first book ends.

Reviewing “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” in The New York Times, [Christopher Lehmann-Haupt](#) called it “a carefully wrought, simultaneously touching and comic memoir.”

The book — its title is a line from “Sympathy,” by the African-American poet [Paul Laurence Dunbar](#) — became a best seller, confounding the stereotype, pervasive in the publishing world, that black women's lives were rarely worthy of autobiography.

The five volumes of Ms. Angelou's memoir that follow “Caged Bird” — all, like the first, originally published by Random House — were “Gather Together in My Name” (1974), “Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas” (1976), “The Heart of a Woman” (1981), “All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes” (1986) and “A Song Flung Up to Heaven” (2002).

They describe her struggles to support her son, Guy Johnson, through odd jobs. “Determined to raise him, I had worked as a shake dancer in nightclubs, fry cook in hamburger joints, dinner cook in a Creole restaurant and once had a job in a mechanic's shop, taking paint off cars with my hands,” she wrote in “Singin' and Swingin'.” Elsewhere, she described her short-lived stints as a prostitute and a madam.

Ms. Angelou goes on to recount her marriage to a Greek sailor, Tosh Angelos. (Throughout her life, she was cagey about the number of times she married — it appears to have been at least three — for fear, she said, of appearing frivolous.)

After the marriage dissolved, she embarked on a career as a calypso dancer and singer under the name Maya Angelou, a variant of her married name. A striking stage presence — she was six feet tall — she occasionally partnered in San Francisco with Alvin Ailey in a nightclub act known as Al and Rita.

The memoirist and poet recited her poem “On the Pulse of Morning” in 1993 at President Bill Clinton's first inaugural ceremony.

She was cast in the Truman Capote-Harold Arlen musical "[House of Flowers](#)," which opened on Broadway in 1954. But she chose instead to tour the world as a featured dancer in a production of "Porgy and Bess" by the Everyman Opera Company, a black ensemble.

Ms. Angelou later settled in New York, where she became active in the Harlem Writers Guild (she hoped to be a poet and playwright), sang at [the Apollo](#) and eventually succeeded Bayard Rustin as the coordinator of the New York office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the organization that he, Dr. King and others had founded.

In the early 1960s, Ms. Angelou became romantically involved with Vusumzi L. Make, a South African civil rights activist. She moved with him to Cairo, where she became the associate editor of a magazine, *The Arab Observer*. After leaving Mr. Make — she found him paternalistic and controlling, she later wrote — she moved to Accra, Ghana, where she was an administrative assistant at the University of Ghana.

On returning to New York, Ms. Angelou helped Malcolm X set up the Organization of Afro-American Unity, established in 1964. The group dissolved after his assassination the next year.

In 1973, Ms. Angelou appeared on Broadway in "[Look Away](#)," a two-character play about Mary Todd Lincoln (played by Geraldine Page) and her seamstress. Though the play closed after one performance, Ms. Angelou was nominated for a Tony Award. On the screen, she portrayed Kunta Kinte's grandmother in the 1977 television mini-series "[Roots](#)," and appeared in several feature films, including "How to Make an American Quilt" (1995).

Ms. Angelou's marriage in the 1970s to Paul du Feu, who had previously been wed to the feminist writer Germaine Greer, ended in divorce. Survivors include her son, three grandchildren and a great-grandchild.

Some reviewers expressed reservations about Ms. Angelou's memoiristic style, calling it facile and solipsistic. Others criticized her poetry as being little more than prose with line breaks. But her importance as a literary, cultural and historical figure was amply borne out by the many laurels she received, including a spate of honorary doctorates.

Her other books include the volumes of poetry, "Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie" (1971), "Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well" (1975), "And Still I Rise" (1978) and "Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?" (1983).

She released an album of songs, "[Miss Calypso](#)," in 1957.

But she remained best known for her memoirs, a striking fact because she had never set out to be a memoirist. Near the end of "A Song Flung Up to Heaven," Ms. Angelou recalls her response when Robert Loomis, who would become her longtime editor at Random House, first asked her to write an autobiography.

Still planning to be a playwright and poet, she demurred. Canny, Mr. Loomis called her again.

“You may be right not to attempt autobiography, because it is nearly impossible to write autobiography as literature,” he said. “Almost impossible.”

Ms. Angelou replied, “I’ll start tomorrow.”