



Maya Angelou

Abridged Reading Comprehension

Maya Angelou was a writer, dancer, singer, actor, director and civil rights activist. Born in America at the start of the Great Depression, she went on to be involved in the civil rights movement and play an influential role in America's social history.

Missouri, 1928. Vivian Johnson gives birth to Marguerite, her second child with Bailey Johnson. Marguerite becomes known as Maya after her brother nicknamed her this because she was “my-a sister” and the moniker stuck for the rest of her life.

Civil Rights Activism

A passionate human rights activist, Angelou had personal friendships with and was inspired by Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Rosa Parks. She attributes her determination in writing her autobiography to “Dr Martin Luther King’s ability to forgive, and I began to forgive others and myself.”

Angelou grew up in a racially segregated town and, as a Black citizen, experienced a lot of racial prejudice and discrimination. Tragically, Angelou’s mistreatment continued within the confines of her home, where she was abused by her mother’s boyfriend. Her abuser was eventually imprisoned for one day but upon his release was immediately murdered by her uncles, seeking retribution for Angelou. Understandably this enormous trauma had an impact on Angelou who stopped talking altogether for five years, preferring instead to read and observe the world around her. After support from a family friend, she once more began speaking at age 12.

Angelou studied in San Francisco. Initially she attended George Washington High School and won a scholarship to study dance and drama at the San Francisco Labor School. While there she took a brief hiatus and became the city’s first ever African-American cable car conductor. Following her high school graduation, at just 17, Angelou gave birth to her son, Guy.

“My mother said I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and more intelligent than college professors.”

To support her son, Angelou became a jack of all trades, working in a fast-food restaurant, a mechanic’s and as a club dancer. Her dancing and singing took her around Europe on a tour of Porgy and Bess and she even released her own calypso album, Miss Calypso. In 1960, while performing in a play titled The Blacks, Angelou met a South African civil rights activist, Vusumzi Make, who had a profound impact on her. Together with Guy, they moved to Cairo where Angelou became editor of The Arab Observer. In 1962, Angelou and Make separated, following which she and Guy moved to Ghana where she worked on The Ghanaian Times and The African Review. Angelou was an incredible multilinguist, speaking English, French, Italian, Arabic, Spanish and Fanti (a West African language).

Returning to America in 1965, Angelou reconnected with the Harlem Writers Guild and went on to publish her internationally acclaimed autobiography, I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings. This book, which explored

the poverty, racial inequality, and trauma of her childhood, was the first non-fiction novel by a Black woman to become a best-seller. Angelou went on to publish six more volumes of autobiography and become a celebrated poet. She wrote a poem for President Bill Clinton’s 1993 inauguration and won the Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album three times!

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

In 1972, Angelou became the first Black woman to write a screenplay for a feature film. She was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and awarded the Presidential Medal of Arts in 2000 and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2010. She also received over 50 honorary degrees. In 1981, she became Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in northern California, working there for 33 years and continuing to deliver lectures until shortly before her death in 2014 aged 86. Following her death, Angelou’s good friend Oprah Winfrey commented “what stands out to me most about Maya Angelou is not what she has done or written or spoken; it’s how she lived her life.”



Angelou in Numbers

- 3** number of Grammy awards won
- 5** number of years she was electively mute
- 7** volumes of her autobiography
- 17** age at which her son was born
- 33** number of years as a university professor
- 40** birthday on which Martin Luther King was assassinated
- 86** age at her death