Maya Angelou

QUICK FACTS

NAME: Maya Angelou

OCCUPATION: Author, Poet

BIRTH DATE: April 04, 1928 (Age: 85)

EDUCATION: George Washington High School, California Labor School

PLACE OF BIRTH: St. Louis, Missouri

ORIGINALLY: Marguerite Johnson

ZOidiac SIGN: Aries
BEST KNOWN FOR

Maya Angelou is a poet and prize-winning memoirist. She is the author of the critically acclaimed *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Maya Angelou biography

SYNOPSIS

Writer and African-American activist Maya Angelou was born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. Maya Angelou's five autobiographical novels were met with critical and popular success. Her volume of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water Fore I Die* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. In 1993, Angelou wrote a poem for Clinton’s inauguration. In 2008, she earned a NAACP Award.

EARLY YEARS

Multitalented barely seems to cover the depth and breadth of Maya Angelou's accomplishments. She is an author, actress, screenwriter, dancer and poet. Born Marguerite Annie Johnson, Angelou had a difficult childhood. Her parents split up when she was very young, and she and her older brother Bailey were sent to live with their father's mother, Anne Henderson, in Stamps, Arkansas.

As an African American, Angelou experienced firsthand racial prejudices and discrimination in Arkansas. She also suffered at the hands of a family associate around the age of seven. During a visit with her mother, Angelou was raped by her mother's boyfriend. Her uncles killed the boyfriend for the sexual assault. So traumatized by the experience, Angelou stopped talking. She returned to Arkansas and spent years as a virtual mute.

During World War II, Angelou moved to San Francisco. There she won a scholarship to study dance and acting at the Labor School. Angelou worked for a time as the first female African American cable car conductor. In 1944, the 16-year-old future literary icon gave birth to her son Guy. Angelou worked a number of jobs to support herself and her son.

CAREER BEGINNINGS

In the mid-1950s, Angelou's career as a performer started to take off. She landed a role in a touring production of *Porgy and Bess*. Angelou later appeared off-Broadway in *Calypso Heat Wave* and released her first album *Miss Calypso*. A member of the Harlem Writers Guild and a civil rights activist, she organized and starred in the musical revue *Cabaret for Freedom* as a benefit for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Angelou served as the SCLC's northern coordinator.

In 1961, Angelou appeared in an off-Broadway production of Jean Genet's *The Blacks* with James Earl Jones, Lou Gossett, Jr. and Cicely Tyson. While the play earned strong reviews, she moved on to other pursuits. Angelou spent much of the 1960s living abroad. She first lived in Egypt and then in Ghana, working as an editor and a freelance writer. Angelou also held a position at the University of Ghana for a time.

Angelou returned to the United States. At the urging of her friend, writer James Baldwin, she began writing about her life experiences. The result of her efforts became the 1970 best-selling memoir about her childhood and young adult years entitled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. This poignant work made Angelou an international literary star.
Angelou soon broke new creative ground, becoming the first African American woman to have her screenplay produced. She wrote the 1972 drama *Georgia, Georgia*. Continuing to act, Angelou earned a Tony Award nomination for her role in the 1973 play *Look Away* and an Emmy Award nomination for her work in the 1977 television miniseries *Roots*.

**LATER SUCCESSES**

Angelou has written several autobiographies, including *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986) and *A Song Fung Up to Heaven* (2002), but the most popular of which has consistently been *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In 1995, Angelou was recognized for remaining on *The New York Times*’ paperback nonfiction best-seller list for two years - the longest-running record in the chart’s history.

She has also published several collections of poetry, including *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water Fore I Die* (1971). This collection was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. One of her most famous works was the poem “On the Pulse of Morning,” which she wrote especially for the inauguration of President Bill Clinton in January 1993. Angelou won a Grammy Award for the audio version of the poem.


**PERSONAL LIFE**

Angelou is good friends with television personality Oprah Winfrey. Winfrey has organized several birthday celebrations for Angelou, including a week-long cruise for her 70th birthday in 1998.