

DURHAM COUNTY LIBRARY

Discussion Guide

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

by

Maya Angelou

(Bantam Books: New York, 1993, c1969)

Author Bio:

MAYA ANGELOU was a poet, autobiographer, and activist, among other roles throughout her career. She was born Marguerite Ann Johnson on April 4th, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. The name Maya was given to her by her older brother, Bailey Jr., who referred to her in his youth as “my-a-sister,” a moniker which was later shortened to “Maya.” After her parents divorced, Maya and her brother resided with their paternal grandmother and crippled uncle in Stamps, Arkansas, where they bore witness to the racism and prejudice that plagued the American South. Angelou turned to literature at an early age, studying a wide range of books which inspired her to begin writing works of her own. In addition to the composition of many volumes of poetry, Angelou chronicled her life in a series of six autobiographical works, which included her most lauded and controversial work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She was convinced to tell her story by the author James Baldwin, whom she met after joining the Harlem Writers Guild in the 1950s. Angelou allowed her voice to be heard not only in her writing, but also through her political and social activism. During the 1960s, Angelou served as the Northern Coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference under Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She also assisted Malcolm X in his work and was deeply affected by the subsequent assassinations of both men. In addition to her work in literature and poetry, and her involvement in social activism, Angelou was also engaged in theater, film, and music. She worked on adaptations, produced, directed, wrote, and composed musical scores. She earned a Tony Award nomination for her role in the play *Look Away*, and three Grammy Awards for her spoken word albums. Angelou’s literary works also garnered significant attention and praise. Her 1971 volume of poetry *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ’Fore I Diiie* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and in 1993, she recited her poem, “On the Pulse of Morning,” at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration. Angelou has served on two presidential committees. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Arts in 2000 and the Lincoln Medal in 2008, and was the recipient of countless honorary degrees. Maya Angelou passed away on May 28th, 2014, at the age of 86.

[From author’s web site]

Summary:

Sent by their mother to live with their devout, self-sufficient grandmother in a small Southern town, Maya and her brother, Bailey, endure the ache of abandonment and the prejudice of the local “powhitetrash.” At eight years old and back at her mother’s side in

St. Louis, Maya is attacked by a man many times her age—and has to live with the consequences for a lifetime.

Years later, in San Francisco, Maya learns about love for herself and the kindness of others, her own strong spirit, and the ideas of great authors (“I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare”) will allow her to be free instead of imprisoned.

Poetic and powerful, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a modern American classic that will touch hearts and change minds for as long as people read. (*From the publisher.*)

Questions:

1. The memoir opens with a provocative refrain: "What you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay ... "What do you think this passage says about Ritie's sense of herself? How does she feel about her place in the world? How does she keep her identity intact?
2. Upon seeing her mother for the first time after years of separation, Ritie describes her as "a hurricane in its perfect power." What do you think about Ritie's relationship with her mother? How does it compare to her relationship with her grandmother, "Momma"?
3. The author writes, "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." What do you make of the author's portrayal of race? How do Ritie and her family cope with the racial tension that permeates their lives?
4. Throughout the book, Ritie struggles with feelings that she is "bad" and "sinful," as her thoughts echo the admonitions of her strict religious upbringing. What does she learn at the end of the memoir about right and wrong?
5. What is the significance of the title as it relates to Ritie's self-imposed muteness?
6. The text presents us with many variations of Maya's name, culminating in a pivotal scene wherein Mrs. Viola Cullinan refers to Angelou as "Mary," instead of "Marguerite." What is the significance of this scene? How does Maya react? Are her actions justified?
7. Following her rape, Marguerite becomes silent. Why does she refrain from speaking? What allows her to find her voice again?
8. What impact does literature have on Maya and her brother? Where in the story do we witness its effects?
9. Why does Angelou devote an entire chapter to the Joe Louis fight? How do the characters in the book react to the fight? Why is it significant? What do we learn from this scene?
10. Analyze Maya's development throughout the story. How does the Maya at the conclusion of the story compare to the young Marguerite that we meet at the start? How has she changed? To what can these changes be attributed?

[From: Litlovers.com and
https://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/teachers_guides/9780812980028.pdf]