

Maya Angelou

A Poet Finds Her Voice



Courtesy, William J. Clinton Presidential Library

**1993 Maya Angelou reads a poem
at the Presidential Inauguration**

Many consider Maya Angelou to be one of America's greatest writers. She was also a musician, a dancer, an actress, and an activist. She was one of America's most inspirational people.

Maya Angelou was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1928. She had a very difficult childhood. When she was eight, her mother's boyfriend hurt her. Maya told her brother, who told the rest of the family and, a short time later, the boyfriend was murdered. Many think Maya's uncles killed him for what he did to Maya. Maya stopped speaking for five years after this because she was afraid that if she spoke again, someone else would get killed.

Soon after, Maya and her brother went to live with their grandmother in Arkansas. Maya says it was her teacher, Mrs. Flowers, who helped her speak again. Mrs. Flowers taught Maya about different poets and writers. Maya learned a lot from these writers and their words spoke to her through the pages of the books and she slowly began to speak again.

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Maya had a baby boy after she graduated high school. In 1951, she married a Greek man named Tosh Angelos—it was very uncommon in those days for a black person to marry a white person. The family moved to New York City where Maya studied dance.

They moved back to San Francisco a year later and divorced in 1954. Maya worked as a singer and dancer and recorded her first album in 1957.

Maya moved New York City in 1959 to concentrate on her writing and joined the Harlem Writers Guild, the oldest organization of black writers in America, where she met many important African American writers. She also became an actress and performed in plays around the city.

Maya wanted to learn more about her African roots so she and her son Guy moved to Cairo, Egypt in 1961. In 1962, they moved to Ghana so that Guy could go to college. Maya wrote for different newspapers, hosted a radio program, and acted in a theater.

Maya moved back to New York in 1965 and became a part of the Civil Rights Movement. She was friends with leaders like Malcom X and Martin Luther King, Jr.



**“The caged bird
sings with a fearful
trill of things
unknown but
longed for still
and his tune is
heard on the
distant hill for the
caged bird sings
of freedom.”**

**– Maya Angelou,
from her poem
“Caged Bird”**

In 1968, Maya began writing and never stopped. She wrote documentaries, plays, and her most famous book: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which is about her life as a child. Over the course of the rest of her life, Maya wrote several more books about her life. She wrote TV scripts, articles, short stories, and poems.

Between 1973 and 1977, Maya won many awards including a Tony Award for acting and honorary degrees from numerous colleges and universities. During this time period, she also met and became friends with Oprah Winfrey.

In 1981, she became a full-time professor at a university in North Carolina. While there, she continued to write. She taught at the university until 2011.

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In 1993, Maya received a great honor. Bill Clinton had just been elected President. He asked her to write a poem and recited it at the Presidential Inauguration. She was the first poet to recite a poem at an inauguration since 1961. Her poem was called "On the Pulse of Morning." She later won a Grammy Award for the recording of her poem. She became known as "the people's poet."

Maya died in 2014 at the age of 86. Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama paid tributes to Maya. So did leaders, artists, writers, and readers all over the world. Oprah Winfrey, Michelle Obama, Bill Clinton, and Maya's son spoke at her memorial.



2011 President Barack Obama presents Maya with the Presidential Medal of Freedom