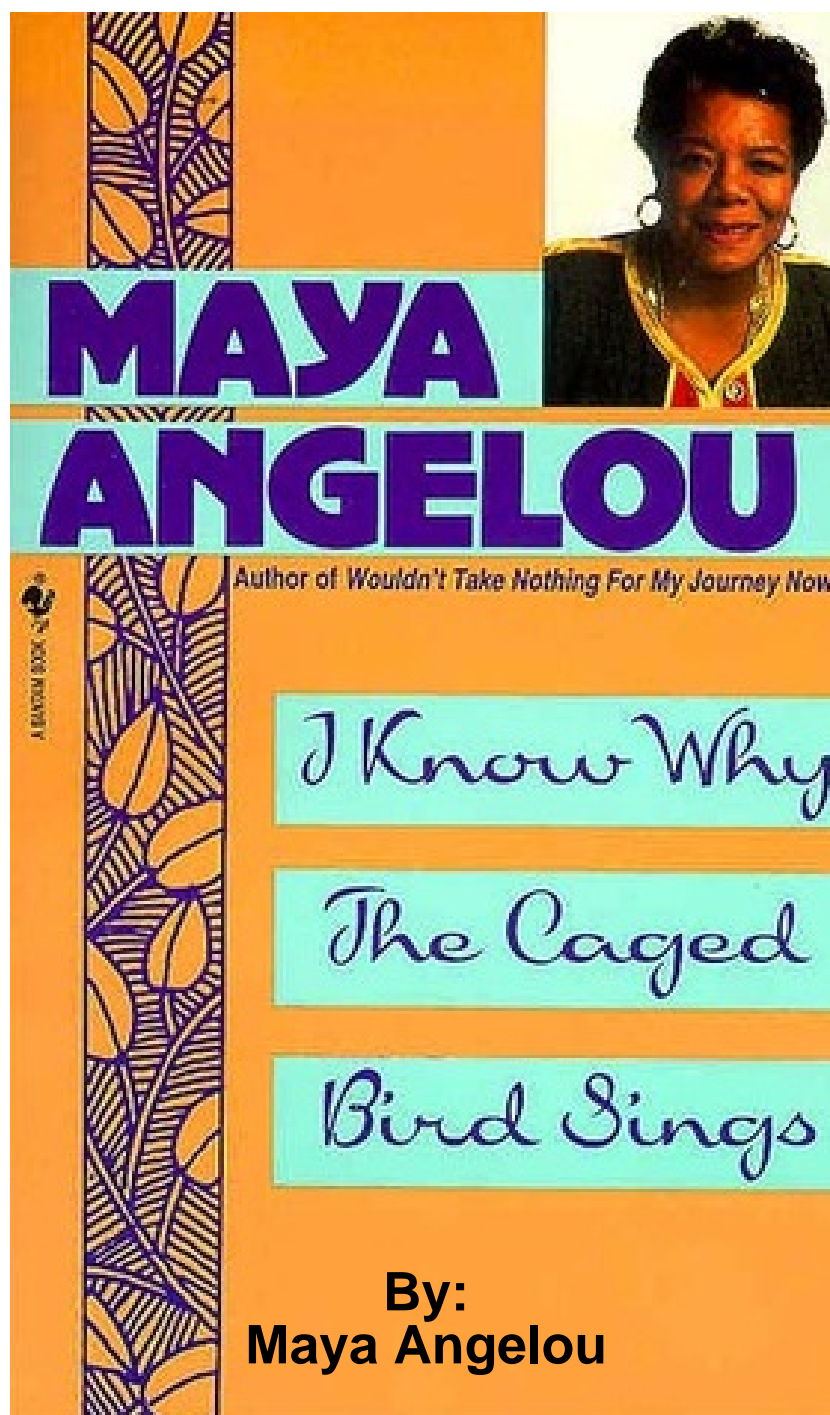


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## What people Say:

### Arthur Graham

I must confess I've read precious little Angelou in my time, but I'll never forget the day she tipped me \$20.

It was some random gray day in Marquette, Michigan, must've been the winter of '00, and I was washing dishes as usual at the downtown Landmark Inn. Someone tapped me on the shoulder and said, "hey, there's a VIP coming in, put on your bellboy hat and head out front." I didn't put on my bellboy hat because I didn't have one — just the same dirty, drenched apron I wore every day in that yea

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Stepping out into the sub-zero winds, I saw before me the fanciest tour bus I'd ever seen in my whole entire life. Even to this day, I've never seen a better one. In fact, the only thing fancier than the bus itself was the mink coat on the elderly black woman exiting it, and I'll never forget the words she mumbled to my wet, skinny ass, there on the frozen sidewalk of my youth:

"Boy, you'll catch yo' death out here..."

If I'd remained outdoors another half hour or so, I suppose I may've proven her right, but instead I hauled her six or seven massive bags inside, into the elevator, and up to her room on the fifth (?) floor.

Maya Angelou gave me \$20, and I never even read her fucking book.

What an

I am...

## Brina

Maya Angelou was a poet and Nobel laureate who once gave an address at President Clinton's inauguration. Before she won her multitudes of awards and honors, Maya was raised in rural Stamps, Arkansas by her grandmother and uncle during the depression. First published in 1969 and now considered a modern classic, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* details Angelou's tumultuous childhood in poignant detail.

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Born Marguerite Johnson and often called Ritie, Maya and her older brother Bailey were taken to live with their grandmother at young ages following their parents' divorce. Even though the south was still in the throes of Jim Crow and Stamps was at the forefront of segregation, young Maya appeared to enjoy a loving childhood. Raised by a strict, church going grandmother and uncle, Maya and Bailey turned to both books and each other for comfort. Devouring books like candy, both children quickly advanced through the Stamps educational system, two grades ahead of schedule.

When Maya was eight and Bailey nine, their father came to Arkansas and brought them to live with their mother in St Louis. Coming from a multi racial family, members of Maya's maternal family were light skinned enough to pass for white and some integrated into the German community. It was in St Louis, a city that should have afforded Maya more opportunities than rural Stamps, that she experienced the low point in her childhood. Physically abused by her mother's fianc , Maya recovered and returned to Stamps and a loving environment. She and Bailey continued to live with their grandmother until they had advanced beyond what the education system offered them in the segregated south. With no future other than a house servant or cotton picker, the two were returned to their mother, now living in desegregated California.

While in California, Maya experienced highs and lows as well as Jim Crow rearing its ugly head, the low point of which was living in a car in a junk yard for a month. These experiences, including being reunited with both parents and establishing relationships with them, made for events that Maya could reflect on later on in life in this volume. I find it extraordinary that Maya could overcome being abused as a young child and still manage to graduate school two years ahead of schedule at a high academic level. This is a testament to her grandmother as well as her personal fabric. This fabric lead her to be the first colored streetcar operator in San Francisco and later on the poet laureate that people recognize to this day.

Maya Angelou noted her writing influences as Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, as well as Booker T Washington who encouraged a generation of African Americans to achieve employment through a stellar education. In her dedication, Angelou also cites her parents as being positive influences in her life after they reconciled. A gifted author and poet who was advanced well beyond her years as a child, Maya graced us with her powerful prose in all of her works of literature. A poignant look into a childhood in the Jim Crow, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings reveals the upbringing of a remarkable American woman. A courageous glimpse into Angelou's life, this first memoir of hers easily merits 5 bright stars.

## Brad

I really enjoyed this book. It was required reading for a University course I took on Adolescent Literature.

This book has been placed on banned book lists by needlessly close-minded people for it's real life content.

The book tastefully addresses issues of molestation, rape, racism. But it does so within the context of the trials and tribulations of growing up as well.

The book presents things in a direct and extremely vivid fashion, but it is not garishly or needlessly graphic. These are issues

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The book presents things in a direct and extremely vivid fashion, but it is not garishly or needlessly graphic. These are issues that need to be addressed and talked about with adolescents. In fact,

earlier generations could have likely benefited from a little more open discussion about such matters.

In any regard, the book is not about these issues, it simply addresses them within the context, which is Maya Angelou's early life from somewhere around age 6 up to about 17 or 18 I believe.

Worth reading, worth having your kids read. Just be sure to discuss it's content with them.....like a parent should anyway.

## **Brian**

My mother could never really speak to me about the abuse she suffered as a little girl - the closest we came to talking about her experiences occurred when we read this painful and important book together. I imagine that Maya's book has allowed countless women who have suffered similar horrors an opportunity to know they will never be alone in their pain. And perhaps, like my mother, an opportunity to begin to heal by sharing their story with a loved one.

RIP, Maya. Your words have made this plan

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RIP, Maya. Your words have made this planet a better place. If only the rest of us could be half as decent as you.

## Nandakishore Varma

The above poem by Maya Angelou (not

The above poem by Maya Angelou (not from this book, BTW) encapsulates in a few lines why the voices of protest are the loudest, and the literature the most powerful when it is forcefully suppressed. Because the only thing the caged bird can do is sing, he will keep on doing it, lest he go mad. Poetry will keep on flowing out of the decapitated head of Orpheus.

I understand that this book has been banned multiple times. Not surprising, considering that the words of the poet have more power than swords or bullets, as proved time and again by history.

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Maya Angelou (born Marguerite Johnson) and her brother Bailey were sent to live with their paternal grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas when their parents' marriage fell apart. It was the early thirties, and the North and the South of USA were poles apart as far as coloured people were concerned; in the North, they were part of the society (albeit an insular one) while in the South, they were the despised 'niggers'.

Maya spent most of the formative part of her childhood down south. Her grandmother ('Momma') was a singularly resourceful woman who owned a store: they managed to live in relative comfort even during the Depression era. However, this material comfort was offset by the fact that they were always the hated 'other' - the 'whitefolk' who lived apart (almost a mythical race, in Maya's young mind) were powerful and whimsical gods who could visit death and destruction any time on any black man or woman. Even the 'powhitetrash', the drifters and squatters who had the fortune to be born into the Anglo-Saxon race, could insult even the propertied black people with impunity.

When she was eight years old, Maya's father took her brother and herself to their mother, Vivian Baxter, in St. Louis. Here the incident which was to become the turning point of her life happened. The eight-year old girl was raped by her mother's current boyfriend, Mr. Freeman: he managed to wiggle out of jail only to be murdered, presumably by Maya's maternal uncles who were also the town toughs. As a result of this, she became a virtual mute for almost five years.

Sent back to Stamps, Maya continued her zombie-like existence until she was brought back into the world of the living by Bertha Flowers, a teacher and family friend - she did this by the expedient of introducing the girl to books. Maya found refuge in the world of imagination, and slowly came back to normal.

She again went to live with her mother in California when she was 15. During this sojourn, she visited her father in Southern California where another traumatic even in her life took place. After a frightening journey across the border into Mexico along with her father (when she was forced to drive a car back to the US in the night with him passed out in the back " even though she was not



a qualified driver!), Maya was attacked and stabbed by her father's girlfriend. She quit home and lived for a month in a junkyard, with similar social drop-outs, before returning to her mother.

A month of living in the rough had emboldened the shy and withdrawn girl. Maya decided to get a job as a streetcar conductor, even though the occupation was closed to blacks, and succeeded: the activist and rebel were just emerging. The first instalment of this extended autobiography ends with the picture of Maya as a teen mother, of a child conceived out of a casual sexual encounter which she had just to satisfy that she was "normal" (that is, heterosexual)!