

Maya Angelou

*I Know Why
the Caged Bird
Sings*

50th
Anniversary
Book Club
Kit



#CagedBird50



“Sympathy” by Paul Laurence Dunbar

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!

When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;

When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing

Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;

And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting—
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,

When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,

But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

“Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

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.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

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.

Quotes About Maya Angelou

“The world knows her as a poet but at the heart of her, she was a teacher. ‘When you learn, teach. When you get, give.’ is one of my best lessons from her.” —**Oprah Winfrey**

“She was special, she was rare, she was more beautiful than perhaps even she realized, because she was, among other things, such an artist, that she could not only create worlds on paper, or in a listener’s imagination, but she also managed, over and over again in her long life, to create and recreate herself.” —**Alice Walker**

“Maya Angelou had a unique voice filled with love, wisdom, understanding, and compassion. Shaped by sorrow, adversity, strength, and resilience, she had a brilliant intellect and powerful insights about the human condition. She taught many of us how to confront our fears with humility but to trust our legacy as survivors. She was that rarest of lights that can illuminate you and the world surrounding you from the inside out.” —**Bryan Stevenson**

“Over the course of her remarkable life, Maya was many things—an author, poet, civil rights activist, playwright, actress, director, composer, singer, and dancer. But above all, she was a storyteller—and her greatest stories were true. A childhood of suffering and abuse actually drove her to stop speaking—but the voice she found helped generations of Americans find their rainbow amidst the clouds, and inspired the rest of us to be our best selves. In fact, she inspired my own mother to name my sister Maya.”
—**Barack Obama**

“She launched African-American women writing in the United States. She was generous to a fault. She had 19 talents . . . used 10. She was a real original. There’s no duplicate.” —**Toni Morrison**

“Dr. Angelou’s words sustained me on every step of my journey—through lonely moments in ivy-covered classrooms and colorless skyscrapers; through blissful moments mothering two splendid baby girls; through long years on the campaign trail where, at times, my very womanhood was dissected and questioned. For me, that was the power of Maya Angelou’s words—words so powerful that they carried a little black girl from the South Side of Chicago all the way to the White House.” —**Michelle Obama**

“This testimony from a black sister marks the beginning of a new era in the minds and hearts and lives of all black men and women. . . . *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* liberates the reader into life simply because Maya Angelou confronts her own life with such a moving wonder, such a luminous dignity. I have no words for this achievement, but I know that not since the days of my childhood, when the people in books were more real than the people I saw every day, have I found myself so moved. . . . Her portrait is a biblical study of life in the midst of death.” —**James Baldwin**

Discussion Questions

1. How old were you when you first read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*?
2. How has the book changed for you on later readings? Did any characters or scenes stand out more than before?
3. How are the themes of the novel—like racism, violence, trauma, and displacement—still relevant today?
4. How does Angelou describe her molestation and later her rape at the hands of Mr. Freeman? Were you surprised by her emotions? Was this terrible experience the defining moment of the novel or of Angelou's childhood? Why or why not?
5. Now that sexual assault has been at the forefront of current conversations, thanks in large part to Tarana Burke's #MeToo movement, did you read this section any differently?
6. As the granddaughter of a comparatively poor businesswoman, Marguerite's understanding of the world is shaped as much by class experience as by race. Can you think of some examples of class distinctions or inversions in the novel?
7. How, if at all, do you think issues of class and race have changed today?
8. Angelou writes that, "Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being 'called out of his name.'" When Mrs. Cullinan renames her "Mary," she exacts her revenge. Can you think of other examples of naming and renaming in the book? What do you think it means to be "called out of [one's] name"? Is this something that you think still happens to people of color today?
9. What are some of the communities that welcome Marguerite during her childhood? Which communities nurture her successfully? Which are less successful?
10. "He was my first white love," Angelou says of Shakespeare, but most of her teachers are Black. How does Angelou describe her education, both formal and informal? What lessons does she learn from those around her?
11. "We survive in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets," Angelou says of Black people. What do you think she means by this? Do you think that this is true of all cultures?
12. The title is a reference to a poem by Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Why do you think that Angelou chose this title?

Facts About Maya Angelou

- Born Marguerite Johnson, she changed her name to Maya Angelou in 1954, after getting divorced from Tosh Angelos.
- In 1960, after hearing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak for the first time at a church in Harlem, Maya Angelou accepted a position working as the northern coordinator for the New York office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.
- Dr. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968—Maya Angelou's 40th birthday. For years after his death, she refused to celebrate her own birthday.
- In 1977, Angelou appeared in the celebrated TV miniseries *Roots*, as the grandmother of Kunta Kinte.
- She won her first of three Grammy awards in 1994 for her recording of her poem, "On the Pulse of Morning," which she delivered at President Bill Clinton's inauguration on January 20, 1993.

Playlist

Listen to songs from Dr. Maya Angelou's spoken word album, *Caged Bird Songs*.

Facts About I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings

- When Angelou was devastated after Dr. King's death, her close friend James Baldwin took her to a dinner party at the cartoonist Jules Feiffer's home. The stories she told about growing up in Stamps, Arkansas so impressed Feiffer's wife, Judy, that she called Robert Loomis, an editor at Random House, the next day.
- Angelou described to *The New York Times* how Loomis "tricked her into writing" *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. At first, she absolutely refused the offer to write a book, so Loomis said, "It's just as well, because to write an autobiography as literature is just about impossible." That challenge did the trick, and she decided to give it a try.
- To write *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and later works, Angelou stuck to a specific ritual: She would rent a hotel room and hibernate, writing on yellow legal pads with just a Bible, a thesaurus, playing cards, and hard liquor to keep her company.