

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Black Genius

Maya Angelou A Phenomenal Woman Rising

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*Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hope springing high,
Still I'll rise.*

Dr. Maya Angelou, author, poet, playwright, stage and screen performer, director, and former nightclub singer, was born Marguerite Johnson in 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri. She attended public schools in Arkansas and California, and later studied dance with Martha Graham and drama with Frank Silvera.

Dr. Angelou has written four autobiographical works that depict sequential periods of her early life. "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" 1970 tells about Marguerite Johnson and her brother Bailey growing up in segregated Stamps, Arkansas, also Missouri and California. Her second book about her life, "Gather Together in My Name" 1976 describes Maya's stage debut, concluding with her return from the international tour of Porgy and Bess. "The Heart of a Woman" 1981 has a more mature Maya becoming more comfortable with her creativity and her successes.

When Marguerite was born her brother, Bailey called her Maya. When she was three and Bailey was four, they were put on a train and sent to Stamps, Arkansas, wearing tags on their wrists which instructed "To Whom It May Concern" that they were Marguerite and Bailey Johnson, Jr., from Long Beach, California, en route to Stamps, Arkansas, c/o Mrs. Annie Henderson. Their parents had shipped them to his mother, Mrs. Henderson in Arkansas.

In Stamps, Arkansas, they lived happily with their grandmother, whom they called Momma, and her son, Uncle Willie, who was cripple, but a proud and sensitive man. He taught Marguerite and Bailey their time tables and assisted them with their other studies.

Early in the century, their grandmother had sold lunches to the sawmen in the lumberyard (east Stamps) and the seedmen at the cotton gin (west Stamps). From being a mobile lunch counter, she set up a stand between the east Stamps and west Stamps. After a few years she had a store built in the heart of the Negro area. Over the years, it became the center of activities in town. The



formal name of the store was the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store. It was a store where people could purchase basic needs as well as food.

Their grandmother taught them wisdom and insisted on perfect discipline: "Thou shall not be dirty" and "Thou shall not be impudent" where the two commandments of Grandmother Henderson upon which hung their total salvation. Each night in the bitterest winter Maya and her brother Bailey were forced to wash faces, arms, necks, legs and feet before going to bed. She used to add, with a smirk that unprofane people can't control when venturing into profanity, "and wash as far as possible, then wash possible."

Grandmother Henderson was concerned about their souls. On Sunday mornings, she served breakfast that was to satisfy them from 9:30 AM to

3 PM. She fried thick, pink slabs of home-curbed ham and poured the grease over sliced red tomatoes. Eggs over easy, fried potatoes and onions, yellow hominy and crisp perch fried so hard that they could even chew the bones, fins and all. Her cathead biscuits were at least three inches in diameter and two inches thick.

Their pastor, Reverend Thomas joined them for breakfast every Sunday morning before service. He was always asked to bless the table. They all stood around the table; Uncle Bailey leaned on the table as Reverend Thomas began the blessing: "Blessed Father, we thank you this morning..." and on and on and on until they stopped listening. As the Reverend droned on and on, the food got cold. The eggs had withdrawn from the edge of the platter, and the grease

on the ham had turned white on the tomatoes. When the Reverend finally said, "Amen," Maya and Bailey had lost their appetites.

After breakfast, they went to Sunday School and morning services where Reverend Thomas took his text from Deuteronomy at the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. The laws were so absolute, so clearly set down, that if a person wanted to avoid hell and brimstone and being roasted forever in the devil's fire, all one had to do was memorize Deuteronomy and follow its teaching, word for word. "I would wiggle a bit in church," Maya said. "But each time I looked over at Momma, she seemed to threaten, 'Move and I'll tear you up,' so obedient to the unvoiced command, I

When Maya reached seven and Bailey was eight, their father came without warning. He arrived in front of the store in a clean gray car. Bailey said it was a De Soto. Their father was tall and handsome. Grandmother Henderson cried, "Bailey, my baby. Great God, Bailey." And Uncle Willie stuttered, "Bu-Buh-Bailey." My brother said, "Hot dog and damn. It's his. It's our daddy." And Maya's seven year old world humpty-dumptyed, never to be put back together again.

After their father was in Stamps three weeks, he took them, against their silent protest, to St. Louis, Missouri to their mother where they were introduced to thin-sliced ham, jelly beans and peanuts mixed, and lettuce on sandwich bread. In Stamps, lettuce was used only to make a bed for potato salad or slaw, and peanuts were brought in raw from the field and roasted in the bottom of the oven on

cold wintry nights.

Maya and Bailey lived with their mother who lived with her mother, their Grandmother Baxter who was a quadroon or an octoroon, or any case, she was nearly white. She was raised by a German family in Cairo, Illinois, and had come to St. Louis at the turn of the century to study nursing. While she was working at Homer G. Phillips Hospital she met and married Grandfather Baxter. Their marriage was a happy marriage.

Their mother, Maya thought, was too beautiful to be a mother. Their mother moved out of her parent's home into her own with her children. Her boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, moved in with them or they had moved in with him. Mr. Freeman raped Maya when she was eight years old. He told her if she told anyone, he would kill Bailey. She loved Bailey more than anything, so she promised not to tell. Finally, she confided in Bailey and he told their mother. Mr. Freeman had made advances toward her before the rape, but at the trial when she was asked if that was the first time he had touched her, she said, yes. He was given one year and one day in jail, but he never got a chance to do his time. His lawyer got him released that afternoon. He was found dead on the lot behind the slaughterhouse the day after he was released.

Maya thought her voice had caused someone to die, so she stopped talking, temporarily.

At age sixteen, she had an unplanned pregnancy and gave birth to her son, Guy. "The greatest gift I've said. He changed her life in so many ways. "When he was small," she said, "I knew more than he did. I expected to be his teacher. So, because of him I educated myself. When he was four, I taught him to read. But then he'd ask questions and I didn't have the answers, so I started my life-long love affairs with libraries... I've learned an awful lot because of Guy."

Life wasn't easy for Maya during those times. In addition to teaching her son, she also had to support him. She couldn't get a job as a telephone operator. The Women's Army Corp Service (WACS) turned her down because the California Labor School where she had taken dance classes was tainted with the rumor of communism. She became a cook and a nightclub waitress and, for a short time, "madam"

for two lesbian prostitutes.

When she was twenty-two, she married Tosh Angelou, a white former sailor. She left him after two and a half years and became a professional dancer. She was cast in Porgy and Bess and other musicals. With her endurance, things began to look up.

Dr. Maya Angelou is fluent in six languages. She is the recipient of more than thirty Honorary Degrees and dozens of civic and literary awards. She is currently the Reynold's Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She accepted this lifetime appointment in 1981.

In 1993, Dr. Angelou delivered a poem at the Inauguration of President Clinton. Her poem, *On The Pulse of Morning* was the second to be delivered at an inauguration, following Robert Frost's poem for President Kennedy in 1961. In 1995, she delivered her poem *A Brave and Startling Truth* at the Fiftieth Anniversary of the founding of the United Nations.

Dr. Maya Angelou is currently at work on the final volume of her autobiographical series which chronicles her life during the second half of the 1960's and culminates with the publication of *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*.

Most recently, she made her feature film directorial debut as director of "Down In The Delta" which was written by 43 year old advertising executive Myron Goble, a white southerner from Georgia. "Down In The Delta" opened in the U.S. theaters on Christmas Day. Angelou's life-long struggle that one person rising above seemingly insurmountable obstacles can truly make a difference.

*I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide*

*Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise*

*Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise*

*Bringing the gift that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hop of the slave.*

I rise

I rise

I rise.

SPECIAL THANKS TO JOE FRANKLIN,
CHAIRPERSON FOR NORTHWEST AFRICAN
AMERICAN WRITERS WORKSHOP

INAUGURATION POEM FOR PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON

On The Pulse of Morning

*A Rock, A River, A Tree
Hosts to species long since departed,
Marked the mastodon,
The dinosaur, who left dried tokens
Of their sojourn here
On our planet floor.
Any broad alarm of their hastening doom
Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.*

*But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly,
forcefully,
Come, you may stand upon my
Back and face your distant destiny,
But seek no haven in my shadow,
I will give you no hiding place down here.*

*The rock cries out to us today.
You may stand upon me,
But do not hide your face.*

*Across the wall of the world,
A River sings a beautiful song. It says,
Come, rest here by my side.*

*Each of you, a bordered country,
Delicate and strangely made proud,
Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.*

*Your armed struggles for profit
Have left collars of waste upon
My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.
Yet, today I call you to my riverside,
If you will study war no more.*

*Come, clad in peace,
And I will sing the songs
The Creator gave to me when I and the
Tree and the Rock were one.
Before cynicism was a bloody scar across
your brow
And when you yet knew you still knew
nothing
The River sang and sings on.*

*There is a true yearning to respond to
The singing River and the wise Rock,
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew,
The African, the Native American, the Sioux,
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the
Greek,
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Shiek,
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.
They hear. They all hear
The speaking of the Tree.*

*They hear the first and last of every Tree
Speak to humankind today.
Come to me,
Here beside the River,
Plant yourself beside the River.*

*Each of you, descendent of some passed-
On traveler, has been paid for.
You, who gave me my first name, you,
Pawnee, Apache, Seneca, you,
Cherokee Nation, who rested with me, then
Forced on bloody feet,
Left me to the employment of
Other seekers - desperate for gain,
Starving for gold.*

*You, the Turk, the Arab, the Swede,
The German, the Eskimo, the Scot,
The Italian, the Hungarian, the Pole,
You the Ahanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought,
Sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare,
Praying for a dream*

*Lift up your eyes
Upon the day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.*

*Women, children, men,
Take it into the palms of your hands.
Mold it into the shape of your most
Private need. Sculpt it into
The image of your most public self.
Lift up your hearts.
Each new hour holds new chances
For a new beginning.
Do not be wedded forever
To fear, yoked eternally
To brutishness.*

*The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space
To place new steps of change.
Here, on the pulse of this fine day,*

*Here, on the pulse of this new day.
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eye,
And into your brother's face,
Your country,
And say simply
Very simply
With hope-
Good morning.*

