



Maya Angelou (April 4, 1928 – May 28, 2014) was an American poet, singer, and civil rights activist. She published seven autobiographies, three books of essays, several books of poetry, and is credited with a list of plays, movies, and television shows spanning over 50 years. She received dozens of awards and more than 50 honorary degrees.

Angelou is best known for her series of seven autobiographies, which focus on her childhood and early adult experiences. The first, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) (*Je sais pourquoi chante l'oiseau en cage*), tells of her life up to the age of 17 and brought her international recognition and acclaim.

In 1993, Angelou recited her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" (1993) at the first inauguration of Bill Clinton.

00:00:09 MAYA ANGELOU: I grew up in a town in Arkansas smaller than the exposed part of this stage.

00:00:16 And I was small and strange because I stopped talking from the time I was seven-and-a-half until I was twelve-and-a-half.

00:00:27 ALICE WINKLER: The cadence is unmistakable. It only takes a few words to know when you're listening to the voice of Maya Angelou.

00:00:36 MAYA ANGELOU: I was known to be weird, but black Americans didn't call me weird. People would see me in the road. My grandmother owned most of the land behind the town, most of the land the poor whites lived on, most of the land the blacks lived on, and the only black-owned store in the town. And so people had many reasons to be angry with Mama, since Mama was severe. So people disliked my grandmother.

00:01:06 I understand that. They'd see me in the street and say, "Mm-mm. It's a shame Sister Henderson's California granddaughter has gone mental."

00:01:16 Or "Mm-mm-mm-mm-mm! Shame Sister Henderson's California granddaughter, you know."

00:01:27 So they didn't actually say I was weird, but I was pretty weird, and I understand that. However, Mama explained to me all the time, "Sister, Mama doesn't care what these people say about you being an idiot, about you being a moron."

00:01:48 "Mama knows, when you and the good Lord get ready, sister, you're going to be a preacher." I used to sit there and think, "Poor, ignorant Mama."

00:02:01 "I mean, really..."

00:02:05 "...I will never speak! What does she mean, preach? Oh, what a shame and disappointment Mama has in store for her."

00:02:19 ALICE WINKLER: Well, she didn't exactly become a preacher, but her mother was right. Words became her divine instrument, her poems, her memoirs, and her performances a kind of benediction. Maya Angelou, who died in 2014, was a sage and officially a national treasure. President Obama gave her the 2010 Presidential Medal of Freedom. When he introduced her, he mentioned that his own sister was named after her, and he said Angelou had risen with unbending determination and spoken to the conscience of our nation.

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00:05:28 As you listen, you'll occasionally hear a question from someone in the audience, but we'll start with Maya Angelou herself, here explaining why, as a child, she suddenly fell silent.

00:05:40 MAYA ANGELOU: I spoke until I was seven-and-a-half. And then, at seven-and-a-half, I was raped, and the man — I told the name of the rapist to my family. He was put in jail. He was out the next day, and the next day he was found dead. And I thought that my voice had killed him, so I stopped speaking for almost six years.

00:06:03 I had voice, but I simply refused to use it. So I was what was called a volunteer mute. After two or three years, I forgot why I stopped speaking. I just didn't talk, and it was the love of poetry and a mentor who drew me out of myself. She told me I loved poetry. I wrote about it. I wrote it, bad poetry, admittedly — the worst west of the Rockies — bad, bad poetry.

00:06:32 But I had a tablet, which I kept in my belt, and I wrote everything. Anytime anybody asked me anything, my answers were written, and this woman told me — Mrs. Flowers in Arkansas. She said, "If you really loved poetry, you would speak it." She was the one who had started me to reading it, and then she said, "Until you feel it come across your teeth, over your tongue, through your lips, you will never love poetry, so I don't want to hear you speak. I don't want you to tell me. I will not read anything you write."

00:07:08 And I wept for six months, and I mewled around and pewled around, and she kept harassing me until, finally, I went under the house with a book of poetry, and I tried to speak, and I had voice. And as you see, I've almost not stopped talking.

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