

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969) by Maya Angelou

Overview

This popular and award-winning work is the first autobiography by poet and activist Maya Angelou. It follows young Maya as endures the challenges of growing up as a black woman in the American Interwar period. Throughout she endures racism, abandonment, and rape but ends the novel self-assured and confident. In a 1970 interview, Angelou described the novel's central theme focusing on: "the hope, the hope that lives in the breast of the black American is just so tremendous that it overwhelms me sometimes."¹ Since its publication, the novel has been widely taught in high schools and universities, and Angelou won numerous awards throughout her lifetime and wrote six other autobiographies.

Why was it banned?

The novel frequently makes banned books top ten lists due to its depictions of sexuality, childhood rape, and racism.

Discussion questions

1. Maya's rape is often cited as one of the primary reasons the novel is banned. Critics have described her rape as "haunting" the novel. Maya turns temporarily mute and later continues to question her sexuality. What was your reaction to reading the novel's depictions of rape and sexuality? How would you defend those arguing for banning the book or those arguing those scenes are essential in Angelou's decision to write her own story?
2. Throughout the novel Maya endures both subtle and overt racism including the shopkeeper who calls her "Mary" and the dentist who refuses to treat her rotten tooth. However, the novel has also been recently banned for appearing to be "anti-white" or portraying white people in negative terms. What is your reaction to reading Maya's racist experiences throughout the novel? How would you counter claims that the novel is "reverse racist" or portraying white people in offensive terms?
3. Angelou overwhelmingly referred to the novel as a non-fiction autobiography, which connects it to other African American autobiographies, however it uses many elements, including a non-chronological time line, commonly used in fiction. Have you read any other books which blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction? Do you consider *Caged Bird* closer to one or the other? How does your perception inform your reading of the novel?

¹ Angelou 1970 radio interview <http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-maya-angelou-studs-terkel-20140528-story.html>

Similar works

Bastard Out of Carolina by Dorothy Alison

Going to Meet the Man by James Baldwin

Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself by Fredrick Douglass

The Autobiography of Malcom X by Alex Haley and Malcom X

No Disrespect by Sister Souljah

Recommendations for additional information

ALA Frequently Banned Books

<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks>

Maya Angelou “Still I Rise” and “I know Why the Caged Bird Sings” poems

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qviM_GnJbOM&t=1s

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeFfhH83_RE

Reading African American Autobiography edited by Eric D. Lamore