**NAME**

Maya Angelou

**BIRTH DATE**

April 4, 1928

**DEATH DATE**

May 28, 2014

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Maya Angelou became the first Black female streetcar conductor in San Francisco, California, in the 1940s.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Maya Angelou's 1969 autobiography, I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings, is the first nonfiction bestseller by an African American woman.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Maya Angelou recited one of her poems at President Bill Clinton's 1993 inaugural ceremony—marking the first inaugural recitation since 1961.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Maya Angelou was lauded in 1995 for her record-setting, two-year run on The New York Times' paperback nonfiction bestseller list.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Maya Angelou is the first African American woman to have her screenplay produced, for the 1972 film Georgia, Georgia.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

MLK Jr. was assassinated on friend Maya Angelou's birthday (April 4) in 1968. Angelou stopped celebrating her birthday for years afterward.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

In 1952, Maya Angelou married a Greek sailor named Anastasios Angelopulos, from whom she took her professional name.

**EDUCATION**

George Washington High School, California Labor School

**PLACE OF BIRTH**

St. Louis, Missouri

Maya Angelou was a civil rights activist, poet and award-winning author known for her acclaimed 1969 memoir, 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings', and her numerous poetry and essay collections.

**Who Was Maya Angelou?**

Maya Angelou was an American author, actress, screenwriter, dancer, poet and civil rights activist best known for her 1969 memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which made literary history as the first nonfiction bestseller by an African American woman. Angelou received several honors throughout her career, including two NAACP Image Awards in the outstanding literary work (nonfiction) category, in 2005 and 2009.

**Early Life**

Angelou was born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. Angelou had a difficult childhood. Her parents split up when she was very young, and she and her older brother, Bailey, were sent to live with their father's mother, Anne Henderson, in Stamps, Arkansas.

As an African American, Angelou experienced firsthand racial prejudices and discrimination in Arkansas. She also suffered at the hands of a family associate around the age of 7: During a visit with her mother, Angelou was raped by her mother's boyfriend. As vengeance for the sexual assault, Angelou's uncles killed the boyfriend.

So traumatized by the experience, Angelou stopped talking. She returned to Arkansas and spent years as a virtual mute.

**Education**

During World War II, Angelou moved to San Francisco, California. There she won a scholarship to study dance and acting at the California Labor School.

Also during this time, Angelou became the first Black female cable car conductor — a job she held only briefly — in San Francisco.

**Acting and Singing Career**

In the mid-1950s, Angelou's career as a performer began to take off. She landed a role in a touring production of *Porgy and Bess*, later appearing in the off-Broadway production *Calypso Heat Wave* (1957) and releasing her first album, *Miss Calypso* (1957).

A member of the Harlem Writers Guild and a civil rights activist, Angelou organized and starred in the musical revue *Cabaret for Freedom* as a benefit for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, also serving as the SCLC's northern coordinator.

In 1961, Angelou appeared in an off-Broadway production of Jean Genet's *The Blacks* with [James Earl Jones](https://www.biography.com/people/james-earl-jones-9357354), Lou Gossett Jr. and [Cicely Tyson](https://www.biography.com/people/cicely-tyson-9512950).

Angelou went on to earn a Tony Award nomination for her role in the play *Look Away* (1973) and an Emmy Award nomination for her work on the television miniseries *Roots* (1977), among other honors.

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**Time in Africa**

Angelou spent much of the 1960s abroad, living first in Egypt and then in Ghana, working as an editor and a freelance writer. Angelou also held a position at the University of Ghana for a time.

In Ghana, she also joined a community of "Revolutionist Returnees” exploring pan-Africanism and became close with human rights activist and Black nationalist leader [Malcolm X](https://www.biography.com/activist/malcolm-x). In 1964, upon returning to the United States, Angelou helped Malcolm X set up the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which disbanded after his assassination the following year.

**Maya Angelou Poems**

'Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie' (1971)

Angelou published several collections of poetry, but her most famous was 1971’s collection *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die*, which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

Other famous collections of Angelou’s poetry include:

* *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*(1975), which includes Angelou’s poem “Alone”
* *And Still I Rise* (1978), which features the beloved poem “Phenomenal Woman”
* *Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing?* (1983)
* *I Shall Not Be Moved*(1990), featuring the poem “Human Family”; Apple famously used a video of Angelou reading this poem in an advertisement at the 2016 Olympics
* *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (1997)

'On the Pulse of Morning' (1993)

One of her most famous works, Angelou wrote this poem especially for and recited at President [Bill Clinton](https://www.biography.com/people/bill-clinton-9251236)'s inaugural ceremony in January 1993. The occasion marked the first inaugural recitation since 1961, when [Robert Frost](https://www.biography.com/people/robert-frost-20796091) delivered his poem "The Gift Outright" at [John F. Kennedy](https://www.biography.com/people/john-f-kennedy-9362930)'s inauguration.

Angelou went on to win a Grammy Award (best spoken word album) for the audio version of the poem.

Other well-known poems by Angelou include:

* “His Day Is Done” (1962), a tribute poem Angelou wrote for Nelson Mandela as he made his secret journey from Africa to London
* “Amazing Peace” (2005), written by Angelou for the White House tree-lighting ceremony

**Books**

'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' (1969)

Friend and fellow writer [James Baldwin](https://www.biography.com/people/james-baldwin-9196635) urged Angelou to write about her life experiences. The resulting work was the enormously successful 1969 memoir about her childhood and young adult years, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

The poignant story made literary history as the first nonfiction bestseller by an African American woman. The book, which made Angelou an international star, continues to be regarded as her most popular autobiographical work.

In 1995, Angelou was lauded for remaining on *The New York Times*' paperback nonfiction bestseller list for two years—the longest-running record in the chart's history.

**Screenplay Author and Director**

After publishing *Caged Bird*, Angelou broke new ground artistically, educationally and socially with her drama *Georgia, Georgia* in 1972, which made her the first African American woman to have her screenplay produced.

In 1998, seeking new creative challenges, Angelou made her directorial debut with *Down in the Delta*, starring Alfre Woodard.

**Accomplishments and Awards**

Angelou's career has seen numerous accolades, including the Chicago International Film Festival's 1998 Audience Choice Award and a nod from the Acapulco Black Film Festival in 1999 for *Down in the Delta*.

She also won two NAACP Image Awards in the outstanding literary work (nonfiction) category, for her 2005 cookbook and 2008's *Letter to My Daughter*.

**Famous Friends**

Martin Luther King Jr., a close friend of Angelou's, was assassinated on her birthday (April 4) in 1968. Angelou stopped celebrating her birthday for years afterward, and sent flowers to King's widow, [Coretta Scott King](https://www.biography.com/people/coretta-scott-king-9542067), for more than 30 years, until Coretta's death in 2006.

Angelou was also good friends with TV personality [Oprah Winfrey](https://www.biography.com/people/oprah-winfrey-9534419), who organized several birthday celebrations for the award-winning author, including a week-long cruise for her 70th birthday in 1998.

**Maya Angelou’s Son and Husbands**

In 1944, a 16-year-old Angelou gave birth to a son, Guy (a short-lived high school relationship led to the pregnancy). After giving birth, she worked a number of jobs to support herself and her child. A poet himself, Angelou’s son now goes by the name Guy Johnson.

In 1952, Angelou wed Anastasios Angelopulos, a Greek sailor from whom she took her professional name — a blend of her childhood nickname, "Maya," and a shortened version of his surname. The couple later divorced.

Notoriously secretive about her marriages, Angelou was likely married at least three times, including in 1973 to a carpenter, Paul du Feu.

**Maya Angelou Death**

After experiencing health issues for a number of years, Angelou died on May 28, 2014, at her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The news of her passing spread quickly with many people taking to social media to mourn and remember Angelou. Singer [Mary J. Blige](https://www.biography.com/people/mary-j-blige-507644) and politician [Cory Booker](https://www.biography.com/people/cory-booker-20967497) were among those who tweeted their favorite quotes by her in tribute.

President [Barack Obama](https://www.biography.com/people/barack-obama-12782369) also issued a statement about Angelou, calling her "a brilliant writer, a fierce friend, and a truly phenomenal woman." Angelou "had the ability to remind us that we are all God's children; that we all have something to offer," he wrot