

Author, poet, actress, and champion of civil rights Dr. Maya Angelou (1928–2014) was one of the most dynamic voices in all of 20th-century American literature. The book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, an autobiographical account of her childhood, gained wide acclaim for its vivid depiction of African-American life in the South.

Published in 1969, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* established Dr. Angelou as a literary figure and opened the field of autobiography to women more generally. In the book, whose title is taken from a line in the poem “Sympathy” by Paul Laurence Dunbar, she unflinchingly tells the story of her tumultuous early life in the South. The first of seven autobiographical volumes she wrote, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* became a best seller.

As her career progressed, the pioneering author displayed extraordinary versatility. In the 1970s alone, she released the Pulitzer Prize–nominated poetry collection *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiie*, wrote the screenplay for the film *Georgia, Georgia*, received a Tony Award nomination for her role in the play *Look Away*, and played the role of Kunta Kinte's grandmother in the acclaimed television miniseries *Roots*.

In the decades that followed, she continued to write and lecture around the country. At President Bill Clinton's inauguration in January 1993, she recited “On the Pulse of Morning,” a poem she wrote for the event. Seen on television by millions, the stirring recitation further elevated her status as an American icon. The performance won a Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album. Dr. Angelou also received Best Spoken Word Album Grammy Awards for *Phenomenal Woman* in 1995 and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* in 2002.

Dr. Angelou received the National Medal of Arts in 2000, and in 2011, at a ceremony in the White House, President Barack Obama awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She continued to tour, speak, write, and teach until the end of her life. Over the course of her career, Dr. Angelou was awarded more than 50 honorary degrees, released several books of essays and poetry, and had a profound influence on American culture.