

Childhood memoir – maya angelou



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Throughout Maya Angelou's childhood, major obstacles do not cease to be thrown at her. This includes the obstacle she was born with, which is being a black female, in a harsh world of Jim Crow laws, racism and sexism, a real world existing during the 1930's-1940's in southern America. She depicts this world to us through the eyes of an innocent, confused little girl searching for her place in a hard world that is reluctant to accept her in it.

Overall, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an honest, heartfelt depiction of the struggles of racial and gender discrimination endured by a southern black girl. In this childhood memoir, Maya Angelou vividly describes herself as a child through many different events and experiences that shape her character. Between the ages of 3 and 16 years old, Maya is moved around from 7 different homes. This leaves her with a deep sense of displacement and causes her to remain shy, introverted and reserved throughout her childhood; she puts up a shield, constantly repeating to herself the phrase " I didn't come to stay"(p.

58), trying to remind herself not to get too close to people because she will just be moved again soon anyhow. Besides Bailey, her big brother who never leaves her side until adolescence, Maya does not give in and make her first friend until the 7th grade. Another reason why Maya is so reserved is because of her extreme physical insecurities. Before her insecurity metamorphosizes into pride, Maya does not appreciate being African American for its typical physical qualities; she describes herself as " big, elbowy, grating.

.. my head covered with black steel wool” and painfully recalls, “ I was described by our playmates as being shit color”(p. 117). Young Maya’s strong sense of displacement and physical insecurities lead to her profound longing for physical affection. Her innocent ignorance and confusion upon the subjects of affection and sexual relations, and her failure to recognize the difference between the two brings only trouble to Maya as she is molested several times and later raped at age late, and as she gets pregnant at the age of 16.

Overall, I would say that describing herself as a child, Maya Angelou creates a portrait of a girl who feels extremely displaced, introverted, and independent, almost alienated from the world, insecure and confused. She is in need of love, guidance and some confidence, all of which she eventually gains by the end of her teens as a result of many hard experiences. Though Maya Angelou didn’t spend her childhood in one set environment, different elements from each helped Maya evolve into a strong and confident woman. Maya spent most of her childhood in Stamps, Alabama, with her brother Bailey and her grandmother whom she refers to as “ Momma”, since she doesn’t meet her mother until later on. Maya describes: “ In Stamps, the segregation was so complete that most black children didn’t really absolutely know what whites looked like..

. I remember never believing that the whites were really real. I couldn’t force myself to think of them as people”(p. 21). The “ whitefolks” and the “ powhitetrash”, as she constantly refers to them, are a mystery to Maya.

Momma informs her that “ the less you say to the whitefolks (or even the powhitetrash) the better”(p. 22). Momma’s advice sort of suppresses Maya’s curiosity for a while, as her ignorance on the subjects of segregation would linger until later experiences will force her to face reality. She accepts what she is told such without questioning; “ Of course, I knew God was white.

.. “(p. 40). As she grows older and more aware of things, Maya starts to experience direct racism.

One example is when, upon being asked to treat her toothache, a white dentist exclaims; “ I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s. “(p. 160). However, the most significant act of racism in Maya’s life is at her 8th grade graduation, when a white speaker condescendingly explains that while the white children will grow up to become successful doctors, lawyers, scientists and artists, black children can only find success in becoming professional athletes, thus, in Maya’s mind, completely excluding black women from the picture of success. The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owenses and Joe Louises”(p.

151). Maya vividly describes the speech: “ The man’s dead words fell like bricks...

and too many would stay settled in my belly”(p. 151). This speech has a huge impact on Maya and her outlook on things, and from this day on, Maya tries to turn things around. She defies the idea of a racist glass ceiling that she once held and accepted, and longs to break through it, proving the

speaker, a harsh representation of society wrong. Through several events in her early adolescence, we can see that she has become more independent, strong and self-assured. Also, her ignorance has evolved into awareness, as she describes: “ I had gone from being ignorant of being ignorant to being aware of being aware”(p.

230). The hard experiences enforced upon her by her environment had molded her into a strong young black woman. She shows her newfound confidence as she becomes the first black streetcar conductor at age fifteen. At sixteen, she hides her pregnancy from her mother for eight months and graduates from high school.

As the book ends, Maya starts to feel confident as a mother to her newborn son, and as a proud young black woman in the working world. “ The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power. The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. “(p.

231) In this memoir, Angelou depicts childhood as being a struggle. Many obstacles were thrown at her such as being abandoned by her parents, not having one true home, not being pretty, being molested and raped, living in the backseat of a car, and just being a young black female in a sexist, segregated, prejudice, environment. She shows that these hardships don't just make up your childhood, they make up who you are, and how you will grow up to be. These events and experiences mold you.

Maya also describes childhood to be an era of confusion, in which one has to find one's true self, and grow comfortable with it. Describing her childhood, Maya asks, " wasn't I known for my awkwardness? "(p. 245) Maya was never comfortable in her own skin as she was growing up; throughout her childhood she struggles to " accept [her] social isolation and social freakishness"(p. 235).

During her childhood, she simply accepts her isolation and displacement, but in her early adolescence, she longs for a place, which is, in her mind, incessantly denied to her: " I wanted to be a woman, but that seemed to me to be a world to which I was eternally refused entrance"(p. 238). However, instead of simply remaining in her slump of not belonging and self-doubt, she moves on and experiments with other things. For instance, at one point, she questions, " maybe I was turning into a lesbian"(p. 236), and has a short adventure with lesbianism, which she eventually grows out of.

In the memoir, Maya also shows that her environment, the world around her, has played a big part in becoming who she is now. She depicts the world to be a cold place, filled with anger and hatred shown through the racism, segregation, prejudice and sexism, a place where she does not belong. The hardships with rape, racism and sexism around her definitely make a huge difference in her life, forcing her to work harder to find her place. On the positive side, Maya is graced with remarkable number of strong female role models in her family and community.

Momma, Vivian, Grandmother Baxter, and Bertha Flowers, four of the female figures in Maya's life have very different personalities, experiences, and

views on life, but despite being black and female, the most vulnerable people to attack from racism and sexism, they manage to maintain their dignity and self-respect. Throughout the book, none of them ever capitulates to racist dishonor and attack. This gives Maya strength, and helps her become confident and proud to be the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco, and she does so with the support and encouragement of her female elders. Overall, Maya shows that childhood is an era in which, with the aid of your environment and the people close to you, you find yourself and grow comfortable with it.

Maya Angelou's book conveys the difficulties of going through constant racial and gender discrimination endured by a young and confused southern black girl. At the same time, however, she speaks about and deals with many other issues that not only black females can relate to, such as the relationships between parents and children, physical and sexual insecurity and confusion, child abuse, and the search for one's own path in life. These issues do not discriminate, and Maya Angelou has depicted the impact of these issues on her life honestly and gracefully. In the end, Angelou shows how these difficulties actually pushed her to become a strong, confident, proud black woman.