



Maya Angelou is all smiles at her post-speech book signing.



LISTS BY CRYSTAL HOLLAND, CONTINUED

Black History / Poets

- Gwendolyn Brooks
- Paul Lawrence Dunbar
- Nikki Giovanni
- Langston Hughes
- Maya Angelou

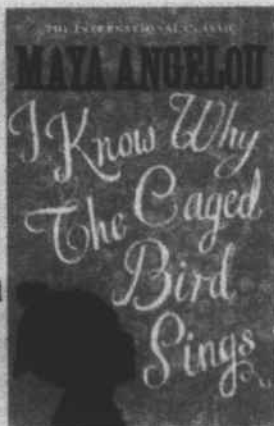
Review: 1969

A literary superstar was born with the publication of "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings."

This seminal autobiographical novel by Maya Angelou has been a best seller around the globe and cherished by generations. After hearing tales of her bittersweet upbringing in tiny Stamps, Ark., friends convinced Angelou to put pen to paper and tell her story. And she did so gloriously.

Angelou was also inspired to write the book following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was killed on her birthday, April 4 in 1968.

The story is one of triumph and tragedy. Angelou tells how she and her brother, Bailey, are abandoned by their parents and shipped off to live with their paternal grandmother and an uncle in Stamps.



Angelou Jokes, Reads Poems

Cambridge, Mass., could have been the home of a woman considered one of the world's best wordsmiths.

Maya Angelou told a crowd of more than 200 on Feb. 19, 2006 at the Central Library that when she was looking to make a fresh start in the early 1980s, she considered relocating to only two places: Cambridge and Winston-Salem.

Angelou, known globally for her prose, had visited Winston-Salem a decade

earlier. The city left an immediate impression, she said. People here said "hello" in grocery stores, she recalled, and while residents were impressed to meet a renowned poet and writer, folks here were never overly star-struck. She was also fond of Cambridge, a Boston suburb that boasts two of the world's pre-eminent institutions of higher learning – MIT and Harvard.

In the end, climate tipped the scale in Winston-Salem's favor. "I don't do snow with any grace," Angelou said, "so I chose Winston-Salem."

Her appearance at the library was billed as a Black History Month program, but Angelou made it much more than that. She shared stories from her life – some of which are included in her series of best-selling autobiographies – and fused them with poetry, some of her own as well as poems of others.

She credited poetry, with its messages of hope, redemption and love, with black people's survival and resilience in a country that has often been hostile and crude.

"We are still here," she said to the racially mixed crowd. "Still the last hired and the first fired, still the butt of many white liberals' jokes, but we are still here."

Angelou said she called Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin, the director of the library, to volunteer her services for the program. Libraries and the knowledge they hold have a special place in Angelou's heart. As a child, literature and poetry piqued her interest. She began writing at an early age; some of her childhood writings are archived at Wake Forest University, where Angelou is the Reynolds Professor of American Studies.

She recited poems written by James Weldon Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Nikki Giovanni, even Edgar Allan Poe. She recited all the poems from memory. Angelou encouraged the crowd to store literature and any bits of knowledge that they could in their minds, which she called the original computer.



"Have something in this," she said, pointing to her head.

Sunday's program had many light moments. Angelou shared several humorous episodes from her storied past, including the hostile encounter she had with a waitress at a health food restaurant after Angelou attempted to light a cigarette in the eatery. The poet gave up smoking years ago but that encounter lives on in "The Health-Food Diner," the pro-meat poem she penned about the incident.

She called laughter the best medicine. Laugh as much as possible, she said.

"I don't trust people who don't laugh," she added.

Angelou, who despite her fame called herself an "artist in progress, took questions from the audience and stayed behind after the event to sign books and programs for attendees.

The Chronicle

Angelou's Books of Poetry

- Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die, 1971
- Oh Pray My Wings are Gonna Fit Me Well, 1975
- And Still I Rise, 1978
- Shaker, Why Don't You Sing, 1983
- Now Sheba Sings the Song, 1987
- I Shall Not Be Moved, 1990
- On the Pulse of Morning, 1993
- The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou, 1994
- Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems for Women, 1995
- A Brave and Startling Truth, 1995
- From a Black Woman to a Black Man, 1995
- Amazing Peace, 2005
- Mother, a Cradle to Hold Me, 2006
- Celebrations, Rituals of Peace and Prayer, 2006
- Poetry for Young People, 2007
- We Had Him, 2009
- His Day is Done, 2012

continued on page 14