

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

by
Maya Angelou

Book Information

Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

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Book Level: 6.7

Interest Level: UG

This sensitive autobiography tells of a Black woman's childhood journey to retain her personal "human dignity."

Award: Coretta Scott King Award/Honors; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

Topics: Biographies/Autobiographies, Biographies/Autobiographies (All); Family Life, Growing Up; People, African American; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Bailey Marguerite's older brother and most faithful companion as a child

Daddy Bailey Marguerite and Bailey's handsome father, who speaks properly

Louise Marguerite's best friend in Stamps, Arkansas

Marguerite a young girl who lives with various family members around the country while she is growing up

Momma (Annie Henderson) Marguerite and Bailey's grandmother, who owns a local general store

Mr. Freeman a man Marguerite's mother lives with in St. Louis who rapes Marguerite

Mrs. Flowers an educated lady who lives near Marguerite and helps her understand the power of the spoken word

Uncle Willie Marguerite's crippled uncle, who lives with Momma

Vivian Baxter Marguerite and Bailey's eccentric and beautiful mother

Vocabulary

anachronism a person or occurrence that is out of place in history

condescension acting with an air of superiority over others

cynic a person who believes others' actions are motivated by selfishness

quadroon a person whose ancestry is one-quarter Negro

quandary a confusing or mentally disturbing situation

Synopsis

At the age of three, Marguerite Johnson and her older brother Bailey are sent to Stamps, Arkansas to live with Grandmother Henderson and crippled Uncle Willie when the children's parents decided to end their marriage. Their grandmother is the owner of the local general store and is a respected member of the community. While living with her grandmother, whom she calls Momma, Marguerite begins to learn what being Black in a poor, segregated, Southern community is all about. She sees the others struggle while working in the cotton fields and witnesses the abuses her grandmother must endure from some of the white people of the area. Marguerite copes by reading books and sharing her life with Bailey.

One day, Marguerite's father arrives in Stamps. After a short while, her father takes Marguerite and Bailey to St. Louis to see their mother. He stays for a short time in St. Louis then leaves Marguerite and Bailey to be with their mother and her family. Living with her mother's family, Marguerite learns about a different way of life. Her relatives, especially her grandmother, have connections in the gambling community and wield a great amount of power. Marguerite learns that although they are mean, tough people to the outside world, they are particularly close and protective of one another.

Eventually Marguerite and Bailey move in with their

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mother. Soon after, Mr. Freeman, her mother's boyfriend, begins molesting Marguerite. Freeman threatens to kill Bailey if Marguerite ever tells anyone. Confused about her feelings, Marguerite tells no one. One day however, Freeman rapes Marguerite. In great pain, Marguerite staggers to and from the library and then to bed. When it is discovered Freeman has raped her, Marguerite is taken to the hospital and Freeman is put on trial. He is convicted of raping Marguerite and is given a short sentence. He never serves time in prison since he is released that same day and is found dead shortly after. Marguerite believes her words have somehow killed him and vows to never talk to anyone but Bailey. Her silence frustrates her family members, who finally decide to send her and Bailey back to Stamps.

Though she is back home and comfortable again, Marguerite still does not speak. Not long after they returned, a neighbor lady invites Marguerite to her house and speaks to her about the power of spoken words. The elderly woman, Mrs. Flowers, also introduces Marguerite to poetry. This kindness sparks Marguerite to speak and to enjoy herself again. Life almost resumes its normalcy until after Marguerite graduates from grade school. Later that year, Bailey witnesses the discovery of a dead Negro man. His experience seems to inspire Momma to announce that they are going to California where Marguerite's parents are both living. They live near their father for a while and then move to San Francisco to be with their mother.

San Francisco holds great new wonder for Marguerite. She enjoys the city immensely. She attends several high schools and eventually is given a scholarship to attend dance and drama classes at an adult night school. Living with her mother and her mother's husband, Marguerite is exposed to a great variety of things, including good restaurants and the ins and outs of gambling.

One summer Marguerite is invited to vacation with her father in Los Angeles. But the event does not turn out to be the "vacation" she had envisioned. Marguerite lives with her father and his girlfriend,

whom she does not like. Marguerite's father takes her to Mexico one day, and she ends up having to drive her drunken father back to Los Angeles. Later, Marguerite finds herself the focus of a fight between her father and his girlfriend. The situation ends badly, and Marguerite sets out on her own. She spends the next month living in an abandoned car. She then returns to San Francisco feeling older and wiser. She loses interest in school and decides she wants to work on the streetcars. This becomes more difficult than she anticipated since Black people had never before been hired for this position. Through her own persistence and some attempts to gain support from Negro organizations, Marguerite is finally hired for the job. She works as a conductorette for a semester and then returns to school and completes her education. Just before she graduates, Marguerite becomes pregnant. Her pregnancy escapes everyone's notice until her eighth month. Marguerite writes her step-father about her pregnancy, and he and her mother take care of her. With her mother's help, Marguerite learns that she can be a good mother to the baby boy.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Marguerite moves to San Francisco around the time World War II breaks out. She describes the gradual disappearance of the Japanese Americans who have been living and working in the community. What do you think was the reason the Japanese moved out of the area?

There could be two explanations. They may have moved out of fear for their own safety because Japan was an enemy in the war. Also, many were forced into camps by the American government. Though they were law-abiding American citizens, the war made them automatic suspects.

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Literary Analysis

Many people influence Marguerite's life. Some of these people have a significant impact on her. Who are some of the people who influence her and what does she seem to learn from them?

Momma teaches Marguerite to face life's difficulties with dignity and patience. Vivian, her mother, tries to teach Marguerite poise, good manners, and the courage to be her own person. The Baxter clan helps Marguerite understand the importance of family. Miss Kirwin, one of her high school teachers, teaches her to love knowledge. Mrs. Flowers, an elderly neighbor lady in Stamps, shows her the power of words. Bailey teaches her that she can be loved no matter what happens.

Inferential Comprehension

What can the reader infer from Mr. Freeman's trial, his subsequent death, and the reputation of the Baxter clan?

The judge's verdict is fair and is not influenced by outside forces. However, the judge's decision to release Mr. Freeman rather than send him directly to prison appears to have been influenced by the family. Grandmother Baxter's calm reaction to Mr. Freeman's death seems to indicate that she was not surprised. The family's reputation for meanness and professed loyalty to one another would suggest they had something to do with his death.

Constructing Meaning

When Marguerite and her brother receive the Christmas gifts from their parents they begin to wonder what they had done to make their parents send them away. They blame themselves for something that is not their fault. Have you ever blamed yourself for something beyond your control? What was the truth of the matter?

Many children have felt responsible for family problems, even if it was beyond their control. Sometimes adults step in to help children realize that the problems are not the child's fault. Stress and frustration can cause adults to lash out at children, and the difficulties parents experience are usually unrelated to their love for their children.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The rural South is a difficult place for young Marguerite and her family to live. Research the history of the area where Marguerite lives with Momma. Have the students create reports about what life was like there during the time period.

Comparing and Contrasting Marguerite's reaction to Mr. Freeman's abusive actions may seem surprising to some students. Invite the school counselor to the class to discuss what happens to people who are abused either verbally or physically. Have the students list and connect this information with Marguerite's experiences.

Understanding Sequence In an unusual twist to the story, Marguerite invents her own version of what happened between Momma and the local dentist. Have the students think of a situation or incident that occurred in their own lives that they wished had happened a different way. Ask the students to write a creative version of what they wished had happened. These could be funny or serious stories.

Responding to Literature Marguerite experiences a great deal in her growing years. She lives in different places and meets many different kinds of people. She also finds herself in a wide variety of situations. Recall some of the more difficult circumstances she faces and ask the students what they would have done in Marguerite's place. Discuss whether they think she would have made the situations better or worse by reacting differently.