

Maya Angelou

(1928-)

Poet, Author, Actress, Civil-rights
Activist, Historian & Educator

When learning of some of the things Maya Angelou has accomplished, one would never think she had a very meager and humble childhood. Born on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri, as Marguerite Johnson, she and her brother, Bailey, were raised by their grandmother in rural Stamps, Arkansas. She became a voluntary mute at the age of 7, after she was raped, and did not speak for nearly six years. Beating insurmountable odds, she graduated from high school with honors at the age of 16 and eventually studied dance, journalism, and became a very popular educator.

To list Maya Angelou's credentials would take several volumes, but some of her better-known accomplishments can be mentioned. In 1969, she was nominated for the National Book Award for *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, an autobiographical book, and was nominated for the Pulitzer prize in 1971, for *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Die*. In 1993, President-elect Bill Clinton personally asked her to write and deliver a poem at his inauguration. The poem was titled, "On the Pulse of the Morning." She has received countless honorary degrees from highly acclaimed universities, has been awarded many more honors and recognitions for her outstanding achievements in civil rights and humanitarian causes. She has personally worked with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., has been commissioned by several U.S. Presidents to leadership positions, and was twice nominated for a Tony award—one of which was for her performance in Quincy Jones' *Roots*.

Maya Angelou's literary works convey powerful themes of courage, perseverance, and strong female role models. She travels nationally to speak on college campuses to share her vast knowledge and experiences. Truly, she is a national treasure, captivatingly graceful, and full of life.