

# Southfield Public Library

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## *I know why the caged bird sings by Maya Angelou*

*Discussion questions used at SPL February 10 & 11, 2015*

1. The book's opening passage really sets the tone.... What do you think it says about Maya's sense of herself? What was her place in the world?
2. Did you get a sense of why her parents sent her and Bailey Junior to live with the grandmother?
3. Interesting about names.. She was Marguerite or Ritie or Maya or Mary... How powerful are names?
4. Whiteville.. what did her description of white people mean to you? Do you think it is still like that in parts of our country? P25
5. How did she differentiate between whites and powhitetrash? Were they the same creatures to her?
6. Why do you think the girls acted as they did? And why did that memory stay with Maya? P30
7. Overall, how did Angelou view her time with Momma?
8. What made Momma send them back to their parents?
9. How different would their lives had been if they stayed in Stamps?
10. Scene in the church..p40
11. Her rape at an early age obviously affected her tremendously. Did she ever recover from it?
12. How did her session as a kitchen girl strengthen her? Weaken her?
13. How does her friendship with Louise change her life? Why didn't she have a friend before?
14. How would you describe her relationship with her brother?
15. She talked about two "father figures" Big Bailey and Daddy Cliddell? Which man was the better father to her?
16. What was her relationship with her mother? Was she good for Maya in any way? What do you think her feelings toward her mother were? Did they change over the years?
17. Who were positive role models for Maya?
18. What did you think of Momma – her grandmother? How much influence did she have on Maya for the few years she lived with her?
19. What did Uncle Willie mean to her?
20. What do you think the title means?
21. Does this book give you a good sense of what life was like in the South during the pre-war years?
22. This book has been described as a semi-fictional autobiography a mix of memory, biography and fiction... would you agree with that? Why do you think it could be called that.. do you see some parts as fiction?
23. This book was horrific to read in some parts, but quite inspirational in others... which part spoke to you more? Or was there something else that really spoke to you?
24. How did the experiences of Ritie produce Maya Angelou?
25. What were Maya's feelings about her looks? How did that affect her? Would you agree with her?

26. What was the most amazing thing in the book for you? Her time living in the junkyard with the band of kids? Her trip to Mexico with her father? Their trip on the train cross country as little ones?
27. Did this make you want to read her other biographical works?
28. Erase from your mind all you know of Maya Angelou - just from what you know of her from this book, what word would you use to describe her? Why?

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## *General discussion questions*

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author’s writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author’s use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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## Caged Bird

BY MAYA ANGELOU

A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wing  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the  
sighing trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn  
bright lawn

and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of  
dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare  
scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.