

Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes was one of the strongest voices of the Harlem Renaissance, the great expression of African-American culture that took place in Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s. He wrote lyrical poems, angry poems, and deeply thoughtful poems. In his short stories, he often put wise and inspiring words into the everyday speech of common people. He understood the rhythms of speech and the power of song and humor to touch his readers and he understood how to use speech, song, and humor to voice the hopes and dreams of African-Americans.

Langston was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902. His mother loved books and made them an important part of his life, but she had to work very hard and was unable to provide many luxuries. His father had abandoned his mother when Langston was born. The boy's grandmother helped to educate him too. She taught him about the African-American heroes who fought for freedom from slavery. As a boy, Langston listened to those stories and learned to love the poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Carl Sandburg,

When Langston's mother remarried, he moved to Cleveland with her and her new husband. Meanwhile, his father had moved to Mexico. When Langston graduated from high school, he took a train to Mexico to join his father. On the train, he wrote his first poem, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*. It was an amazing achievement for such a young writer. It was published in *Crisis*, the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1921 and became one of his best-known poems.

Hughes attended Columbia University in New York but soon dropped out to travel around the world by ship. He did odd jobs, but all the time he continued to write poetry. He used his experiences at those jobs in his writing. Some of his best known works are *Weary Blues*, *The Dream Keeper*, *Shakespeare in Harlem*, *Fields of Wonder*, and *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. During the 1930s, he wrote many short stories, including the stories of Jesse B. Semple, an African-American man who sits around talking with his friends. A narrator comments. As Semple talks, he asks what seem to be simple questions about race and life in America. Some critics have thought these questions made Jesse B. Semple sound "simple," but others recognize that the questions are far from simple and remain important today.

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Hughes wrote more than 12 volumes of poetry, plus plays, novels, and stories. He won many awards and was deeply appreciated by young writers, African-Americans and others, who read his work as they struggled to find their own voices. He died of lung cancer in New York in 1967.

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Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou is a poet, historian, author, actress, playwright, civil-rights activist, producer and director. She was born Marguerite Johnson in St. Louis in 1928 and was raised in rural Arkansas. She lectures throughout the US and abroad and is Reynolds professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in North Carolina.

During her childhood, Maya moved back and forth between family members. At three, she and her brother were sent by their parents to Arkansas to live with her uncle and her grandmother. Once, Maya's father came to Arkansas and offered to take her and her brother to live with him in California. He asked if they wanted to see their mother in St. Louis first. When they got there, he took off and left them with her.

While living in St. Louis, Maya began to read a lot. She loved to read the writings of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Edgar Allan Poe, and later, she read William Shakespeare. In 1940, Maya and her brother moved with their mother to San Francisco, where she finished high school.

Although she was quite young, she had had many adult experiences. She had her first child soon after she graduated from high school and spent the next several years in San Diego and Los Angeles, moving often. She married a musician, but the marriage started to fall apart within a year and they divorced.

Maya was determined to accomplish something in a creative field. She studied dance and drama, and she started writing poetry. After a time, she began to compose music for her poems. In 1953, she traveled in *Porgy and Bess*, an opera about African-American life by the composer George Gershwin.

She was very successful as a dancer and began to get work as a singer in nightclubs. When she and her son finally settled in Los Angeles. Maya began to write again. She started with short sketches, moved to song lyrics, and then tried writing short stories. She met the African-American writer John Killens, who talked her into moving to New York.

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In New York, she met the comedian Godfrey Cambridge, and together they wrote and produced a show to make money for the civil rights movement. It was called *Cabaret for Freedom* and was very popular.

Maya married a South African freedom fighter and moved with him to Cairo, in Egypt, where she was editor of *The Arab Observer*, an English-language news weekly. In Ghana, she was feature editor of *The African Review* and taught at the University of Ghana. She speaks French, Spanish, Italian and Fanti, a West African language.

In the mid-1960s, Maya and her son moved back to the United States, where her articles were published in several national magazines. Writing made her think about her own life, and in 1967, she began work on an autobiography. Three years later, she published the first volume, titled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It was an immediate success and received a nomination for the National Book Award. The book tells the story of the time in her childhood when she lived with her grandmother in Arkansas.

Maya Angelou has been a groundbreaker for African-American women in television and films. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was made into a TV special on CBS. She wrote and produced the PBS documentary *Afro-Americans in the Arts* and a 10-part TV series on African traditions in American life. She also acted in the PBS drama based on Alex Haley's novel about the descendants of a slave, *Roots*.

At the inauguration of President Bill Clinton in 1993, she read her specially commissioned poem "On the Pulse of Morning." On that day, Maya Angelou's words were heard around the world.