

## Maya Angelou

1928–

### Other Works

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*  
*Even the Stars Look Lonesome*  
 "On the Pulse of Morning"  
*Wouldn't Take Nothin' for My*  
*Journey Now*

**A Southern Childhood** Marguerite Johnson, now better known as Maya Angelou, acquired her nickname of Maya from her brother, who called her "My" or "Mine." She was not yet five when her parents divorced, and she and her brother went to live in Stamps, Arkansas, where her father's mother owned a small grocery store. There she experienced the poverty of the Great Depression. In 1940, after her mother remarried, she moved to San Francisco where, in addition to working as a streetcar conductor, she studied dance and drama.

**Multiple Talents** After high school, she worked as a cook, a waitress, a dancer, and a singer. In the late 1950s, she performed in off-Broadway plays, joined the Harlem Writers Guild, and served as the northern coordinator of Martin Luther King's

Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1963, she taught music and drama in the newly independent African nation of Ghana.

**Writing Fame** Encouraged by writer friends like James Baldwin and Jules Feiffer, Angelou wrote the autobiography of her early years, published in 1970 as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. A resounding success, it prompted several more installments, including *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), which chronicles Angelou's activist years in New York, and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), about her time in Africa. Also a talented poet, she was invited by Bill Clinton to create and read a poem at his 1993 inauguration as president.

## Author Activity

**Powerful Poetry** Find out more about Maya Angelou's role at the 1993 presidential inauguration. What poem did she recite? Obtain a copy of the poem, and rehearse and present an oral recitation.

**CAREER-MINDED GIRLS**  
 Beginners Needed in War Vital Telephone Work

**GIRLS WANTED**  
 Conductresses Motormen for streetcars

Full or Part Time  
 No experience necessary  
 Apply in Person



MARKET STREET RAILWAY COMPANY

**THE PACIFIC TELEPHONE and TELEGRAPH COMPANY**

**START YOUR CAREER AS**

1. Telephone Operator
2. Typist
3. Clerk
4. Junior Stenographers

**DINING-SERVICE ATTENDANTS**

Full pay while in training, meals program, vacation, sick pay, disability and benefits plans.



**I Was a Salesgirl!**  
 When I was twelve I worked as a salesgirl at the Market Street Railway Company. I remember the excitement of the job and the pride I felt in my uniform.

**Come In and Talk It Over Today!**  
 Guided State Employment Service  
 PERMANENT METALS DEPARTMENT  
 CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS  
 NO FEE CHARGED

# PREPARING to Read

## Getting a Job

### from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Autobiography by MAYA ANGELOU

#### Connect to Your Life

**On the Job** Think about a part-time or summer job that you have had in the past or one that you hope to have in the future. How would you feel if you were denied the job because of your race, religion, ethnic background, or something else that had nothing to do with your qualifications? How would you respond to such a situation?

“... in the struggle lies the glory.”

## Build Background

**Job Discrimination** “Getting a Job” takes place in San Francisco in the 1940s during a period when more and more jobs were opening up to American women because so many men were overseas fighting in World War II. However, despite these new opportunities for women, racial prejudice still limited the types of employment open to African Americans.

The following selection is an excerpt from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the first in a series of autobiographical works written by Maya Angelou. Angelou, born Marguerite Johnson, was raised by her grandmother in Arkansas, but at the age of 12 she moved to San Francisco to live with her mother.

#### WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

- |               |             |
|---------------|-------------|
| ascend        | haphazardly |
| charade       | haughty     |
| comprehend    | hypocrisy   |
| dexterous     | ostensibly  |
| diametrically | terse       |

## Focus Your Reading

**LITERARY ANALYSIS NARRATIVE NONFICTION** An autobiography can be classified as a work of **narrative nonfiction**, which tells a true story about real people, places, and events. As such, it has many of the same elements that a fictional narrative has. Angelou, for example, creates a vivid **setting**, as illustrated by this description of her room:

*My room had all the cheeriness of a dungeon and the appeal of a tomb.*

As you read this selection, look for evidence of other fictional elements, such as **plot** and **conflict**, that Angelou uses to bring events to life.

#### ACTIVE READING IDENTIFYING CAUSE AND EFFECT IN NONFICTION

When reading narrative nonfiction, you often get a better understanding of events if you pause to consider their **cause-and-effect** relationships. The following sentence illustrates such a relationship:

*Women had replaced men on the streetcars as conductors and motormen [cause], and the thought of sailing up and down the hills of San Francisco in a dark-blue uniform . . . caught my fancy [effect].*

The first condition—women working as streetcar conductors—caused the effect: Angelou imagined herself doing such work.

**READER'S NOTEBOOK** As you read this selection, jot down at least three causes that led Marguerite to seek the job of streetcar conductor. Then list at least three effects that this experience had on her life.

# Getting a Job

TELEPHONE GA. 1112

65 Help Wanted—  
Female

65 Help Wanted—  
Female

## GIRLS WANTED

Conduciorettes Motorettes  
for streetcars

Full or Part Time  
No experience necessary  
Apply in Person



MARKET STREET RAILWAY COMPANY

**I Was a Salesgirl**

I am welding Liberty at Richmond and I make more money than I did in my life at a sales job. It isn't as hard as you think. I'm doing my share at home front to my husband on the home front.

Annie Otto  
Age 43-102

LOKAI

win the war by welding at Richmond. You get \$214 a month while you learn to weld. After you learn you get promotions to pay \$270 a month as a welder. 10% extra is paid for swing shift; 15% for night shift.

and Talk It Over Today!

States Employment Service

201 North Street Richmond  
12th and Oak St. Oakland

ALUMINUM METALS CORPORATION  
KAISER COMPANY, INC.  
KAISER CARGO, INC.  
105 AT RICHMOND, CALIFORNIA

250 17th Street Oakland  
29th and North Richmond

## Maya Angelou

**M**y room had all the cheeriness of a dungeon and the appeal of a tomb. It was going to be impossible to stay there, but leaving held no attraction for me, either. . . . The answer came to me with the suddenness of a collision. I would go to work. Mother wouldn't be difficult to convince; after all, in school I was a year ahead of my grade and Mother was a firm believer in self-sufficiency. In fact, she'd be pleased to think that I had that much gumption,<sup>1</sup> that much of her in my character. (She liked to speak of herself as the original "do-it-yourself girl.")

Once I had settled on getting a job, all that remained was to decide which kind of job I was most fitted for. My intellectual pride had kept me from selecting typing, shorthand or filing as subjects in school, so office work was ruled out. War plants and shipyards demanded birth certificates, and mine would reveal me to be fifteen, and ineligible for work. So the well-paying defense jobs were also out. Women had replaced men on the streetcars as

1. gumption: initiative; boldness.

**San Francisco Chronicle**

FOUNDED 1865—VOL. CLVI, NO. 141

THE CITY'S ONLY HOME-OWNED NEWSPAPER

CCCCA SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.

THIS WORLD TODAY

ROYCE BRIER

conductors and motormen, and the thought of sailing up and down the hills of San Francisco in a dark-blue uniform, with a money changer at my belt, caught my fancy.

Mother was as easy as I had anticipated. The world was moving so fast, so much money was being made, so many people were dying in Guam,<sup>2</sup> and Germany, that hordes of strangers became good friends overnight. Life was cheap and death entirely free. How could she have the time to think about my academic career?

To her question of what I planned to do, I replied that I would get a job on the streetcars. She rejected the proposal with: "They don't accept colored people on the streetcars."

I would like to claim an immediate fury which was followed by the noble determination to break the restricting tradition. But the truth is, my first reaction was one of disappointment. I'd pictured myself, dressed in a neat blue serge suit, my money changer swinging jauntily at my waist, and a cheery smile for the passengers which would make their own work day brighter.

From disappointment, I gradually ascended the emotional ladder to haughty indignation, and finally to that state of stubbornness where the mind is locked like the jaws of an enraged bulldog.

I would go to work on the streetcars and wear a blue serge suit. Mother gave me her support with one of her usual terse asides, "That's what you want to do? Then nothing beats a trial but a failure. Give it everything you've got. I've told you many times, 'Can't do is like Don't Care.' Neither of them have a home."

Translated, that meant there was nothing a person can't do, and there should be nothing a human being didn't care about. It was the most positive encouragement I could have hoped for.

In the offices of the Market Street Railway Company, the receptionist seemed as surprised to see me there as I was surprised to find the interior dingy and the décor drab. Somehow I had expected waxed surfaces and carpeted floors. If I had met no resistance, I might have decided against working for such a poor-mouth-looking concern. As it was, I explained that I had come to see about a job. She asked, was I sent by an agency, and when I replied that I was not, she told me they were only accepting applicants from agencies.

The classified pages of the morning papers had listed advertisements for motorettes<sup>3</sup> and conductorettes and I reminded her of that. She gave me a face full of astonishment that my suspicious nature would not accept.

"I am applying for the job listed in this morning's *Chronicle* and I'd like to be presented to your personnel manager." While I spoke in supercilious<sup>4</sup> accents, and looked at the room as if I had an oil well in my own backyard, my armpits were being pricked by millions of hot pointed needles. She saw her escape and dived into it.

"He's out. He's out for the day. You might call tomorrow and if he's in, I'm sure you can see him." Then she swiveled her chair around on its rusty screws and with that I was supposed to be dismissed.

"May I ask his name?"

She half turned, acting surprised to find me still there.

"His name? Whose name?"

"Your personnel manager."

2. **Guam:** a U.S. island territory that was a scene of fierce fighting during World War II.

3. **motorettes:** female streetcar drivers.

4. **supercilious** (sū'pər-sīl'ē-əs): disdainful; haughty.

We were firmly joined in the hypocrisy to play out the scene.

“The personnel manager? Oh, he’s Mr. Cooper, but I’m not sure you’ll find him here tomorrow. He’s . . . Oh, but you can try.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

And I was out of the musty room and into the even mustier lobby. In the street I saw the receptionist and myself going faithfully through paces that were stale with familiarity, although I had never encountered that kind of situation before and, probably, neither had she. We were like actors who, knowing the play by heart, were still able to cry afresh over the old tragedies and laugh spontaneously at the comic situations.

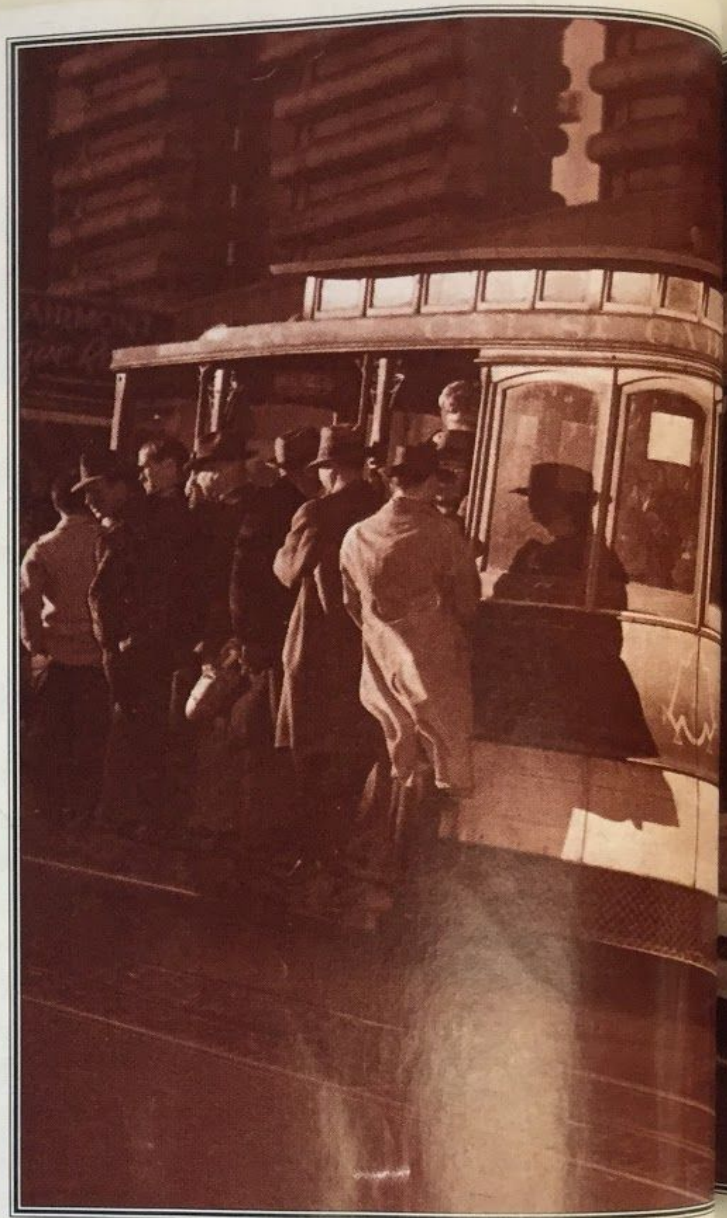
The miserable little encounter had nothing to do with me, the me of me, any more than it had to do with that silly clerk. The incident was a recurring dream, concocted years before by stupid whites and it eternally came back to haunt us all. The secretary and I were like Hamlet and Laertes<sup>5</sup> in the final scene, where, because of harm done by one ancestor to another, we were bound to duel to the death. Also because the play must end somewhere.

I went further than forgiving the clerk, I accepted her as a fellow victim of the same puppeteer.

On the streetcar, I put my fare into the box and the conductorette looked at me with the usual hard eyes of white contempt. “Move into the car, please move on in the car.” She patted her money changer.

Her Southern nasal accent sliced my meditation and I looked deep into my thoughts. All lies, all comfortable lies. The receptionist was not innocent and neither was I. The whole charade we had played out in that crummy waiting room had directly to do with me, Black, and her, white.

I wouldn’t move into the streetcar but stood on the ledge over the conductor, glaring. My



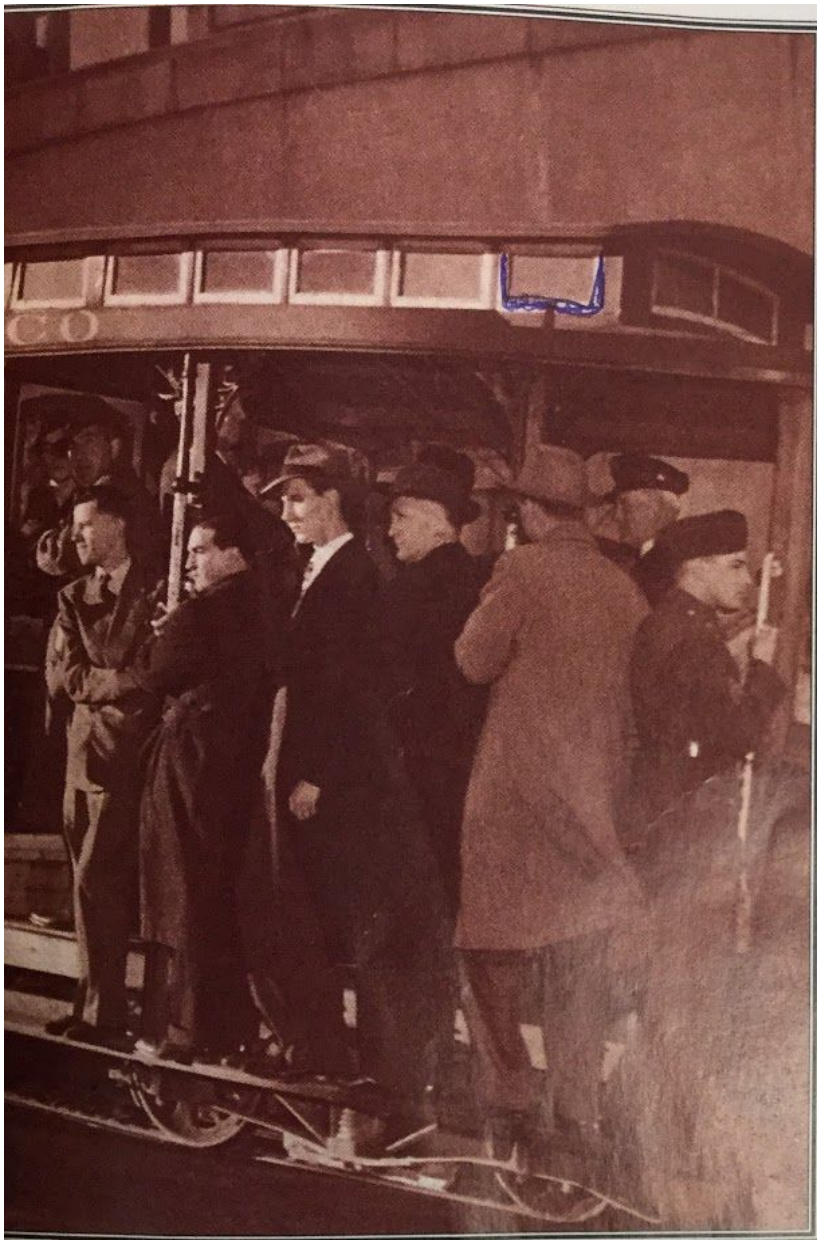
mind shouted so energetically that the announcement made my veins stand out, and my mouth tighten into a prune.

I WOULD HAVE THE JOB. I WOULD BE A CONDUCTORETTE AND SLING A FULL MONEY CHANGER FROM MY BELT. I WOULD.

The next three weeks were a honeycomb of determination with apertures<sup>6</sup> for the days to go in and out. The Negro organizations to whom I appealed for support bounced me back and

5. **Hamlet and Laertes** (lā-ûr'tēz): characters who kill each other in a sword fight in the last scene of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

6. **apertures** (ăp'ər-chərz): openings.



forth like a shuttlecock on a badminton court. Why did I insist on that particular job? Openings were going begging that paid nearly twice the money. The minor officials with whom I was able to win an audience thought me mad. Possibly I was.

Downtown San Francisco became alien and cold, and the streets I had loved in a personal familiarity were unknown lanes that twisted with malicious intent. Old buildings, whose gray rococo façades housed my memories of the Forty-Niners, and Diamond Lil, Robert Service, Sutter and Jack London,<sup>7</sup> were then imposing structures viciously joined to keep me out. My trips to the streetcar office were of the frequency of a person on salary. The struggle

expanded. I was no longer in conflict only with the Market Street Railway but with the marble lobby of the building which housed its offices, and elevators and their operators.

During this period of strain Mother and I began our first steps on the long path toward mutual adult admiration. She never asked for reports and I didn't offer any details. But every morning she made breakfast, gave me carfare and lunch money, as if I were going to work. She comprehended the perversity of life, that in the struggle lies the joy. That I was no glory seeker was obvious to her, and that I had to exhaust every possibility before giving in was also clear.

On my way out of the house one morning she said, "Life is going to give you just what you put in it. Put your whole heart in everything you do, and pray, then you can wait." Another time she reminded me that "God helps those who help themselves." She had a store of aphorisms<sup>8</sup> which she dished out as the occasion demanded. Strangely, as bored as I was with clichés, her inflection gave them something new, and set me thinking for a little while at least. Later when asked how I got my job, I was never able to say exactly. I only knew that one day, which was tiresomely like all the others before it, I sat in the Railway office, ostensibly waiting to be interviewed. The receptionist called me to her desk and shuffled a bundle of papers to me. They were job application forms. She said they had to be filled

7. **Forty-Niners . . . Jack London:** Forty-niners were people who flocked to northern California in the gold rush of 1849; Diamond Lil was a colorful character of the gold-rush era; Robert Service was a Canadian poet who wrote about life in the mining camps of the 1897 Klondike gold rush; John Sutter owned the California ranch where gold was discovered in 1848; Jack London was a writer who grew up in the San Francisco area and joined the Klondike gold rush.

8. **aphorisms** (ă'f'ə-rīz'əmz): proverbs.

in triplicate. I had little time to wonder if I had won or not, for the standard questions reminded me of the necessity for dexterous lying. How old was I? List my previous jobs, starting from the last held and go backward to the first. How much money did I earn, and why did I leave the position? Give two references (not relatives).

Sitting at a side table my mind and I wove a cat's ladder of near truths and total lies. I kept my face blank (an old art) and wrote quickly the fable of Marguerite Johnson, aged nineteen, former companion and driver for Mrs. Annie Henderson (a White Lady) in Stamps, Arkansas.

I was given blood tests, aptitude tests, physical coordination tests, and Rorschachs,<sup>9</sup> then on a blissful day I was hired as the first Negro on the San Francisco streetcars.

Mother gave me the money to have my blue serge suit tailored, and I learned to fill out work cards, operate the money changer and punch transfers. The time crowded together and at an End of Days I was swinging on the back of the rickety trolley, smiling sweetly and persuading my charges to "step forward in the car, please."

For one whole semester the street cars and I shimmied up and scooted down the sheer hills of San Francisco. I lost some of my need for the Black ghetto's shielding-sponge quality, as I clanged and cleared my way down Market Street, with its honky-tonk homes for homeless sailors, past the quiet retreat of Golden Gate Park and along closed undwelled-in-looking dwellings of the Sunset District.

My work shifts were split so haphazardly that it was easy to believe that my superiors had chosen them maliciously. Upon mentioning

my suspicions to Mother, she said, "Don't worry about it. You ask for what you want, and you pay for what you get. And I'm going to show you that it ain't no trouble when you pack double."

She stayed awake to drive me out to the car barn at four thirty in the mornings, or to pick me up when I was relieved just before dawn. Her awareness of life's perils convinced her that while I would be safe on the public conveyances,<sup>10</sup> she "wasn't about to trust a taxi driver with her baby."

When the spring classes began, I resumed my commitment with formal education. I was so much wiser and older, so much more independent, with a bank account and clothes that I had bought for myself, that I was sure that I had learned and earned the magic formula which would make me a part of the gay life my contemporaries led.

Not a bit of it. Within weeks,

I realized that my schoolmates and I were on paths moving diametrically away from each other. They were concerned and excited over the approaching football games, but I had in my immediate past raced a car down a dark and foreign Mexican mountain. They concentrated great interest on who was worthy of being student body president, and when the metal bands would be removed from their teeth, while I remembered sleeping for a month in a wrecked automobile and conducting a streetcar in the uneven hours of the morning. ❖



9. Rorschachs (rôr'shâks'): psychological tests in which people are asked to interpret a set of inkblots.

10. conveyances (kən-vā'ən-səz): means of transportation.

WORDS **dexterous** (dĕk'stēr-əs) *adj.* skillful; clever  
TO **haphazardly** (hăp-hăz'ərd-lē) *adv.* in an aimless or random manner  
KNOW **diametrically** (dī'ə-mĕt'rī-klē) *adv.* in complete opposition