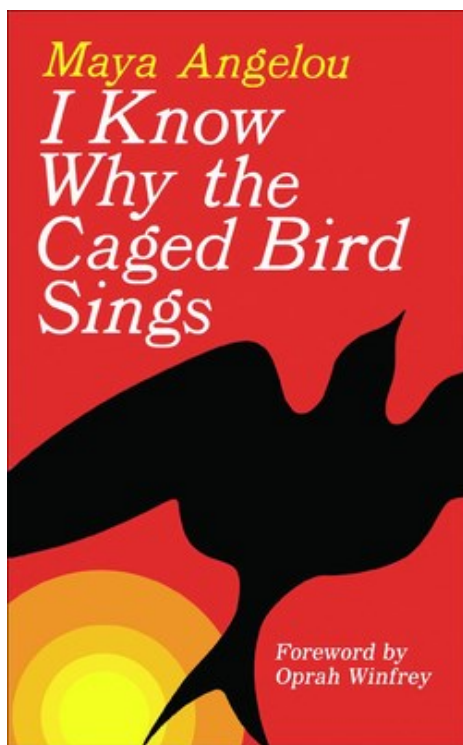


I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS



Adult

Book Summary:

Autobiography telling the story of the author as a young girl through her teenage years when she became a mother.

Summary of Concerns:

This book contains references to child molestation; sexual activities involving minors; references to racism and discrimination; alternate sexualities; controversial racial and historical commentary; profanity/derogatory terms; alcohol use; and violence.

By Maya Angelou

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CONTENT WARNING

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Minor Restricted
BookLooks Review Rating

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4	<p>I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world.</p> <p>...Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten?</p>
5	<p>Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil.</p>
19	<p>From the side of the Store, Bailey and I heard him say to Momma, "Annie, tell Willie he better lay low tonight. A crazy nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys'll be coming over here later." Even after the slow drag of years, I remember the sense of fear which filled my mouth with hot, dry air, and made my body light.</p>
20	<p>His confidence that my uncle and every other Black man who heard of the Klan's coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in chicken droppings was too humiliating to hear.</p>
21	<p>It was fortunate that the "boys" didn't ride into our yard that evening and insist that Momma open the Store. They would have surely found Uncle Willie and just as surely lynched him.</p>
27	<p>In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really absolutely know what whites looked like. Other than that they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed. I remember never believing that whites were really real.</p>
28	<p>I looked at the items that weren't on display. I knew, for instance, that white men wore shorts, as Uncle Willie did, and that they had an opening for taking out their "things" and peeing, and that white women's breasts weren't built into their dresses, as some people said, because I saw their brassieres in the baskets.</p>
30	<p>Since Momma told us that the less you say to whitefolks (or even powhitetrash) the better, Bailey and I would stand, solemn, quiet, in the displaced air.</p>
34	<p>Her dirty bare feet and long legs went straight for the sky. Her dress fell down around her shoulders, and she had on no drawers. The slick pubic hair made a brown triangle where her legs came together.</p>
40	<p>I didn't think that was so bad, but Bailey explained that Mr. Washington was probably "doing it" to her.</p> <p>...And once, we found out about a man who had been killed by whitefolks and thrown into the pond. Bailey said the man's things had been cut off and put in his pocket and he had been shot in the head, all because the whitefolks said he did "it" to a white woman.</p>
51	<p>She didn't cotton to the idea that whitefolks could be talked to at all without risking one's life. And certainly they couldn't be spoken to insolently. In fact, even in their absence they could not be spoken of too harshly unless we used the sobriquet "They."</p>
52	<p>Some years before Bailey and I arrived in town, a man was hunted down for assaulting white womanhood.</p>
53	<p>People in Stamps used to say that the whites in our town were so prejudiced that a Negro couldn't buy vanilla ice cream. Except on July Fourth.</p>

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	<p>...A light shade had been pulled down between the Black community and all things white, but one could see through it enough to develop a fear-admiration-contempt for the white “things”—whitefolks' cars and white glistening houses and their children and their women. But above all, their wealth that allowed them to waste was the most enviable. They had so many clothes they were able to give perfectly good dresses, worn just under the arms, to the sewing class at our school for the larger girls to practice on.</p>
54	<p>I couldn't understand whites and where they got the right to spend money so lavishly. Of course, I knew God was white too, but no one could have made me believe he was prejudiced.</p>
78	<p>One morning she got out of bed for an early errand, and I fell asleep again. But I awoke to a pressure, a strange feeling on my left leg. It was too soft to be a hand, and it wasn't the touch of clothes. Whatever it was, I hadn't encountered the sensation in all the years of sleeping with Momma. It didn't move, and I was too startled to. I turned my head a little to the left to see if Mr. Freeman was awake and gone, but his eyes were open and both hands were above the cover. I knew, as if I had always known, it was his “thing” on my leg. He said, “Just stay right here, Ritie, I ain't gonna hurt you.” I wasn't afraid, a little apprehensive, maybe, but not afraid. Of course I knew that lots of people did “it” and they used their “things” to accomplish the deed, but no one I knew had ever done it to anybody. Mr. Freeman pulled me to him, and put his hand between my legs. He didn't hurt, but Momma had drilled into my head: “Keep your legs closed, and don't let nobody see your pocketbook.”</p> <p>“Now, I didn't hurt you. Don't get scared.” He threw back the blankets and his “thing” stood up like a brown ear of corn. He took my hand and said, “Feel it.” It was mushy and squirmy like the inside of a freshly killed chicken. Then he dragged me on top of his chest with his left arm, and his right hand was moving so fast and his heart was beating so hard that I was afraid that he would die.</p> <p>...Finally he was quiet, and then came the nice part. He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go.</p> <p>...But then he rolled over, leaving me in a wet place and stood up.</p> <p>“I gotta talk to you, Ritie.” He pulled off his shorts that had fallen to his ankles, and went into the bathroom.</p> <p>It was true the bed was wet, but I knew I hadn't had an accident. Maybe Mr. Freeman had one while he was holding me. He came back with a glass of water and told me in a sour voice, “Get up. You peed in the bed.” He poured water on the wet spot, and it did look like my mattress on many mornings.</p> <p>...“If you ever tell anybody what we did, I'll have to kill Bailey.”</p>
81	<p>One evening, when I couldn't concentrate on anything, I went over to him and sat quickly on his lap. He had been waiting for Mother again. Bailey was listening to <i>The Shadow</i> and didn't miss me. At first Mr. Freeman sat still, not holding me or anything, then I felt a soft lump under my thigh begin to move. It twitched against me and started to harden. Then he pulled me to his chest. He smelled of coal dust and grease and he was so close I buried my face in his shirt and listened to his heart, it was beating just for me. Only I could hear the thud, only I could feel the jumping on my face. He said, “Sit still, stop squirming.” But all the time, he pushed me around on his lap, then suddenly he stood up and I slipped down to the floor. He ran to the bathroom.</p>

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83	<p>He was sitting in the big chair by the radio. "Ritie, come here." I didn't think about the holding time until I got close to him. His pants were open and his "thing" was standing out of his britches by itself.</p> <p>"No, sir, Mr. Freeman." I started to back away. I didn't want to touch that mushy-hard thing again, and I didn't need him to hold me anymore. He grabbed my arm and pulled me between his legs. His face was still and looked kind, but he didn't smile or blink his eyes. Nothing. He did nothing, except reach his left hand around to turn on the radio without even looking at it. Over the noise of music and static, he said, "Now, this ain't gonna hurt you much. You liked it before, didn't you?"</p> <p>I didn't want to admit that I had in fact liked his holding me or that I had liked his smell or the hard heart-beating, so I said nothing. And his face became like the face of one of those mean natives the Phantom was always having to beat up.</p> <p>His legs were squeezing my waist. "Pull down your drawers." I hesitated for two reasons: he was holding me too tight to move, and I was sure that any minute my mother or Bailey or the Green Hornet would bust in the door and save me.</p> <p>"We was just playing before." He released me enough to snatch down my bloomers, and then he dragged me closer to him. Turning the radio up loud, too loud, he said, "If you scream, I'm gonna kill you. And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey." I could tell he meant what he said. I couldn't understand why he wanted to kill my brother. Neither of us had done anything to him. And then.</p> <p>Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot.</p> <p>I thought I had died—I woke up in a white-walled world, and it had to be heaven. But Mr. Freeman was there and he was washing me. His hands shook, but he held me upright in the tub and washed my legs. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Ritie. I didn't mean it. But don't you tell ... Remember, don't you tell a soul."</p>
85	<p>Walking down the street, I felt the wet on my pants, and my hips seemed to be coming out of their sockets. I couldn't sit long on the hard seats in the library (they had been constructed for children), so I walked by the empty lot where Bailey was playing ball, but he wasn't there.</p> <p>...Not unless I counted every step and stepped on every crack. I had started to burn between my legs more than the time I'd wasted Sloan's Liniment on myself. My legs throbbed, or rather the insides of my thighs throbbed, with the same force that Mr. Freeman's heart had beaten.</p>
87	<p>The terrible pain assured me that I couldn't. What he did to me, and what I allowed, must have been very bad if already God let me hurt so much.</p>
111	<p>When Bailey tried to interpret the words with: "White-folks use 'by the way' to mean while we're on the subject," Momma reminded us that "whitefolks' mouths were most in general loose and their words were an abomination before Christ."</p>
115	<p>I reasoned that a pig's organs included the lungs, heart and liver, so if Mrs. Cullinan was walking around without those essentials, it explained why she drank alcohol out of unmarked bottles.</p>
142	<p>Let the whitefolks have their money and power and segregation and sarcasm and big houses and schools and lawns like carpets, and books, and mostly—mostly—let them have their whiteness. It was better to be meek and lowly, spat upon and abused for this little</p>

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	time than to spend eternity frying in the fires of hell. No one would have admitted that the Christian and charitable people were happy to think of their oppressors' turning forever on the Devil's spit over the flames of fire and brimstone.
144	"I ain't worried 'bout this fight. Joe's gonna whip that cracker like it's open season." "He gone whip him till that white boy call him Momma."
146	My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped and maimed. It was hounds on the trail of a man running through slimy swamps. It was a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful.
159	There he initiated girls into the mysteries of sex. One by one, he took the impressed, the curious, the adventurous into the gray shadows, after explaining that they were going to play Momma and Poppa. I was assigned the role of Baby and lookout. The girls were commanded to pull up their dresses and then he lay on top and wiggled his hips.
160	Her breasts were not the hard little knots of other girls her age; they filled out the tops of her skimpy little dresses. ...He strung the tent and Joyce crawled in first. Bailey told me to sit outside and play with my doll baby, and he went in and the flap closed. "Well, ain't you going to open your trousers?" Joyce's voice was muffled. "No. You just pull up your dress." There were rustling sounds from the tent and the sides poched out as if they were trying to stand up. Bailey asked, "What are you doing?" "Pulling off my drawers." "What for?" "We can't do it with my drawers on." "Why not?" "How are you going to get to it?" Silence. My poor brother didn't know what she meant. I knew. I lifted the flap and said, "Joyce, don't you do that to my brother." She nearly screamed, but she kept her voice low, "Margaret, you close that door." Bailey added, "Yes. Close it. You're supposed to be playing with our doll baby." I thought he would go to the hospital if he let her do that to him, so I warned him, "Bailey, if you let her do that to you, you'll be sorry."
161	Bailey told me after that Joyce had hairs on her thing and that she had gotten them from "doing it" with so many boys.
164	I don't know how long Bailey had known about Joyce, but later in the evening when I tried to bring her name into our conversation, he said, "Joyce? She's got somebody to do it to her all the time now."
194	Then I wished that Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner had killed all whitefolks in their beds and that Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and that Harriet Tubman had been killed by that blow on her head and Christopher Columbus had drowned in the Santa María. It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead. I thought I should like to see us all dead, one on top of the other. A pyramid of flesh with the whitefolks on the bottom, as the broad base, then the

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	Indians with their silly tomahawks and teepees and wigwams and treaties, the Negroes with their mops and recipes and cotton sacks and spirituals sticking out of their mouths. The Dutch children should all stumble in their wooden shoes and break their necks. The French should choke to death on the Louisiana Purchase (1803) while silkworms ate all the Chinese with their stupid pigtails. As a species, we were an abomination. All of us.
202	It seemed terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness. ...“Annie, you know I don't treat nigra, colored people.” “I know, Dentist Lincoln. But this here is just my little grandbaby and she ain't gone be no trouble to you ...” “Annie, everybody has a policy. In this world you have to have a policy. Now, my policy is I don't treat colored people.”
203	“Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's.”
210	Momma added that some people said that whitefolks had come over to Africa (she made it sound like a hidden valley on the moon) and stole the colored people and made them slaves, but nobody really believed it was true.
236	Some of the tales were funny, a few were pathetic, but all were amusing or gratifying to me, for the Black man, the con man who could act the most stupid, won out every time over the powerful, arrogant white. ...“There was a cracker in Tulsa who bilked so many Negroes he could set up a Negro Bilking Company. Naturally he got to thinking, Black Skin means Damn Fool.
238	“Anyhow, I played scary at first but Just Black told me that this was one white man that our people could trust. I said I did not trust no white man because all they wanted was to get a chance to kill a Black man legally and get his wife in the bed. (I'm sorry, Clidell.) The mark assured me that he was the only white man who did not feel like that.
240	Stories of law violations are weighed on a different set of scales in the Black mind than in the white.
267	Did I have the nerve to commit suicide? If I jumped in the ocean wouldn't I come up all bloated like the man Bailey saw in Stamps?
291	The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power. The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance.
293	The Well of Loneliness was my introduction to lesbianism and what I thought of as pornography. ...But true freaks, the “women lovers,” captured yet strained my imagination.
294	After my third reading of The Well of Loneliness I became a bleeding heart for the downtrodden misunderstood lesbians. I thought “lesbian” was synonymous with hermaphrodite, and when I wasn't actively aching over their pitiful state, I was wondering how they managed simpler body functions. Did they have a choice of organs to use, and if so, did they alternate or play favorite? Or I tried to imagine how two hermaphrodites made love, and the more I pondered the more confused I became. It seemed that having two of

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	everything other people had, and four where ordinary people just had two, would complicate matters to the point of giving up the idea of making love at all.
295	But just suppose I was developing into a lesbian, how would she react?
296	<p>“Mother ... my pocketbook ...”</p> <p>“Ritie, do you mean your vagina? Don't use those Southern terms. There's nothing wrong with the word ‘vagina.’ It's a clinical description. Now, what's wrong with it?”</p> <p>...“Well? ... Well? Have you got crabs?”</p> <p>....“Mother, something is growing on my vagina.”</p> <p>...“On both sides. Inside.” I couldn't add that they were fleshy skin flaps that had been growing for months down there.</p> <p>...“Ritie, go get me that big Webster's and then bring me a bottle of beer.”</p> <p>Suddenly, it wasn't all that serious. I was “Ritie” again, and she just asked for beer. If it had been as awful as I anticipated, she'd have ordered Scotch and water.</p> <p>...When I returned from the kitchen and poured her beer, as she had taught Bailey and me beer should be poured, she patted the bed.</p> <p>...She drank the beer as I read, and when I had finished she explained it in every-day terms.</p>
298	“I thought maybe I was turning into a lesbian.”
299	<p>I gave her one of my gowns, and without curiosity or interest I watched her pull off her clothes.</p> <p>...And then suddenly for the briefest eye span, I saw her breasts. I was stunned.</p> <p>They were shaped like light-brown falsies in the five-and-ten-cent store, but they were real. They made all the nude paintings I had seen in museums come to life. In a word they were beautiful.</p> <p>...All I knew was that I had been moved by looking at a woman's breasts.</p>
300	And even those sought-after girls were asked to “give it up or tell where it is.” They were reminded in a popular song of the times, “If you can't smile and say yes, please don't cry and say no.” If the pretties were expected to make the supreme sacrifice in order to “belong,” what could the unattractive female do?
301	<p>I was being crushed by two unrelenting forces: the uneasy suspicion that I might not be a normal female and my newly awakening sexual appetite.</p> <p>I decided to take matters into my own hands. (An unfortunate but apt phrase.)</p> <p>...If I was going to venture into sex, I saw no reason why I shouldn't make my experiment with the best of the lot. I didn't really expect to capture either brother on a permanent basis, but I thought if I could hook one temporarily I might be able to work the relationship into something more lasting.</p> <p>...“Hey.” I plunged, “Would you like to have a sexual intercourse with me?”</p> <p>...“Take me somewhere.”</p> <p>...We went to a furnished room occupied by one of his friends, who understood the situation immediately and got his coat and left us alone. The seductee quickly turned off the lights. I would have preferred them left on, but didn't want to appear more aggressive than I had been already.</p> <p>...I had anticipated long soulful tongued kisses and gentle caresses. But there was no romance in the knee which forced my legs, nor in the rub of hairy skin on my chest. Unredeemed by shared tenderness, the time was spent in laborious gropings, pullings, yankings and jerkings.</p> <p>Not one word was spoken.</p>

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	My partner showed that our experience had reached its climax by getting up abruptly, and my main concern was how to get home quickly.
303	At home I reviewed the failure and tried to evaluate my new position. I had had a man. I had been had.
304	How was I to blame the innocent man whom I had lured into making love to me?

Profanity/Derogatory Term	Count
Ass	1
Bitch	6
Cracker	2
Dyke	1
Nigger/Niggah	16
Shit	3
Titties	1