



I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Written by Maya Angelou

Nominated
for National
Book Award

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Reading Level: 8th Grade



• note to teachers •

As with all great works of literature, there are some challenges associated with the use of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in the classroom. Along with classic books such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Angelou's work has drawn attention from critics advocating censorship, who claim that it is too graphic for student use. Angelou's unguarded depiction of rape and sexual abuse, and her treatment of topics such as racism and teenage pregnancy, placed the work at the top of the American Library Association's list of banned books, where it still remains today. Although this presents some obstacles for teachers, the attempted censorship of the book only serves to illuminate its most important themes: namely, the power of literature and the power of our own voices, as well as the greater theme of freedom in all of its varieties, and the struggles we undertake in order to preserve it.

Teachers who wish to use *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in their classroom should possess a solid awareness of the subject matter it contains. They should also be prepared to confront the challenging issues the book presents by engaging students in an active examination of these issues, rather than down-playing the book's controversial attributes. Taking this approach in the classroom can yield tremendous rewards. An exploration of such dynamic topics can re-invigorate the classroom by inviting students to participate in an active form of learning. In opening up these topics for discussion, students do more than witness someone else's story; they engage in a process of reflection, formulating and sharing their own thoughts. They learn to value their story and to develop and find confidence in their own voices. Throughout *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, we witness Maya and her brother reading voraciously, and through their interaction with literature, they are educated and empowered. Angelou also makes note of the tremendous influence of Mrs. Bertha Flowers, who acts as a mentor not only by sharing books, but by encouraging a young Angelou to give voice to her ideas. With the same principles of mentoring applied in the classroom, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* can have a similar effect on your students, inspiring them to find their own voices.

Finally, while the book certainly possesses a distinct sense of time and place throughout, teachers (who will no doubt note the book's historical and cultural significance) should resist the urge to reduce their lesson to a study of the book from a purely historical perspective. The work certainly has many cultural and historical merits, but the primary challenge for teachers today lies in helping students recognize how the book applies to their own lives. Challenge them to ask: Why has this book had such a lasting impact? What significance does *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* hold for me? In fact, these are questions which should not only be asked in consideration of Angelou's works, but in our confrontation with all works of literature. How does literature reflect, challenge, or define notions of our identity, our culture, our history, and our philosophies? Encouraging this line of questioning will help your students truly connect with the book, allowing the work to enter their lives in a way they might not have expected.

Maya Angelou Study Guide Questions

R Barnett



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