

= A Song Flung Up to Heaven =

A Song Flung Up to Heaven is the sixth book in author Maya Angelou 's series of autobiographies . Set between 1965 and 1968 , it begins where Angelou 's previous book All God 's Children Need Traveling Shoes ends , with Angelou 's trip from Accra , Ghana , where she had lived for the past four years , back to the United States . Two " calamitous events " frame the beginning and end of the book ? the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King , Jr . Angelou describes how she dealt with these events and the sweeping changes in both the country and in her personal life , and how she coped with her return home . The book ends with Angelou at " the threshold of her literary career " , writing the opening lines to her first autobiography , I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings .

As she had begun to do in Caged Bird , and continued throughout her series , Angelou upheld the long tradition of African @-@ American autobiography . At the same time she made a deliberate attempt to challenge the usual structure of the autobiography by critiquing , changing , and expanding the genre . Most reviewers agreed that the book was made up of a series of vignettes . By the time Song was written in 2002 , sixteen years after her previous autobiography , Angelou had experienced great fame and recognition as an author and poet . She recited her poem On the Pulse of Morning at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton in 1993 , becoming the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost at John F. Kennedy 's in 1961 . She had become recognized and highly respected as a spokesperson for Blacks and women . Angelou was , as scholar Joanne Braxton has stated , " without a doubt , ... America 's most visible black woman autobiographer " . She had also become , as reviewer Richard Long stated , " a major autobiographical voice of the time " .

The title of Song was based upon the same poem , by African @-@ American poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar , the basis of her first autobiography . Like Angelou 's other autobiographies , the book was greeted with both praise and disappointment , although reviews were generally positive . Reviewers praised Angelou for " the culmination of a unique autobiographical achievement " , while others criticized her for coming across as " smug " . The 2002 spoken @-@ word album by the same name , based on the book , received a Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album in 2003 .

= = Background = =

A Song Flung Up to Heaven ( 2002 ) is the sixth of Maya Angelou 's series of autobiographies , and at the time of its publication it was considered to be the final installment . It was completed 16 years after the publication of her previous autobiography , All God 's Children Need Traveling Shoes ( 1986 ) and over thirty years after the publication of her first , I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings . Angelou wrote two collections of essays in the interim , Wouldn 't Take Nothing for My Journey Now ( 1993 ) and Even the Stars Look Lonesome ( 1997 ) , which writer Hilton Als called her " wisdom books " and " homilies strung together with autobiographical texts " . She also continued her poetry with several volumes , including a collection of her poems , The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou ( 1994 ) . In 1993 , Angelou recited her poem On the Pulse of Morning at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton , becoming the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost at John F. Kennedy 's inauguration in 1961 . Her recitation resulted in more fame and recognition for her previous works , and broadened her appeal " across racial , economic , and educational boundaries " .

By 2002 , when Song was published , Angelou had become recognized and highly respected as a spokesperson for Blacks and women . She was , as scholar Joanne Braxton has stated , " without a doubt , ... America 's most visible black woman autobiographer " . She had also become " a major autobiographical voice of the time " . Angelou was one of the first African @-@ American female writers to publicly discuss her personal life , and one of the first to use herself as a central character in her books . Writer Julian Mayfield , who called her first autobiography " a work of art that eludes description " , stated that Angelou 's series set a precedent not only for other Black women writers , but for the genre of autobiography as a whole .

Als called Angelou one of the " pioneers of self @-@ exposure " , willing to focus honestly on the

more negative aspects of her personality and choices . For example , while Angelou was composing her second autobiography , *Gather Together in My Name* , she was concerned about how her readers would react to her disclosure that she had been a prostitute . Her husband Paul Du Feu talked her into publishing the book by encouraging her to " tell the truth as a writer " and to " be honest about it " . " *Song* " took 16 years to write because it was so painful for her to relive the events she described , including the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King , Jr . She did not celebrate her birthday , April 4 , for many years because it was also the anniversary of King 's death , choosing instead to send his widow Coretta Scott King flowers . Although *Song* was considered the final installment in her series of autobiographies , Angelou continued writing about her life story through essays , and at the age of 85 , published her seventh autobiography *Mom & Me & Mom* ( 2013 ) , which focused on her relationship with her mother . The spoken word album based on *Song* and narrated by Angelou received a Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album in 2003 .

= = = Title = = =

Angelou returned to the same poem she based the title of *Caged Bird* upon for the title of *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* , from the third stanza of the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem " *Sympathy* " . Along with Shakespeare , Angelou has credited Dunbar with forming her " writing ambition " . The caged bird , a symbol for the chained slave , is an image Angelou uses throughout all her writings .

I know why the caged bird sings , ah me ,  
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore ,  
When he beats his bars and would be free ;  
It is not a carol of joy or glee ,  
But a prayer that he sends from his heart 's deep core ,  
But a plea , that upward to Heaven he flings ?  
I know why the caged bird sings .

= = Plot summary = =

*A Song Flung Up to Heaven* , which takes place between 1965 and 1968 , picks up where Angelou 's previous book , *All God 's Children Need Traveling Shoes* , ends , with Angelou 's airplane trip from Accra , Ghana , where she has spent the previous four years , back to the United States . Two " calamitous events " frame the beginning and end of the book ? the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King , Jr . Her nineteen @-@ year @-@ old son Guy has become an adult and is attending college in Ghana , and she is leaving a controlling relationship ? her " romantic other " , whom she described as " a powerful West African man who had swept into my life with the urgency of a Southern hurricane " . She had also been invited to return to the US by Malcolm X , whom she had become friends with during his visit to Accra , to help her create the Organization of African Unity .

She postpones meeting with Malcolm X for a month and visits her mother and brother in San Francisco . Malcolm X is assassinated two days later . Devastated and grief @-@ stricken , she moves to Hawaii to be near her brother and to resume her singing and performing career , which she had given up before leaving for Africa several years earlier . She realizes , after seeing Della Reese perform , that she lacks the desire , commitment , and talent to be a singer . She instead returns to her writing career , but this time in Los Angeles instead of in New York City as she had earlier in her life . To earn extra money , Angelou becomes a market researcher in Watts and gets to know the neighborhood and its people . She witnesses the 1965 Watts Riots , knowing that doing so could lead to her arrest , and she is genuinely disappointed that it does not .

At one point , Angelou 's lover from Ghana , whom she calls " the African " , arrives in Los Angeles to take her back to Accra . Angelou enlists the aid of her mother and brother ; they come to her rescue once again by diverting the African first to Mexico and then back to Ghana . Guy , during a visit to his grandmother in San Francisco , gets into another car accident , similar to what happened

before he began college in Ghana . His maturity is striking to his mother , and she leaves him in the care of his grandmother .

Angelou returns to New York , where she dedicates herself to her writing and renews many of the friendships made there in the past . She also describes her personal and professional relationships with Ruby Dee , Ossie Davis , Beah Richards , and Frank Silvera . Martin Luther King , Jr. asks her to travel around the country promoting the Southern Christian Leadership Conference . She agrees , but " postpones again " , and he is assassinated on her 40th birthday . Again devastated , she isolates herself until invited to a dinner party also attended by her friend James Baldwin and cartoonist Jules Feiffer and his wife Judy . Judy Feiffer , inspired by her tales about Angelou 's childhood , contacts editor Robert Loomis , who challenges Angelou to write her autobiography as literature . She accepts his challenge , and Song ends with Angelou at " the threshold of her literary career " , writing the opening lines to her first autobiography , *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* :  
" What are you looking at me for . I didn 't come to stay " .

= = Style and genre = =

Starting with *Caged Bird* , Angelou made a deliberate attempt while writing all her autobiographies , including *Song* , to challenge the usual structure of the autobiography by critiquing , changing , and expanding the genre . Her use of fiction @-@ writing techniques such as dialogue , characterization , and thematic development has often led reviewers to categorize her books as autobiographical fiction . Angelou stated in a 1989 interview that she was the only " serious " writer to choose the genre to express herself . As critic Susan Gilbert stated , Angelou was reporting not one person 's story , but the collective 's . Scholar Selwyn R. Cudjoe agreed , and viewed Angelou as representative of the convention in African @-@ American autobiography as a public gesture that spoke for an entire group of people . Angelou 's editor Robert Loomis was able to dare her into writing *Caged Bird* by challenging her to write an autobiography that could be considered " high art " , which she continued throughout her series , including her final autobiography .

Angelou 's autobiographies conform to the genre 's standard structure : they were written by a single author , they were chronological , and they contained elements of character , technique , and theme . In a 1983 interview with African @-@ American literature critic Claudia Tate , Angelou called her books autobiographies . When speaking of her unique use of the genre , Angelou acknowledged that she has followed the slave narrative tradition of " speaking in the first @-@ person singular talking about the first @-@ person plural , always saying I meaning ' we ' " . Reviewer Elsie B. Washington agreed , and stated that *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* " offers a glimpse into the life of a literary icon in the making " influenced by historical events and personalities such as Malcolm X , Martin Luther King , Jr . , and James Baldwin .

Angelou recognized that there were fictional aspects to all her books ; she tended to " diverge from the conventional notion of autobiography as truth " . Her approach paralleled the conventions of many African @-@ American autobiographies written during the abolitionist period in the US , when truth was often censored for purposes of self @-@ protection . Author Lyman B. Hagen has placed Angelou in the long tradition of African @-@ American autobiography , but insisted that she has created a unique interpretation of the autobiographical form . In a 1998 interview with journalist George Plimpton , Angelou discussed her writing process , and " the sometimes slippery notion of truth in nonfiction " and memoirs . When asked if she changed the truth to improve her story , she stated , " Sometimes I make a diameter from a composite of three or four people , because the essence in only one person is not sufficiently strong to be written about . " Although Angelou has never admitted to changing the facts in her stories , she has used these facts to make an impact with the reader . As Hagen stated , " One can assume that ' the essence of the data ' is present in Angelou 's work " . Hagen also stated that Angelou " fictionalizes , to enhance interest " . Angelou 's long @-@ time editor , Robert Loomis , agreed , stating that she could rewrite any of her books by changing the order of her facts to make a different impact on the reader .

= = Critical reception = =

Like Angelou 's previous autobiographies , Song received mostly positive reviews , although as the Poetry Foundation has said : " Most critics have judged Angelou 's subsequent autobiographies in light of her first , and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings remains the most highly praised . " Kim Hubbard of People Magazine , for example , found Song unsatisfying and " hastily assembled " , but poetic like Caged Bird . Many reviewers appreciated what Kirkus Reviews called Angelou 's " nice structural turn " of framing Song with two assassinations . Paula Friedman of The New York Times Book Review appreciated Angelou 's " occasions of critical self @-@ assessment and modesty " not present in many other autobiographies . Patricia Elam of New Crisis agreed , stating that there is much to admire both about the book and about the " large life " , full of tension , laughter , and love , it describes . Elam also called Song " a spirit @-@ moving work that describes Angelou 's journey through an authentic and artistic life " .

Reviewer Margaret Busby , who saw this book " not so much an ending as a beginning " , called Song " the culmination of a unique autobiographical achievement , a glorious celebration of indomitable spirit " . Like other reviewers , Busby considered Song a series of " beautifully crafted vignettes " and found the book concise and readable . Scholar John McWhorter did not look at Angelou 's use of vignettes as positively , and stated that all of her books were short , divided into " ever shorter " chapters as her series progressed , and " sometimes seem written for children rather than adults " . McWhorter recognized , however , that Angelou 's precise prose and " striking and even jarring simplicity " was due to Angelou 's purposes of depicting African @-@ American culture in a positive way . Busby also recognized Angelou 's ability to find inspirational lessons from adversity , both nationally and personally , although the emphasis in this book was on the personal , especially her dilemmas as a mother and as a lover .

Amy Strong of The Library Journal , perhaps because Angelou 's life during the time the book took place was full of more personal loss than conflict and struggle , considered Song less profound and intense than the previous books in Angelou 's series . She predicted that Song 's direct and plainspoken style would be popular . Publishers Weekly , in its review of the book , agreed with Strong and saw " a certain resignation " in Song , instead of " the contentiousness " in Angelou 's other autobiographies . The reviewer also stated that those who lived through the era Angelou described would appreciate her assessment of it , and that Song was " a story of tragedy and triumph , well stated and clearly stamped by her own unique blend of Afro @-@ Americanism " . The assassinations in Song provided the book with depth as Angelou described the events of her life , which would be " mere meanderings " if described by a less skilled writer . The reviewer was able to see Angelou 's " gracious spirit " and found the book " satisfying " , although he considered it a " sometimes flat account " that lacked " the spiritual tone of Angelou 's essays , the openness of her poetry and the drama of her other autobiographies " .

Both McWhorter and scholar Hilton Als found Angelou 's writing throughout her series self @-@ important . Although McWhorter has admitted to being charmed by Angelou 's sense of authority she has inserted into her works , which he calls her " black @-@ mother wit " , he considered Angelou 's autobiographies after Caged Bird " smug " , and has stated that she " implicitly dares the reader to question her private line to God and Truth " . Als agreed , stating what made Song different from her preceding volumes is her " ever @-@ increasing unreliability " . Als stated that Angelou , in her six autobiographies , " has given us ... the self @-@ aggrandizing , homespun , and sometimes oddly prudish story of a black woman who , when faced with the trials of life , simply makes do " . Als believed that Angelou 's essays , written in the 1990s , were a better culmination of her work as an autobiographer .