

I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings Book Notes

I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou

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Author/Context

Maya Angelou was born in 1938, and has led a full and public life. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, her most famous work, is the poeticized true story of her childhood in Arkansas and California. She has continued her autobiography with *Gather Together in My Name*, which is considered superior to *Caged Bird* in literary style, but inferior in terms of ideas and content. Later volumes, which focus on specific parts of her political or ideological life, include *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* and *The Heart of Woman*. These works have found a place in the canon of African American literature. Some critics have likened them to Frederick Douglass' autobiography: both Angelou and Douglass chronicled their lives in the hope of uniting African Americans through their common experiences of racism and perseverance. Angelou has also written many volumes of poetry, including *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*, and read a poem for Bill Clinton's inauguration. The poem, called *On the Pulse of the Morning*, which celebrated America's diversity, was praised by some as heartfelt and song-like, but others, like Ishamel Reed, thought it sounded as though it had been written in her hotel room the night before.

Angelou has confronted mixed reviews of her work since she began writing, but no one questions her passion and ambition. Throughout her life, and sometimes all at once, she has been a singer, a dancer, a playwright, an actress on stage and screen, a mother, a wife ("I've never told anyone how many times I've been married...people tend to think that if a person marries frequently, he or she is frivolous") and a friend to everyone from author James Baldwin to Martin Luther King, Jr. She has written a few books for children. Recently, at 74, she launched her Hallmark line of "Maya Angelou Life Mosaic" products-cards, pillows, wind chimes, etc. Years ago, for a short time she was a prostitute, and has dabbled in drugs. Once, however, she realized that she could choose for herself whether or not to continue her life in the criminal underworld, she chose to get out. She has traveled the world, working as a journalist in Ghana and Cairo.

As a political activist, she has dealt most often with the difficulties of being African American and female in the United States. She has said that she feels most at home in Africa, where racism is largely not an issue. She has met people in Ghana who look like her and her relatives, and feels a strange kinship with them, wondering if they might be distantly related. For a woman who spent years as a child away from her own parents, this feeling was very important. She has struggled with her own anti-white sentiments at times: she married a white man but divorced him soon after, partly because she felt she was betraying her heritage. Her most consistent message, however, is perhaps a call for strength: the strength that comes from community, and that which comes from within oneself. Many of her poems, such as *Phenomenal Woman*, concern women who draw their strength from their womanhood. This is unsurprising, since Angelou never had a consistent male role model, but found two models of strong womanhood in her mother and grandmother. For Angelou, however, strength has never meant infallibility. Nor does it necessarily mean happiness. *Caged Bird* takes its title from a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar, which concludes:

*I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,
When he beats his bars and he 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!*

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Barbour, S., Leone, B., Szumski, B., Williams, M., eds. *Readings on Maya Angelou*. San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1997.

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Plot Summary

Marguerite, or Maya, Johnson is a young black girl growing up in the racist town of Stamps, Arkansas. She and her brother Bailey (her only friend in the world) were sent to Arkansas by their parents when she was three and he four: they now live with their father's mother, Momma. Momma is strictly religious, and she owns a general store where the children are expected to work. They are both very intelligent, and spend much of their time reading because there is little else to do in Stamps. Maya does not understand why white people treat black people so terribly. In fact, she does not understand much of the adult world, though she tries hard to do so. She is merely expected to sit still and keep her mouth shut. Then their father arrives suddenly, and takes them to St. Louis to stay with their mother. He is handsome and interesting, but he is vain and does not really seem to care for his children. In St. Louis, the children are looked after by their mother's family and their mother herself-a beautiful, laughing movie star type of woman. Her boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, avoids contact with the children for the most part, until he begins to molest, and finally rapes, Maya. Soon after he is discovered, he is mysteriously killed, probably by Mother's family. Maya believes it is all her fault, and stops talking for a long time. She and her brother are sent back to Stamps, where Maya meets Mrs. Flowers, who teaches her that speech and writing are beautiful and important.

Maya's life continues with a series of episodes that affect her in different ways-some positive, some negative-but all of them teach her something. She is sent to learn manners in a white woman's house at ten years old. She has her first real run-in with prejudice, and decides that she will not accept it. She and Bailey dream of their mother, and Maya longs to get away from Stamps. She watches her black neighbors nearly kill themselves with work, then look to religion for relief-or, she sometimes thinks, as an escape. She makes her first friend, and gets interested in boys-though not seriously. Bailey, a year older, gets initiated into sex by a fourteen-year-old, who then leaves town, breaking his heart. Maya hears a ghost story from a neighbor and is terrified, then learns her grandmother's power when Momma is able to make everyone in the house, including Maya, feel better. Maya attends her eighth grade graduation, at first proud of herself, but then disappointed when a white guest speaker tells the crowd that they can only be good at sports, not academics. Still, even after that depressing speech, the crowd sings together, and Maya feels proud again, of herself and her people. Still, she sees that racism is not so simply overcome. When she has two cavities, her mother tries to take her to a white dentist, who refuses to help her. All her grandmother can do is force him to give her money, when Maya would like Momma to run him out of town. Soon after, Momma decides that Maya and Bailey have to go to California to be with their parents. Maya doesn't know why, but she thinks it's because Bailey has seen, up close, a dead black man and a white man who is happy to see the man dead. Maya thinks Momma is afraid for her grandson, who is becoming a man.

In California, Maya at first lives with her grandmother, then her mother. She and Bailey love Mother very deeply: she is beautiful, fun-loving, and she loves them. She is strong and kind, and marries an equally strong and kind man, Daddy Clidell, who is Maya's first



real father. In San Francisco during the war, Maya witnesses racism against blacks and Japanese people. She does well in school and gets involved with dance and theatre. She meets fun-loving con artists. She spends the summer with her father and his girlfriend, who is not much older than Maya herself. The two women do not get along. Her father takes her to Mexico for a night, and Maya learns that he has a mistress there. Her father gets so drunk Maya has to drive him home. She has never driven before and is terrified, but once it is over, she feels proud. She gets into a fight with her father's girlfriend and decides to leave. She lives in a junkyard with a group of teenagers for a month. There, she learns about friendship and tolerance. Back in San Francisco, she decides to work as a streetcar conductor, though black people are not allowed to do this. She persists until they finally hire her. She works for a semester and then goes back to school. Meanwhile, Bailey and Mother have been fighting so much that Bailey finally leaves home and gets a job on a railroad train. Maya is disappointed in him. She reads some lesbian literature and, not understanding her developing body and mind, thinks she is a lesbian. She decides to find a boyfriend. She approaches a popular boy and asks him to have sex with her. He agrees and the experience is disappointing-almost boring-for Maya. She forgets him, and three weeks later finds she is pregnant. She hides it from her mother and stepfather for 8 months, and when she finally tells them they are at first angry but then accept it. She has the baby, and is afraid of hurting it for a while, but soon realizes that as long as she has good intentions, her instinct will help her care for it.

Major Characters

Marguerite 'Maya' Johnson: Main character of this autobiographical story (Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Johnson). She begins as a young, self-hating black girl in the racist town of Stamps, Arkansas, and ends a self-aware, confident, mature mother at sixteen. Throughout her life, she thinks deeply about racism, religion, and other subjects that her neighbors sometimes take for granted. Raised for the first decade of her life by her father's mother in Stamps, she learns from 'Momma' how to find strength in religion and dignity in the face of racism. She then moves to St. Louis to live with her mother, from whom she learns how to have fun and be self-confident. A quiet, intelligent and ambitious girl, she feels out of place everywhere she goes. Only her brother Bailey, who understands her, makes her feel better. When she is raped by her mother's boyfriend, she stops communicating altogether, until she meets a kind woman in Stamps who shows her the power of language, which provides a happy escape for her.

Momma (Annie Henderson): Maya's grandmother, mother of Bailey Sr. and Uncle Willie, and owner of the Store. Though Maya resents Momma's super-religious beliefs and her strictness, she often loves her for them too. Sometimes she feels like Momma can do anything, and will protect Maya from anything that might try to harm her. Though Momma is subject to white bigotry just like everyone else, she manages to rise above it by maintaining her own dignity: she almost never sinks to their level. Maya has a lot of respect for this.

Bailey Johnson, Jr.: Maya's brother, one year older, and her only friend for years. He shares her intelligence and sense of humor, but unlike her, he is bold, confident, well-liked and handsome. He loves Maya and takes care of her. He buys her books to read, and defends her from insults. Even as they grow up and grow apart, he speaks to her as an equal, because he understands her intelligence. Yet the true love of his boyhood life is his mother, whose affection he craves desperately. They are so attached to each other that, by the time he is sixteen, they realize that he has to leave the house, because their bond is too strong.

Uncle Willie: Maya's uncle; Momma's son; Bailey Sr.'s brother. A generally kind, quiet and ineffectual man who helps Momma run the store. He is crippled, so he cannot work, and this sets him apart from most other men in the town, who work their bodies to the breaking point. He is proud, so he rarely pretends he is not crippled, though he hates to draw attention to it or be pitied for it. He does not seem to question his life often: when Bailey asks him why white people hate black people so much, he has no real answer. It seems that, though he confronts it every day, he hasn't ever really tried to find a reason for it. He leads a simple life and has little interest in rebelling.

Father (Bailey Johnson, Sr., 'Daddy Bailey'): Father of Maya and Bailey, and son of Momma. He was raised in Stamps, but his ambition took him to California, where he learned to speak perfect, pretentious English and attracted numerous women with his charm and good looks. Though he dresses well, is vain, and seems genteel, he has never achieved more than a place at the edge of real gentility: he worked, for example,

as a doorman at a fancy hotel. When Maya goes to stay with him for a summer when she is fifteen, he lives in a trailer park with a girl not much older than Maya. He takes Maya to a party in Mexico, then disappears with his Mexican mistress. He has no interest in being kind to Maya or being her father or even getting to know her; everything everyone does amuses him, and he handles every troublesome situation perfectly, without ever getting too attached. For this reason, Maya generally thinks of him as a stranger.

Mother (Vivian Baxter, 'Mother Dear'): Bailey and Maya's mother. Beautiful, kind and funny, Mother enchants her children from the moment they meet her. She is strong, independent, honest and tough, and Maya admires these qualities her entire childhood. Still, the children's relationship with Mother is uncertain: they are sent to live with her unexpectedly, and then she just as unexpectedly sends them back to Stamps. It is only after living with Mother for several years, as teenagers, that they begin to view her as their real mother, who they can depend on, rather than a wonderful movie star-type who lets them live with her.

Minor Characters

Mr. Steward: The former sheriff and the only man in town who owns a horse, Mr. Steward thinks of himself as kind when he is actually condescending and even cruel. He seems to believe that he is a great ruler over the sad, pathetic 'Negroes.' He comes to warn Momma about the KKK, feeling he is doing her a favor, but everyone knows he lets the Klan do whatever they want.

Mr. McElroy: As an adult, Maya knows that Mr. McElroy was just a simple salesman, but as a child, she thought he was amazing. He was an independent black man who had his own house. He was quiet and mysterious. He didn't go to church, even though he lived right next door to Momma-a fervently religious woman.

Powhitetrash children: The poorest white children in town. Some of them have less money than Maya's family, and most of them are dirtier and ruder, but because they are white, they think they are superior.

Reverend Howard Thomas: The preacher for several townships, including Stamps. He checks on the various churches every few months to collect money and make sure everything is running smoothly. Bailey and Maya hate him, because whenever he comes to town, he eats their best food, makes long boring speeches, and bothers them with his irritating laugh. He takes himself very seriously, but he is a fat, ugly, greedy man. The children love to make fun of him behind his back.

Sister Monroe: An over-enthusiastic church-goer. She lives far enough away that she cannot always get to church, and when she comes she makes up for it by becoming possessed by 'the spirit'-which means attacking people, especially the preacher himself. She yells, 'Preach it!' as though she truly feels what the preacher is saying, so much that she cannot control herself. But it seems that she is more interested in causing chaos in the church than in praying.



Grandmother Baxter: Mother Dear's mother. A kind and authoritative older woman, much like Momma, Grandmother Baxter takes care of Maya and Bailey for six months before her daughter can take the children. Mrs. Baxter has political power in St. Louis, but she also is knowledgeable about the St. Louis crime scene. She is generally fearless, even among the most hardened criminals.

Mr. Freeman: Mother's boyfriend, who lives with her and Bailey and Maya. He seems to be completely in love with Mother, and spends a lot of time waiting around for her throughout the day. But then he begins to molest Maya. At first she likes the way he holds her, but when she doesn't want it anymore, he forces her, and rapes her. Though he can see she is in terrible pain afterward, he does nothing. When Maya tells her family what he has done, someone (probably Mother's brothers) kills him.

Mrs. Bertha Flowers: A genteel, beautiful black woman who speaks in perfect English. She is friendly with Momma, and likes Maya (who is awestruck by her beautiful clothes and manners.) She makes cookies and lemonade just for Maya. She gives Maya books and tells her to read them aloud so she can understand the connection between writing and speech. Maya feels that her world has been opened up, because of this one woman's kindness and interest.

Mrs. Viola Cullinan: The white woman whose kitchen Maya works in. At first Maya pities Mrs. Cullinan (she is overweight, seems rather silly, and cannot have children) but then Mrs. Cullinan decides the name 'Marguerite' is too long, and starts calling her Mary. Maya is furious and decides she will not accept this treatment. She purposely breaks a favorite dish and gets fired. Mrs. Cullinan throws a piece of the dish at Maya on the way out.

Miss Glory: Mrs. Cullinan's maid. She is nice to Maya, but Maya is made uncomfortable when she sees how meek Glory is. She allowed her mistress to rename her (her real name is Hallelujah) because Glory is shorter, and she accepts all the other racist things Mrs. Cullinan does and says. Maya is amazed that anyone could let themselves be treated that way.

Louise Kendricks: Maya's first real friend her own age. Louise teaches Maya how to be a girl-they giggle about boys, play childish games, and generally have a lot of fun together. Louise is one of the few people Maya knows she will miss when she moves back to California.

Joyce: An older girl who introduces Bailey to sex, Joyce has a developed body and a relatively mature outlook. She is not shy, and she knows how to use boys. Bailey has a crush on her, but one day she abruptly disappears from town. They find out later that she ran away with another man, and Bailey is so bitter about it he will hardly talk about her.

Mr. George Taylor: His wife died over the summer, but Mr. Taylor, who had been married for forty years, still hears her voice. He comes to the Store one stormy night and tells everyone a ghostly story: he heard his wife say she wants children. Maya is



terrified, but Momma brushes the story off, and everyone is comforted by her commanding attitude.

Mr. Edward Donleavy: Mr. Donleavy is the unexpected white speaker at Maya's graduation. He casually knocks down all the hopes of the intelligent, studious young children, assuring them that while they can be great athletes, they cannot work in any academic field. He implies that no black person is smart enough to work at an intelligent job. Throughout his speech, he makes it clear that he has other, more important things to do later that evening.

Dentist Lincoln: The white dentist in Stamps. Even though he borrowed money from Momma to save his office during the Depression, he will not remove Maya's rotten teeth. He never once looks at Maya when she and her grandmother go to see him, he simply acts sorry but says rude and racist things to Momma.

Daddy Clidell: Mother Dear's husband. Maya's first real father figure. Unlike her real father, Daddy Clidell cares for Maya, takes an interest in her, and supports her, while disciplining her at the same time. She did not expect to get to know him at all, but she finds she likes him. He introduces her to all his friends, and likes that she looks like him, and supports her when she is pregnant.

Dolores Stockland: Daddy Bailey's girlfriend, who is hardly older than Maya. She is pathetic, because she loves Maya's father, but he cheats on her and doesn't respect her. She is possessive of him, and is jealous of Maya. She keeps her house obsessively clean and speaks pretentiously-Mayaya knows she would like to be a 'lady,' but Daddy Bailey has her living in a trailer park. Maya tries to be kind to her, but Dolores is too petty, jealous and hurt to accept her kindness.

Objects/Places

Stamps, Arkansas: The small town where Maya grows up. She loves her neighbors for the comfort they provide and the strength they find in religion and community, but she also hates their sometimes ignorant, self-hating ways. Also, though the town is sharply segregated, Maya has the constant sense that white people could easily invade the black part of town, doing whatever they like to her largely powerless community. She never really feels safe in Stamps, and she often feels too smart for it: it is a cotton field town, and Maya was born with ambition and intelligence in equal measure.

The Store: Momma's general store. The place represents Momma's power (she is one of the wealthier black people in town, and her store is essentially a commercial center). It is also one of the few places Maya enjoys: she loves the smells, and the bustle, and all the delicious products they sell.

The junkyard: In the junkyard, for the first time, Maya is independent and surrounded by friendly people of all races. She learns a lot about friendship, tolerance, and self-reliance in the short month she is there.

The Well of Loneliness: A very famous lesbian novel. Maya reads it several times, intellectually curious but very innocent. Impressionable and unsure of herself, she begins to worry that she is a pervert.

Quotes

Quote 1: "I didn't come to stay." Preface, pg. 3

Quote 2: "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult." Preface, pg. 6

Quote 3: "like most children, I thought if I could face the worst danger voluntarily, and *triumph*, I would forever have power over it." Chapter 2, pg. 10

Quote 4: "I remember never believing that whites were really real." Chapter 4, pg. 25

Quote 5: "I knew that if a person truly wanted to avoid hell and brimstone, and being roasted forever in the devil's fire, all she had to do was memorize Deuteronomy and follow its teaching, word for word." Chapter 6, pg. 38

Quote 6: "He was a stranger, and if he chose to leave us with a stranger, it was all of one piece." Chapter 9, pg. 59

Quote 7: "don't worry 'cause you ain't pretty...I rather you have a good mind than a cute behind." Chapter 10, pg. 66

Quote 8: "There was an army of adults, whose motives and movements I just couldn't understand and who made no effort to understand mine." Chapter 11, pg. 73

Quote 9: "language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone that separates him from the lower animals." Chapter 15, pg. 95

Quote 10: "By the way, Bailey, Mrs. Flowers sent you some tea cookies" Chapter 15, pg. 99

Quote 11: "learning the mid-Victorian values with very little money to indulge them." Chapter 16, pg. 101

Quote 12: "Mrs. Cullinan was right about one thing. My name wasn't Mary." Chapter 16, pg. 108

Quote 13: "I saw Mother Dear." Chapter 17, pg. 114

Quote 14: "One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped and maimed...a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful." Chapter 19, pg. 131

Quote 15: "my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's." Chapter 24, pg. 184



Quote 16: "If you ask a Negro where he's been, he'll tell you where he's going." Chapter 25, pg. 189

Quote 17: "They don't really hate us. They don't know us. How can they hate us? They mostly scared." Chapter 25, pg. 192

Quote 18: "Then ask your son to look around for my arm, which I left over there." Chapter 27, pg. 208

Quote 19: "All knowledge is spendable currency, depending on the market." Chapter 28, pg. 210

Quote 20: "We are the victims of the world's most comprehensive robbery. Life demands a balance. It's all right if we do a little robbing now." Chapter 29, pg. 219

Quote 21: "mean and petty and full of pretense." Chapter 30, pg 223

Quote 22: "How maddening it was to have been born in a cotton field with aspirations of grandeur." Chapter 30, pg. 226

Quote 23: "'This is my daughter' and 'She speaks Spanish.'" Chapter 30, pg. 229

Quote 24: "He had enjoyed his Mexican holiday, and still was unable to proffer a bit of kindness to the woman who had waited patiently, busying herself with housewifely duties." Chapter 31, pg. 237

Quote 25: "she's a whore." Chapter 31, pg. 239

Quote 26: "At fifteen life had taught me undeniably that surrender, in its place, was as honorable as resistance, especially if one had no choice." Chapter 31, pg. 243

Quote 27: "I was never again to sense myself to solidly outside the pale of the human race." Chapter 32, pg. 247

Quote 28: "In two months, I had become blasé." Chapter 33, pg. 250

Quote 29: "I left his room because, and only because, we had said all we could say." Chapter 33, pg. 254

Quote 30: "Can't do is like Don't Care. Neither of them have a home." Chapter 34, pg. 258

Quote 31: "See, you don't have to think about doing the right thing. If you're for the right thing, then you do it without thinking." Chapter 36, pg. 281



Topic Tracking: Ignorance

Chapter 2

Ignorance 1: Though Momma doesn't know who Shakespeare is, Marguerite and Bailey anticipate that she would not approve of him, simply because he was white. To her, race is the most important issue, but it clearly keeps her ignorant about many subjects.

Chapter 4

Ignorance 2: Marguerite, like most black people in Stamps, knows almost nothing about white people. She does not even consider them human: they are too different from her. She sees them as creatures with see-through skin, who are unpredictable, incomprehensible and very strange.

Chapter 8

Ignorance 3: Since Marguerite and Bailey don't know who their parents are, or why they abandoned them, the children live in painful ignorance. What did they do to deserve such treatment? It seems unfair, but there is nothing they can do except wait, half-loving, half-hating their parents.

Chapter 11

Ignorance 4: Maya doesn't know what Mr. Freeman is doing to her. She likes him, though, and she wishes she could know. She doesn't understand why adults have to be so secretive and mysterious, why they can't take the time to explain anything to her, when she tries so hard to understand.

Chapter 13

Ignorance 5: Maya does not understand that what happened was not her fault: in fact, she does not really understand what happened at all. She is not sure when to tell the truth and when to lie, and no one helps her. It is especially ridiculous that women in the courtroom think that she is on their level, just because she has "had sex," when she doesn't even really know what sex is.

Chapter 15

Ignorance 6: Momma believes what she wants to believe about her religion (and most other things), and she will not listen to any other interpretation, especially not from her grandchildren. She does not often change, or accept new information into her life.

Chapter 23

Ignorance 7: Completely ignorant of who his audience is and what they want out of life, Mr. Donleavy speaks to the graduating class as if they were fools. He assumes they all

want to be sports heroes, because he can't imagine a black person using his or her mind. Though he probably has never spoken at length with a black person, he thinks he knows who they are and what they are capable of.

Chapter 25

Ignorance 8: Bailey, and even Willie, live in terrible ignorance, never knowing why white men hate them so much, simply knowing that they are hated and must protect themselves at all costs. They are never given an explanation, though they desperately search for some understanding of why they must live in fear and poverty.

Chapter 29

Ignorance 9: Daddy Clidell's friends are able to run a profitable business by cheating white people. Their schemes are easy to pull off, because the people they cheat never believe that a black person could be smart enough to cheat them. Although they are completely ignorant as to what black people know and are capable of, these rich white men think they have complete control over every deal.

Chapter 31

Ignorance 10: Maya is upset when Dolores calls her mother a whore, partly because she is insulted, but also because she is afraid Dolores might be right. Maya has no idea whether the accusation is true or not, so it terrifies her to hear it spoken. Maya lashes out at Dolores because there is nothing else she can do: she is so ignorant of her mother's true nature that she cannot say for certain whether Dolores is right or wrong. It is this uncertainty that is most upsetting to Maya. She wants her mother to be perfect, but she is aware of how little she knows about her.

Chapter 35

Ignorance 11: Maya worries that she might be a lesbian, though if she had any idea what a lesbian was, she would not be worried. Equipped with an overactive imagination, self-consciousness, and a lot of rumors, Maya decides she must be abnormal, and decides she needs to have sex with a man to make herself normal.



Topic Tracking: Self Esteem

Preface

Self Esteem 1: As a young girl, Marguerite has no self-pride. She longs to be someone else, believes she is ugly, and can almost convince herself that she is actually white instead of black

Chapter 5

Self Esteem 2: This may be the first time Marguerite sees someone preserving their own self-pride and dignity, despite what other people do to them. She assumes her grandmother is being mocked, but Momma shows her that no one can be mocked if they will not allow themselves to be. Marguerite remembers this lesson later when dealing with white people who try to belittle her.

Chapter 9

Self Esteem 3: Marguerite is at first proud to have such a handsome, charismatic father. But soon she begins to feel uncomfortable, because she doesn't think she belongs to him: she is too ugly and strange. His easy manner and good looks intimidate her, and she cannot stand to feel foolish because of his jokes.

Chapter 13

Self Esteem 4: Maya believes that the rape, and Mr. Freeman's death, are her fault-first, because she liked when he held her, and then because she lied about how many times he had touched her in court. She thinks of herself as a bad girl, so bad that she has to stop talking so that she won't make things worse for everyone around her. This disturbs and angers her family, who doesn't know what is happening, and makes it more difficult for her to understand that she is not actually bad.

Chapter 16

Self Esteem 5: Maya's sense of self-worth is still a little shaky-she thinks Mrs. Cullinan might be making fun of her because she knows about Mr. Freeman (Maya still thinks his death is her fault.) But when her mistress calls her Mary, Maya suddenly understands what she will and will not accept. She gets herself fired, not caring about the consequences, rather than be called a name other than her own.

Chapter 23

Self Esteem 6: Maya feels very proud of herself for graduating, even though the white speaker at the ceremony suggests that she and her class will never be what they really want to be. She understands that this attitude is not a reflection of her-it is racism, pure and simple. When they sing "Lift Ev'ry Voice," she sees that her people have not given



up hope, and that in itself gives her hope. Her self-esteem is not shaken by the white speaker; it is now grounded in her own achievements.

Chapter 25

Self Esteem 7: Though Maya will miss Bailey for the month they are separated, she is becoming more independent. She no longer needs him to defend her from insults. She now has books, which are a consistent source of joy and education. She has found something she really loves-reading-and it has given her more of an identity.

Chapter 28

Self Esteem 8: Maya is at first afraid that everyone will laugh at her body when she dances, but when she sees that no one notices her, she is able to forget her self-consciousness and learn to do something she really enjoys and is good at.

Chapter 30

Self Esteem 9: Alone on the mountainside, Maya realizes she can accomplish even the most frightening thing if she puts her mind to it. She is never the same afterward: she has a new confidence that sets her apart from most people her age. She has faith in herself.

Chapter 32

Self Esteem 10: In the junkyard, Maya learns to take care of herself, and she begins to understand that people of all races, and all personality types, can be friends. The kids accept her without questioning her. This helps her to feel less alone because of her own race, and makes her feel like a normal human being, rather than an unwanted, ugly black girl who doesn't belong.



Topic Tracking: Strength

Chapter 4

Strength 1: Maya's closeness to Bailey gives her strength in a world that rejects her. They laugh and read together. He offers her an escape from the cold and frightening reality of Stamps, and takes care of her in a way that no one else is willing to.

Chapter 5

Strength 2: Momma gets a strange kind of strength and dignity from not fighting with the powhitetrash girls. She simply allows them to be cruel, but refuses to be cruel back. She does not sink to their level. She hums her hymn and waits for them to go, almost pretending that they are not there, and not letting anything they do get to her.

Chapter 6

Strength 3: Though Marguerite is eventually upset with Bailey for making her laugh so hard, she has a humor connection to him that enables her to endure even the greatest boredom and insult. They ridicule Reverend Thomas together, when everyone else seems to respect him, and Bailey allows her to laugh at the ridiculous aspects of church, which everyone else takes deadly seriously.

Chapter 11

Strength 4: Though she feels very alone in St. Louis, Maya learns to pretend that the books she reads are her real life. Instead of a poor, unwanted ugly girl, she is a beautiful princess who has simply been mistaken for a maid. She believes desperately in the morals of the stories, and is sometimes able to forget her life for a moment.

Chapter 18

Strength 5: Maya's neighbors find unbelievable strength in their faith: it is largely what helps them work their broken bodies to death, day after day, for very low wages. Yet they also, she notices, take heart in the particular idea in their religion that those who are cruel and selfish (white people) on Earth will be punished when they die. They are thus able to hate white people (not a Christian idea) with a kind of spiritual righteousness that masks their very real and personal hate.

Chapter 22

Strength 6: Maya is amazed at her grandmother's power. Momma turned a terrifying ghost story into a harmless dream. As she crawls into bed with her grandmother, Maya thinks that there is nothing Momma can't do, and feels very safe.

Chapter 23



Strength 7: Even when their hopes seem to be crushed, Maya and her neighbors find the courage to keep trying. Maya claims that the reason for this is directly related to the power of their many different songs: blues songs, poetry, sermons, etc. These songs bring the people together and give them strength.

Chapter 27

Strength 8: Maya understands that the only way for black people to remain strong and dignified in the face of racism is to respond with dignity to attacks. She notes that the war veteran in the story does not yell at the white woman, or argue with her. He simply and quietly points out that she is wrong.

Chapter 29

Strength 9: Maya implies that black people are able to survive because of their ability to move easily between very different worlds. They obey whites when they have to, they steal from the racist, cruel ones, and they keep a sense of humor. They, for the most part, support each other. This keeps them strong, even when the majority of their nation is against them.

Chapter 36

Strength 10: Though Maya is afraid to have her baby alone, she is strong enough not to force its father to take care of her. She knows he had no part in her decision to have the child, so she knows she must shoulder the responsibility alone. Though she is afraid at first, once she realizes that she is capable of loving and caring for her young son, she relaxes and feels more confident.

Preface

Marguerite Johnson is at the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in Stamps, Arkansas. Her teacher is trying to get her to remember the words to a song, and the children are giggling at her forgetfulness, but Marguerite can only think about how the words relate to her own life in the town: "I didn't come to stay." Preface, pg. 3 She feels out of place there, and longs to leave. She is wearing a dress her grandmother, Momma, made. Marguerite thought the dress would make her beautiful, but when it was finished she saw it was just a hand-me-down dress from a white woman. She daydreams about how one day everyone will see she is not the ugly, awkward black girl they thought she was- in fact, she is white, with light blue eyes and blond hair. Her teacher mouths the words to the hymn to her, and she sings them reluctantly, then indicates that she has to go to the bathroom. Someone trips her, and her bladder lets go. She runs out of the church, crying, unable to control her bladder. But she laughs also, because she is glad to be out of the church. "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult." Preface, pg. 6

Topic Tracking: Self Esteem 1

Chapter 1

When Marguerite was three and her brother Bailey was four, their parents put them on a train in California and sent them to Stamps to live with their father's mother. Marguerite doesn't remember much of the trip, but she knows that other "Negroes" on the train were kind to them. They live with Momma and her son, Uncle Willie at the Store. The Store, which Momma has owned and run for twenty-five years, is in many ways the center of activity in the black part of town. People use it as a gathering place, and it provides all kinds of supplies to farmers. Each morning, Momma gets up very early and prays earnestly, then calls her household to work. Marguerite enjoys listening to the black farmers chatting in the morning: they are full of energy and competitive spirit. Each one says he will pick more cotton than the next. In the early morning, the Store feels almost ghostly. But in the evening, reality sets in heavily: everyone is dead tired, and depressed. They are overworked and terribly poor and they get no rest or relief. Later in life, Marguerite will bitterly remember these scenes when she confronts images of happy, carefree cotton pickers.

Chapter 2

Marguerite and Bailey, at ages five and six, recite multiplication tables for their Uncle Willie, who pretends he will burn them if they make a mistake. Once, Marguerite nearly does get burned, because, "like most children, I thought if I could face the worst danger voluntarily, and *triumph*, I would forever have power over it." Chapter 2, pg. 10 She jumps toward the stove. Uncle Willie is crippled, and Marguerite and Bailey feel awed by this--they know the random tragedy could have easily happened to them--and criticize him because of it. Over and over, Momma tells the story of how Willie was dropped when he was a baby. He is rejected by his peers because he can't work, and he is proud and sensitive, so that he can't pretend he isn't crippled or that people don't resent him for it. Marguerite only saw him pretend once: she came into the Store and he was alone with a couple who were clearly tourists. He was standing up, pretending he didn't have to lean against anything. His cane was hidden. He told her firmly to leave the room, and she did so, but she watched him from outside and she understood that, just this once, he was presenting the illusion that he was normal.

Marguerite falls in love with Shakespeare. He is the first white writer she has ever loved--she respects others, like Kipling, but she usually saves her passion for Langston Hughes and other black writers. She convinces herself it's okay to love Shakespeare because he's been dead for so long that it doesn't matter what race he was. Still, she and Bailey keep their reading of him a secret, because they know that if Momma found out about it she would demand to know if he was white, and they would have to tell the truth.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 1

Chapter 3

Marguerite prides herself on being able to measure flour accurately. If she fails, she punishes herself by not allowing herself chocolate-which she loves, just as she loves canned pineapples. She is only allowed to eat those at Christmas, when her grandmother makes cakes, and allows her grandchildren one slice from the can each.

Marguerite loves the Store. She thinks of it like a human being that gets tired at the end of the day. She feels a sense of belonging when she eats dinner with her family in the evening. One night when she is feeding the hogs, however, she hears Mr. Steward, the former sheriff, ride up on his horse. He warns Momma that a black man supposedly molested a white woman, so "the boys" (the KKK) are angry and looking to punish a black man. The sheriff acts like he is doing them a great favor, when really he is telling Willie to hide, because he will not prevent the Klan from hurting him. Willie crawls into a bin of onions and potatoes, and stays there all night while Momma prays. But Marguerite knows that if the Klan had come to the house at all, they surely would have found Willie and killed him.

Chapter 4

Marguerite learns a lot from her small town, and her impressions, she says, are the kind that stay with you your whole life. She remembers Mr. McElroy, a big man who likes to talk to Uncle Willie. He doesn't go to church, even though he lives right next door to Momma, and he is a black man who owns a house. The two children find this brave and very interesting.

Marguerite loves her brother, because he is handsome and kind to her, and they both have a strong intellectual curiosity, and a naughty sense of humor. Bailey protects her, and she admires his intelligence and his resourcefulness: he is good at stealing treats from the Store.

Topic Tracking: Strength 1

In Stamps, every food that can be preserved is. Momma and the other church ladies make sausage together. Every once in a while, Momma gives the two children money to buy fresh meat from white people on the other side of town. This is an incredible adventure for them. Some black children do not even know what white people look like, since the segregation in Stamps is so complete. Marguerite says, "I remember never believing that whites were really real." Chapter 4, pg. 25 She knew they existed, but she could not believe they were human. Though she might not have liked many people in her neighborhood, she knew them and understood them. She knew almost nothing about white people.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 2

Chapter 5

Momma demands that her grandchildren be clean and polite, and she whips them often if they disobey her. Everyone Marguerite knows is just as polite as she is, except for the powhitetrash children. Though some of them live on Momma's land, they call her by her first name, and roughhouse in the store in ways that shock Marguerite. They do not seem to care what anyone thinks of them, and they think that just because they are white they are superior to the black people who live near them. Marguerite is mortified that Momma and Willie obey these children. One day, Marguerite rakes a lovely design in the dirt outside the Store. Momma wants an important person to walk by and see it. Then suddenly they see a group of powhitetrash children approaching. Momma begins to hum a hymn quietly, and tells her granddaughter to go inside. Marguerite doesn't understand what is going on. Then the children begin to make fun of Momma, mimicking her cruelly. She says nothing, and does not change her stance or song. One of them does a handstand, and she is not wearing underwear. Finally, they leave, calling Momma Annie. Momma responds by calling each of them "Miz" and saying goodbye politely. Marguerite doesn't understand how Momma could be polite to those mean girls, but when Momma comes inside, she seems happy and dignified. Marguerite stops crying and makes another design in the dirt. Momma approves, and continues to sing hymns.

Topic Tracking: Strength 2

Topic Tracking: Self Esteem 2

Chapter 6

Revered Howard Thomas is the presiding elder over several Arkansas districts, including Stamps. He checks up on their church every few months. Bailey and Marguerite hate him, because he is fat, ugly, condescending and eats the best parts of their chicken dinner every time he comes. Marguerite is afraid to even talk to him, because she does not want to mock him, but she truly hates him so she isn't sure she is capable of being nice. The two children eavesdrop on the gossipy Reverend's conversation: Marguerite speaks in two voices, pretending to have a conversation with Bailey, while Bailey listens to the gossip. They overhear stories about doing "it," which Marguerite does not really understand. In the morning, they have breakfast, which is only good when it's eaten hot. But Revered Thomas prays for so long that everything gets cold, and the children hate him for it.

Whenever Reverend Thomas is in town, he preaches. One Sunday he preaches on Deuteronomy, and though Marguerite hates him, she loves the book, because it is so straightforward and absolute. "I knew that if a person truly wanted to avoid hell and brimstone, and being roasted forever in the devil's fire, all she had to do was memorize Deuteronomy and follow its teaching, word for word." Chapter 6, pg. 38 Marguerite knows the sermon is going to be exciting, because Sister Monroe is there. She lives far away so she is not able to come to every service, but when she does come, she makes up for it by getting excited to the point of violence. Ushers stand near her, prepared to hold her still. Marguerite remembers that once, Sister Monroe ran up to their usual preacher as he was speaking, and chased him around, yelling "Preach it!" and shaking him. This caused other people to "get the spirit" as well, and soon there was chaos in the church: people were flailing around, hitting each other. The next week the preacher talked about people who pray publicly just to show off, but Marguerite doubted if anyone understood what he was getting at. This week, Marguerite hates Reverend Thomas so much that she simply wants to see what Sister Monroe will do to him. She does not listen to his sermon; she waits. Bailey nudges her and whispers, "Preach it." Momma is glaring at Sister Monroe, trying to quiet her, but her voice is already rising. Though several men try to hold her back, Sister Monroe breaks loose and runs for the Reverend. He slips down the other side of the podium. She chases after him and hits him on the back of the head, twice. His false teeth fall out. Marguerite wishes he would look sad or embarrassed, so she will feel bad and not laugh at him. But he picks up his teeth and continues speaking, through his gums. Bailey begins to laugh, and Marguerite loses all control, cracking up and falling to the floor. Their relatives are furious, and Uncle Willie beats them when they get home. For Marguerite, laughter and hysteria are similar. She feels that she has been sick from laughing.

Topic Tracking: Strength 3

Chapter 7

Momma was married three times: to Mr. Johnson, Marguerite's grandfather, who left Momma, to Mr. Henderson, who Marguerite knows nothing about, and to Mr. Murphy, who Marguerite saw only once and who disappeared fast. Momma had apparently been attractive, but Marguerite sees only her power. She has large hands, a commanding nature, and an amazing voice. She teaches Marguerite and Bailey not to talk to white people at all-it's too dangerous. She was the only black woman in Stamps ever to have been called Mrs. by a white person. She had been called in to court as a witness, and the judge had referred to her that way before she got there, not knowing she was black. The white people in court thought it was funny, and the black people thought it proved how special Mrs. Henderson was.

Chapter 8

Stamps is a very segregated and racist town. White people have more money than Marguerite can imagine, and she can't understand how they can spend like they do. She thinks it is vain. The Great Depression hit the white section of Stamps hard, but since the black section was so poor and underpaid to begin with, they didn't feel it for a long time. In order to keep her store going when no one had money to pay her, Momma traded Welfare food (powdered milk and eggs) for her merchandise. So even though her family was relatively rich, they had to eat what poorer families could trade, in order to keep the store open.

That Christmas, the children get their first gifts from their parents. They are told that their parents live in California, where it is always sunny and they get to eat as many oranges as they want. Marguerite never believed it-she thought her parents must be dead, because she couldn't believe they could abandon her. When she received the presents, she could not deny that they were not dead-that they had simply abandoned their children. She and Bailey feel miserable about this: what did they do to deserve it? They cry, and begin to destroy the presents. Momma calls them ungrateful, but they understand each other's grief.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 3

Chapter 9

A year later, their father, Bailey Sr., arrives in Stamps unexpectedly. The children are shocked and disturbed. He is very big, very handsome, and he speaks perfect, almost pretentious, English. Marguerite is impressed in spite of herself. He has wonderful clothes and a big car. She feels ugly next to him, and hates the way he teases her. Everyone admires him, and her world feels turned upside down. Then he announces he will take them to California. Marguerite ponders this: should she go? Should she drown herself? She has no idea what to do. Her grandmother tells her fiercely to be good. In the car on the way there, she sits uncomfortably in the back, while Bailey and their father tell jokes in front. Suddenly, their father tells them that he's taking them to St. Louis to see their mother. This terrifies Marguerite, but her father just laughs. In St. Louis, she tries to talk Pig Latin to her brother, and when her father laughingly speaks it too, she gets angry. She thought her brother had made up the language.

Their mother is absolutely beautiful, and Bailey falls in love with her instantly. A few days later their father leaves, and Marguerite accepts this without question. "He was a stranger, and if he chose to leave us with a stranger, it was all of one piece." Chapter 9, pg. 59

Topic Tracking: Self Esteem 3

Chapter 10

Grandmother Baxter, their mother's mother, is almost completely white by blood, and looks completely white. She was raised by a German family and speaks with an accent. Mother's family is close-knit and happy. There is a lot of crime in St. Louis, and Grandmother Baxter has some control over it because of her connections with the police department. She pushes for leniency for criminals, and they bring votes to the candidates of her choice during election time.

In school, Marguerite and Bailey are shocked by the ignorance of their classmates and teachers. Bailey picks on the other boys, asking them academic questions, never afraid of a beating. They rarely see their mother in the house, but she has them meet her at a tavern sometimes. There, she is kind to them and dances in front of them, which is when Marguerite loves her most. Everyone likes her, and thinks she is beautiful. She and her brothers also have wild tempers: when someone curses at Mother, she and her brothers hunt him down and she beats him nearly to death. Nothing happens, because everyone is afraid of their family-their tempers and their political connections. They take pride in their closeness. They tell Marguerite the story of why she is nicknamed Maya: Bailey has always called her "My sister" instead of her name, and it was gradually shortened to "My," which turned into Maya. Maya particularly likes her Uncle Tommy, who tells her, "don't worry 'cause you ain't pretty...I rather you have a good mind than a cute behind." Chapter 10, pg. 66

After about six months of living with their grandparents, the children move into their mother's house. Maya does not see this as strange at all-she knows her life is different from that of most children her age, and she thinks no more about it. Bailey, smitten with his mother, calls her "Mother Dear" and finally "M'Deah." They are a little afraid of her, because she is so beautiful and because she can easily send them back to Stamps. Mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, lives with them. He is older than Mother, and Maya knows he is lucky to have such a pretty, happy wife.

Chapter 11

St Louis seems incredibly strange to Maya. She feels the same way about it as she felt about Stamps: she doesn't really belong there. Mr. Freeman waits for their mother to come home (she works late, running poker games) and rarely speaks to the children. He simply sits and waits for her. Bailey and Maya have certain emotional problems: he stutters, and she has nightmares. She sleeps in bed with Mother and Mr. Freeman because of this. One morning her mother leaves early and Maya feels something against her leg. She realizes, without really knowing how she knows, that it is Mr. Freeman's penis. He puts his hand between her legs. She isn't afraid, and he doesn't hurt her, but she has been told not to let anyone touch her there, so she is nervous. Then he asks her to feel his penis. She does so, thinking it feels very strange, and then he holds her against him and begins to shake. He is masturbating, but she doesn't realize this: she thinks he is going to die, and is afraid of what will happen to her. Then he quiets down and holds her for a long time. She feels wonderfully safe, like he must be her real father. But then he gets up and says he has to talk to her. He tells her she wet the bed-it *is* wet, but she knows she didn't cause it. Then he tells her that he will kill Bailey if she tells anyone what they did together. She is shocked, and doesn't know what to do. "There was an army of adults, whose motives and movements I just couldn't understand and who made no effort to understand mine." Chapter 11, pg. 73 She does not dislike Mr. Freeman, she just doesn't understand him. She likes the comfort of his arms, though, and one day sits on his lap again. He pushes her around on his lap for a while, then abruptly runs to the bathroom. He does not speak to her for months. She reads often, especially melodramatic stories about great escapes, and wishes she were a boy, so she could have adventures like the boys she reads about.

Topic Tracking: Strength 4

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 4

Chapter 12

One afternoon when everyone else is out, Mr. Freeman tells Maya to buy some milk. When she returns, his penis is out of his pants. He beckons her, and she tries to say no, but he grabs her. His face looks kind but expressionless. He tells her he won't hurt her much, then tells her that he will kill her or Bailey if she screams or tells on him. Then she feels unbelievable pain, and passes out as he rapes her.

She wakes up some time later, and Mr. Freeman is washing her. She feels very sleepy, but he makes her walk to the library. She can't sit on the hard benches in the library, so she tries to find Bailey at the baseball diamond. He isn't there, and she heads home, but the pain and shock overtake her. She walks slowly and carefully, almost falling unconscious. She hides her bloodstained underwear under her mattress and gets into bed. Everyone thinks she is sick, and she is too scared to tell the truth. Her mother thinks she has the measles. Mr. Freeman comes to her bed and threatens her. That night, she hears her mother and Mr. Freeman arguing, and she is afraid for her mother's life. The next morning when she asks, her mother informs her that Mr. Freeman has left. When Mother and Bailey begin to change the bed, they find her stained underwear.

Chapter 13

In the hospital, Bailey tells her that she must tell him who did this to her, or he could hurt another girl. When she finally tells him, he begins to cry until she cries too. Bailey tells Grandmother Baxter, and Mr. Freeman is arrested. Maya wants to stay in the hospital forever, because everyone is so nice to her.

In court, Maya is very intimidated. Mr. Freeman's lawyer is cruel to her-he snidely asks her if she even knows if she was raped-and he forces her to say that the day of the rape was the first time Mr. Freeman had touched her. (If she revealed that he had done it before, her family would have been shocked that she had never told them.) She despises the lawyer for making her lie, and yells at him. Mr. Freeman is sentenced to a year and a day in prison, but he is released that afternoon. Later, as Bailey and Maya are playing Monopoly, a white policeman comes to the house and tells Grandmother Baxter that Mr. Freeman is dead-it appears he has been kicked to death. She hardly seems surprised. Maya thinks he is dead because she lied in court. She thinks everything is her fault, and she must do something to stop herself from causing more problems. She stops talking to everyone but Bailey. At first, everyone understands that she is traumatized. But after some time, people expect her to get better and she does not. Finally, they get very frustrated with her and sometimes even beat her. Eventually, the children get sent back to Stamps, and Bailey cries all the way there. Maya is convinced they are leaving because she is so disturbingly sullen. She doesn't care where she is, but she doesn't want Bailey to be sad.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 5
Topic Tracking: Self Esteem 4

Chapter 14

Maya is happy to be in Stamps. She welcomes its slowness, and its feeling of seclusion: she doesn't want anything more to happen to her, and nothing happens here. Many people come to see her and her brother, because they are travelers. Bailey tells fantastic stories about St. Louis, and everyone believes him. Bailey has matured a little: he speaks eloquently and sarcastically. No one in Stamps understands his insults. Maya is still afraid of being thought of as sinful, and does not speak. Her family thinks of her as "tender-hearted"-almost as if she were ill.

Chapter 15

Maya wanders around aimlessly for almost a year. Then she meets Bertha Flowers. Mrs. Flowers is beautifully black, speaks in perfect sentences, and wears wonderful flowery dresses. Though she and Momma are friendly, Maya is ashamed when Momma does not speak correct English to Mrs. Flowers. Mrs. Flowers is like a character from a beautiful English novel for Maya. One day Mrs. Flowers asks Maya to accompany her home, bringing her groceries. Maya puts on a nice school dress, and Momma insists on lifting it over her head to show Mrs. Flowers her sewing job. Maya is embarrassed and Mrs. Flowers knows it, which makes it worse. On the walk home, Mrs. Flowers tells Maya, "language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone that separates him from the lower animals." Chapter 15, pg. 95 Maya has never thought of this before. Mrs. Flowers encourages her to read, giving her books and telling her to read them aloud. She offers Maya cookies and lemonade that she made especially for her. She shows Maya what a difference a voice can make: reading from *A Tale of Two Cities*, Mrs. Flowers makes the book sound like a poem. Maya runs home in excitement, but stops before she reaches home so she won't get scolded for running. She brings some cookies for Bailey, saying, "By the way, Bailey, Mrs. Flowers sent you some tea cookies" Chapter 15, pg. 99. Momma suddenly gets very angry, makes the three of them pray together, and beats Maya. Only afterward does she explain that "by the way" refers to Jesus (Jesus is "the Way, the Truth and the Light") and is therefore a blasphemous phrase. Bailey tries to explain that it is just an expression, but Momma refuses to listen.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 6

Chapter 16

Young black girls learn to be "ladies" just like young black girls, but while the white girls learn to waltz, the black girls are "learning the mid-Victorian values with very little money to indulge them." Chapter 16, pg. 101 At age ten, Maya is sent to a white woman's kitchen to learn manners. Mrs. Viola Cullinan and her maid, Miss Glory, keep an awe-inspiring house. Every dish and piece of silverware has a special purpose. Mrs. Cullinan, Glory tells her, cannot have children (though Bailey later tells her that Mr. Cullinan has two children by a black woman, and that Maya knows the children personally.) Maya pities her boss at first, but then one evening as Maya is serving her and her friends, Mrs. Cullinan, who thinks Maya's name is Margaret, tells her friends to call her Mary. Margaret is too long, she says. Maya is furious. She wonders if the women are making fun of her because they know about Mr. Freeman. The next day, Mrs. Cullinan calls her Mary, and Glory takes her aside and tells her not to be offended. She says that her name used to be Hallelujah, but years ago Mrs. Cullinan changed it to Glory because it was shorter. Maya decides that she has to leave the job, but she can't quit-Momma wouldn't understand. She has to be fired. Bailey instructs her to break one of Mrs. Cullinan's favorite dishes. When she does so, everyone comes running. Mrs. Cullinan bawls over her broken dish, and Glory is almost as upset. When someone calls the culprit Mary, Mrs. Cullinan screams angrily that her name is Margaret, and hurls a piece of the dish at Maya. It hits Glory, who starts to scream. Maya walks out, saying to herself, "Mrs. Cullinan was right about one thing. My name wasn't Mary." Chapter 16, pg. 108

Topic Tracking: Self Esteem 5

Chapter 17

Saturday is Maya's favorite day of the week, even though she is still very busy helping out at the Store. She still feels a little aimless and out of place, as though she is waiting for something to change in her life. One Saturday, Bailey, who goes to the movies every weekend, does not return on time. It gets dark, and finally Momma and Maya go out to find him. They meet him in the road, and he will not say where he has been. Momma is furious, and Uncle Willie beats him severely, but his face remains blank. For days, he is distant. Finally, he suddenly tells Maya, "I saw Mother Dear." Chapter 17, pg. 114 Bailey has seen a movie starring Kay Francis, who he says looks just like their mother. He came home late because he had to watch the movie twice. He tells Maya he will take her to see the next movie she stars in. A few weeks later they go together, and Bailey is right, except that Kay Francis is white and Mother is prettier. On the way home, Bailey runs in front of a train, and Maya is terrified that he is dead or on the train, rushing away from her. But when the train passes, he reappears and they go home together. A year later he does try to get to his Mother Dear by train, but is stranded in Baton Rouge, Louisiana for two weeks.

Chapter 18

Maya watches the tired farmers come into the store each night, praising the Lord because they are still alive. This makes her angry: she wants them to fight against their awful existence. She can't believe that they go to church after such hard days. They go to a tent that has been set up as a temporary church, and Maya wonders if Jesus could really be there with these tired, dirty people, in this sad place. This is the only time of year when all the black Christians from different churches meet in the same place. They begin to sing. The preacher begins to talk about charity. He makes veiled references to white people, who act as though they are being charitable just by giving black people jobs, then expect them to bow and scrape like slaves in gratitude. Maya realizes that this kind of sermon is meant to hearten the people by helping them to believe that white people will be punished by God for what they have done. Then the preacher says that anyone who wants to be saved can come forward and indicate which church he or she wants to join. Even though this preacher belongs to a particular church, he does not demand that everyone join his. The audience is surprised and pleased by this act of charity, and many people are saved that night.

Topic Tracking: Strength 5

Chapter 19

People pack themselves into the Store to listen to the boxing match between Joe Louis, a black man, and Carnera, a white man. Everyone in the Store needs Louis to win, to prove that black people can be victorious. If Louis loses, it will be "One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped and maimed...a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful." Chapter 19, pg. 131 Louis triumphs, and there is celebration and candy. But some people are afraid to go home, because they know white people will be angry that a white man lost the fight.

Chapter 20

Maya is at a large picnic and barbecue in summer. She wanders off by herself, sitting down against a tree. Suddenly a girl who Maya knows from school (and thinks is beautiful) Louise Kendricks, appears. Louise is curious and interested in Maya. They play together, spinning around and getting dizzy. She and Louise become friends, and make up a secret language. Maya begins, for the first time in years, to have fun and be silly.

One day in school Maya gets a note from a boy, asking her to be his valentine. She finally, after agonizing over it, decides it is not a cruel joke. Maya is afraid. She thinks this will be the way it was with Mr. Freeman. She and Louise tear up the valentine. Soon after, their teacher announces it is Valentine's Day tomorrow and begins to read the valentines out loud. The boy has sent another one, saying she will always be his valentine, even if she tears up his cards. Maya likes the letter and decides to be more friendly with the boy, but she is so embarrassed she can't talk to him, and eventually he forgets her.

Chapter 21

Bailey begins to take girls to a makeshift tent behind the house so that they can play Momma and Poppa. Bailey doesn't really understand what sex is, so he and the girls pantomime it with their clothes on. Maya has to be Baby. She is also the lookout. After a few months, Bailey meets Joyce, a fourteen year old (Bailey is nearly eleven.) Joyce knows Bailey likes her, so they play house together. Joyce knows about sex, and she begins to take off her clothes. Afraid that Bailey will have to go to the hospital (and Maya did when Mr. Freeman raped her) Maya tries to prevent this. Joyce angrily tells Maya to leave. Afterward, Bailey is very proud of himself. He loves Joyce, and steals things from the store for her. Then one day she disappears. She ran away with a railroad porter. Bailey is very bitter about it.

Chapter 22

A ghostly storm is coming when they hear a knock at the door of the Store. It is George Taylor, whose wife died over the summer. Maya is afraid he is going to try to marry Momma. Mr. Taylor has a strange look on his face. Momma gives him a bowl of soup, and tells him he should try to stop thinking so much about his wife. They had many good years-though it is sad they had no children. Mr. Taylor suddenly says that his wife wants children-she said so just the night before. Everyone stares at him, not knowing what to say. Momma tries to say it was a dream, but Maya, with a child's imagination, instantly believes it is true. At the funeral during the summer, Maya for the first time understood her own mortality. In death, Mrs. Taylor had not looked peaceful. She had just looked empty, and that scared Maya. The memory is so real that for a moment Maya can't believe she's in the Store, listening to Mr. Taylor. He tells the story of how he lay down to sleep the night before, then opened his eyes to see a baby angel laughing at him, right in front of his face. He heard his wife's moaning voice. She said she wanted children. Momma doesn't believe the story, but Willie, Maya and Bailey are frightened. Momma tells Mr. Taylor that it probably means his wife wants him to help with the children of the church. Though Mr. Taylor protests, Maya sees the whole mood of the room change because of Momma's words. Nothing is frightening anymore.

Topic Tracking: Strength 6

Chapter 23

Everyone in town is excited: graduation is coming up. Maya is graduating the eighth grade, and since many of her teachers did not pass further than that level, she feels very special. She has done extremely well in school, she will wear a beautiful dress, and everyone admires her. Everything seems perfect. As she takes her seat in the auditorium, however, Maya can feel that something is wrong. And then an unexpected speaker takes the stage. He is Mr. Edward Donleavy, a white man running for election who asks for their vote. He praises their athletic abilities, and everyone can see that he has no interest in their academic strengths. He makes them feel as if all their studying has been for nothing: the only thing black people are good at is sports. He leaves, making it clear that he has more important business to attend to. Miserable, Maya believes him. She finds the graduation ceremony ridiculous: no one there will ever amount to anything. Then she hears people begin to sing "Lift Ev'ry Voice," which everyone she knows calls the Negro National Anthem. It is a song about hope under the worst conditions, and she has heard it all her life. But for the first time, she really listens, and feels proud. She understands how strong her people really are.

Topic Tracking: Self Esteem 6

Topic Tracking: Strength 7

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 7

Chapter 24

Maya has two very painful cavities. The nearest black dentist is 25 miles away, so Momma says they will go see Dentist Lincoln, a white dentist in Stamps who Momma says owes her a favor. Maya knows that during the Depression both whites and blacks borrowed money from Momma, but she has never heard of Lincoln seeing a black person. She bathes carefully, and they walk to the white side of town. The dentist's secretary at first does not want to let them in. Then the dentist slowly tells Momma, without once looking at Maya, that he does not treat black people. Momma reminds him that he almost lost his office, and she lent him money to save it. He acts sorry, but he tells her, "my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's." Chapter 24, pg. 184 Momma tells Maya to go downstairs. Waiting, Maya daydreams that her grandmother is punishing the dentist. She forces him to leave town and never practice dentistry again. In her daydream, Momma speaks perfect English, never using slang.

Momma reappears, and takes her to the black dentist twenty five miles away. That evening, Maya hears Momma telling Willie what she said to the white dentist. She demanded interest on the money she had lent him, so that she could pay for a train ticket to the black dentist. He gave it to her, even though he hadn't actually owed it. Hearing this, Willie laughs, and Momma joins him. Maya prefers her version of what happened.

Chapter 25

Momma is a secretive woman, who embodies the proverb, "If you ask a Negro where he's been, he'll tell you where he's going." Chapter 25, pg. 189 So when Momma tells Maya and Bailey she is taking them to California, Maya knows better than to ask why. Momma tells them that she herself is getting old, Willie is crippled, and they should be with their parents anyway. None of these seems to be the real reason they are going. Maya thinks it is because of something that happened to Bailey.

One day, Bailey had come into the house, looking shocked beyond speech. Finally, he asked Willie what black people had ever done to white people to make whites hate them so much. Willie had no answer. Bailey said that he saw a dead black man. He had been fished out of a pond, and all the black people stayed away from the body, but a white man approached and kicked the body over onto its stomach, grinning. Bailey asked again why white people hate blacks, and Willie said "They don't really hate us. They don't know us. How can they hate us? They mostly scared." Chapter 25, pg. 192 The white man then forced Bailey to help lift the dead man into a calaboose full of black prisoners. They protest that they couldn't be bad enough to have to share their cell with a dead man, but they laugh as they say this. Bailey didn't see what could possibly be funny. Though neither Momma nor Willie said much in response to this story, Maya is sure that it is the real reason she and Bailey have to go to California. Maya will go ahead with Momma, and Bailey will follow in a month, when they have the money to send him. They will go to their father in Los Angeles first. Maya feels bad: she will miss her friend Louise, and Bailey, and she feels sorry for Willie. Still, now that she has books, she feels stronger and more confident.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 8

Topic Tracking: Self Esteem 7

Chapter 26

Maya is afraid of what will happen when she sees her mother. She still thinks about Mr. Freeman. Her mother meets them at the train station and gets them settled in L.A. before going back to her home in San Francisco. Her father visits them sometimes, but only briefly, and always bringing gifts. Maya does not realize at the time how well her grandmother, who has lived her whole life in the tiny town of Stamps, adjusts to living in the big city. Then Momma leaves. Bailey and Maya are afraid: what will living with their parents be like? On the road to San Francisco, their mother sings and tells jokes. They are reunited with the Baxter family, still as fiesty as ever, though a little saddened since Grandfather Baxter is dead. One night their mother wakes them up and invites them to a party-just the three of them, in the bathroom. She gives them sweets, and they dance and tell jokes. Maya and Bailey cannot resist her, and fall in love with her all over again.

Mother is absolutely honest with them, no matter what question they ask. She has a temper, but she is fair. Maya knows a story of something that happened before she came to San Francisco. Her mother had a business partner who was not fulfilling his responsibilities. She got angry, and he called her a bitch. She shot him. He staggered toward her, and she shot him again-all she wanted was to be rid of him. He recovered, and good feelings remained between them: she had warned him she would shoot him, so she was only being fair.

World War II begins soon after Maya comes to San Francisco. Grandmother Baxter tells her not to worry, because Roosevelt is a good president. Mother marries Daddy Clidell, who is to be Maya's first real father figure. He is successful, and moves Bailey, Maya and Mother into their own house.

Chapter 27

During the war, Japanese Californians are relocated, and black Californians take their places in the businesses and homes. Maya marvels at how these two groups, who have so much racism in common, could not sympathize with one another. Black people simply accept their good fortune, without wondering who is suffering because of it. Maya enjoys living in San Francisco. It feels big and dangerous and free, and that suits her. Yet she knows that racism is not missing from the city. She tells the story of a white woman who would not sit next to a black man on the bus, saying that he was a Negro and a draft dodger as well-he should fight for his country, as her son is doing. The man told her, "Then ask your son to look around for my arm, which I left over there." Chapter 27, pg. 208

Topic Tracking: Strength 8

Chapter 28

In school, Maya does very well, but she is intimidated by the confident, educated children. She has one teacher who shows no favorites, but simply displays a love of learning. She expects her students to do well and be interested in the world around them, and so they are. Maya loves and respects her, especially because she seems to believe she is just doing her job. Maya now believes what Bailey has told her: "All knowledge is spendable currency, depending on the market." Chapter 28, pg. 210

Maya attends a drama and dance school on scholarship. She has no idea why-she has no experience with either. One of her teachers makes her pantomime for six months, because she is such an overactress. She loves dance especially, though, and continues her evening classes.

Topic Tracking: Self Esteem 8

Chapter 29

The new pieced-together family-Daddy Clidell, Mother, Bailey and Maya-lives in a large house and takes many boarders. They board everyone from prostitutes to elderly couples. Maya is prepared to ignore Daddy Clidell, but she finds he is a kind and strong person, qualities she admires. He does not complain, and he treats everyone well. Plus, she looks like him. He takes her to meet many of his criminal friends. They are so nice to her, and so clearly only cheat rich racist white people, that she cannot think of their crimes as wrong. They all have colorful names-Red Leg, Just Black, etc.-and tell hilarious stories. They use the fact that some white people think that all black people are idiots to cheat them by pretending to be idiots. One con man tells an elaborate story about how they sold some public land to a white man, just because the man was so ready to believe that the con artists were stupid because they were black. He thought he was getting an amazing deal from a couple of "niggers" who didn't know how valuable their property was. They were able to take forty thousand dollars from the man. Maya reflects that black people often think, "We are the victims of the world's most comprehensive robbery. Life demands a balance. It's all right if we do a little robbing now." Chapter 29, pg. 219 She knows that black people are able to live easily in two different cultures: the formal, public, and mostly white world, where they go to school and obey the rules, and their own culture, where they speak in slang and play by their own rules.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 9

Topic Tracking: Strength 9

Chapter 30

Maya's father has invited her to stay with him in Southern California for the summer, and she is very excited. He acts so superior that she thinks he must be rich. Maya agrees to meet her father at the train station, and is shocked to discover what appears to be a young girl there. She is in her early twenties, but serious, tiny, and very neat in appearance. She introduces herself as Dolores Stockland, Father's girlfriend. She was told that Maya was eight years old, when she is in fact a teenager, and nearly six feet tall. Dolores tries to be genteel, but she lives in a trailer park with Father. She tries desperately to keep everything orderly. Maya is, by contrast, a clumsy, awkward girl. Daddy cooks wonderful meals, always looks amused, even when nothing is funny, and goes to Mexico frequently to buy ingredients. Dolores, being too good to wander the streets and investigate her town, doesn't realize (as Maya does) that Daddy must be going to Mexico for some other reason, because he can buy everything he needs right where they live. Maya and Dolores do not get along: Maya doesn't like her because she is "mean and petty and full of pretense." Chapter 30, pg. 223 Then Daddy invites her to drive to Mexico with him. Dolores is jealous, and Maya is surprised: her father has never paid much attention to her.

Maya is amazed by Mexico: everything is strange and carefree. Her father has a drink with a customs officer. Her father offers him her hand in marriage, and she sits uncomfortably as they joke about this. Finally, they pull up to a building outside of Ensenada, where a group of women begin to shout welcomes to her father. He tells them Maya is his daughter, and everyone thinks this is hilarious. Her father seems more relaxed than she has ever seen him. She knows he has tried to prove himself over and over throughout his life. "How maddening it was to have been born in a cotton field with aspirations of grandeur." Chapter 30, pg. 226 Maya understands this, and she sees that her father doesn't have to impress anyone in this house-unlike in America. Everyone in the building loves him, and there is a great party where everyone is kind to Maya. Then suddenly Maya fears that her father has left her. No one takes her seriously, and she walks outside in alarm. His car is still there, and she knows he is with a woman. She remembers the beginning of the night, when her father had quickly said to a certain woman, "'This is my daughter' and 'She speaks Spanish.'" Chapter 30, pg. 229 Maya waits in the car, thinking happily of how upset Dolores would be if she knew about the other woman. For some reason, Maya begins to feel afraid. Does her father even care what happens to her? She decides not, and begins to cry. Then he appears in the darkness, led by the woman and another man. He is very drunk, and agrees when Maya suggests that he rest in the car for a while. After her father passes out, Maya decides that she has to drive home, even though she has never driven before. She gets one of the Mexican men to start the car, and drives off in a fit of loud roaring, sudden braking, and misdirected steering. Still, her father doesn't wake up. Terrified, she navigates a mountainside. When she reaches the customs office, she crashes into another car. At first everyone is angry with her, but when they see she is just a young girl trying to take her drunk father home, they concentrate on waking him up. Once awake, he speaks to the officer and the man whose car Maya hit, and everything is

resolved quickly. Her father is utterly charming. She is angry, however, that he has recovered so quickly, when she has worked very hard to even get them to customs in the first place.

Topic Tracking: Self Esteem 9

Chapter 31

Dolores has waited for them. Maya hears her father in the next room arguing with her. She says that he's let Maya come between them, and he leaves angrily. Maya thinks he is mean, even though she doesn't like Dolores: "He had enjoyed his Mexican holiday, and still was unable to proffer a bit of kindness to the woman who had waited patiently, busying herself with housewifely duties." Chapter 31, pg. 237 She tries to tell Dolores that she isn't trying to come between them, but Dolores will not accept her kind gesture. She tells her to go back to her mother, saying, "she's a whore." Chapter 31, pg. 239 Furious and threatened, Maya attacks Dolores. They scuffle, and Maya pushes her away, leaving the house. She then discovers she is bleeding. She waits in her father's car until he and the neighbors calm Dolores down. Then he comes out to see her. When she tells him she is bleeding, feeling superior to everyone and everything, he takes her to a friend's house. The friend treats the wound, and Maya is disappointed that it isn't more serious: she was prepared to die, or at least go to the hospital, but her father wants to avoid a scandal. He then takes her to another strange trailer and tells her he will pick her up in the morning. She is undisturbed: "At fifteen life had taught me undeniably that surrender, in its place, was as honorable as resistance, especially if one had no choice." Chapter 31, pg. 243 The next morning, however, she thinks it over: why should she wait for her father? He would be better off if she just left. She thinks about going home to Mother, but knows that she could not hide her wound from her mother. It makes her think of Mr. Freeman, and she feels guilty even so many years later.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 10

Chapter 32

Maya wanders around the town for a day, then decides to sleep in a car in a junkyard. She wakes up the next morning and a group of teenagers is peering in at her. She learns that they live in the junkyard, though each of them works low-paying jobs during the day. They forbid stealing, since it might get them put in foster homes or juvenile court. Their money is used communally. Maya spends a month in the yard, learning to drive, swear, and dance. She enters a dancing contest, and she and her partner win second prize. The group is made up of different races, and they are all friends. "I was never again to sense myself to solidly outside the pale of the human race." Chapter 32, pg. 247 Finally, Maya asks her mother to send her money to come home (she thinks Maya is still with her father.) Maya picks the ticket up at the airport. Her mother comments on how thin she's become, and feeds her well. Maya happily decides that Dolores was wrong about her mother.

Topic Tracking: Self Esteem 10

Chapter 33

San Francisco is less exciting than before. Maya feels that she has gained wisdom. Her brother is older too-he speaks in slang, drinks gin, and tells dirty jokes. Maya cares less about everything. She simply feels detached. "In two months, I had become blasé." Chapter 33, pg. 250

Bailey and Mother are deeply attached to one another, but they know that they must separate. Bailey is getting older and their attraction for each other is getting unhealthy. They begin to fight, so that their separation will be easier. Bailey comes home late. Mother cuts him with harsh insults. They hover on the brink of separation for weeks, until finally Bailey decides it is time to go. He packs up his things and moves into a boarding house at one a.m. The next day Maya goes to see him, and he has already spoken to their mother. She is going to try to get him a job on a train. Maya is surprised and feels depressed when she sees how sincere and hopeful her brother is, even though he is living among criminals and drug addicts. "I left his room because, and only because, we had said all we could say." Chapter 33, pg. 254

Chapter 34

Maya is bored and depressed at home. She decides to go to work on the streetcars as a conductor. Her mother tells her that black people aren't allowed to work on the streetcars. At first, Maya is disappointed, but then she gets angry and decides to change the rules. Her mother supports her, saying, "Can't do is like Don't Care. Neither of them have a home." Chapter 34, pg. 258

Chapter 35

After reading *The Well of Loneliness*, a famous lesbian novel, Maya worries that she might be a lesbian, though she does not really know what this means. At sixteen, her body is still undeveloped, and her voice is deep. After worrying for days, she asks her mother about it, but she is too embarrassed to ask directly. At first her mother thinks she has a sexually transmitted disease. When she realizes that Maya simply doesn't understand her own anatomy (she assumed there was something abnormal about her developing vagina) Mother has her read the dictionary definition of "vulva." Relieved that she is normal, Maya begins to cry, and her mother hugs her. Soon after, one of Maya's friends sleeps over, and Maya watches her undress, amazed at the beauty and femininity of her breasts. Suddenly Maya again believes she must be a lesbian. She decides she needs a boyfriend. She is very confused as to how to go about this, however, so she simply asks a good-looking boy if he wants to have sex with her. Struck dumb, he agrees. They go to an apartment owned by his friend and have a wordless, completely unromantic sexual experience. Afterward, she has no idea how someone could think love or sex was that important. She forgets the boy, and three weeks later, she is pregnant.

Topic Tracking: Ignorance 11

Chapter 36

Maya keeps her pregnancy a secret. She has no idea what to do-her only consolation is that now she is sure she isn't a lesbian. She cannot blame the father of her child in any way-it was she who approached him, and she knows that. She is afraid of what her mother will say, so she keeps quiet. Though she will not lie, she is not above deceit, so she does everything in her power to make her mother think she is a perfect 16-year-old student who would never dream of getting pregnant. Her mother leaves for Alaska to open a night club. After eight months and a week, Maya finally tells her stepfather. Her mother is angry, but accepts that these things happen. Maya goes through a short, relatively painless labor, and her son is born. She loves him possessively, but she is afraid of hurting him. After three weeks, Mother insists that the baby will sleep in bed with Maya. In the middle of the night, Mother wakes Maya and shows her that she has unconsciously moved the baby next to her, protecting it under her arm. Mother says, "See, you don't have to think about doing the right thing. If you're for the right thing, then you do it without thinking." Chapter 36, pg. 281

Topic Tracking: Strength 10