
REVIEWS

Joanne M. Braxton. *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 162p.

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Maya Angelou comments that she was goaded into writing her first autobiography because she couldn't refuse the challenge to write a "literary autobiography." Indeed, categorizing autobiography is a difficult task — is it "literature," "history," "memoir," or something else? In academic settings, autobiography is sometimes taught in history classes (Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* often appears in American history classes, for example) and sometimes in literature courses (Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*, for instance, often begins surveys of African-American literature). That Angelou consciously attempted to write a "literary autobiography" seems to indicate her desire that her autobiography be read as a literary, rather than an historical or sociological, text. However, as any good reader knows, it is impossible to separate these categories completely, and in order to do justice to a work like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, one must necessarily juggle literary, historical, and cultural readings.

Joanne Braxton's Casebook, *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, illustrates these different types of readings. Braxton collects seven essays about *Caged Bird* and two interviews with Angelou (one she conducted herself specifically for this collection) in her new Casebook. All of the essays (except Braxton's introduction) were previously published between 1976 and 1995, representing two decades of scholarship devoted to this seminal autobiography.

The essays themselves reflect various strategies for reading and studying Angelou's work. For the most part, the essays target a general audience; the majority of the essays could be easily enjoyed by scholars, students, and other interested readers. Braxton's introduction, "Symbolic Geography and Psychic Landscapes," explores Angelou's use of memory in the autobiography, and intersperses her commentary with snippets from her interview with Angelou. Braxton's piece nicely introduces the ideas that will follow in the other essays. The collection opens with Dolly McPherson's "Initiation and Self-Discovery," an essay which explores the lasting impact of *Caged Bird* on African-American autobiography, and the way

in which the work led to Angelou's growing public career. Opal Moore's "Learning to Live: When the Bird Breaks from the Cage," explains why *Caged Bird* has so consistently been banned from high school curricula, and argues for its importance in illustrating life's difficult choices and struggles to young adults. Her essay rates as one of the better ones in the volume; in it, she advocates teaching the autobiography in order to help students confront the challenging choices they face as adolescents.

Mary Vermillion's "Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*," relates two texts separated by one hundred years to illustrate the importance of overcoming somatophobia (fear of the body) for African-American women. While the comparison is intriguing, Vermillion might have pushed the connections between the texts slightly further; especially towards the end of essay, the significance of the comparison fades. "Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form," by Pierre A. Walker, provides a formal reading of the autobiography, emphasizing the connections between form and politics. Mary Jane Lupton, too, stresses form, though her essay, "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity," traces thematic and formal connections within Angelou's entire autobiographical oeuvre. This enlightening essay is particularly helpful for contextualizing images of motherhood in *Caged Bird*. Susan Gilbert's "Paths to Escape," reads *Caged Bird* through various literary traditions, especially the *bildungsroman*. The real gem of the collection, though, is Liliane K. Arensberg's "Death as Metaphor of Self." In it, she illustrates the tension between life and death with insight and scholarly adeptness. The collection closes with Claudia Tate's famous interview from *Black Women Writers at Work*, thus ending the collection the same way it began — with Angelou's voice.

This collection is part of a new series from Oxford University Press called Casebooks in Contemporary Fiction. The series is edited by William L. Andrews, and other titles so far include Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. Such a series is timely and necessary, and illustrates the growing importance of ethnic American literature in education and society at large. While Braxton's collection as a whole represents an important contribution to African-American autobiographical criticism, the Casebook does have its weaknesses. Read together, the essays seem somewhat repetitive. Pivotal episodes (the rape scene, most notably) are repeated in almost every essay, which makes reading the collection in its entirety somewhat tiresome. Additionally, some of the essays push little further than plot summary. McPherson's essay, for instance, and Gilbert's, while addressing important critical

points, sometimes read as a synopsis of the plot rather than as a critical commentary of the autobiography. The strengths of the essays, however, outweigh the weaknesses, and make this a collection worth reading. Braxton's Casebook offers readers a valuable resource for studying Angelou's text from a variety of perspectives, and the series as a whole bodes well for the serious study of contemporary multicultural literature. ✨