

# FREEING MAYA ANGELOU'S CAGED BIRD

BY

JOYCE L. GRAHAM

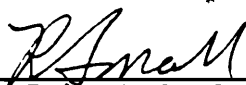
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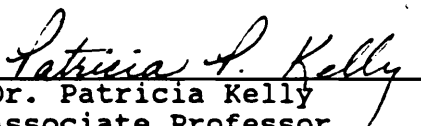
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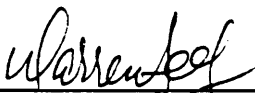
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(ABSTRACT)

This study involves a comprehensive examination of one book, Maya Angelou's autobiographical *I Know Why the I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, since it was first published in 1970. Recognized as an important literary work, the novel is used in many middle and secondary school classrooms throughout the United States. Additionally, the work often is challenged in public schools on the grounds of its sexual and/or racial content.

The purpose of this study included establishing the importance of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a significant literary work; documenting how and why the book is used in schools; recording the censorship history of the book; and preparing a case study as an example of how censorship complaints can arise and how they can be handled. Additionally, this dissertation includes the interview

responses of the book's author to various issues dealt with in this study.

In this study, the researcher examined the reception of the book by reviewers at the time of publication and the literary criticism written about the book during the past twenty years. After examining the literary merits of the book, the researcher established the context in which the book came to be included in school classrooms. An historical account of the censorship challenges raised against the book is included. Finally, a case study is used as a point of reference to illustrate how a censorship challenge might come about when Maya Angelou's book is used in schools.

TO MY FATHER  
ROY BALLARD GRAHAM  
AND  
TO THE MEMORY OF MY MOTHER  
MILDRED COLE GRAHAM

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published over twenty years ago to great critical acclaim. It remains widely read today and has a place on the required reading lists of even conservative educators such as former Education Secretary William Bennett. At the same time, the book is one of the thirty most frequently censored books when used in middle and secondary classrooms (Burress). While this dissertation focuses on one instance of censorship involving the book, the issues I examine reach far beyond the particular case presented.

The dissertation considers the questions: what kinds of arguments support the use of a literary work in the school? How is the literary merit of a text such as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* established? What is the critical basis for the inclusion of such a work in the high school curriculum? Why does the work turn up on so many required reading lists? Second, I examine arguments that have been advanced by censorship proponents against the inclusion of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in the middle, junior, and senior high school curriculum. As we shall see, however, many censorship cases come to involve more than the issue of whether or not a book should be allowed in the schools. How the book should be used also becomes a central focus. Thus

the third issue discussed is the question of how a book such as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* should be taught to high school students. The three chapters that follow this introduction examine each of these questions in turn.

Chapter two, "Initial Reception of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*," presents an overview of the reviews and literary criticism written about the autobiography since it first appeared in 1970. This review will make clear that positive reception of the book by reviewers and critics alike helped the book achieve wide acclaim as one of this century's most important literary works.

Chapter three provides an historical recording of the censorship challenges raised against *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* since the book first was used in classrooms. Of particular importance in this section is the similarity of concerns expressed in the various complaints about the book's use during the past two decades. The complaints chronicled in this chapter were raised in a wide variety of regions of the country. This review demonstrates that it is both widely used and also widely censored.

In Chapter four, "From Bookshelves to Classrooms: How *Caged Bird* is Used in Schools," I describe the kinds of recommendations that publishers and professional organizations make to teachers concerning the incorporation of the autobiography in their classes. Sections of the work

are frequently anthologized for use with middle and high school students. Additionally, the book is the focus of articles and books that present teaching strategies that differ from the traditional approaches found in most of the anthologies discussed in the chapter. The intent of this chapter is to illustrate the ways in which this book is handled in America's classrooms. Some of the practices of the teacher discussed in the case study parallel the way in which several publishers suggest that the book be taught. Furthermore, readers will see that there is a wealth of teaching possibilities beyond the traditional that have been published dealing specifically with the content of Angelou's work.

Having set the stage in these three chapters, I present a case study of an attempt to censor the use of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in a ninth grade English class. Chapter five describes a parental challenge of its use in a school system on the east coast of the United States. The complaint was raised after the mother of a fourteen-year-old boy discovered a quiz he had taken in his ninth-grade English class. Because of its apparent focus on sexual issues, the content of the quiz raised significant concerns on the part of the mother. She immediately read the work to determine whether or not she felt it suitable for her son. The case details the story of the parents' decision to

challenge the book and the circumstances surrounding the resolution of this complaint.

The case begins with a description of the events and context in which the issue arose and delineates what actions the parents took when they became concerned that their son was reading the book. This section of the case study comes under the heading, "The Story," and provides a narrative account of the concerns of the parents, here given the name of Wilson, regarding both the book selected by their son's teacher and the way in which the teacher had handled the book with her class. Most of the information for this section of the case study was obtained through interviews with the parents.

The second section of the case study describes the procedures provided for by the school system when an individual wishes to object to material used in the schools. The procedures adopted by the school board were in accord with those suggested by the American Library Association and provided a forum through which the concerned parents were able to file their complaint. Detailed information concerning the procedures the school system followed are discussed in the case.

The case study is distinctive in providing an important avenue of insight into issues arising not merely from the content of a text, but from the way in which the text was

handled by a teacher. In the school studied, the book had been taught without repercussions on numerous occasions by other teachers. Therefore, this case provides an excellent framework in which to examine the issues that contribute to books being seen by parents as appropriate or inappropriate for use with middle and high school students.

Chapter six includes Maya Angelou's comments elicited during my interviews with her as she responded to various issues related to challenges of her book in particular and to censorship in general. Angelou's comments address important issues concerning the rights that young people have to an education and the responsibilities that adults have to provide young people with learning opportunities.

In chapter seven, I conclude by examining, in the light of the case, the range of considerations that must be dealt with as teachers make decisions about how to organize their classes. Issues such as the critical reception of a work, the appropriateness of the work to the intended age group, and the potential teaching options available in using a specific literary work are but a few of the concerns addressed in this work.

For the reader unfamiliar with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, I will try to provide a summary of the book. Though any brief summary of this autobiography does the book a disservice, it is important for a reader of this study to

get a sense of the total content of the book in order to understand better which portions have been singled out for praise, and which for criticism.

Synopsis of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

After their parents' divorce, three year old Maya Angelou and her four year old brother, Bailey, are sent alone by train from Long Beach, California, to Stamps, Arkansas, home of their paternal grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson. Momma, as Mrs. Henderson is known by her grandchildren, is the matriarch of the Black community in Stamps and landlord and loan agent for much of the poor White community. For Maya and Bailey, life with Momma in Stamps involves daily work in their grandmother's home and store, regular and frequent attendance at the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, and serious study of school material. Maya learns at a young age to love literature; her first White love is William Shakespeare, and she works to hide this information from Momma, who disapproves of getting too familiar with Whites. (pp. 1-44)

Another major adult figure in Maya and Bailey's lives is their crippled Uncle Willie.

Maya watches quietly as Willie goes through the frightening disgrace of hiding overnight in a potato bin to avoid a potential murderous attack from angry Whites. She learns much as she watches this same man use all his strength to disguise his physical disability in front of a stranger who stops by the store. This act by Willie helps Maya better understand the importance of pride and self esteem. (pp. 1-44)

Life with Momma is strict. Maya and Bailey quickly learn to be quiet and polite and to study their Sunday school lessons regularly. Maya's boundless devotion to her brother is strengthened as she comes to abhor the thoughtless cruel treatment of Blacks by Whites. She is especially angered when several young girls call Momma "Annie" and try to taunt her with rude and inappropriate comments and actions. (pp. 21-27)

Momma's store provides food and supplies and serves as a diner for workers at the local sawmill and cotton gin. Momma is a smart business woman who teaches Maya the importance of treating customers fairly and with respect. It is perhaps these factors that encourage members of the community to use the store as a gathering place



for events such as a radio broadcast of the Joe Louis-Carnera fight. (pp. 1-115)

When Daddy Bailey arrives in Stamps several years after sending his children to live with their grandmother, Maya does not recognize her father. She is devastated when he moves them from life with Momma and Uncle Willie to live with their mother, Vivian, in St. Louis. Vivian's live-in lover begins almost immediately to sexually abuse Maya. His threats to kill her brother, Bailey, should she tell anyone of the abuse silence the eight-year-old child. The abuse is soon discovered; and, when the man goes out on the streets, after being sentenced to a year and a day in jail, he is killed by several of Maya's uncles. Again, the children are shipped off to live with Momma. Maya decides that her spoken identification of her abuser led to his death. Guilt and remorse send her into several years of self-imposed muteness. (pp. 44-74)

An aristocratic Black woman, Mrs. Flowers, invites Maya home from the store and uses the occasion to encourage Maya out of her silence by inviting her to memorize and recite literary passages. (pp. 74-87)

Maya's first job involves working in the kitchen of Mrs. Cullinan. This woman resists calling Maya by her real name, "Marguerite," as would be proper for those other than family and friends, and instead calls her "Mary." Mrs. Cullinan continues this practice after she receives several reminders of Maya's proper name. Maya is so angered by Mrs. Cullinan's insensitivity and rudeness that she intentionally breaks a valuable dish. Mrs. Cullinan then fires a vindicated Maya. (pp. 87-93)

Maya's pride at her eighth-grade graduation from Lafayette County Training School is crushed when a White politician's speech insults and degrades the graduating class, all of whom are Black. Maya's confidence is slightly restored when the class valedictorian proudly leads the audience in singing the Negro national anthem. (pp. 142-156)

Maya and Bailey again move west, this time to Oakland and the home of their mother's parents. Vivian and her children soon moved to San Francisco to live with Vivian's new husband, Clidell. Maya excels in her studies at George Washington High School. (pp. 164-185)

While visiting Daddy Bailey one summer, Maya travels to Mexico with her father where her father supposedly is purchasing Mexican food. He returns drunk to the car, where Maya has waited for hours, and insists that Maya drive his big car down the mountain. Maya has a minor accident, and her father sobers up when he discovers several Mexican children peering into the car. (pp. 191-206)

Maya and Daddy Bailey's lover get into a terrible argument. Maya is stabbed in the side. Daddy Bailey takes Maya to friends for help and a place to spend the night. Maya leaves the friend's trailer the next morning before her father returns and she spends the day at a library. That night she discovers a junker car and decides to spend the night there. She awakens to discover a group of other runaway teenagers who are living in the junkyard. Maya joins this community for a month before asking her mother to send her money for the trip home. (pp. 206-217)

As they approach adulthood, Maya and Bailey grow apart. Bailey moves out of the house and lives with a White prostitute. Maya becomes intent on landing a job as the first Black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Her job

eventually leads to her declined interest in school. (pp. 217-231)

Uncomfortable with her size and appearance, Maya wonders if she is lesbian. In order to test her sexual preference, she asks a neighbor boy to have sexual intercourse with her, and she becomes pregnant. At Bailey's urging, Maya hides this information from her family until three weeks before her son is born. At the end of the first volume of her autobiography, young Maya learns that she can care for her baby. (pp. 232-246)

## CHAPTER II

### CRITICAL RECEPTION OF *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

One of the issues that frames censorship cases relates to the general merit or literary value of the text in question. Public and critical reception of literary works serve as influential factors in determining what literature is of value to read and study and, thus, what literature should be taught in English classrooms. Although many public school teachers probably do not read criticism written about individual selections they choose for their classes, reputations of particular works are often established by reviewers and critics. *I I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an example of how positive public reception of a work might have influenced a decision to include it in many classrooms.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published at the end of a highly volatile decade of the civil rights movement and deals with often explosive issues around the racially tense environment in which Maya Angelou spent her childhood and adolescence. From the isolated community of Stamps, Arkansas, to the big cities of St. Louis and San Francisco, Angelou was shuttled back and forth across the United States between her divorced parents and her grandmother. Maya Angelou told the story of her life in painfully realistic detail, and the language she used to convey this detail has

been lauded as an important literary contribution. Reviewers and critics have been effusive in their praise of this work.

Received with positive reviews, the book quickly found its way to *The New York Times Book Review* "Best Seller List." When it was first published, a review in *Newsweek* lauded *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as:

more than a tour de force of language or the story of childhood suffering: it quietly and gracefully portrays and pays tribute to the courage, dignity and endurance of the small, rural Southern black community in which she spent most of her early years in the 1930s. . . . But a summary of the incidents cannot do this book justice; one has to read it to appreciate its sensitivity and life. What she says of her grandmother will hold for herself: 'A deep-brooding love hung over everything she touched.' (March 2, 1970, 89-90)

*The New York Times* quoted James Baldwin's response to this work by a new Black author:

This testimony from a black sister marks the beginning of a new era in the minds and hearts and lives of all black men and women. . . . *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* liberates the reader into life simply because Maya Angelou confronts her own life with such a moving wonder, such a luminous dignity. I have no words for this achievement, but I know that not since the days of my childhood, when people in books were more real than the people one saw every day, have I found myself so moved. . . . Her portrait is a Biblical study of life in the midst of death. (March 20, 1970, L45)

In an article in *The National Observer*, Clifford A. Ridley, in commenting on her "extraordinary continuing autobiography," states that "In a world existing perpetually

under a cloud of white, any affirmation of blackness is an achievement, any denial of blackness an affront" (October 2, 1976, 21). Certainly, this "affirmation of blackness" is an important dimension of this autobiography; yet the themes and issues found in the book are by no means limited to people of one race. Betsy Kline supports this notion when she states that "A book by Maya Angelou is always a cathartic experience and a cause for celebration. Terror, rage, love, loss and hope cascade from the pages of her autobiographical chapters of a life so intense that it defies the credibility of even the most probing human fiction" (October 4, 1981, 12F).

In a *Washington Post Book World* review of Angelou's fourth autobiography, *The Heart of a Woman*, David Levering Lewis noted,

. . .autobiography has been the Afro-American strong suit, a literary form generating maximum compassion and indignation for victims of injustice. By the '60s and early '70s, that outpouring of first-person straight talk (viz., Claude Brown, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, George Jackson, Malcolm X and Baldwin himself) brought in a high tide of compelling testimony that swept over the public in wave upon candid, coruscating wave, seemingly telling everything like it was in black and white America. To move well beyond this shoreline to new ground, to beat out the first contours of a new era of mind and spirit seems, at first thought, more than the life story that one gifted, determined woman could reasonably be supposed to achieve.

That, nevertheless, is precisely what Maya Angelou has done. She has achieved a kind of literary breakthrough which few writers of any

time, place, or race achieve. . . . As with any corpus of high creativity, exactly what makes Angelou's writing unique is more readily appreciated than analyzed and stated. It is, I think, a melding of unconcerned honesty, consummate craft, and perfect descriptive pitch, yielding a rare compound of great emotional force and authenticity, undiluted by polemic. (October 4, 1981, 1)

It is perhaps the combination that Lewis points to -- the honesty, craft, and pitch -- of Maya Angelou's writing that has caused her works to become increasingly popular during the more than two decades since she began writing prose.

Another reviewer stated that

no autobiographer in our literature celebrates and sings of her life with as much verve and vulnerability as Maya Angelou. . . . There are themes in the first four volumes of the autobiography that critics will explore -- the tight-rope walk between reality and fantasy, the way the artist records and alters events, the moments of decision and indecision -- but the singular power of the work is the authority she wields over her own life.

The autobiography of Maya Angelou makes a memorable and important statement about America and engages us, heart and mind, in the life of the woman and the artist. (Wilson 1981, C4)

Almost from the first moment that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* appeared on shelves in America's bookstores, it has met with great acclaim. Since its initial reception, reviewers and critics have maintained their assessment of Angelou's strength as a writer of first person narrative and of her declaration that autobiography is her "form" (McPherson 1990, 133) as they have closely examined and



praised her writing during the past twenty years. A common ground on which many critics write about Angelou's works involves an examination of the Black autobiographical traditions. For example, Dolly McPherson states:

Black writers have tried, by the use of autobiography and, to a lesser degree, other literary modes, to examine themselves and articulate their findings, not only in an effort to celebrate their unique experiences, but also to explain their situation to that group of the society, which could, if it chose, alter the conditions of the writers' lives. (1)

The marginalization of Black Americans through generations of oppression and rejection has presented this group little opportunity for voicing the struggles, defeats, and triumphs never experienced by most other groups of people. The autobiographical form, therefore, allowed Black voices to be heard as individual experiences were recorded on the printed page. Thus, McPherson maintains that "Black autobiographers write to define and redefine the self, to record the history of individual self-consciousness, and to discover what it was in them and their response to life that led to their present identity" (4).

According to McPherson, Black American autobiography can be traced back to the slave narratives of writers like Frederick Douglas when these early works

established certain prototypical patterns, both with respect to theme and structure, that recur again and again in later Black autobiographies. The journey to a distant goal, the return home, and

the quest which involves the voyage out, achievement, and return are typical patterns in Black autobiography. (120)

Certainly, these characteristics are evident in Angelou's writing; however, McPherson maintains that Angelou's writing extends beyond the traditions found in Black American autobiographies to encompass themes of universal appeal, including "death and rebirth, movement from innocence to experience, idealism versus cynicism, the search for selfhood, and the importance of determining one's own self-definitions" (129).

Earlier in her work, McPherson cites four themes as playing important roles in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: "courage, perseverance, the persistence or renewal of innocence against overwhelming obstacles, and the often difficult process of attaining selfhood" (12). These themes, though important to the Black American autobiography, are also important issues for all individuals to consider. Therefore, it is necessary to look at Angelou's work as an autobiographical art form that appeals both to Black Americans and to a larger, more universal readership.

In an article dealing with "Strength of Character" in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, S. J. Cordell talks about the writer's skill of crafting characters in this work. She says, "What Angelou does is to elevate the image of herself

and the black women in her life by telling her story using episodic details to illuminate personal and historical identity as well as give shape and meaning to the experiences from which that identity has evolved" (36-37). Angelou's careful selection of events weaves a story that presents complex issues and concerns in fascinating ways. As Cordell indicates, the strong female characters in this work serve to make clear the personal and social struggles they encounter.

Lucinda MacKethan in an article in *Studies in American Humor* suggests that words have always served as a life line for Angelou, that her autobiography is "in many places a lyrical testament to language as providing her one saving image of self; from a childhood in which she tried to live wordlessly as a means of protecting herself against knowledge that was certain pain, Angelou emerged from her oppressive childhood armed with a 'secret work which called for the djinn who was to serve me all my life: books'" (52-53). While books have served Angelou all of her life, her words have served her readers by providing them with a better understanding of racial and sexual tensions that existed, and no doubt continue to exist, in our culture.

One critic states that "her autobiographies and poetry reveal a vital need to transform the elements of a stultifying and destructive personal, social, political and

historical milieu into a sensual and physical refuge" (Ramsey 1985, 140). Ramsey commends Angelou for the frankness with which she deals with her personal flaws and mistakes in her writing (148). It is perhaps this balance between refuge and honesty that has caused readers to so warmly embrace this work.

McPherson also discusses the role of Angelou's autobiography as "the exploration of the self -- the self in relationship with intimate others: the family, the community, the world. Angelou does not recount these experiences simply because they occurred, but because they represent stages of her spiritual growth and awareness" (6). Once again we are reminded of the degree of selectivity utilized by Angelou in chiseling away at the facts of her life in an effort to reveal truth.

The truth that Angelou portrays in her autobiography crosses barriers that allow a diverse readership to interact with the text. According to the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "Maya Angelou's literary significance rests upon her exceptional ability to tell her life story as both a human being and a black American woman in the twentieth century" (Bloom 1985, 3).

Sidonie Ann Smith suggests in *The Southern Humanities Review* that one of the universal themes Angelou confronts is the problem of personal displacement that so many people

encounter (369). Smith applauds Angelou for her ability to overcome the experiences from her own displacement through being shuttled off from one family home to another during her childhood and adolescence.

Another dimension of the book that Smith deals with in her review is the matter of recognizing that "one way of dying to life's struggle is to suppress its inevitable pain by forgetting the past" (374). Smith maintains that Angelou's work is a model for showing how, through "remembering the past and shaping it into a pattern of significant moments, she had imposed some sense of an ending upon it. And in imposing that ending upon it she gave the experience distance and a context and thereby came to understand the past and ultimately to understand herself" (374). Thus, Smith suggests, Angelou's experiences and her resolution of them can serve as a model for readers.

Smith goes beyond examining Angelou's work as an autobiographer when she states, "Her genius as a writer is her ability to recapture the texture of the way of life in the texture of idioms, the idiosyncratic vocabulary and especially in its process of image-making. The imagery holds the reality, giving it immediacy" (375). Smith concludes that, although Maya Angelou has approached her writing by telling of her own life experiences, she has

written of reality with a fiction writer's eyes and ears (375).

In a *New York Times Book Review*, Annie Gottlieb supports Smith's assessment of Angelou's writing when Gottlieb states that "Maya Angelou writes like a song, and like the truth. The wisdom, rue and humor of her storytelling are borne on a lilting rhythm completely her own, the product of a born writer's senses nourished on black church singing and preaching, soft mother talk and salty street talk, and on literature" (16).

The reception that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has enjoyed in the twenty years since its publication has been influential in the decisions of educators all across the United States to incorporate this book into study in middle and secondary school classrooms. In their book, *Black Literature for High School Students*, a National Council of Teachers of English publication, Barbara Dodds Stanford and Karima Amin discuss the need for the inclusion of literature by and about Black Americans as a means of helping students understand and bridge cultural and racial diversity. In the introduction to this book, Stanford states,

. . .At first, most of us assumed that black literature could and should be taught and interpreted in the same ways as white literature. [In the 1960s] the struggle was for integration, and both blacks and whites were trying to prove that we were all the same under the skin and that the happy ending was only a few more freedom

marches away. Ten years later [in 1978], we have been more open with ourselves and each other and are realizing that the experience of blacks and whites in this country is quite different and that the evils of three hundred years cannot be dissolved in one rousing chorus of 'We Shall Overcome.' (p. 1)

Because of this attitude, the authors have prepared a detailed listing of books they recommend for use with high school students; the list includes *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The novel is recognized because of its excellent literary quality and because "even in the most distressing circumstances, Angelou shows the capacity of the human being for resourcefulness and for love" (145-146). Such positive reviews and criticism written about *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, combined with publicity received from the television screening of a film based on the book, moved the work from best seller bookshelves into middle and secondary classrooms during the 1970s.

Today this title is found on numerous recommended book lists and selections from it are anthologized in many textbooks. A *Washington Post* article entitled "Bennett's Books" included former Education Secretary William J. Bennett's recommended reading list for what he believes would be a model elementary school curriculum. Bennett listed *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a recommended title for grades seven and eight (September 6, 1988, A19). The Young Adult Services Division of the American Library

Association, in a 1988 brochure entitled *Nothin' But The Best*, recommended the "best of the best books for young adults, 1966-86." *Caged Bird* is included in this listing of seventy-five outstanding titles.

A brochure released recently by the National Council of Teachers of English and prepared by that organization's Committee on Women in the Profession suggests "Guidelines for a Gender-Balanced Curriculum in English Grades 7-12." This committee's work is an important contribution to the English education community because it takes a proactive stance to move teachers and school divisions to recognize the importance of diversity in curriculum decisions and the necessity of providing middle and secondary students with positive female and male role models in an effort to help these young people "shape their own experiences. Balancing the curriculum allows all students to see themselves as doers and thinkers and as persistent and successful" (1). Not only is Angelou's *Caged Bird* listed as a recommended title for grades nine and ten in this brochure, but it also is used as an example of how we can begin to balance the literary curricula found in schools. In a section listing ten examples of ways in which teachers can begin to balance the curriculum, item 2 states that teachers should "use books in pairs. Introduce a woman's work beside that of a man's, perhaps in such clear comparisons as Richard Wright's



*Black Boy* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*" (1).

A variety of book companies list Angelou's work in their catalogs and recommend it on publicity flyers. Everbind Book Sets lists *I Know Why the Caged Bird* on its "Titles Recommended for Multicultural Studies" advertisement. Econo Clad Books, in its 1990-91 catalog, notes this book's inclusion on the H. W. Wilson Standard Catalog for High School Libraries and the American Library Association Booklist. Additionally, the book is cited for having been named a Kliatt Paperback Book Guide Library of Congress Children's Book of the Year and an American Library Association Notable Book (350). The book is listed in this catalog as having a seventh grade reading level with a reading interest level of eighth grade and up (354).

The 1990-91 Perma-Bound Books catalog lists the book as having a ninth grade reading level and an interest level for grade nine and up. *I Know Why the Caged Bird* is cited in this catalog for its positive reviews in the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Voice of Youth Advocates*, and the National Council of Teachers of English *Books for You* (311).

The combination of Angelou's life, her love of literature, and her ability to involve readers in her works have brought these impressive literary accolades to Angelou and her *Caged Bird*. As I point out in the next chapter,

however, the literary quality of a work does not ensure that all will consider it appropriate for adolescents to study.

## CHAPTER III

### CENSORSHIP ISSUES SURROUNDING *CAGED BIRD*

As Maya Angelou's book has been increasingly used in public school classrooms, it is often the focus of censorship challenges. By 1986, censorship complaints had been reported so frequently against *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* that the American Library Association pictured Maya Angelou along with James Baldwin, William Shakespeare, Norma Klein, Joseph Heller, Judy Blume, Kurt Vonnegut, Samuel Clemens, and Alexander Solzhenitzyn with a piece of black electric tape across her mouth on its publicity poster advertising their annual "Banned Books Week."

During the period from 1982-1990, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was the ninth "most frequently challenged book" in American schools (*People for the American Way 1990*, 100). The challenges usually focused on the sexual issues dealt with in the book. Additionally, complaints related to the language used in the book and to its handling of racial issues are recorded. The following complaint from a California school system included in the *Attacks on the Freedom to Learn: People for the American Way 1989-90 Report* cites all of these issues as concerns in a 1989-90 challenge of the book:

Incident: In Woodland, objections to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, in ninth-grade English course, for "sexually stimulating

students without moral guidelines, promoting fear and violence, profanity, exhibiting a hatred of whites, mocking Southern Black Christianity, explicit sexual content, depicting communication with the spirits of the dead, and stimulating curiosity about lesbianism." Removal requested.  
Initiator: Committee on Excellence in Education.  
Resolution: Following the recommendation of a review committee, the school board voted to move the book from the ninth grade to the tenth grade. (32-33)

### Complaints Based on Sexual Content

Schools in two other California school divisions were confronted with complaints about this book during 1989-90. In the People for the American Way annual report mentioned above, the following information is given concerning these censorship challenges:

Incident: In Agoura Hills, objections to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, in ninth-grade honors English class, for explicit description of child abuse and rape. Removal from reading list or alternative assignment requested.

Initiator: Parent.

Resolution: The teacher and school principal decided to retain the book on the reading list and offered the student an alternative assignment. The parent accepted an alternative assignment, but requested that a "warning label" be placed on the book. The request was denied. (18-19)

Incident: In Castro Valley, objections to Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in tenth-grade English class, for obscenity and description of rape. Removal from the curriculum requested.

Initiator: Parents.

Resolution: Teachers are permitted to use only excerpted portions of the work taken from an anthology. (20)

The March, 1989, issue of the American Library Association's *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* records that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was challenged "by a parent for use in a ninth-grade English class in Mount Abram Regional High School in Strong [Maine]" (38). This challenge was resolved when the children of the two complaining parents were "assigned another book and a review committee recommended that the book be retained in the ninth grade curriculum, but moved to the second semester" (8). This case was also presented in the 1988-89 report by the People for the American Way as having been raised because of the rape scene included in the text (36).

Another case included in the 1988-89 *Attacks on the Freedom to Learn* dealt with the highly publicized challenge of this book in Vista, California. This challenge is described by the People for the American Way as follows:

Incident: In Vista, objections to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, in ninth-grade honors class, for containing "pornographic" and "sexually explicit" chapters. The book has been on the state department of education's approved reading list since 1985. One parent complained that requiring the book was "tantamount to giving our children an X-rated movie. It is something that would usurp parents' responsibility in raising their children." Removal requested.

Initiator: Parents.

Resolution: After six parents complained, their children were given an alternative reading assignment. Students who chose to continue reading the book were not required to read the controversial three (of thirty-six) chapters. School officials also had the book reviewed by the

school's Language Arts Committee, who voted 19-3 to retain the book in the ninth grade. The school superintendent, however, recommended to the board of the Vista Unified School District that the book be moved to the eleventh-grade level. In a subsequent review, the board decided that the book should be banned from the high school entirely.  
(17)

From the time this challenge was raised in September of the 1988-89 school year until it was resolved the following January, this complaint became the focus of a number of newspaper articles and editorials. The *Los Angeles Times*, in an article concerning an early hearing about the inclusion of the book, states that "The book has been simultaneously praised within literary circles for its poignant talk of childhood suffering and assailed by parents, who were disturbed by several passages that depict in detail the rape of an 8-year-old girl" (November 19, 1988, 1-3).

In the November 17, 1988, issue of the *Vista Times-Advocate*, Angelou responded to the complaints being raised about her autobiography by stating, "Henry Thoreau said, 'In evil times, the only place for an honorable person is in jail or exile.' And in a society of small and mean minds, the only honorable place for a caring writer is on the banned list" (A1-A2). Angelou's response came in reaction to the Vista Board's decision to ban *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* from their curriculum.

No doubt, Angelou had become accustomed to being on the banned list by the time of the Vista challenge. In Wake County in her own home state of North Carolina, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* met with complaints about the sexual content of the book. According to the *Winston-Salem Journal*, this challenge was resolved by moving the book from a required reading list to a supplemental reading list for juniors (February 16, 1987, 26).

#### Complaints Based on Language

A September, 1987, issue of the *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* cites a challenge of the book in the Longview, Washington, school system "because some students could be harmed by its graphic language" (195). This complaint is recorded by the People for the American Way in their 1985-86 report, which states that the book, being used in a seventh-grade advanced literature class, is "'perverted' and 'inappropriate'" (61). Ultimately, the book remained in this school's curriculum.

#### Concerns Based on Racial Tension

Although most complaints about *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* are raised because of the sexual content and language found in the book, a March, 1983, issue of the *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* cites a call by four

members of the Alabama State Textbook Committee for the rejection of this work. These individuals charged that Angelou "preaches bitterness and hatred against whites" (39). This is the only complaint on file with the offices of the People for the American Way, the American Library Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the Coalition Against Censorship that focuses exclusively on matters seemingly unrelated to the sexual content of the book.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has been the focus of considerable controversy in school systems in all parts of the United States since it began to be used frequently in middle and high school classes. It is apparent from the type of censorship challenges discussed in this chapter that the overriding concern of most would-be censors is the frankness with which Angelou presents her early life experiences with sexual abuse and deals with her own sexuality. Yet, as discussed earlier in this dissertation, the book is commended over and over again as an outstanding example of American autobiographical writing and is recommended by many for use with school children.

Public school teachers work in the public gaze. Unlike university professors, they are vulnerable to challenges over the works they select for the classroom. Additionally, teachers are directly accountable to their school



administration and to the public, to the parents of their students, and to the communities their schools serve. Such community influence is central to the choices that many teachers are able to make as they consider literary works for their classes. Therefore, teachers must consider more than just the literary merit of a text.

## CHAPTER IV

### FROM BOOKSHELVES TO CLASSROOMS: HOW CAGED BIRD IS USED IN SCHOOLS

The National Council of Teachers of English, one of the largest professional educational organizations in the United States, is actively involved in disseminating information to its membership concerning the most recent research findings dealing with the teaching of English language arts. Each decade since NCTE was organized more than seventy-five years ago, a committee is formed to examine the current trends and philosophy in teaching the language arts. One important component of this committee's work involves a careful examination of how literature is used in public school classrooms.

*Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts* is the most recent position statement from NCTE detailing specific expectations about what knowledge English language arts teachers should bring to their work. Included in these guidelines are four detailed suggestions about what teachers should know in the areas of reading and literature.

"How students respond to their reading and how they interpret it" (8) is listed in *Guidelines* as the first area of concentration for English teachers. Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* presents a theoretical basis in

which literature instruction focuses on providing readers with opportunities to engage with a text and to shape meaning through a personal response to the literature. Drawing on Rosenblatt's ideas, this section of the *Guidelines* suggests that the teacher's role is to work to engage the reader with the text and then to encourage student responses by asking "questions at a variety of levels -- questions which elicit both oral and written responses" (9).

The second guideline dealing with reading and literature states that teachers must know "how readers create and discover meaning from print, as well as monitor their comprehension" (9). This section states that it is imperative that English language arts teachers have a clear understanding of how people read and that this knowledge be used to identify students with reading problems. Furthermore, knowledge of reading ability and the age and maturity levels of students are critical factors that must be taken into consideration as reading material is selected for the classroom. Included in this section are the following three statements reflecting current research in the teaching of literature:

(a) that reading is a creative process in which readers use structures of previous knowledge and experience to make meanings from print,

(b) that readers tend to respond in similar ways as well as in singular ways, and

(c) that meanings and responses are sustained by readers' awareness of how satisfactorily they are comprehending what they read. (9)

These statements indicate that reading is an individual activity that should allow each person the opportunity to develop his/her own meaning from the text. Certainly, reading comprehension is taken into consideration in these statements; however, they point out that much more is involved in reading than simply an ability to recall specific details from a text.

The third statement related to literature instruction in *Guidelines* is that teachers must have knowledge of "an extensive body of literature and literary types in English and in translation" (9). Since English teachers should be working to help encourage their students to be lifelong readers, teachers need to model active and rich reading practices. This section states that teachers should be well read in the classics as well as in the literature written specifically for the age levels they teach. Additionally, teachers should be knowledgeable of literature "by male and female writers, by people of many racial and ethnic groups, and by authors from many countries and cultures" (9). Indeed, in our rapidly changing twentieth century, teachers

need a diverse background in order to encourage their students to expand their reading practices.

Finally, the fourth area concerning the teaching of literature discussed in *Guidelines* calls for a knowledge of "literature as a source for exploring and interpreting human experience -- its achievements, frustrations, foibles, values and conflicts" (9). Through reading and literature, readers are able to come to look at and/or understand ideas and experiences that they may never encounter otherwise. Literature, when approached with an open mind, serves to expand our worlds and our thinking.

As these recommendations for the knowledge base for English teachers indicate, the work of involving students with literature is serious business. Teachers have an obligation to involve their students in making connections between the text and their own experiences. Furthermore, literature should be used to make the unfamiliar familiar and to expand the world of the reader.

As the following pages will demonstrate, however, there is a great disparity between the ways that several publications by the National Council of Teachers of English suggest that literature should be incorporated into the classroom and the ways that major publishers handle teaching suggestions in their literature anthologies and teachers' manuals.

Recommendations by NCTE Publications

Many publications are available to teachers that recommend how to include Maya Angelou's autobiography, or sections of it, in class work with middle and high school students. This section examines some of the suggested uses of this book by publications from the National Council of Teachers of English. Following is an overview of different recommendations and teaching philosophies included in literature anthologies and accompanying teachers' manuals. These suggestions for teaching *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in middle and secondary classes will sketch the diversity of uses to which this text is put. A critical consideration in this comparison is that some of the sources do a poor job of presenting ideas that motivate and challenge teachers and students, whereas some of the sources are rich with productive teaching and learning ideas and strategies. Although there are differences in the types of approaches suggested for teaching *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, it is important to recognize that teachers have choices about the material they select to assist in their planning. Teachers should pay careful attention, therefore, to the vastly different approaches presented in these works.

As discussed earlier, one approach to teaching *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* involves pairing it with another work, such as *Black Boy* by Richard Wright. This method

allows readers to closely examine and compare a female and a male protagonist. An October, 1989, *English Journal* article by Lisa Moore details how to implement several of the suggestions included in the NCTE brochure dealing with providing a gender balanced curriculum. In her article, Moore discusses her successful experience using *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a paired reading with *Black Boy* in a suburban English class of juniors and seniors of varied backgrounds and abilities. Because of the length of the two works, *Caged Bird*, which was included on her school's approved reading list, was read immediately after *Black Boy*, instead of simultaneously as she often does with paired readings.

One element of the paired approach to teaching this book that seemed especially positive for Moore was the way that her students immediately began to compare, rather than contrast as they had with other paired writers, the lives of Maya Angelou and Richard Wright. Moore comments that "instead of evaluating Marguerite [Maya Angelou's given name] in a vacuum, students measured her against Richard. Again, I saw that students had more to observe, more to say, more to synthesize because they could compare and contrast. The two characters illuminated each other" (37). Apparently Moore's students also illuminated each other's observations and comments as she notes that their "discussions were

vigorous, and only once do I recall opinions following gender line" (37).

At the end of the unit, Moore assigned what she referred to as "the traditional expository essay, 'How are *Black Boy* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* alike or different?'" (37). She commended her students' reflective ideas and the associations they made between the readings and their own lives.

The culminating activity for Moore's unit involved having her students write a chapter of their own autobiography using a chapter from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* or *Black Boy* for "shape," that is, as a model. Moore stated that her students interpreted in different ways the idea of using the model: "In some cases, students interpreted 'shape' to mean parallel plot, style, tone, theme, voice; others simply chose a similar age or incident. All original chapters were clearly influenced by both writers" (38). Moore, in choosing these literary works, therefore, provided her students with writing role models as they recorded events of their own lives.

*Notes Plus*, a quarterly publication of the National Council of Teachers of English that presents teaching ideas, included an article recommending *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* use with seventh and eighth grade students. The approach discussed in this article incorporates writing



strategies and reader response theory. Students are asked to complete daily journal entries of personal responses to issues they read about in the book. Journal topics used by the teacher in this article include "earliest memory; favorite family member; scary childhood experience; embarrassing memory; description of hometown; childhood fears; childhood fantasies; best friends; death, funerals, afterlife; moving and changing; beliefs to stand up for; discrimination; loneliness; teenagers as parents" (November, 1990, 2). The author, Susan VanSchuyver, uses these topics as a springboard for encouraging her students to think about their own lives and to see how their lives may parallel or diverge from the life led by Angelou as a young girl.

*Portraits: Biography and Autobiography in the Secondary School*, an NCTE publication, presents a wide assortment of ideas about how *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* can be dealt with in middle and secondary classrooms. A collaborative project done as an outgrowth of work begun in a course, this book uses two works, *Abe Lincoln Grows Up* by Carl Sandburg and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, to illustrate philosophies and ideas related to eight different critical approaches to teaching these works. One reason that the book gives for studying the use of autobiography in the classroom is that "the first-person 'I' voice invites more intimacy than does the third-person 'he' or 'she,' making it

easier for students to identify with the subjects, to care about what happened in their lives" (xiii). From this position, the editors and authors build convincing arguments for a wide variety of ways in which students can be encouraged to relate more closely to Angelou.

In "Ourselves and Others: A Sociological Approach," another chapter from *Portraits*, the authors present an approach that involves using Benjamin Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook 1: Cognitive Domain* for structure in establishing six levels of questioning used in examining a variety of social situations found in *Caged Bird*. For the purposes of their example, the authors used different passages from the text describing food; however, they suggest that, in addition to food, "clothing, housing, economy/work, education, religion, family structure" would provide appropriate social situations on which to focus a discussion (13). Included in the text are examples of the types of questions that might be asked for each of these social situations. For example, the questions listed under the "family structure" section include

1. Define matriarchal society as seen in Angelou's work.
2. Describe how a matriarchal society affects Maya and Bailey.
3. Dramatize an incident not specifically narrated in the text involving an encounter between a child and a parent figure. For

example, write a dialogue regarding what happened with Maya, Bailey, Uncle Willie, and Momma after the "hot" church service.

4. Examine the quotation "like father, like son" or "like mother, like daughter" as it relates to the text.
5. Propose alternative family structures in one of Maya's living situations and construct a plot outline of how her life might have been changed as a result. For example, what if Momma had remarried? What if Mr. Freeman had not been killed?
6. Assess the importance of family structure in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in America today.

(13)

In another chapter of *Portraits*, Jo McGinnis presents a psychological approach to the study of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and suggests that "the psychological approach to literature provides insight into character development, our own as well as others,' by trying to identify and to understand the forces that motivate us all" (25). Using different characters from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the author examines the Freudian "model of the human psyche - the Ego, the Superego, and the Id" as a means of looking at a character's psychological motivation (22).

Included in this chapter are "Guidelines for Using the Psychological Approach" that suggest procedures for selecting a character that is involved in a conflict and having students evaluate the variety of options that are available to the character under each of the psychological

forces at play. This careful analysis of a character encourages students to "get into the heads" of characters in a way that leads to genuine understanding. This chapter also includes sixteen specific situations from *I Know Why the Caged Bird* as possible conflicts to which it would be appropriate to apply the psychological approach to studying literature. The following illustrates how McGinnis uses scenes from the novel to have her students examine the psychological motivation at work:

When Maya receives a valentine from Tommie Valdon, she feels afraid: "My questions fell over themselves, an army in retreat. Haste, dig for cover. Protect your flanks. Don't let the enemy close the gap between you" (121-122). What voices of the mind are these, the Superego or the Id? Justify your opinion by giving why the voices would be pressuring Maya in this situation. (27)

In "Ideals and Ideas: A Moral/Philosophical Approach" from *Portraits*, Margaret Fleming explores the contributions that a moral/philosophical approach to reading literature can make in a classroom. She suggests that this approach helps the students to infer the values held by literary characters and the reasons those characters have for holding them" (41). As a model for this approach, Fleming uses Kohlberg's three levels of moral development as a means of analyzing the motivation behind different characters' actions in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The premise of this approach is that, as students examine the motivation

behind certain actions, they begin to understand the character better. The first of eleven examples Fleming gives to show how students can look at the moral/philosophical motivations behind a character's actions asks students to consider whether or not Maya and Bailey's parents made the right decision in sending the children to live with their grandmother after the parents divorced (55). This type of analysis is designed to have students consider carefully the motivation behind a character's actions.

Sandra Francis Treharne, in "Persona and Persuasion: A Rhetorical Approach" in *Portraits*, discusses an author's care in selecting the appropriate persona for each character. The position discussed in this chapter is that

In all literature, rhetorical skill involves a writer's ability to interweave the classical elements of narration, incident, character, and setting into a textual unity. But to achieve such unity is more than just imaginative prose; rather, it is the "achieved effect," the controlled arrangement of language. A rhetorical evaluation considers both the intent and effectiveness of such devices in a literary text; it seeks to discover how a piece of writing works, and why it works that way. (78)

Treharne maintains that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* "is an effective piece of writing because it achieves such unity" that it is successful in "persuading readers to see, feel, and experience as the author intended" (79). She contends that Angelou's motive in writing this selection was to have her readers empathize with both the child character

and the adult narrator, thus juxtaposing these characters in telling and responding to the story. Thus, the student looks at the motivations behind both a character's persona and actions and the tools employed by the author in creating a character. Central to this effect is the way in which the author involves the audience in the text, and Treharne suggests seven applications for incorporating this literary approach into study of *Caged Bird*. Item three from the list asks the reader to "find an example of a passage in which Ritie persuades the reader through emotional appeal. Then find a passage in which Maya persuades through reason, or an appeal to the intellect. What is each persona trying to persuade the reader of? Which persona is more effective? Why?" (86). This type of analysis involves the reader in careful evaluations of the character, the narrator, and the process through which these personas were developed.

The final suggestion for using *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in *Portraits: Biography and Autobiography in the Secondary School* is in a chapter on "Dealing with Sensitive Subjects." The authors are of the opinion that "it is unreasonable to believe that an adolescent reader could somehow be harmed by reading Angelou's articulate story of her childhood, teenage years, and growth into motherhood. The effect on the reader is more likely to be shock, enlightenment, wonder, excitement, pleasure, empathy" (92).

The chapter puts forth the position that "parents may want to protect their children from the feared effect of change - - changes in environment and changes in the adolescents themselves. Teachers, however, have a responsibility to use that which literature offers them to protect students from the effects of their own ignorance" (93). They conclude that the ignorance of misunderstanding or unconcern for differences can certainly begin to be combatted through literature. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an excellent, though controversial, means through which issues of misunderstanding can be addressed.

The variety of recommendations for using *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in the classroom discussed in this section illustrate that this text can be used successfully with middle and secondary students. Additionally, the approaches discussed here provide appropriate ways that teachers of English language arts can use *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to study literature in a manner in keeping with the recommendations of NCTE.

#### Recommendations by Perma Bound

From time to time, publishers and distributors prepare for teachers guides of works in their catalogues. Such guides, sometimes prepared by prominent educators, often have considerable influence on both what is taught and how

the teaching is planned. In a teacher's guide available from Perma-Bound Books, teachers are presented with a detailed summary of the book's action and a brief biographical sketch of the author. Following this, nine "General Objectives" are listed:

1. To discuss the purpose of a memoir.
2. To explain the style of an autobiography.
3. To locate influences and events that lead to major decisions in the lives of the main characters.
4. To analyze the impact of first person narrative.
5. To contrast rural and urban settings.
6. To note central themes in the life of the main character.
7. To chart the geographical locations mentioned in the story.
8. To question the author's evaluation of her own motives.
9. To emphasize the importance of role models in children's lives.

(2)

The "Specific Objectives" section of this teacher's guide lists the following goals:

1. To explain Maya's reason for conceiving a child.
2. To discuss the contrasting influences of Momma, Grandma Baxter, and Vivian.



3. To assess the changes in Maya's relationship with Bailey Junior.
4. To note a change in Maya's hero-worship of Vivian.
5. To analyze Vivian and Bailey's attitude toward their children.
6. To account for Maya's silence after being raped by Mr. Freeman.
7. To explain the reaction of Negroes to blatant and subtle discrimination.
8. To contrast the influence of church and school in Southern life.
9. To characterize Maya's vivid imagery.

(2)

The next section of this teacher's guide presents ten allusions used by Angelou and asks students to explain the meaning of each. The author of the guide presents detailed explanations of these allusions.

Questions are provided in the "Comprehension Study" section of this guide to teaching *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Items 1-5 include "Literal Level" questions, that is, questions that ask readers to recall specific events; items 6-8 include "Interpretive Level" questions, that is, questions that ask readers to explain Maya's reactions to three specific events or time periods in her life; items 9 and 10 include "Critical Level" questions that ask the reader "How do the experiences of Marguerite Francis produce a Maya Angelou?" and "Why does this book belong among the

classic works read by young adults?" Item 11 includes a "Creative Level" question and asks readers to "read a representative sample of poetry and prose from the Harlem Renaissance," and to "choose for memorization a series of lines that characterize Maya Angelou's struggle to accept and surpass her limitations" (5).

The next section of this guide is entitled "Student Involvement Activities." Although the author does not mention the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem from which the title of this autobiography is taken, the first assignment under this section asks students to "write a theme explaining the many ways in which Maya Henderson [sic] is a 'caged bird'" (5). Additional assignments suggest that students could prepare a program of music that may have been important to Maya and her family; write a report on a variety of famous Black and White Americans; draw Maya's family tree; draw a map tracing Maya's childhood travels from one family home to another; give an oral report on the use of trolley cars in America; prepare a list of "maxims" that Maya heard as she grew up; "outline the Civil Rights movement since World War II"; write a letter from Maya to Momma "describing the baby's birth and Maya's hopes for him" and write a response from Momma on suggestions for "the child's guidance"; write diary entries from Maya's perspective on different scenes in the book (5-6).

Following a bibliography and twenty item vocabulary list, the author provides "Comprehension Test A" and "Comprehension Test B." Test A includes a section where students are asked to match ten quotations to a list of twelve characters. For example, they should match Mrs. Flowers' name to the statement "You see, I had planned to invite you for cookies and lemonade so we could have this little chat" (8). Part II is a fifteen item fill in the blank section that asks students to complete such statements as "Mrs. Cullian insists upon calling Marguerite Mary" (8); part III includes ten true/false statements such as "Maya receives a Mickey Mouse watch for graduation" (9); and part IV includes two essay questions that ask the students to "describe the methods of three people who help Marguerite gain self-confidence" and "explain how Bailey changes before he leaves home" (8-9).

Part I of Test B includes ten multiple choice questions; part II lists facts about fifteen characters that are to be identified. For example, students are asked to match Bailey's name to the statement "joins the merchant marines" (9). Part III asks the reader to match the identity of ten different events with the location where they occurred; and part IV includes two essay questions that ask the reader to "compare Maya's home in Stamps with

Vivian's house in San Francisco" and to "describe the relationship between Maya and her brother" (10-11).

Literature Anthologies and Accompanying Teachers' Manuals

Sections of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* are frequently included in literature anthologies for middle and high school students. In five of the eight anthologies examined in this section, the publishers have included a selection from this book in their "Nonfiction/Autobiography" unit or chapter. Ginn and Company's *American Literature* text presents chapter one from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* under a section on "The American Dream" in a chapter on "Major Themes in American Literature." Houghton Mifflin Company places their selection from the book in a chapter entitled "Portraits," and Ginn and Company's *Exploring Literature* presents a selection in its unit on "Encounters."

One of the more frequently used passages in literature anthologies is from chapter fifteen, pages 77-87, dealing with Angelou's invitation to visit Mrs. Bertha Flowers, whom Angelou described as "one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be" (78). This section of the book involves Mrs. Flowers's kind treatment of Angelou's as she encourages the young girl to end her years of silence

brought on as a result of Angelou's internalized reaction to the belief that her spoken words had led to the murder of the man who had raped her when she was eight years old. Mrs. Flowers, whom Angelou respects as a sophisticated, intelligent "aristocrat" in the Black community of Stamps, reads aloud to Angelou and offers her two books with the understanding that on Angelou's next visit she will recite a poem from one of the books. This individual act of compassion and understanding played such a positive role in Angelou's life that she refers to Mrs. Flowers as "the lady who threw me my first life line" (77).

Houghton Mifflin Company's eighth grade textbook, *Focus on Literature: People*, published in 1981, McDougal Littell's 1986 eighth grade textbook, *Reading Literature*, and McGraw Hill's *American Literature: A Chronological Approach* published in 1985 for use in eleventh grade all include the section of Maya's visit to Mrs. Flowers's home.

The approaches involved in dealing with the text in these three different anthologies vary considerably. The McGraw Hill book includes six "For Understanding" questions and five "For Interpretation" questions (824). The Houghton Mifflin text includes three "Discussion" questions that have the students both recall events from their reading and interpret certain events from the story. The section included in the McDougal Littell series also includes six

"Developing Comprehension Skills" questions that ask students to recall events of the story. However, this series also includes many additional sections including one entitled "Reading Literature" that asks students to evaluate the character of Mrs. Flowers; to interpret the significance of the book's title in relationship to the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem on which it is based; to consider the lessons Maya learned in her encounter with Mrs. Flowers; and to analyze the differences in the dialect spoken by Mrs. Flowers and Maya's grandmother (451-452).

A "Developing Vocabulary Skills" section asks students to consider the usage of five different sentences from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a means of looking at language diversity. Students have the opportunity to work on two different writing assignments in which the directions guide them through a process approach to writing their responses to two bits of advice that Mrs. Flowers gives to young Angelou or to writing about a person who has had a great influence on their lives (453).

The final section in the McDougal Littell text dealing with this book focuses on "Developing Skills in Speaking and Listening" and asks students to practice reading a sentence aloud in six different ways. Students are encouraged to "use these same techniques whenever [they] read a story or poem aloud" (453).

Another section of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* often found in literature anthologies is the first chapter, describing how Angelou and her brother, Bailey, had been shipped, at ages three and four, from St. Louis to the Stamps, Arkansas, home of their paternal grandmother. This chapter reveals the strength of character found in Momma, as Angelou refers to her grandmother. She serves as caretaker for her grandchildren and as a source of physical and spiritual food for the field workers who come to her store each morning and each evening.

McDougal, Littell and Company includes this chapter in their 1983 edition of their *Literature: Orange Level* series for tenth graders. The assignments at the end of this selection are similar to the ones described in the McDougal Littell series cited above. Students are given three recall questions. Then they are asked to consider the importance of setting to a story and to evaluate whether or not this chapter is about Maya Angelou's life. Students are then asked to study the root word "auto" and to look up six words with this prefix. Finally, students are asked to write about their earliest recollection (212).

The Teacher's Manual for this book lists ten "Glossary Words." As a pre-reading activity, in the section "Introducing the Selection," it is suggested that teachers "might wish to introduce this selection with a discussion of

train travel and of the experience of moving to a new environment, perhaps to live with a new family" (73).

Under the "Teaching the Selection" section, teachers are encouraged to "explain that this selection is narrated in the first person and that, as autobiography, it is a true story" (73). The McDougal Littell series includes a writing assignment that asks students to write about their earliest memories.

Prior to the writing skills section, detailed answers are given to the questions included in the students' textbook. Following the writing skills section, a five item "Check Test" is provided. This completion quiz is made up of recalling five facts from the story, such as "The narrator and her brother travel by train from Long Beach, California to Stamps, Arkansas" (74).

The last section in the teacher's guide, "Extending the Lesson," suggests that teachers "urge students to read the rest of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, as well as the later two volumes of Angelou's autobiography" (74).

Chapter one, along with sections from chapters three, five, and fifteen, of *Caged Bird*, is also included in Ginn and Company's *Exploring Literature* series for eighth grade students. Again, students are given questions asking them to recall specific details from the story, and they are provided two topics for composition assignments. A



vocabulary section asks students to use context clues to come to the meaning of five words used in the book with which they may be unfamiliar (34-35).

A supplemental book that provides tests for selections included in this series includes five multiple choice recall questions on the selection from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. For example, question one, to which the correct response is selection "d", asks:

- The Francis children were sent to live with their
- a. grandparents in Kansas.
  - b. grandmother and uncle in Arkansas.
  - c. grandfather in Mississippi.
  - d. great aunt and their cousins in Alabama. (4)

The test manual uses a similar objective format for all selections included in the anthology.

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers includes selections from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in their *Adventures for Readers, Book Two* series for eighth grade students. The selection includes passages from chapters one, three, and fifteen. The "Seeking Meaning" section at the end of the selection asks students, in five questions, to both recall specific details and to interpret certain events. For example, question five states, "Maya compares herself to an old biscuit. What beautiful fruit does she compare Mrs. Flowers' skin to? What do these two comparisons tell you of Maya's feelings about herself and Mrs. Flowers?" (387).

The teacher's guide for this selection suggests that as a pre-reading for the book, teachers might have their students consider the meaning of the book's title. The Dunbar poem "Sympathy" is included in the guide. Additionally, thirteen vocabulary words are listed, and teachers are encouraged to read the opening scene of the book aloud (94-95). A five item true/false quiz is provided along with detailed answers to the five questions from the students' text.

Finally, in "Extending and Individualizing Response," students are asked to write a descriptive paragraph about a place from their past and/or to write an autobiographical sketch about some person who has influenced them (95). Additional activities suggested in the book include having groups of students prepare an oral reading of the passage from Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* that Mrs. Flowers read to Angelou or having students discuss Mrs. Flowers's attitudes on the importance of language (95).

An eleventh grade anthology by Ginn and Company includes part of chapter thirty-four of *Caged Bird*. This selection recounts Angelou's determination to obtain employment as a conductorette on a San Francisco trolley car, an accomplishment never before achieved by a Black, let alone by a Black fifteen-year-old girl. Again, this

anthology follows the format of others described above and asks students to respond to four recall questions (114).

### Comparison of Texts

There are large disparities among the recommendations of the authors of the articles from *English Journal*, *Notes Plus*, and *Portraits: Biography and Autobiography in the Secondary School* for dealing with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and the way in which most of the textbook publishers recommend that the book or sections of the book be used. The teaching strategies suggested in *Portraits* and the articles encourage teachers to involve their students actively in the text by having them respond on a personal level to circumstances from the story. These materials include a wealth of ways in which teachers can alter their teaching to look at *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* from many different critical approaches. These suggestions are designed to engage the reader with the text through analysis and evaluation.

In contrast to these materials, the *Perma Bound* teacher's guide and most of the suggested activities presented by publishers involve primarily lower level thinking skills. These facts, though certainly important to the book, seem to provide little opportunity for students to be challenged to evaluate critically events and characters

in the text. Furthermore, there are seldom opportunities for students to connect the experiences in the text with experiences from their own lives. The 1989 Perma Bound teacher's guide for *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, I think, makes a profoundly important statement about the inclusion of literature study in America's classrooms. Although this is only one example of the type of material being prepared and sold by publishers, and purchased and used by teachers, it is clear that both the author and the publisher have failed to recognize the critically important contributions that this book can make to the English curriculum.

The case study that follows presents an important picture of what happened when a teacher made some unwise choices about how to include *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in her work with a ninth-grade class. This case presents an example of what can happen when the instructional focus is on surface "facts" of a text rather than on having readers interact with a text to create meaning and to engage in reflective, evaluative thinking.

## CHAPTER V

### **FREEING MAYA ANGELOU'S CAGED BIRD: A STUDY OF A CENSORSHIP CASE**

As I turned down Route 19 in the 3:00 a.m. darkness on the morning of April 20, I discovered the outskirts of the town surrounding Fort Coburn. Pawn shops, advertising surf boards and stereos, alternated with service stations, massage parlors, and fast food restaurants. They served as my introduction to this military community. Beautiful forests engulfed me the next morning during much of the thirty-minute drive I made from the back gate of the base to the school board office near the front gate. The contrasts I saw on my first drive through Fort Coburn amazed me. At times I thought I was driving through a national forest; at times I thought I was in a war zone; at times I thought I was watching men playing with toy soldiers and war equipment.

After parking the car in a gravel lot next to the small, glass-fronted, brick school board office, I was greeted by Charles Smith, superintendent, and the two other people I would be meeting with: Dr. Ned East, Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, and Mrs. Catherine Meador, Chairperson of the Board of Education. We talked for about ninety minutes; and, after I explained the purposes of my

study, they agreed to allow me to conduct my research in their school division.

### The Organizational Structure of the School Division

The Fort Coburn School Division serves about 4000 students in five elementary schools, one middle school and one senior high school. The schools are operated under the supervision of the Commanding General, who oversees policies enacted by the local school board, a function like that of a State Department of Education. The Board of Education seems to be actively involved in the day-to-day operations of the school. The seven members of the Board of Education, elected for three year terms, must be parents of children enrolled in the division, and only parents of school children are eligible to vote in annual elections for the Board held in May of each year.

### The Story

Mrs. Judith Wilson, an out-going, gracious woman, is a devoted mother of an adolescent son. Her deep blue eyes lost their sparkle and her laugh that earlier had peppered our conversation faded as she told me about discovering a quiz that her son, Timmy, had taken in his ninth-grade college placement English class at Coburn High School. This quiz was the catalyst that led Mrs. Wilson and her husband

to complain about the use of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in the ninth-grade curriculum. In her spacious living room, that included antique, light oak, glass-fronted bookcases and a heavy rolltop desk, Mrs. Wilson seemed relaxed in an over-stuffed, brown leather chair. She talked of her frustration when she realized her son was being exposed to material at school that she felt was too mature for him. One of six children in the family of a retired Air Force Colonel, Mrs. Wilson spoke enthusiastically of her years as a military dependent and of her contentment with her six-year marriage to a Lieutenant Colonel. A member of the Catholic church, she works as a Sunday school teacher on base and also trains for the Red Cross. She completed two years of college, and she held a professional position in the Federal Government Commerce Department for fifteen years. Now she is, in her words, "wonderfully unemployed" and "loves it." Her parental responsibilities, coupled with church and civic activities, fulfill a youthful desire to be a teacher, a desire she abandoned when she left college to marry her first husband.

Although Mrs. Wilson is "very involved" in Timmy's life, she did not read the book Timmy was assigned in his English class until she ran across a quiz in his notebook while cleaning his room one Saturday morning. She

discovered the answers to ten questions and one extra credit question on a quiz.

The answers were to a pop quiz on chapters 31-36 of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. These chapters open with a confrontation between Angelou's father and his fiancée, Dolores, concerning his relationship with fifteen-year-old Maya and her brother, Bailey. After her father storms out of the house, Maya decides to apologize to Dolores for causing problems between the two adults. In a rage of anger, Dolores tells Maya to go live with her mother, "If you've got one" (208). When Maya expresses her support for her mother, Dolores calls Maya's mother "a whore" (208). Enraged by this idea, Maya slaps Dolores, and, thus, a terrible fight ensues between them. Maya runs out of the house, after having been cut or stabbed in the fight, and she takes refuge in her father's car. After being informed of his daughter's injury, her father takes her to a friend to have the wound bandaged.

Maya is later left at the unoccupied trailer of a friend to spend the night. Maya leaves the trailer the next morning and spends the day "wandering aimlessly through the streets" (213). Later that day Maya searches through a junkyard until she finds an abandoned car in which to spend the night. Upon waking the next morning, Maya realizes that



she is being watched by a group of homeless youngsters who are to become her communal family for the next month.

At the end of the month, Maya decides to go to her mother's house to live, and, when there, she and Bailey begin dancing for fun. All is happy in their home until Bailey takes up the fast life of his mother's friends and hires a "withered white prostitute" (218) to do business for him. His mother, incensed by his actions, demands that he move out of the house. Angelou immerses herself in reading The Well of Loneliness and becomes concerned that she may be a lesbian. In order to find out one way or another about her sexuality, Angelou schemed to ask a handsome neighbor boy if he would have sexual intercourse with her. This, her first sexual encounter, confuses her even more on the issue of her sexual orientation. In addition, she becomes pregnant. This section, and the book, ends with Maya's acceptance of the birth of her son.

Mrs. Wilson was alarmed when she read the following answers to the quiz:

- 1) whore
- 2) stabs her/cuts her
- 3) in an abandoned car
- 4) her mother
- 5) they dance publicly in a contest
- 6) the white prostitute/hooker

- 7) she thinks she is becoming a lesbian
- 8) has sex with a boy down the street
- 9) she gets pregnant
- 10) boy

Extra Credit: He is a merchant marine at sea

While I can only speculate on what questions prompted these responses to the quiz that was given orally by the teacher, Mrs. Milton, it seems clear that they called for recall responses to surface details in the book, and that four of the answers were directly related to the sexual content of these chapters. Prior to discovering the quiz, Mrs. Wilson had only a general understanding of the books Timmy was reading.

I asked him, at the time they started this, what now are you reading in English? He told me they were reading a biography, an autobiography by a black woman. And I asked him what it was. And I honestly had not heard of Maya Angelou. And I asked him about her, and he told me she was a writer, and this was her autobiography. And I thought great, that's good. I'm glad to hear that you're doing an autobiography of a black woman. And one Saturday I was looking through his notebook, as I do, and found one of his quizzes on the book.

And I was taken aback. I couldn't believe what I was reading. I thought what is he studying? What are these answers. This doesn't even make sense that I would find this in his book. A ninth grader. "Whore, stabbed her, cut her." I thought, what is this?

When Timmy returned home later that morning from playing with friends, Mrs. Wilson asked if she could read

the book he was reading in English class. "So I got his book, and I read it that afternoon and was again taken aback at what they were reading in the class. And thought about his level of maturity and the other kids that I know so well, and could not believe that they were reading this in ninth grade."

To understand her reaction to the quiz answers, it is important to first understand Mrs. Wilson's understanding of her son and his academic preparation. While she speaks very approvingly of his high school, she feels that his junior high had not prepared him well academically.

Timmy is 15. Born in 1975. This is our second year in this school system, and we're very pleased with the school. Would hope that he could stay here forever. It's a very demanding, hard, great school. They don't compromise in high school. We felt that the junior high when we came was very babyish. That it was not a good transition school to go into high school. For instance, they did not even have to do a book report during the year, and they focused very much on self esteem and the overall development of the child. And [we] felt that many of the requirements like term papers and book reports and things like that were going to be dealt with in the high school, which is what happened.

They hit high school, and it was like a slap in the face, and we were all thrilled. It's just a very good school.

In addition to being academically unprepared to deal critically with literature, Timmy was, in Mrs. Wilson's view, too young to deal with the complex "adult" issues addressed in Angelou's book.

So they came, from an environment of--they were called Bears or Gators [in junior high], they were in teams and they had logos and a very protective environment, into what we call the real world in the high school. And that was one of the reasons that we were concerned about the material that was presented. Our son is, I think, a very typical ninth grader, and we're very close with a lot of parents of the other students. I'm involved in two different youth groups on base. One from church and then also the Red Cross program, so I've got a lot of experience with teenagers and a lot of discussion took place between different parents and kids about the book. But, most people weren't, you know, concerned enough to get--well most people, to be honest, weren't aware of what the book was and then just kind of being involved with all kinds of stuff.

After reading the book, Mrs. Wilson called a friend to discuss her concerns:

And so I called one of my friends whose daughter is in a different class, but the same grouping. And I said, "Is your daughter reading *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*?" And she said, "No, she told me she was going to read that next." They haven't started it yet. And she laughed; she said, "Do you know anything about it? All the kids call it the porno novel." And she's laughing and she said that Kelly [the friend's daughter] said that they get to read the porno novel when they finish this.

She was referring to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a porno novel. This was the reputation in the ninth grade. They were looking forward to--you see, Kelly is in a different class and Kelly was reading X, and she could hardly wait to finish reading X because her next book was *Caged Bird*. Quote "The porno novel."

And Timmy's class was reading it at that time. So I told Elaine that I had just finished reading it and that I was real surprised at what they were reading and told her about the quiz that I had just finished reading.

So I asked Timmy about it that afternoon when he came home from playing, and he was just very vague as he is, you know, had no real feelings. I

didn't get a chance to really talk to my husband about it for a couple of days, and I told him about it, and I said, "I want you to know what Timmy's reading in class, and I'm very upset about it, and I'm thinking I'm going to go up and talk to the teacher about it." So I was telling him and he too was very surprised, and he took the book and read it.

Mrs. Wilson's husband, Lieutenant Colonel Wilson, has eighteen years of active duty experience. At the time of this censorship complaint, he was the Commanding Officer of a Combat Engineer Battalion. In that capacity he directed a battalion of about 800 men, including 34 officers. A graduate of The Citadel, LTC Wilson entered the military immediately upon graduation and has been stationed in many parts of the world. The son of a career military officer, he had graduated from Coburn High School and felt a civic responsibility to respond to the book, a responsibility he felt was even greater than his parental responsibility: "it's merely the right thing for me to do to challenge them on that regardless of whether Timmy was a student down there or not." In particular, LTC Wilson pointed to his responsibility as an officer to be concerned about what happened in all areas of life on base.

After LTC Wilson "skimmed over quite a bit of it [the book]," he, like his wife, felt the material was inappropriate for ninth graders to read. He then contacted the principal of Coburn High School, Dr. Heslep, to express

his concerns about the use of the book in Timmy's class. Dr. Heslep and LTC Wilson had known each other during their early years as military officers. LTC Wilson was optimistic that Dr. Heslep would agree with him and insist that the book be withdrawn from the classroom. Because LTC Wilson knew Dr. Heslep personally, he never considered contacting the teacher first to register his complaints.

Dr. Heslep also had been a officer before leaving the service and joining the base school system. He had held a number of positions; he had been a teacher, then a counselor, an assistant principal, and finally, since 1985, the principal of Coburn High School. Dr. Heslep expressed support for LTC Wilson's concern but told him that he had to file a written complaint, as provided for in Schools Regulation 15. Schools Regulation No. 15 deals with Challenged Instructional Materials and contains the following:

Detailed Guidance:

1. If a complaint is made, the principles of the freedom to read and of the professional responsibility of the staff must be defended, rather than the materials.
2. The principal will investigate the nature of the complaint, discussing such with the complainant. If the complaint involves the propriety of material, the social, emotional and moral impact of the challenged material upon a particular child or group of children must always be considered. In such a case, agreement between the principal (and/or other appropriate school staff) and the complainant

may be reached and a satisfactory solution to the problem agreed upon. The solution may involve the offer of alternative materials to the individual student or group of students. Under no circumstances, however, may a principal (as a result of such complaint) change or modify curriculum or remove materials from use.

3. If the challenge cannot be satisfied as stated in paragraph 2 above, the teachers and school officials will make no commitments to the complainant regarding the removal of the subject materials from the classroom or library.
4. If a satisfactory solution has not been reached, the principal will inform the superintendent and invite the complainant to file his objections in writing, using the "Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of Educational Materials" form. This form will be submitted to the Superintendent.
5. The formal complaint will be evaluated by an ad hoc Materials Review Board appointed by the Superintendent, composition depending on the nature of the complaint. The Board will be empowered to seek out and entertain the views of all interested parties but will be guided in their decisions by the criteria specified in paragraph 2 of Schools Policy No. 145, Selection of Instructional Materials. When appropriate, the Materials Review Board will request legal advice from the Base Staff Judge Advocate. The Materials Review Board must always consider the social, emotional and moral impact of the challenged material upon a particular child or group of children.
6. After review of the formal complaint by the Materials Review Board, the Superintendent will advise the complainant and other interested parties of the action taken in a written statement giving reasons for his decision.

Dr. Heslep promptly provided LTC Wilson with a "CITIZEN'S REQUEST FOR RECONSIDERATION OF EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS" form, and LTC and Mrs. Wilson completed the form and turned it into Dr. Ned East, Assistant Superintendent for Instruction. In the request, the Wilsons cited objections to sections of the book including chapter 6, paragraph 13; chapter 11, paragraphs 12-27; chapter 12, paragraph 3-12, and chapter 35. They asked that the book be made an "optional reading assignment at the 11th/12th grade level rather than required at the 9th grade." In their specific written complaints, the Wilsons stated that their

objection to the use of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* for ninth grade literature is twofold. First, at age 14, ninth graders are generally too young to put Ms. Angelou's story of growing up with rape, child sexual molestation, homosexuality, adventurous sexual activities, crude descriptions of sexual organs, and nonchalance over the birth of an illegitimate child in the proper perspective. No doubt, the interest level is high, but the ability to understand and appreciate what occurred in perspective to their world and within their level of maturity and knowledge is not possible. We're pushing these 14 year olds from "Bears and Gators" at Brewster [the middle school] less than 5 months ago to:

"it was his "thing" on my leg. . .Mr. Freeman pulled me to him and put his hand between my legs. . . his thing stood up like a brown ear of corn. He took my hand and said "feel it." It was mushy and squirmy. . .he dragged me on top of his chest. . .then he rolled over leaving me in a wet place and stood up. (later) I sat quietly on his lap. . .I felt a soft/lump under my thigh begin to move. It twitched against me and



started to harden. . . He said, "Sit still, stop squirming." But all the time he pushed me around on his lap.

(From chapter 11)

Secondly, this book, because of its coarseness, should not be required reading at any level. Surely, a higher level student (11th or 12th grade) could select from several books. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a moving, gut wrenching book with obvious value, but not appropriate, and potentially harmful, at the 9th grade level. It may be useful to see the attached quiz given to the class. The answers to 6 of the 10 questions have as their focus what appears to be the coarse and sensationalist details of the book as opposed to those aspects which may have lent themselves to a discussion of ethical standards or ethnic and cultural group influences, etc.

Please reread the "Detailed Guidance" in Schools Regulation No. 14, Subject: Selection of Instructional Material, after reading this book and ask yourself, "Is this the best book we can provide for our ninth graders?"

The reference in the final paragraph of the complaint to Schools Regulation No. 14 draws attention to the district's formal guidelines for selecting materials:

Detailed Guidance:

1. Selected materials will enrich and support the growth of factual knowledge, literary appreciation, aesthetic values, and ethical standards; will expose opposing sides of controversial issues so that young citizens can make intelligent judgements in their daily lives; and will represent the many religious, ethnic and cultural groups and their influence on our heritage.
2. Criteria for selection of instructional materials includes, but is not limited to:
  - Needs of the individual school
  - Knowledge of the curriculum
  - and of the existing collection
  - Overall purpose

Timeliness, permanence, and  
 importance of subject matter  
 Quality, readability and  
 popular appeal  
 Authoritativeness, reputation  
 and significance of the  
 author/ artist/  
 composer/publisher/producer,  
 etc.  
 Format and price  
 Desires of parents and  
 students

When LTC Wilson turned in the complaint form at the School Board Office, he talked with Dr. East about the ad hoc committee that was to be appointed by the superintendent to read the book and then discuss the issue with the Wilsons. In talking to me, LTC Wilson was firm in his opinion that this procedure implied that "an ad hoc committee would be a completely objective group with no axe to grind one way or the other." He was immediately concerned when Dr. East called to tell him what the composition of the committee was:

a Mrs. Atkinson from the English Department, a Mrs. Francis from the English Department, a LTC Jones , who also had some connection to the school system, and I don't know exactly in what capacity, something related to parent's group, or something, at any rate he had some ties with the school system, and myself. And, I sat on that for about a day, and then I called him back -- called Dr. East back -- and I expressed my concern that this did not seem like the objective group that I had in mind. Specifically, everybody that would be sitting there -- it kind of reeked of the fox guarding the chicken house; and I might add that I concluded later on that's exactly what had occurred -- especially the teachers from the English department were there in more of self-

defense mode as opposed to a very objective mode of looking at the book. And I understand that.

Although LTC Wilson had strong reservations about the composition of the review committee, he and his wife decided to continue with their complaint.

The reason that I decided to go ahead and proceed was, at that time Dr. East gave me the indication that he thought that we had a very good argument that it was inappropriate for 9th graders, and I thought well, if he thinks that, it ought to be cut and dried--it was so obvious to me that it wasn't appropriate to 9th graders.

It seems clear that LTC Wilson was confident that his request would be approved. This may explain in part his decision not to include other parents in the challenge:

He [Dr. East] also indicated that I had the liberty of bringing anybody that I wanted along with me to this ad hoc committee and I very specifically did not want to do that because I did not want this thing to turn into a crusade. I'm sure I could have gone and got a couple of priests and couple of hard-core Southern Baptists to march in there with me and take a much more stringent view of affairs.

Mrs. Wilson concurred with her husband's view when she stated:

We were allowed and encouraged to bring anyone with us. But we felt that the case either was going to stand or wasn't. We could have inflamed lots of parents to come up to the school board and complain about the book, and we could pretty much tell who would think it was inappropriate. But we didn't see that as necessary. We still feel that way. Our argument should stand up and that's how we felt.

Mrs. Wilson also agreed with her husband's assessment that "we felt that [the ad hoc committee] was rather stacked."

The January 8, 1990, Meeting of the Committee

After a committee was appointed to respond to the Wilsons' complaint, Dr. East organized the Ad Hoc Materials Review Committee to evaluate the appropriateness of including *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in the ninth-grade phase four curriculum. It met on January 8:

So we called the parents together and we didn't have any prior meetings or such of the committee before we talked to the parents. We have an--also procedurally we just will not do that--we don't think that would be quite ethical. In that we want the parents to be involved in all meetings or deliberations, and the superintendent assigned the committee members, as he is supposed to, and what we did is we made a copy of the book available to each committee member and asked them to read it and then came together with the parents on that particular first meeting and discussed their concern and listened to their concern. We wanted to have the chairman of the department express, the teacher wasn't there, the chairman of the department and the vice principal of the school for instruction to express their concerns about what might happen.

Review board minutes indicated that all four committee members and LTC and Mrs. Wilson were in attendance:

As explained by Dr. East, this meeting was called to discuss the concerns of LTC and Mrs. Wilson regarding the book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, an autobiography by Maya Angelou, which is being taught in the ninth grade literature class. Copies of Schools Regulation No. 14 and 15, "Selection of Instructional Material" and "Challenged Instructional Materials" respectively,

along with the parents' "Request for Reconsideration of Educational Materials" were distributed.

Sue Francis, Assistant Principal (Curriculum), Coburn High School, explained that the first book of Ms. Angelou's autobiography was being studied by Coreen Milton's (English teacher at FCHS) ninth grade enrichment class. The book was chosen as a valuable piece of literature and nonfiction. Prior to presenting the book to her class, Ms. Milton told her students the book contained mature material matter but thought they could handle it. She told them at the onset that if they could not handle it to let her know. No one did.

Ms. Milton's students who read the book did evaluations of her as a teacher. Ms. Francis cited some of their comments: "You treat us like an adult"; "You made us feel welcome in your class"; "I really like how you treat us as mature students, not as kids."

Ms. Atkinson [English Department chairperson] reported that she presented the autobiography to her academically gifted class and told them that parts of the book were on a mature level. The class previewed Bill Moyer's introduction to the book before studying it. Only one student out of 16 chose not to read the book.

When questioned about their impressions after reading the book, the students told her they were in favor of it. There was nothing in it foreign to them, and they felt it was not as graphic as they expected. They were not embarrassed nor repulsed by the contents. The class viewed the piece as a very honest expression of emotions and feelings and understood why Ms. Angelou wrote in such detail.

Ms. Atkinson said she read the book from a teacher's point of view and from the viewpoint of a 13/14 year old. She felt comfortable with parts of it, but she discovered a new purpose for including it in the class, i.e., child abuse. She mentioned that she talked with the former FCHS English Department team leader who classified it as an eighth grade level piece of literature. She, too, felt uncomfortable with some of the subject matter having been made aware of the reality of child abuse. This book, they felt, was actually a good education experience to make

children aware of what could happen to them. Ms. Atkinson was appalled by statistics; she recently learned that 68% of child molesters have molested children two other times before their crimes were reported.

Ms. Francis added that from an education aspect, Ms. Angelou's command of the English language in this literary piece, particularly her use of metaphors, was most impressive. The book, they feel, is an excellent example of writing. Also a poet, Ms. Angelou writes with sensitivity, and the study of biographies plays an important part in the need of students to identify themselves. The anxieties and doubts they experience in their adolescent years are universal.

LTC Jones noted that he was impressed by the student comments cited by Ms. Francis. He acknowledged that child abuse is more widespread than we can imagine. He agreed that we must do something about child abuse, but personally did not feel this book was the avenue toward this end. He appreciated Ms. Angelou's writing talent -- her use of metaphors, but felt that parts of the book most certainly did not fit this analogy. It is not just that the book contains mature subject matter, but rather the type of language used in it. And, once word gets out, these students will seek it out to read. LTC Jones' feeling is that it is up to parents to determine what is good for their children. Children need guidance in the maturing process. So much in Ms. Angelou's book emphasizes coarse, nonchalant vulgar language.

LTC Wilson conceded that some ninth grade students may be mature enough to handle Ms. Angelou's descriptiveness in her book, but he personally feels that ninth graders in general are not able to put the contents of this book in its proper perspective. They do not have the background to appreciate fully the intensity of Ms. Angelou's emotions of her experiences related in her book. He fully supports openness but questions if this is the way we want to educate students, even about child abuse. The real question to be raised here is: Is *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou, the best piece of literature to offer ninth grade students as required reading? He asked if the option were

open to look at other autobiographies of renowned blacks; for instance, Ethel Waters.

Mrs. Wilson voiced additional concerns over the unscrupulous outcomes of many of the events and experiences in Ms. Angelou's childhood, i.e., Ms. Angelou's way of proving to herself that she was not a lesbian, and the fatal beating of the man Ms. Angelou named as her rapist.

Ms. Francis explained that these extreme experiences were a major part of Ms. Angelou's childhood, her life. When she heard what happened to her rapist, she did not speak for a year. The book is not a novel, but rather an account of her life. The students who read the book were impressed by its honesty and openness. She added that the school has never made it a firm requirement that every student must read a certain book. The question raised in her mind is whether or not we will offer this book in the future. The gifted students were so impressed with her works that they wrote to her at Wake Forest inviting her to come speak at their graduation.

Dr. East read the entire book by Ms. Angelou. As an adult, he reviewed it as an excellent piece of literature. Its appropriateness is another question. The following options were considered for further review:

- Have Bonnie Martin, Health Education Coordinator, review it.
- Find reviews in English education journals.
- Inquire if other systems use this book and at what grade level.
- Save it for fourth quarter as optional reading to ninth graders.
- Have it as optional reading.
- Substitute with another female black author.
- Keep it available for the Enriched and Gifted classrooms with parents previewing it.

Dr. East explained to LTC and Mrs. Wilson that the Ad Hoc Review Board would have to meet again to consider the options and make a final recommendation to the Superintendent regarding the book. The Superintendent will convey the recommendation to them. If the Wilsons do not agree with it, a meeting will be scheduled for them with the Superintendent.

The reactions of the individuals attending this meeting vary greatly. LTC Wilson commented

So the ad hoc committee met, we went around the talk, and everybody had their say, and it kind of went about like I expected. The two teachers from the English Department, I thought, were rather defensive. LTC Jones initially seemed to be much more concerned about the book than either I or Judith was, and I thought Dr. East took a position at the meeting, at that meeting, that clearly was in line with mine, that the book was inappropriate for ninth graders, though it was a very good piece of literature.

As it turned out, when I got the written results of the board meeting, I did not think that Dr. East's position, as I understood it at the meeting, was exactly in line with what I had heard him say at that time; and I certainly didn't think LTC Jones' position as it was written was exactly as strong as I had heard him on that day.

Mrs. Wilson seemed to concur that the meeting had gone as she had expected; however, she expressed strong concern that one important part of the ad hoc committee meeting had been omitted from the minutes. According to Mrs. Wilson,

LTC Jones had this survey that he had done of all ranks, races, sexes, telling them about the book and going over different parts with them and asking them for their impromptu opinion. What did they think? Was this appropriate for 14 year olds, 15 years olds in the 9th grade. And 100% of them said no. That wasn't included in the minutes. That disappeared. LTC Jones' survey was not mentioned in the minutes.

LTC Robert Jones, at the time of our interview, was completing a one year appointment to fill an unexpired term on the Fort Coburn Dependent School Board. LTC Jones, a graduate of the University of Tennessee served as a pilot in



the Marine Corps for six years, and attended Law School at the University of Tennessee. He has served as a Trial Defense Attorney, a Prosecutor for the Government, and a Military Judge for the last two years. The father of five children, two in high school, one in middle school, and two in elementary school, LTC Jones speaks positively of his interest and dedication to education. An active member of the Southern Baptist Church, LTC Jones is also a Sunday school youth worker. At the time of our interview, LTC Jones was awaiting the results of the upcoming school board election. Throughout the interview, LTC Jones expressed genuine concern and interest in his and his wife's involvement in their children's education. In this censorship challenge, he represented the Education Committee of the school board. As such, he was the only school board representative on the ad hoc committee. LTC Jones' description of the events surrounding his role as the school board representative on the committee provides important information.

I got a copy of the book from Dr. East and read -- I really, because I was busy here too -- kind of skimmed through the entire book -- and then focused in on the chapters that the complaint specifically focused on, and I read those in their entirety.

And then I thought I'd be semi-scientific, although I don't have any scientific abilities whatsoever; I decided to conduct a poll. Because when I first read that language in the book I said, "What is this? Why is this being forced on

ninth graders, or students at any level?"

When I read what some of the, I think it was from the National Council of Teachers of English, some other criticisms, which were very favorable criticisms. So I did my very unscientific poll and I came to two clerks we had -- one who's black, one who's white -- who were between 19 and 21 years old, bachelors. I had copies made of the chapters in question so they didn't get to see the rest of the book. However, I prefaced it with "Let me tell you that overall the book has a great deal of literary value -- that these, I'm only showing you the parts that are controversial; but you just assume for what I'm asking you that the rest of the book is an outstanding piece of work." And then I showed it to officers, enlisted, black and white, married, unmarried, children, no children, and ended up about 12 people. And the unanimous opinion I got was that it was garbage, that it shouldn't be being forced upon students at any level. And I came, quite frankly, to the first meeting armed to say that the complaint is valid, that it should not be being required reading at any level. I think at that time I said that 10th, 11th, and 12th, or maybe we said 11th and 12th, making it optional reading and that was really what I went to the first meeting thinking.

Sue Francis, Director of Instruction and assistant principal and former chair of the English Department at Coburn High School, became involved in this challenge when she was asked through the superintendent's office to assist in gathering information for the committee meeting. A graduate of Wake Forest University, Sue Francis began her teaching career in Forsyth County, North Carolina. The

early years of her career in the mid-sixties were spent teaching at the North Carolina Advancement School, an experimental school for underachievers. Frustrated with the traditional school she taught in after Federal money was withdrawn from the Advancement school, Mrs. Francis made the decision to apply at Fort Coburn Dependent Schools because of the positive work she saw being done there. On the staff since 1977, Mrs. Francis has taught all grades and all levels during her years in the English Department at Fort Coburn High School. In addition she has served as department head and is now the Director of Instruction, a curriculum specialist position.

Mrs. Francis was appointed to the ad hoc committee by Dr. Smith and was actively involved in preparing the school's defense of the book because of her long term membership in the National Council of Teachers of English. A December 13, 1989, memo from Ms. Francis to Coreen Milton, the teacher in whose class the book was being challenged, requested "a statement from you for a hearing on the challenge of this book." Francis asked Milton to "give all the information you can on the rationale you presented to the students and the circumstances which may have led to this challenge. Also attach any written material you used (writing assignments, tests, etc.)."

When this case began, Coreen Milton had taught ninth-grade English at Fort Coburn for three years. During the process of the complaints in December, 1989, Mrs. Milton's husband was transferred to another base. Although she was aware that a complaint had been raised at the time of her departure, she was never involved in the defense of the book. (Mrs. Milton now lives in Japan where her husband is stationed and was not available for interviews related to the complaint concerning the autobiography and her teaching of it.

Mrs. Milton, who was preparing to move a week after receiving the memo, asked Mrs. Francis if she could tell her the information she had concerning the use of the book. Mrs. Francis' agreed with her account and this discussion follows:

And so she told me how it went. And it didn't sound bad. She had told them that it's mature material, but I think you can handle it and nobody had complained to her. She showed me letters the students had written. Upon her leaving, she had asked them to write about what they thought of her as a teacher. And they all seemed to brag on the fact that she did treat them maturely, even the child whose parents were complaining.

An example of the type of instruction and evaluation that Mrs. Milton utilized in work with her students as they read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is ten pages of "Worksheets" she distributed to her students as they began to read the book. The worksheets, numbered 1 - 6, were

provided to me by a female student who was a friend of the Wilsons' son. No grade or comments appeared on the pages of answers this student had prepared in response to the 414 questions. The worksheets were questions about the introduction and about each of the thirty-six chapters of the book.

Mrs. Francis willingly prepared a defense of the book for the discussion of it at the January 8 meeting of the ad hoc review committee. It was at this meeting, however, that Mrs. Francis discovered new information that she found shocking: "and then we saw this test that the woman had given. We really didn't see the test, we saw the child's answers to the test, and he had made 110% because he had answered the extra credit."

Mrs. Francis' concern is evident as she talks about the events surrounding her discovery of this quiz:

After we had spoken and given our defense of the book as a worthy work of literature, then we saw the problem was stemming from the teacher's playing on the sensationalism of it. Whether intentionally or not, by asking them whatever she had. . . resulted in his writing a list of words for a short pop quiz. Answers like "lesbian"; I don't even remember what they were. I was embarrassed.

Mrs. Francis expressed her frustration concerning the procedure that was followed in preparing the committee members for the meeting. She stated that "I just really felt that it was too bad that we had no copies. Patricia

and I had not received copies of their complaint before we sat down at the table so we could have known where they were coming from a little bit." Although Mrs. Francis was unsure of the impact that her knowing about the quiz prior to the meeting might have had on how things went, she talked of her opinion that, had she known more about the nature of the complaint, she may have been able to help intervene with the parents. Had she known about the quiz, Mrs. Francis believed that she would have "been tempted to call Mrs. Wilson and say, "We don't need to even have this. I can see what your complaint is coming from."

Another strong reaction Mrs. Francis holds for the way this challenge was handled relates to the "unscientific" survey conducted by LTC Jones:

The part that I thought was scariest was that he had gone around and done this little poll of asking Marines, sticking parts of the book in front of them and saying 'Would you want your kid to read this?' Just classic censorship attempt, and he didn't even realize that was what he was doing. Although he said himself, "I realized it was unscientific the way I did the poll; but, I did show it to blacks and whites and enlisted and officers of various ranks." I was scared to think that even though he himself would say it was an unscientific poll he was still using it in this meeting as support for their side that this book shouldn't be taught.

Celia Atkinson, English Department Chair at Coburn High School in 1989-90, also talked of her concern over the survey LTC Jones presented at the first committee meeting.

Mrs. Atkinson, a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, was in her seventh year of teaching at Fort Coburn Dependent Schools at the time of the book challenge. She worked with Mrs. Francis in preparing the defense of the book.

Mrs. Atkinson first learned of the Wilsons' complaint when Mrs. Milton "received a letter about a week before she was to leave and was quite angry over the situation, was angry that the parents had not called her and had not contacted her, had not talked with the son, keeping him totally out in left field." Soon after learning of the complaint, Mrs. Atkinson "was given a letter saying the book was being challenged and if I would report to a committee after Christmas to decide if this book should continue to be taught at the ninth grade-level."

The final person in attendance at the January 8 ad hoc committee meeting, Assistant Superintendent Ned East, was formerly a teacher and principal of a middle school in New Jersey in the early 1960s. He holds a master's degree from Temple University and a doctorate in Administration and Instructional Technology from the University of Utah. Dr. East had taught at the University of Colorado and at North Carolina State University before accepting his present position in 1981. In his capacity as Associate Superintendent, Dr. East is responsible for curriculum and

instructional matters. His direct involvement in this censorship complaint was to chair the ad hoc committee appointed by Dr. Smith to deal with the complaint made by LTC and Mrs. Wilson.

Dr. East saw his role as that of mediator between the school division and the parents. In my interviews with him, he talked at length about his responsibilities in handling the Wilsons' complaint:

What happened to make me aware of the complaint was the fact that whenever we have a parent file a complaint form, of which I think you have a copy of the form, with the school principal, they send it to me and then I get everything together as far as the paperwork for the superintendent to see and we submit it to the school board chair and indicate that we need to have a committee appointed. At that point in time I just corresponded with the parents to indicate that I had received their concern and that it was being acted upon. So that's how I got involved. And it's a matter of procedure that I get involved in that each time we have one.

I think that there was a very good amount of discussion about censorship in general and what it might mean to the curriculum in general and what it might mean to the curriculum and the school if we were, you know, the different kinds of actions that could be taken. So there was quite a bit of discussion about that. The parents talked about their particular child and the way their child reacted to the book; the way that their child reacted to the test the child had taken; and some real concerns, not only about the book as I might have mentioned to you, but also about the emphasis of the test that the child had taken--a pop quiz.

And we studied that and we had a tendency to agree with the parents, that, yes, from what we could see, since the teacher had already moved out of the area and was not available to give us some information, it appeared to us that in a multiple choice, short answer type of format that she was



talking about that this was rather surface, cursory types of things. And most of the answers seemed to deal with the sexual aspect of the piece. And that was a concern. And we talked about that concern.

Much of Dr. East's recollections of the meeting focused on how teachers need to deal with assigned reading.

We also talked about the instructional strategies that should be used by the teachers and the types of work that had to be done with the students before they read the book. Preparing them for the time period and the issues of the economics of the situation, the racial problems of the situation, and to get them prepared to really be able to work with this book and analyze it. So this kind of discussion went on for quite a while. The parents had some good ideas on this. We were quite pleased to see that.

When asked to reflect on what he felt prompted the Wilsons' concern about the book, Dr. East stated that the committee

basically focused on the sexual aspects of the book and the graphic types of details that our parents felt that had been referred to. Of course it had been discussed then how other children were reacting to this book and I think LTC Jones, the school board representative, indicated how his children reacted to the book. The fact that it was not a big deal and that there was much more graphic detail in sexual types of things on television everyday. We all agreed that regardless that is no excuse, out and out excuse, for sexual types of information in our curriculum that is not being handled correctly. So we focused on that and talked about the parents' request.

According to Dr. East, the meeting ended with the committee indicating "to the parents that we needed to do

some more deliberation and, I believe, talk to some people and children to get some more background information. And that we would then meet as a committee and make our final decision as far as a recommendation was concerned."

The January 16, 1990, Meeting of the Committee

The second meeting of the Ad Hoc Materials Review Committee was held on January 16, 1990. Those present included Dr. Ned East, Chairman, LTC Robert Jones, Mrs. Sue Francis, Mrs. Patricia Atkinson, and Ms. Bonnie Martin. The action of this meeting is described in the minutes as follows:

The members of the Board met and discussed the merits of the instructional use of the book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou. A review of the book was presented by Mrs. Francis. She also presented information on several court cases involving this book in the public schools.

Mrs. Atkinson discussed the instructional strategies necessary to make the analysis of the book a significant educational experience for students. Because of the attention drawn to the book by these proceedings [sic] and the references to sexuality in the book, teachers must properly present the book and use appropriate instructional techniques for instruction.

Ms. Martin, Health Education Coordinator, read the book and presented her views of its appropriateness relative to the health education curriculum. She indicated that, in her judgement, the book was appropriate reading and discussion material for this age level and accurately represented how abused children think about and respond to sexual abuse.

After further discussion, LTC Jones recommended to the Board that the book remain in the curriculum but that it not be used before the last quarter of the freshman school year. In

addition, he recommended that the book be optional, with alternative reading(s) available. Mrs. Atkinson expressed that teachers, especially inexperienced ones, need to consult with their department heads before using this and other books containing possibly controversial subject matter.

#### Recommendation

The Board unanimously recommends that the book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, remains [sic] in the FCHS curriculum for reading at any grade level, but not before the final quarter of the ninth grade. In addition, optional reading(s) will be offered to those students who themselves or whose parents deem it appropriate.

The recommendations of the Ad Hoc Materials Review Committee were communicated to the superintendent in a January 18 memo from Dr. East. According to Dr. East, the committee felt that the Wilsons had "presented a valid case concerning the maturity level required of a student to appreciate the literary qualities of the book." Therefore, the committee felt it was appropriate to restrict the book to being taught no earlier than the fourth quarter of the freshman year.

In a letter dated January 23, 1990, Dr. Smith informed the Wilsons of the Review Board's decision.

You have a valid concern about the maturity level of the student required to appreciate the literary qualities of Ms. Angelou's book. The Committee is unanimous in its recommendation that the book remain in the curriculum but be presented to students with a viable option made available to them. In addition, the book will not be presented in the curriculum earlier the final quarter of the ninth grade. Teachers, before using the book with students, will consult their department head to assure that it is presented properly and

appropriate instructional techniques are used in the classroom.

Although, according to Dr. East, the committee had discussed the possibility of requiring teachers to consult with their department head prior to teaching *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, this recommendation was not part of the Review Board's final recommendations to the superintendent.

## CHAPTER VI

### AN INTERVIEW WITH MAYA ANGELOU

Maya Angelou is a highly respected writer and scholar. Her book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has been identified by critics and scholars as one of the most important works of literature of the twentieth century. In the years since the publication of her first autobiography, Angelou has written four more works continuing her telling her life's story. In addition, she has published many collections of poetry, and she has pursued interests in film making, teaching, and public speaking. Yet, it is clear that the highly acclaimed first book remains the foundation for much of her later work.

Angelou has strong feelings about censorship and teacher and parental responsibilities. In the following pages, she shares some of her attitudes about these topics. Her comments deal with the ideas of censorship in general and serve to cast another context for the events in the case study presented in the previous chapter. The interviews included here were conducted at her home in Winston Salem, North Carolina, in May, 1990, and April, 1991.

Angelou: I am always saddened when censorship is raised as a protection of the young. When it is not called what it really is, which is an attack or evidence of ignorance, evidence of what is usually a protection of the status quo. The protection, in fact, of ignorance. But when it is called the protection of the young and it's just the opposite

to that, it saddens me because the only way we're ever going to be liberated is that our young men and women become educated and they should have the right to read everybody from Keats to Killens.

That I am the target of censorship does not sadden me anymore than if other writers are targets. I'm respected for the work I do, so I don't have to be defensive for my work alone. It's just that censorship as it is used and as it is misused and abused is distressing because the young men and women who are bound by it, bound in ignorance by the censorship, might not begin to question. If they believe the censors, then they go from ignorance to ignorance. If they question the censors, more often than not, they go from ignorance to cynicism and there are few things sadder than a young cynic because it means he has gone from knowing nothing to believing nothing.

If a young person believes his mother and dad or the preacher or the teacher, the superintendent of schools or whoever the authority figure is who censors works, then he out of hand dismisses the works that he/she should be reading. So he is going then from ignorance to ignorance. This is unfortunately what one sees in universities and colleges and high schools when one sees young men and women projecting racism, shouting on quads and university campuses, "Get the Niggers! Get the Kikes! Get the Japs!" They have brought that from somewhere, and more often than not it is from home. So they have gone from ignorance to education at the university level, but what they've done really is gone from ignorance to ignorance and they bond between themselves and they recognize themselves by their ignorance. The other group who questions the authority risks becoming cynics because if they question and go behind the authorities' back and read the censored books and find that the books are not what the authorities say they are then they question everything that the authority figure has told them. Is the sky blue? Should I not smoke? What do you mean I shouldn't use drugs? Why can't I have sex before marriage or without any protection? If censors have told me lies then isn't it possible that everything else they told me was a lie? So they go from ignorance to

cynicism. And just seeing that makes me very sad.

**Graham:** We talked before about your ideas on what is appropriate reading at different age levels, but I'd like for you to talk about what responsibilities you think parents have in monitoring, selecting and/or approving what their children read.

**Angelou:** I think one is always the other. I mean, if you select, then obviously that implies that you have monitored what they should not have, and you have also approved what they should have. So one is the other. I think that parents, in making any of those choices, or of those three choices, should be well advised to not only make the selection, monitor and approve, but experience the book with the child. It would enlarge both groups' understanding; the children's appreciation of disapproval of the parents' choice, and the parents' understanding of the impact of the book. The parent would be totally involved in the work. Then as unpleasant or questionable elements of the book arise, the parent can explain or even question with the child the book's meaning and that is possible the best thing that could happen.

**Graham:** I think I understand what you're saying, but I think I also know enough about your reading history as a child to think that you probably believe that young people should also be free to read pretty liberally.

**Angelou:** Absolutely. I love the stories of friends who lived in houses where there were large or small bookshelves or libraries and stories of those who were children of doctors and nurses who could examine medical books. As youngsters they were able to examine maps of ancient Asia and puzzle over the drawings of human anatomy. I'm saddened to hear the stories of parents who wouldn't allow them to read *Moby Dick* or even look at the skeleton of the human body. I just think the child who has a chance to go to the library in the home and choose whatever she or he wants to read is better off. But, since few live in families where there are libraries in the home, the parents should be involved in the experience of the school

library, the public library, and reading books along with the children.

Graham: Who should decide the difference between pornography and literature?

Angelou: I suppose each reader. I'm not sure. I never have been quite sure. If I can't find a redeeming element in a piece of work, that is to say, if I'm not shown something deeper and more understandable, more wondrous, however bad or good wondrous, a negative or positive wondrous, about the human being and this particular journey called life which we have all had the audacity to begin, then I might find salaciousness. Just salaciousness does not teach me anything.

On the other hand, I remember being quite young reading Henry Miller's books and my first response was "uck" and then I thought, "Well, let me, well, my goodness, did this, could they, would they?" And, finally being totally informed by Miller's work and yet a little bit embarrassed that it might be just true pornography because I didn't know very much. I didn't know people to whom to speak and get some understanding. But reading the Miller books and *Lady Chatterly's Lover* and *The Well of Loneliness*, there were always enough descriptions of times and places which I would never have known without those books. I mean, if the salacious parts had not been in them, I would have read them. I would have read the books, yes, because there was just so much in them, so much sensuality, and I began to understand something of the human and geographic landscape of Britain, of Greece, and of France. When a book has been written to stimulate not the mind but the libido and the pocketbook it could be called pornographic.

Graham: What responsibilities do you think teachers have in selecting materials for their classes?

Angelou: Well, teachers' responsibilities are no less than parents' responsibilities. In some cases teachers spend more time with students than do parents. I don't think there should be any difference in their selectivity, in their approval and in their monitoring. I think the only advantage teachers



have over parents is that they must experience books with students. They have added advantages: group approval, group examination, group responses, group feedback. If there are twenty-five students in the classroom and six different approaches to one idea, each student would find more benefits than could be found in the room of parents.

Graham: I know that you don't use your own works when you teach, but if you were going to teach *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in a high school classroom, how might you use it? What would be the important issues? What would you want the students to take away from their reading of the book?

Angelou: I suppose I would teach *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as I would teach any other book. I mean, I would ask the students to look for particular, positive, human traits and particular negative ones. Where, in each chapter, was there evidence of courage, evidence of support? Where did they see evidence of cruelty, of neglect, of humor? What character in this chapter showed evidence of respect, of love? What was the overall sense of continuity in chapter to chapter? Did one feel that one really wanted to go with these people, or see this person survive, and how he or she has increased the quality of life? What one incident in this chapter would I like to see deleted? What would I like to see included that was not included?

Graham: Could you talk about your reactions when learning for the first time that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* had been challenged in school?

Angelou: I suppose I wasn't much surprised, which is sad. And I'd like to not have to say that, but there are all manners of describing sexism and racism and so forth. There are all manners. For instance, when my play "Sisters" was an NBC Movie of the Week, a group of the fundamentalists, I believe led by Reverend Falwell, of the Moral Majority, began to send out letters. They sent out hundreds of thousands of letters to his followers saying not to watch my movie because I had written about a preacher who was in love; the preacher was married; it was an incidental story,

but the preacher was married and in love with another person. My film was broadcast on the same night as *Dallas*, with its incidents of incest, adultery, thievery and brutality. The Moral Majority never opposed *Dallas*, but decided I would be their whipping boy. I was Black, and I was female. Interestingly though, it seems that night when my film played, my film took the largest percentage of viewers.

Somehow I was not surprised that a book of mine or books of mine might be found to be undesirable by some and I know very well it had nothing to do with its literary merit. So, the same people who would say that my work should not be read passed over other books which might be explicit. A writer can be explicit without being informative. That sounds like I'm hedging, but I don't mean so. What I mean is, one can tell facts without once telling the truth, without once helping a reader understand why a thing is wrong, how a character felt, and how human beings survive.

So, I think that's what my work does. It tries to say this is what happens to human beings, these are some of the things which happen to human beings and these are how we can survive brutishness without becoming brutes, bestiality without becoming beasts, how one can be bullied without becoming bullies. That's what my work means to achieve.

Quite often teachers don't trust themselves to be creative, yet teachers and parents need creativity to achieve their aims. I mean the teacher has got to keep creativity at her/his finger tips. I think if the teacher admits that each time she/he goes into a classroom there is not only one way to do anything. That each work and each group of students ask for new ideas and new approaches. But, there are some teachers who feel themselves put upon by the chore of teaching and would rather bear the ills they have than fly to others that they know not of. They would rather teach the same way they learned in college. And, they will reach page forty-six on the fifth day whether the students understand, enjoyed, or hated the book.

- Graham:** As a writer, what do you expect the reader to bring to your text?
- Angelou:** I hope that the reader brings curiosity, enthusiasm, and a willingness to suspend disbelief. If the reader brings those three things, what she or he will get will be enormous. If a reader brings those qualities to my work I have been very well served and so has the reader.
- Graham:** Do you have any suggestions about ways that teachers can help cultivate that curiosity and enthusiasm and ability to suspend disbelief on the parts of students?
- Angelou:** I think if they're teaching a Black writer, any Black writer to Black students or White students, that the teacher would be well advised to ask the student to bring in some lyrics from different singers that they like. Let's say you like Whitney Houston, bring in a lyric and read the lyric aloud, bring in the lyrics of Lionel Ritchey or Ray Charles or Michael Jackson. Bring it in and let's hear what you've really been ingesting without knowing it, subconsciously and unconsciously you have been ingesting literature without knowing it. So, let's know it before we get into the real written literature.

## CHAPTER VII

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Censorship is a much more complex matter than just parents' complaining about the content of a literary text. At the center of censorship controversies is the question of how works of literature are taught. The parents in this case study expressed concern not only about what was seen as controversial matter in the text but also how the text was taught. When Mrs. Wilson discovered the content of the quiz, she immediately began to question the judgment of her son's teacher; therefore, she made the decision to read the book. It is important to realize that her reading of the book was motivated not by the book itself but by what she found to be shocking answers to the pop quiz. That is, because of her concern about one aspect of the way in which the book was taught, she read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* looking for objectionable content -- and, with that expectation, she found it. In other words, to a considerable extent, the way in which the book was taught to her son not only caused her to read it but also clearly shaped her perception of its content.

In addition, given their content and influence, publishers' guides dealing with the ways in which works of literature should be taught may make it more difficult to teach "controversial" books such as *I Know Why the Caged*

Bird Sings. That is, books that deal with social, political, or moral issues outside the mainstream may, in fact, make it more difficult to teach such "controversial" books if teachers follow their guidelines. Publishers, as we saw in chapter four, encourage the focus on surface detail that seemed to characterize Mrs. Milton's pedagogy. This focus on surface detail decontextualizes events and issues -- such as Maya's sexual abuse and explorations of sexuality -- rather than putting them into a meaningful context that would allow students to link them to their own experiences. By isolating such topics, a pedagogical approach that emphasizes isolated incidents highlights them and encourages censorship challenges.

### The Teaching of Literature

How should literature be taught? Can it be taught without avoiding controversial texts. As teachers we have the right to make choices about the literature included in our classes and the obligation to provide our students with meaningful learning opportunities related to their reading. However, we do need always to consider carefully the needs of our students and the climate of the local community when selecting texts and deciding how to use them.

Making these decision has become increasingly difficult during the last two decades as the nature of school-

community relations have changed. For example, I recall two cases during my career as a secondary English teacher in which parents of my students strongly objected to novels their children had selected for independent reading for my classes. The image of glaring parents sitting in wait for me to arrive at school on those two mornings is still fresh in my mind.

I remember my annoyance with both sets of parents for making judgments about books they had not read. In one instance, the parents were objecting to the book because they disapproved of the book's cover which displayed a goddess. They had not read the book, nor did they intend to. In the second circumstance, the mother had skimmed the book and objected to some of the language used by the author. In both cases, the students had selected the book on their own initiative. The parents were upset with me because I had the books available in my classroom.

Both of these complaints were resolved without much problem. However, the circumstances surrounding them made me aware of how differently I handled the concerns expressed by the parents than I might have had I not known these families well. As a lifelong resident of the community where I taught, I found talking with these parents easy. I understood that their motivation came from a fundamentalist Christian background and that they were doing what they felt

was best for their children. Although my own attitudes about the reading rights of children and adolescents differed substantially from those of these parents, we were able to talk comfortably with each other. In the case of the parents complaining about the cover of the book, the parents allowed their son to read the book. In the other case, the parents asked their son to discontinue reading the book. He obliged.

My teaching experience was vastly different, however, from that of the teachers at Coburn High School or of teachers at regional and urban schools all across our country. Most teachers do not know the parents of their students. In fact, at Coburn High School, one third of the students and one fifth of the faculty move each year. It would be difficult, if not impossible, in this type of community to develop close connections between teachers and parents.

One implication of this change in school-community relationships is that teachers must be highly flexible in their approaches to teaching a work. For example, three English teachers at Coburn High School, all of whom had taught *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* during the previous academic year, systematically varied their uses of the text across grade levels. The teachers believed that the book was appropriate for use with ninth-grade students; however,

they also believed that the book had a different impact on younger readers than on older students. These teachers agreed that the climate of a school is an important factor to consider in selecting books, and they felt that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was an appropriate book to use with their high school students in advanced placement, honors, and college placement courses.

Although the Wilsons expressed doubts that "prevailing community standards" would support the inclusion of the book in any grade level at the school, these teachers felt that the book provides an important literary contribution to their curriculum. Thus they were dismayed when they first learned at the Materials Review Board hearing of the quiz their colleague had given. Although the quiz given by Mrs. Milton seemed to follow the approach suggested in most of the anthologies and teachers' manuals reviewed in Chapter four of this study, these teachers believed that it obviously highlighted the most sensational aspects of chapters 31-36.

The concerns expressed in the Wilson's written request that the use of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* be reviewed are consistent with those frequently expressed by parents raising objections to the inclusion of this book in middle and secondary classrooms. As discussed in the case study, the parents raised objections to the language used by



Angelou in recounting the first sixteen years of her life. The Wilsons' complaint dealt only with those sections of the book that discussed the sexual abuse in Angelou's early life and with the section of the book in which she initiated sexual intercourse with a neighbor boy in an effort to explore her own sexual identity.

Throughout the pages that tell many of the important, though often graphically unpleasant and disturbing, details of Angelou's childhood and adolescence, Maya Angelou tells us in the interview in Chapter six that she attempted to go beyond her mere survival of her difficulties but to show how she used them as a way of strengthening her sense of self and determining her place in the world. Maya Angelou might have made this opening story of her life more delicate -- and more palatable to parents like the Wilsons -- had she omitted certain scenes from the work. But that would have given us her readers an incomplete, and therefore, false, picture of her life. To suppress those sections of the book, or to deny children access to them, would be just as great a falsehood.

In this study, I have attempted to show how a highly respected book can, because of the critical esteem it has received, come to be used in the classroom; thus, because of guides supplied for the teaching of it, it can be approached in class as a focus for factual tests rather than as a

source of insights; and how it can come to be seen by lay persons as inappropriate for study by American public school children. The case study explored in this dissertation presented one example of how such a complaint may be raised. However, the implications of this case are far more serious for teachers and teaching than they are for the book being challenged. As we as teachers make decisions about what books to include in our classes and how best to use them, we must ask ourselves questions such as:

- \* What are the literary merits of the text? Does the text have the potential for engaging the reader? Are there themes and issues in the text that will serve to expand the world of the reader?
- \* For what age, grade, and/or level is the text best suited? Why?
- \* If there are controversial sections in the book, what is the justification for using the book? How can these sections best be addressed with the students?
- \* What are the prevailing community standards in the school area? How will the selection of the book stand up to these standards? Should teachers attempt to expand the literary offerings in more conservative communities?

\* What is the responsibility of the school to communicate with parents when potentially controversial material is available to students? What are parents' responsibilities to be involved in supervising what their children are studying in school?

\* How is instruction influenced by the teaching methods suggested by publishers and professional organizations? What are the best sources to turn to for teaching ideas that will advance the opportunities of our students?

Education by its very nature brings different world views into contact with each other. In any setting where ideas are exchanged, there exists the potential for conflicts and disagreements about what is important and appropriate. As the case study and most of the challenges cited in chapter three indicate, censorship complaints are often resolved by making a text optional, rather than required, reading. Should they choose to exercise it, this "solution" gives parents great control over what their children read. As Angelou discussed in the interview in Chapter six, the home environment is the major contributing factor to the attitudes developed by young people. When parents choose to restrict the reading their sons and daughters engage in schools, they are closing the doors of

learning on their children. Educators must work to keep these doors open.

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## APPENDIX

This appendix is being prepared in order to record the process that I followed as I conducted my research. In the pages that follow, I shall discuss how I originally came to do this study, background information on each of the interviews involved in the study, and the approach I followed in the interviews and in gathering other data for the study.

The path that led me to my research topic concerning the censorship history of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has been long and varied. Not long into my graduate study, I was in attendance at a meeting at Radford University when Charles Wood, Executive Assistant to the President, asked me if I would be interested in working with Maya Angelou, whom, it was to be announced the next day, had accepted the position as Distinguished Visiting Professor at Radford University for the 1989-90 academic year.

After having been offered the opportunity to work with Angelou, I talked with my academic advisor at Virginia Tech and other members of my graduate committee concerning the possibility of doing a dissertation related to my work with Maya Angelou. Everyone seemed in agreement that the opportunity to work with this writer/actress/director/civil rights activist was too rare a chance to pass up.

Nearly one year after meeting Angelou when she was introduced at a press conference at Radford, I traveled to her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to conduct an interview with her in the hopes of having it published in a professional journal. I discovered, in reviewing my questions, that I was especially interested in the final question on my list which asked Angelou to reflect on the censorship history that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* had experienced during the twenty years since its publication. Because of time constraints during the interview, I decided to withhold this question for a future interview. The more I considered the idea of censorship issues related to Maya Angelou's book the more excited I became about the possibilities of conducting in-depth research on this topic.

About two weeks after this interview in November 1989, while attending the National Council of Teachers of English Adolescent Literature Assembly's (ALAN) wine and cheese social in Baltimore in November, 1989, a colleague from Virginia Commonwealth University, Dr. Leila Christenbury, introduced me to Dr. Margo Sacco, who had just replaced my Virginia colleague as chair of the ALAN Intellectual Freedom Committee. Leila explained to my new acquaintance, a faculty member in the education department at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, about my work with Maya Angelou and my increasing interest in doing a study related to the

ensorship problems of this autobiographical work. In the course of our conversation, we talked about many other things. However, in early March Dr. Kelly received a phone call from Dr. Sacco explaining that she remembered that a Virginia Tech graduate student was interested in going a dissertation on the censorship of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Dr. Sacco had been contacted by Sue Francis, Director of Instruction at Fort Coburn, for help in gathering information in defense of a December challenge of the book.

When I contacted Dr. Sacco, she eagerly volunteered to contact Ms. Johnson and introduce the idea of my study to her. She did this immediately, and within two hours of my first conversation with Dr. Sacco, I had spoken with Ms. Johnson and she had volunteered to consult with me concerning a letter to her superintendent asking for an appointment to discuss the possibility of conducting a study of the complaint against this book.

I telephoned Dr. Smith, superintendent of schools, approximately two weeks after sending my letter. After talking with me about my research interest, Dr. Smith asked if I could meet with him on April 19, 1990. At this meeting with Dr. Smith, Dr. East, associate superintendent, and Catherine Meador, chairperson of the school board, I was granted permission to conduct research on the censorship

challenge of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* at Coburn High School.

My experiences at Fort Coburn provided me with a rare opportunity to work in surroundings totally unfamiliar to me. Having spent all but four years of my life in the county in which I was born, I seldom find myself among strangers. Therefore, I was fairly uncertain about how my appointment with Dr. Smith would go. I discovered almost immediately that he and his two colleagues he had invited to the meeting were eager to hear of my research interest and in finding out more about how I intended to approach my work.

There was a consensus among the three that they were willing to allow me to conduct interviews and visit the school. In fact, I was stunned at how completely open the group seemed to be. I discovered later in an interview with Dr. Smith that the school system is frequently the site of doctoral research studies; many of their teachers and administrators actively pursue graduate degrees at a nearby university.

At the end of the meeting, Dr. Smith asked Dr. East to assist me in becoming acquainted with the school system, and Mrs. Meador invited me to follow her to her home in order to conduct my first interview with her in her capacity as chairperson of the school board. Within ninety minutes

after arriving on base, I felt at ease with the people with whom I was to work. This sense of feeling welcome in homes and at the school continued throughout my visits to the school system during the months of April and May.

During these multi-day visits to the school system, I conducted interviews with many individuals that helped me formulate the story that is included as the case study in chapter five.

### Interviews

Immediately following my meeting on April 19, 1990 with Dr. Smith, Dr. East, and Mrs. Meador, I was invited by Mrs. Meador to her home to conduct an interview with her. When we arrived at her home in the row of houses reserved for those officers with rank of Lieutenant Colonel or higher, she suggested that I might find it helpful to interview her three children as well. Therefore, the interview, which lasted approximately ninety minutes, was done with Mrs. Smith, her son, Charles, who was a senior at Coburn High School, her son, Bill, who was a freshman at Coburn High School, and her daughter, Lauren, who was a sixth grader at Brewster Middle School. Much of this interview focused on their perceptions of the school system. In addition, we talked about life on a military base. This family is unusual from most of the others that I met in that they

spent ten years outside the military before LTC Meador reenlisted when his older son was in elementary school. The family had spent five years at Fort Coburn, a long time by military standards, and was preparing to move as soon as the school year ended.

My first interview on the morning of April 20, 1990, was with Mrs. Judith Wilson, the mother who objected to her son reading *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Mrs. Wilson invited me to come to her home for the interview which lasted for approximately ninety minutes.

On April 20, 1990, I conducted an interview with Associate Superintendent, Dr. Ned East, that lasted for forty minutes. This interview, held in Dr. East's office, focused on gathering general background information about the school system and about Dr. East's role in the complaint brought by the Wilsons.

At Dr. East's suggestion, he arranged for me to meet with Ms. Patricia Atkinson, English department chairperson, and Brenda Gray, a ninth and tenth grade English teacher, during their planning period on April 20, 1990. This interview, which lasted for approximately seventy-five minutes, was held in Sue Francis' office. Most of this interview dealt with the questions concerning their use of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in their classes at Fort Coburn High School. Both teachers had used the book during



the 1989-90 academic year. In addition, the teachers talked about their perceptions of Mrs. Milton's work as a teacher and what they knew about the challenge brought against the novel by the Wilsons.

Both Mrs. Atkinson and Mrs. Gray suggested that I meet with a twelfth grade honors student, Harper Wickel. This fifteen minute interview was held on April 20, 1990 and focused on Harper's attitudes about the quality of education he felt he had received during his high school years at Fort Coburn and about his strong feelings that the Wilsons' censorship challenge was inappropriate.

On May 10, 1990, I met with LTC Robert Jones in his office at Fort Coburn. This interview lasted for fifty minutes and focused on LTC Jones' information concerning the ad hoc review committee's hearing of the Wilsons' complaint. LTC Jones served as the School Board representative to the committee.

A second interview with Mrs. Wilson was held on the morning of May 18, 1990 at her home. This interview was held to clarify and expand on the information Mrs. Wilson provided earlier.

After meeting with Mrs. Wilson, I met with her husband, LTC Wilson, at his office for forty-five minutes. This interview involved asking LTC Wilson to talk about his role

in bringing the challenge of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and about his feelings about censorship in general.

Later that day I met with Mrs. Wilson's son, Timmy, at their home. This interview lasted approximately sixty minutes and focused on Timmy's attitudes about his school and about his English class in particular.

My first interview on Friday, May 18, 1990, was with Dr. Charles Smith and lasted thirty minutes. This interview, held in Dr. Smith's office, focused on general information on the school division, his knowledge of the Wilsons' complaint, and his decision to uphold the recommendation of the review committee.

I met with the principal of Fort Coburn High School, Dr. Thomas Heslep, on May 18, 1990, in the conference room at the Superintendent's office. Dr. Heslep talked for about twenty minutes about his role in routing the Wilsons' through the proper channels for handling their complaint. He also gave some background information about Coreen Milton, the teacher in whose class *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was challenged.

After meeting with Dr. Heslep, I interviewed Ms. Bonnie Martin, coordinator of health education for the school system, in the Superintendent's conference room. During the forty-five minutes we talked, Ms. Martin discussed her role at the ad hoc review committee's hearing of the challenge of

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Ms. Martin had been asked to explain how topics of concern by the Wilsons actually paralleled what was presented in the school's family life curriculum.

Later that morning, I met with Margaret Richards, twelfth grade English teacher at Fort Coburn High School, for fifty minutes. Mrs. Richards talked about her frustration with the Wilsons' for bringing the complaint and with Mrs. Milton's handling of the book with her class. Mrs. Richards had taught the book during the first semester and had strong feelings about the appropriateness of the use of the book in their school.

On May 19, 1990, Mrs. Sue Francis drove out to meet with me where I was staying while working at Fort Coburn. This interview lasted for ninety minutes. Mrs. Francis talked about her role as curriculum specialist asked to defend the book's use in their school. In addition, she talked at length about her attitudes about the school system and the process used by the division to handle materials complaints.

The following afternoon, on May 20, 1990, I again met with Mrs. Catherine Meador, chairperson of the school board, to clarify some information from the previous interview. This interview lasted thirty-five minutes.

After meeting with Mrs. Meador, I met with John Neily, a student in Mrs. Milton's class, for approximately fifteen minutes. I also had the opportunity, after talking with John at his home, to interview his mother, Mrs. Julia Neily.

Another student from the class that I met with was Tammy Wood. This interview was held at her home on Saturday, May 20, 1990, and last thirty minutes.

My final interviews were conducted with Amy Robertson, a student in Mrs. Milton's class, and her mother, Mrs. Connie Robertson. These interviews were conducted separately on the lawn of the school. I talked with Amy for approximately fifteen minutes and with her mother for approximately thirty minutes. Amy talked about her knowledge of the censorship challenge and about what had been involved in her study of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in Mrs. Milton's class. Mrs. Robertson talked about her limited knowledge that the parent of a student had raised the complaint and about her strong feelings that the book was appropriate for use with students.

#### Accessibility to Teacher

Mrs. Coreen Milton, former ninth grade English teacher at Fort Coburn, left the school division at the Christmas break of 1989 to move with her husband to Japan, where he had been transferred with the military. I was able to

obtain a mailing address from the associate superintendent; however, three letters asking for her assistance in my research were unanswered.

### Interviewing Process

Work on this study has provided me with many opportunities to conduct interviews. Interviews with Maya Angelou in November, 1989, November, 1990, and April, 1991, along with the individual listed earlier in this appendix provided me with interesting opinions about this case study and about censorship issues of a wider nature.

My interviews with Maya Angelou were done in her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Although I feel quite comfortable with Angelou, I found that in an interview setting, I was more hesitant than during the many conversations I had with her during the semester I assisted in her work at Radford University. It was often difficult for me to get over the barrier of her fame to take the lead in the interview; therefore, she quite often pointed the direction the interviews took. Learning this during my first interview with her, I worked in preparation for the two following interviews to prepare specific questions that allowed her to expand in any direction she wished to take them, but that provided a vehicle through which I could move to asking for specific information and/or ideas. By the

third interview with Angelou, I was quite comfortable with her and the interview seemed more conversational in tone.

Interviews conducted at Fort Coburn were much different from those with Maya Angelou. After my initial meeting with Dr. Smith and his colleagues, I found that I quickly was put at ease in the military environment to which I was completely unfamiliar. The parents, teachers, administrators, and students involved in the case were extremely cordial to me throughout my work at their school. Although I generally think of myself as being fairly outgoing, I felt rather timid at the beginning of my work at Coburn High School. By the end of my first visit to the school system, however, I had been welcomed into three homes, had tea with the chair of the school board and coffee with Mrs. Wilson, and felt very much as though I had been accepted as a trustworthy educator who was interested in learning more about censorship issues.

Prior to traveling to Fort Coburn, I prepared interview questions for the parents, students in the class, teachers at the school, administrators, and individuals who had served on the review committee. These questions were taken to each interview and were available for reference to be sure that I felt I had gathered appropriate information; however, I did not use the questions to frame the interviews because I quickly discovered that all of the individuals

involved were eager to tell their stories of the events surrounding the Wilsons' complaint. This sort of story telling felt more comfortable to me and in the end allowed me to collect far more interesting information that I might have had I stayed with the question format. This format may also have been responsible for the acceptance I felt from the individuals with whom I talked.

One interesting component of my interviews involves the rather large differences in the level of comfort I felt with the educators, students, and mother vs. the level of comfort I felt with the male military personnel with whom I talked. I found that I felt far less comfortable with LTC Wilson, LTC Jones, and Dr. Heslep, who is a former officer and is currently active in the reserves. As transcripts indicate, these men, with the possible exception of LTC Jones, seemed much more reluctant to engage in conversation. Most of their remarks were in response to a direct question. All of these interviews were conducted in offices and the individuals sat behind a desk or removed from where they had suggested I sit.

As a research at Fort Coburn, I was completely unfamiliar with the base, the school division, and the people. I worked in my research to be a good listener and to convey my genuine interest in what I was being told in interviews. Several of my interviews took far longer than

they might have because I felt it important to listen to whatever stories these individuals felt helped explain their view of the Wilsons' challenge of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

#### Documents Involved in the Study

Mrs. Sue Francis and Dr. Ned East were extremely helpful in providing me with important information related to their school system and my study. Dr. East gave me a copy of a thirty-two page document from the base general that describes the school system and outlines its purpose and responsibilities. He also provided me with a copy of the strategic plan report conducted by the school division in an effort to establish long range goals.

Sue Francis provided me with a copy of the system's most recent self-evaluation report for the visiting committee from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. This information was helpful in providing demographic information. In addition, Ms. Francis provided me with a copy of her file on the complain against *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. This file included a memorandum from Ms. Francis asking Mrs. Milton to provide written information for the defense of the book, a copy of the Wilsons' written complain, a copy of their system's materials adoption policy, a copy of the guidelines for



filing a complaint against materials, and copies of the minutes of the review committee meetings.

### Literature Review

Information was gathered from a variety of sources in order to complete chapters two, three, and four of this study. Most of the reviews used in the first part of chapter two were found on file in the rare books room at the library at Wake Forest University, where Maya Angelou holds an appointment as Reynolds Chair. The Maya Angelou collection includes twenty-eight linear feet of materials that have been gathered since she first became recognized because of her work with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The second half of chapter two dealing with literary criticism written about the novel was prepared after extensive reading and library time.

Chapter three, which focuses on the censorship history of the book, required a great deal of assistance from librarians at the Coalition Against Censorship, the American Library Association, and the People for the American Way, and from a staff member at the National Council of Teachers of English. Individuals from these organizations sent copies of their files dealing with the censorship of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In December, 1990, I spent two days in the Washington, D.C. library of the People for the

American Way gathering articles from their huge file on censorship. These organizations were most helpful in my work.

Chapter four is by no means an exhaustive survey of how *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is dealt with in classrooms. I surveyed many publications from the National Council of Teachers of English and found several publications that used this novel as a focus for teaching ideas. The anthologies I surveyed were checked out from the Virginia Tech curriculum lab and included a variety of publishers popular in school systems in Virginia.

#### Impact of the Study on the Researcher

My work on this study during the past twenty-one months has been challenging, rewarding, and, at times, frustrating. I entered into the study never having given much thought to censorship issues. Now nearing the end of my work, I am, quite frankly, still rather confused about my thinking on the differences between censorship and selection. It grates against everything I believe about teachers that we are so often challenged in our choices of the literature we choose to teach in our classes. At the same time, when teachers make bad decisions like that of Mrs. Milton, we should indeed be questioned about our work.

The issues in this study are very clear to me. I believe that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was an appropriate book for use in the class Mrs. Milton taught. The cross section of students at Fort Coburn and the variety of experiences that these students have had seem to support the English department's belief that the novel was an important book for their students to study. As I come to the conclusion of this part of my work on this study, I find myself eager to continue to explore several of the issues in this study. This study provides an important look at one of the ways in which books come to be challenged. It seems that this case study can serve as an excellent example to teachers of the importance we need to place on the decisions we make as we plan for our teaching. Furthermore, I am quite interested in the differences in the way in which teaching ideas are presented to teachers by publishers. This issue, discussed in chapter four, is one that I will continue to explore.

Finally, work on this research study has convinced me that I can get from point A to point B, even with many, many side trips, both good and horrible, along the way. I am eager to take this lesson with me as I begin my work as an English educator.

## VITA

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### EDUCATION

Doctor of Education in English Education, Virginia Tech,  
August, 1991

Master of Science in Counseling, Radford College, 1977

Bachelor of Science in Journalism, Radford College, 1976

Fellowship to the Southwest Virginia Writing Project,  
Virginia Tech, 1988

Fellowship to the James R. Stokely Institute for Liberal  
Arts Education, The University of Tennessee, 1984

Additional Undergraduate and Graduate Work in English,  
Radford University, 1981

### TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia. Department of  
Curriculum and Instruction, August 1988-present.  
Responsibilities include team teaching senior-level  
methods course; leading student teaching seminar;  
assisting in teaching adolescent literature; and  
assisting in junior-level methods course.

Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia. Associate Director,  
Southwest Virginia Writing Project, 1989-present.  
Responsibilities include assisting the director in  
facilitating a workshop experience for teachers from  
Southwest Virginia on the theory and practice of  
teaching writing and being a writer.

Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia. Internship, Radford University English Department, September-December 1989. Responsibilities included assisting Distinguished Visiting Professor Maya Angelou in her courses, Philosophy of Liberation and Black American Literature.

New River Community College, Dublin, Virginia. Adjunct Instructor, September 1985-June 1988. Responsibilities included teaching college-level writing courses and oral communication courses.

#### **TEACHING IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Montgomery County Public Schools, Shawsville High School, Shawsville, Virginia. August 1981-June 1988. Responsibilities included teaching ninth and eleventh grade English.

#### **SUPERVISION OF FIELD PLACEMENT**

Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia. Graduate Assistant, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, August 1988-present. Responsibilities have included supervision of thirty-eight middle and secondary English education student teachers and sixty student aides during their internships in schools.

#### **MEMBERSHIPS IN PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

National Council of Teachers of English  
 Assembly on Literature for Adolescents  
 Conference on English Education  
 Assembly on American Literature  
 Virginia Association of Teachers of English  
 International Reading Association  
 Virginia State Reading Association  
 New River Valley Reading Council  
 Virginia Conference of English Educators  
 Phi Delta Kappa  
 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development  
 Special Interest Group Network for Adolescent  
 Literature (IRA)