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UNDERSTANDING

*I Know Why
the Caged Bird
Sings*

A STUDENT CASEBOOK TO
ISSUES, SOURCES, AND
HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

Joanne Megna-Wallace

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Grade 9 Up-A look at the historical context of Angelou's autobiography. In addition to one chapter of literary criticism, overviews of race relations in the South, school segregation, the African-American church, the African-American family, sexual abuse, and censorship attempts against the book are discussed. Primary sources include letters, newspaper reports, and documents. The writing is dry, but the convenient package of individual writings makes up for it. Each chapter provides a list of bibliographic sources, "Suggested Readings," "Study Questions," and "Topics for Written or Oral Exploration." This book will be used primarily by researchers but some chapters could be used as springboards for discussion.

Karen Hoth, Marathon Middle/High School, FL

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Review

"[A] welcome addition to a growing series of studies devoted solely to enhancing the reader's comprehension of a single author's work....[a]n extremely useful tool for teachers and students....[t]his study not only expands our understanding of Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, but it allows us to judge the work on its own merits."-Journal of African American History

"Megna-Wallace does an admirable job of putting Angelou's first autobiography in historical context, using the socio-political atmosphere surrounding I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings as a means of explaining Angelou's and others' actions as characters in the book...well written and beneficial."-VOYA

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About the Author

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Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was nominated for a National Book Award, yet in 1995 it topped the list of books most frequently challenged in schools and libraries. This interdisciplinary collection of documents and commentary explores the historical and social context, as well as the contemporary issues and controversies raised by Angelou's autobiography. A rich resource for teachers and students, it will help to enhance the reader's understanding of the historical and social forces that shaped Maya Angelou's experience?race relations in the pre-civil rights South, segregated schools, the African American church, and the African American family. It also examines the issue of childhood sexual abuse, the inclusion of which has been the basis of most of the challenges to the autobiography, and the issue of the work's censorship since its publication.

This rich resource begins with a literary analysis of the structure and dramatic elements of Angelou's autobiography, as well as discussion of the genre of autobiography. Subsequent chapters include introductions and documents that provide insight into the topics of race relations, lynchings, and racial etiquette; the education of African Americans in the South in the 1930s (particularly county training schools like the one Angelou attended); the otherworldliness, emotion, and music of the African American church; African American women as nurturers, and the effect of frequent migration on children such as Angelou; information from the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect which puts the sexual abuse Angelou experiences in a broader context; and many news stories regarding censorship attempts on *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Documents in the work include newspaper articles, interviews and first-person narratives, government documents, excerpts from books and journals, and legal statutes. Study questions, ideas for project topics, and suggested readings conclude each chapter and further enhance the usefulness of this interdisciplinary research tool for students and teachers.

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Features

- Understanding *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* A Student Casebook to Issues Sources and Historical Documents

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Excellent adjunct reading for *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

By Ella McCrystle

This book is chock-full of wonderful resources, offering a diverse array of articles and essays covering the major themes of Maya Angelou's first autobiography. From its historical perspective through race relations,

child sexual abuse, the Black Church, the family, segregation in the South and in schools, sources are diverse, ranging from court cases to newspaper articles to the US Government. All are neatly and easily arranged in a book that is not meant to replace reading the original work, but certainly makes your second or fiftieth read much deeper and thoughtful. Highly recommended for adults who want to study the importance of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

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