THE MAYA CHARACTER

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1928, Maya Angelou began her literary career as a poet, but is best known for her highly-acclaimed autobiography, of which five volumes have been published so far. The first, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, was published in 1970; the fifth, All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes, is now available in Australia. Jackie Kay talked to her about her life, her work, and her politics.

I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings was first published in the States by Random House; it wasn't published overseas until 15 years later. I would be very interested to know exactly what was the response when it was first published in 1970?

Well, within a week it was on the bestseller list, the national bestseller list, and it stayed there for some time.

When did you start writing?

Almost immediately. I mean my papers are at Lake Forrest University in North Carolina, letters from folks and important papers. Now I have papers, poems and prose I wrote at nine years old, which had been sent to Lake Forrest. Admittedly it may have been the worst poetry west of the Rockies, but there is something, you know.

I was interested to read that you refer to the Maya in your autobiographies as the “Maya character”, is that right? You think of her as a “Maya character”, not exactly the same as yourself? How difficult is it to maintain this distance?

Yes, very good. I didn't read that in any article. I don't believe anyone has ever asked me that. The person I was yesterday is not exactly the same as the person I am today, understandably. So, if that is so, then the person I write about 20 years ago knew only that much. Now, writing today, about somebody 20 years ago, one has to impose a kind of distance, otherwise I will imbue that person with the wisdom I have today.

That is the difficulty, in really writing autobiography as literature. You have to keep that distance and not even imply that this person knew what she was doing from the vantage point of 1987. No-one in the world has ever asked me that. The difficulty is probably the horn, the unicorn horn, of the dilemma from which I spin, to try to keep that distance. And what is lively, and I've never thought about this before, is that in writing poetry I can write from today. I can admit that I have now got wrinkles and now got this, and I now know better than I knew 20 years ago.

I think I am the only serious writer who has chosen the autobiographical form as the main form to carry my work, my expression. I pray that in each book I am getting closer to finding the mystery of really manipulating and being manipulated by this medium, to pulling it open, stretching it.

Memory is a fascinating thing, memory and time. You must be constantly thinking about how we edit memory, and that whole subject.

Well, it's fascinating. In truth, when I set out to write, I choose some sort of “every-human-being” emotions, themes. So I will choose generosity, meanness of spirit, romantic love, loss of love, familiar love, ambition, greed, hate. And then I will set myself back in that time and try to see what incidents contained that particular theme. I may find seven. Some of them are too dramatic, I can't write them without being melodramatic, you understand, so I say no, I won't write that one. Some are too weak. But I find one and I think, aha, this one. Now let me enchant myself back to that day or that month, or those months, so I can remember everything about that one incident. In that way the work is episodic, you see, but if I'm lucky and work hard it should flow so that it looks like just a story being told.

Protest is integral to your work and your life. Can you tell us what first politicised you? Or do you believe that black Americans have no other choice than to be fighters?

Well, there is no choice if you want to stay alive, otherwise you ally yourself with death and the end of action. Nothing in life stops, nothing. I don't know. I think we’re all politicised and I couldn’t say what was the first incident. It starts so early and it’s so consistent.

So when you say you don’t tolerate fools, that applies to you when you were young as well, doesn't it?

You see, what will happen, unfortunately, if we tolerate the fool, a person who really acts foolishly, will be that we ally ourselves with them. Sometimes a person will insult you, and if you respond he says: “Oh, I was just teasing.” Now quite often the person really wants you dead, maybe just for four minutes, and then he would resuscitate you. But what he means by those vicious remarks is die. Well, as soon as I hear it from anybody anywhere I say: “Stop it, not me, this is my life, this is all I've got.”

In the 1960s, you worked alongside Dr. Martin Luther King as a civil rights campaigner. I’d just like to hear more about that period from your point of view.

The period was absolutely intoxicating. The streets were filled with people who were on their toes, figuratively, with alertness. There was a promise in the air, like a delicious aroma of a wonderful soup being cooked in the kitchen on a cold day when you are hungry. It really appeared as if we were going to
overcome racism, sexism, violence, hate.

So while it was strident, it was hopeful and it was as if there was a heaven in the air. It was a wonderful time.

And what has happened to the civil rights movement?

Well, it was derailed, understandably, by those, to quote Miss Margaret Walker: "who tower over us omnisciently and laugh".

Angela Davis was recently in London, invited by the ANC. What do you remember of the time when she was on America's Ten Most Wanted People's List?

Well, naturally, a number of people were involved in keeping her secure, because we knew it was a put-up job, just one more way to kill one of the leaders. After she was apprehended, Margaret Burnam, who is now a black judge, but was then a young lawyer and a sister friend of Angela's, got me in to see her. The way I could go in person was to be credited as a legal adviser. She was in a "facility" which was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright—pink and blue nestled in the hills—what artistry! So I asked her once: "Here you are, in this pretty palace, and what do you think?" She said: "Girl, the joint is the joint." And when she finally won her freedom, I interviewed her.

There was a popular television series in the States; the host gave it up for a year and six of us took it over. I could interview anyone I wanted for those six. So I interviewed Angela in her sister's kitchen. We just sat over coffee and biscuits and it was really sweet.

In August there was a rally in London to commemorate the 1956 South African women's march to Pretoria. That was just a year after Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of that bus in 1955. Do you feel you have a responsibility as an artist to record our heroes and heroines, our Rosa Parks and Ruby Doris figures?

Well, let me come back before I answer that, please. One of the challenges for any radical (and I use the word to mean revolutionary, reformer) is to remain human and not take on the trappings of the opposition and become dehumanised. That's very important. That's one of the gifts that black American women have, and try to share; always the humanity, the sweetness. And under oppression, kicking butt and taking names, they are still laughing sometimes and hugging. Very important.

Everything we do, I mean I don't know how broad that landscape is, is an action of recording. The impetus to record, I don't know whether that comes from the artists or whether artists are the recorder. That's two different things and yet they serve the same end. If I set out with the idea that I ought to record, then maybe my artistry suffers; if I set out with... I don't know. It's a very complex question. I do know that people live in direct relation to the heroes and she-roes they have.

In Caged Bird, you tell us that, as a young girl, you took responsibility for your rapist's death— which was the reason you became mute. Child abuse is now talked about more than it was then. Do you think this changes anything?

Well, more often than not, the victim, especially if you are a member of a depressed class or gender or sex, is loaded with the guilt for that action against herself or himself. It is always so. The young girl today is no less made to feel guilty or feels no less guilty than I did 40 years ago. And I know, I know too well, that the girls feel as much involved in the crime as the criminal.
When you were younger you never thought of white people as being real people; you thought that if you put your finger through them it would come out the other end. I find that fascinating and funny because it had such a strong spark of survival in it.

Well, they didn’t act like people in my little town in the South, they were so mean, you know. People laughed and people cried and people hugged. They would just, you know, stand on the back porch or the front porch and sing and people loved children and they’d: “Come here girl” and hug you all the time. Well, they didn’t do anything like that, so I thought they weren’t people.

In a recent article you describe a celebration you attended for four new black British MPs. You said the solidarity between black and white people gave you an incredible high. How important do you feel alliances with white people are?

We will all survive together or we will die together; it is imperative that we make alliances, sincere alliances. But, you see, the difficulty is, only equals make friends; any other relationship is out of bounds. So, if the white thinks he is better than the black or the Asian, then the relationship can never be peer, then there can never be any friendship. If the black woman thinks she’s better than the white woman there can never be any serious meeting point.

In the early 70s, Amiri Baraka wrote such things as the woman’s role was to be feminine and submissive. How far do you think black male attitudes have changed since then, since the Black Panther movement?

That was an aberration which took place and black women for a while said: “Okay, we’ll see what you do with this,” and it didn’t happen. Black women said: “No, babe, we don’t take it like that”, and we don’t, we haven’t. We were sold together, bought together on the African continent, lay spoon fashion in the filthy hatches of slave ships together, and got up on the auction block together, stood together, sold again together, got up before sunrise, got up after sunset together, worked those cane fields and cotton fields, and the mines and all that together. Please, we are equal.

In your latest book, All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes, you describe being in Ghana at the age of 33. You say: “We had come home, and if home was not what we had expected, never mind, our need for belonging allowed us to ignore the obvious and to create real places or even illusory places, befitting our imagination.” This reminds me of a V.S. Naipaul story where the narrator says: “All landscapes are in the end only in the imagination; to be faced with the reality is to start again.”

You can never go home again, but the truth is you can never leave home, so it’s all right. And yet it is innate in human nature to try to go home again, and it may in fact be what life is all about: getting back to home, back to death, and then out of death and back to life.

Many black British people today possess a kind of myth of return. They think that by returning to Africa, once they set foot on African soil, they will suddenly become whole again.

Everything will be all right!

Don’t you think that’s dangerous?

I think it’s important, though it’s good to have that, and it’s good to go back. A part of that is true; you find that mores, customs, attitudes, melodies, rhythms which you thought came from Jamaica, or even from Britain, actually had their origins on that continent. And somehow you are made more strong. But you also find out, ah, I really am an American, I really am an African as well. But I am a new type of African, I am also an American, or I am also British, or I am also Jamaican. I’ve found the source of so many things that I had not known to be other than black American. Or even that I thought had originated due to slavery, you see, and that is encouraging and uplifting.

At the beginning of this interview, you said it is important to maintain the distance between who you are now and who you were then. Does the language you use in Gather Together to describe an encounter with two lesbians (“lecherous old hags”, “dirty things”) relate to how you felt then? Has your attitude towards lesbians changed over the years?

Oh, yes, of course, but I mean I was 18 and they were old! They were 28. To me, I thought, well, at 18 you think anybody over 23 is a crone. I think I wouldn’t have thought that, I wouldn’t have been so mean, had I not sensed that they wanted to take advantage of me. And I felt that about anybody, anybody who wanted to take advantage of me. That has not changed; it has polished a bit. Had they been two men, or two anybody, who wanted to outwit me, I would have been the same. Even then I had an aunt who was gay, who was a lesbian, and who I loved, and who helped me raise my son, Guy.

When you were young, you had a fear of being a lesbian yourself, didn’t you?

Yes, I thought if I was going to be a lesbian I was going to live this sad life that was written about in The Well of Loneliness.

Loneliness and more loneliness!

I told my mum when I thought I was going to be a lesbian. I sat on the side of her bed and told her my vulva was growing. My mum said: “What, no, get the dictionary”, and she said: “This is very natural.” And so I was quite relieved. But about 10 years later, my son Guy came to me, he was about 10, and he said: “Mum, I want to ask you about something. What do you think about lesbians?” I said: “Lesbians, Jesus, I don’t.” He says: “Well, I’m going to tell you something: Aunt Lottie is a lesbian but if you don’t change the way you treat her I’ll Never speak to you again!” Obviously, I support any group which means to survive and make a better world.

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