

A Song Flung Up to Heaven, by Maya Angelou

reviewed by [Wayne A. Holst](#) in the [June 19, 2002](#) issue

Rise and be prepared to move on and ever on," is the continuing theme of Maya Angelou's autobiographical cycle, and the phrase succinctly sums up the story of her life. The first of this series of six splendid testaments, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1970, accounted for her first 17 years. That memoir met with much acclaim and popular success. Succeeding volumes included *The Heart of a Woman* (1981) and *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (1993). Angelou writes autobiography as literature, telling a story of tragedy and triumph, well stated and clearly stamped by her own unique blend of Afro-Americanism.

In *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, an account of her activities during the '60s, a certain resignation replaces the contentiousness found in at least some of the books in the series. "At that point in the '60s," she writes, "American blacks were acting as if they believed 'A man lived. A man loved. A man tried and a man died and that was all there was to that.' Sometimes, it is hard to believe, in retrospect, that much has really changed. And yet . . ."

Those born before that tumultuous decade when civil rights activists Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were assassinated while still in their prime will treasure the author's personal assessments of the times and her commitment to the dreams of both men. Angelou returned from four years in Africa to work for Malcolm X, only to learn soon after her arrival that he had been killed. King also died just a few weeks after she had agreed to help him organize his poor people's march. She supported what she believed both men ultimately sought to accomplish and did not see their goals at odds.

Those born in the wake of those times, seeing them only through the eyes of history, are offered a unique perspective into the causes of the devastating riots that broke out in many American cities in the late '60s. Angelou writes about her 1965 discoveries as a door-to-door consumer surveyor in Watts a few years before

everything came unstuck. It was not hard for her to understand why people burned their own homes and looted community stores. The poignant beauty of Angelou's writing enhances rather than masks the candor with which she addresses the racial crisis through which America was passing.

The book is more of a summing up than a breaking of new ground. Much of Angelou's wisdom has already appeared earlier in the series. For example, she repeats here--using slightly different wording and context--the advice her grandmother gave her as a child, earlier reported in *Nothing for My Journey*: "Sister, change everything you don't like about your life. But when you come to a thing you can't change, then change the way you think about it.

"You'll see it new, and maybe a new way to change it."

On the whole, Angelou's book is a worthy addition to what she originally set out to accomplish: to examine that quality in the human spirit that makes it continue to rise despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. What has served Angelou well is now bestowed upon us. Her autobiographies are statements of profound faith and hope.