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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou

Summary

Sent by their mother to live with their devout, self-sufficient grandmother in a small Southern town, Maya and her brother, Bailey, endure the ache of abandonment and the prejudice of the local “powhitetrash.” At eight years old and back at her mother’s side in St. Louis, Maya is attacked by a man many times her age—and has to live with the consequences for a lifetime.

Years later, in San Francisco, Maya learns about love for herself and the kindness of others, her own strong spirit, and the ideas of great authors (“I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare”) will allow her to be free instead of imprisoned.

Poetic and powerful, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a modern American classic that will touch hearts and change minds for as long as people read.

Discussion Questions

1. The memoir opens with a provocative refrain: "What you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay ... " What do you think this passage says about Ritie's sense of herself? How does she feel about her place in the world? How does she keep her identity intact?
2. Upon seeing her mother for the first time after years of separation, Ritie describes her as "a hurricane in its perfect power." What do you think about Ritie's relationship with her mother? How does it compare to her relationship with her grandmother, "Momma"?
3. The author writes, "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat." What do you make of the author's portrayal of race? How do Ritie and her family cope with the racial tension that permeates their lives?
4. Throughout the book, Ritie struggles with feelings that she is "bad" and "sinful, " as her thoughts echo the admonitions of her strict religious upbringing. What does she learn at the end of the memoir about right and wrong?
5. What is the significance of the title as it relates to Ritie's self-imposed muteness?

Summary and Discussion Questions from the publisher.