Many consider Maya Angelou (1928–2014) a U.S. national treasure. A writer, activist, filmmaker, actor, and lecturer well into her eighties, Angelou transcended her humble upbringing in deeply racist Arkansas to create a vast body of work that helped to change the landscape of American culture. After a traumatic childhood event that she would later chronicle in her game-changing memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou became extraordinarily gifted in arts and literature and earned a scholarship to a San Francisco high school. As a teen, she became the first African-American female cable car conductor in San Francisco. She became a mom at sixteen and married a Greek aspiring
musician, flouting the existing laws forbidding interracial marriage. Angelou studied dance with legendary choreographer Alvin Ailey and became a staple on the calypso music and dance scene as a performer. She also toured Europe with a production of the opera *Porgy and Bess*.

After meeting novelist John Oliver Killens in 1959, she joined the Harlem Writers Guild and published her first written work. She became a civil rights activist and worked alongside Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Angelou would go on to write thirty-six books, earning the honor of both being on the banned books list and holding the record for the longest-running nonfiction book on the *New York Times*’s bestseller list.

In addition to roles in producing, writing, and directing film and television, Angelou became the first African-American woman to pen a screenplay that was actually made into
a film, the Pulitzer Prize-nominated *Georgia, Georgia*. She won three Grammys for her spoken word albums, served on two presidential committees, and became the first female poet to compose and recite a poem for a presidential inauguration (President Bill Clinton’s in 1993). Showered with accolades at the end of her life, Angelou was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor, by President Barack Obama in 2010. Angelou was fittingly recognized in her lifetime for her work that opened America’s hearts and minds.