

# Mrs. Flowers

from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Autobiography by Maya Angelou

## Apply the Model

BEFORE READING

DURING READING

AFTER READING

## Preview the Model

### At a Glance

#### Guided Reading: Reading Model

- Reading Level: Moderate
- Difficulty Consideration: Vocabulary
- Ease Factor: Sympathetic character

### Objectives

This lesson will enable students to

- use reading skills such as distinguishing fact from opinion
- define *autobiography* and recognize that Maya Angelou is telling a true story about her own life
- describe the literary accomplishments of Maya Angelou and explain the historical significance of her writing

### Launch the Lesson

Before students read "Mrs. Flowers," have them think about an adult who had a positive influence on their sense of self-worth. How was that adult influential? What qualities in that adult would they like to imitate? Write their answers on the board. Then tell them that the selection they are about to read describes an adult that the author admires. As they read, have them compare her qualities with the ones you have written on the board.

GUIDED READING

### Build Background

**Historical Context** The excerpt "Mrs. Flowers" takes place in Stamps, Arkansas, in the 1930s, during segregation. "Mrs. Flowers" tells of Maya Angelou's upbringing and her experience with a mentor.

**Reader's Context** Who has had a big effect on your life? What did he or she do? How did he or she affect you?

### Set Purpose

Skim the first paragraph to preview the narrator's attitude toward Mrs. Flowers. Based on Build Background and your preview, what do you predict might happen in the story?

### Analyze Literature

**Autobiography** An **autobiography** is the story of a person's life, written by that person. The writer conveys his or her story through facts, opinions, and tone. **Tone** is the writer's attitude toward the subject. As you read, pay attention to the tone Angelou creates.

### Use Reading Skills

**Distinguish Fact from Opinion** A fact can be proven true. An opinion expresses an attitude or desire. Create a chart to help distinguish fact from opinion as you read. If the evidence to support a fact is not in the text, list what are most likely facts and how they could be proven.

#### Fact or Opinion Chart

<b>Fact:</b> Mrs. Flowers didn't belong to our church.	<b>Opinion:</b> Momma had a strange relationship with Mrs. Flowers.
<b>Proof:</b> Could check church records	<b>Support:</b> Mrs. Flowers called Momma "Mrs. Henderson"; Momma called Mrs. Flowers "Sister Flowers."

### Preview Vocabulary

**taut** (tot) *adj.*, tense, tight

**be•nign** (bi nīn') *adj.*, harmless

**per•sist•ent•ly** (pə sis' tənt lē) *adv.*, repeatedly

**com•pe•tent•ly** (kām' pə tənt lē) *adv.*, capably

**in•fuse** (in fyūs') *v.*, introduce gradually; cause to penetrate; instill



### Meet the Author

**Maya Angelou** was born Marguerite Johnson on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. She spent much of her childhood with her grandmother in rural Stamps, Arkansas, which is the setting for the excerpt. "Mrs. Flowers" tells the story of how Maya Angelou

gained self-confidence and a love of literature. Angelou's written works include autobiographies, poetry, and essays. Much of her work deals with both economic and racial oppression.

MRS. FLOWERS 281

## Words in Use

### Preview Vocabulary

**taut**, 282  
**benign**, 283  
**persistently**, 283  
**competently**, 285  
**infuse**, 286

### Selection Words

**aristocrat**, 282  
**unceremonious**, 283  
**gait**, 283  
**leered**, 287  
**cascading**, 288

### Teaching Words

**excerpt**, 281  
**segregation**, 281  
**mentor**, 281  
**oppression**, 281

## KEY TERMS

**AUTOBIOGRAPHY**, 281  
**tone**, 281  
**narrative**, 289  
**characterization**, 289

## Teach the Model

### Summary

In the black neighborhood of Stamps, Arkansas, where Maya Angelou grew up, Mrs. Bertha Flowers was the most elegant, refined, and well-educated resident. When she invited Angelou to her home one day, the young girl was beside herself. As they visited, Mrs. Flowers said things that changed Angelou's life. Maya Angelou still credits Mrs. Flowers with awakening in her a sense of the importance of spoken, as well as written, language.



The Mirrors & Windows questions at the end

of this selection focus on the theme of the power of literature. Before reading, ask students to think about the books and poems they have read. Have any struck a chord in them? Why might some books and poems have a more widespread effect on people than others?

### Independent Reading

Direct interested students to the following titles mentioned in "Mrs. Flowers":

*Beowulf* by Anonymous  
*Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens  
*A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens

### Analyze Literature

**Autobiography** *Answer:* It takes place in Stamps, Arkansas, which was divided along racial lines. **A**

## Apply the Model

BEFORE READING

DURING READING

AFTER READING

# Mrs. Flowers

from  
*I Know  
Why  
the  
Caged  
Bird  
Sings*  
Autobiography  
by Maya  
Angelou



*Blue Woman with Mirror*,  
1954. Hyacinth Manning.  
Private collection.

### DURING READING

#### Analyze Literature

**Autobiography** What does this tell you about where the narrative takes place? **A**

**taut** (tot) *adj.*, tense, tight

Mrs. Bertha Flowers was the aristocrat of Black Stamps. She had the grace of control to appear warm in the coolest weather, and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her. She was thin without the taut look of wiry people, and her printed voile<sup>1</sup>

1. **voile.** Light, cotton fabric

282

## Program Resources

### Planning and Assessment

*Program Planning Guide*, Selection Lesson Plan  
*E-Lesson Planner*  
*Assessment Guide*, Lesson Test  
*ExamView*

### Technology Tools

*Interactive Student Text on CD*  
*Visual Teaching Package*  
*Audio Library*  
[mirrorsandwindows.com](http://mirrorsandwindows.com)

### Meeting the Standards

*Nonfiction: Unit 3*, Guided Reading, pp. 19–26

### Differentiating Instruction

*Advanced Students*, Author Study, pp. 15–16



## She was our side's answer to the richest white woman in town.

dresses and flowered hats were as right for her as denim overalls for a farmer. She was our side's answer to the richest white woman in town.

Her skin was a rich black that would have peeled like a plum if snagged, but then no one would have thought of getting close enough to Mrs. Flowers to ruffle her dress, let alone snag her skin. She didn't encourage familiarity. She wore gloves too.

B

I don't think I ever saw Mrs. Flowers laugh, but she smiled often. A slow widening of her thin black lips to show even, small white teeth, then the slow effortless closing. When she chose to smile on me, I always wanted to thank her. The action was so graceful and inclusively<sup>2</sup> **benign**.

She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be.

C

Momma had a strange relationship with her. Most often when she passed on the road in front of the Store, she spoke to Momma in that soft yet carrying voice, "Good day, Mrs. Henderson." Momma responded with "How you, Sister Flowers?"

Mrs. Flowers didn't belong to our church, nor was she Momma's familiar. Why on earth did she insist on calling her Sister Flowers? Shame made me want to hide my face. Mrs. Flowers deserved better than to be called Sister. Then, Momma left out the verb. Why not ask, "How *are* you, Mrs. Flowers?" With the unbalanced passion of the young, I hated her for showing her ignorance to Mrs. Flowers. It didn't occur to me for many years that they were as alike as sisters, separated only by formal education.

Although I was upset, neither of the women was in the least shaken by what I thought an unceremonious greeting. Mrs. Flowers would continue her easy gait up the hill to her little bungalow, and Momma kept on shelling peas or doing whatever had brought her to the front porch.

Occasionally, though, Mrs. Flowers would drift off the road and down to the Store and Momma would say to me, "Sister, you go on and play." As I left I would hear the beginning of an intimate conversation. Momma **persistently** using the wrong verb, or none at all.

"Brother and Sister Wilcox is sho'ly the meanest—" "Is,"

**be • nign** (bi nin') *adj.*,  
harmless

### DURING READING

**Make Connections**  
How does Marguerite's reaction to Momma's greeting affect your feelings about the characters?

D

**per • sist • ent • ly**  
(per sis' tənt lē) *adv.*,  
repeatedly

### Use Reading Strategies

**Visualize** Have students take a moment to visualize Mrs. Bertha Flowers. Ask: "What details can you add to Maya Angelou's description that would be consistent with it? For example, what kind of shoes might she be wearing? How might she hold her head? What is her posture like?"

B

### Analyze Literature

**Characteristics** Ask students to recall a person they have known who could be called a "gentlewoman" or a "gentleman." Ask: "What characteristics set him or her apart from others? Do good manners earn a person this title, or does it require a certain attitude toward other people?"

C

### Make Connections

*Answer:* Some students might relate to being embarrassed by an adult's actions, while others might think that Marguerite is an ungrateful child. Her attitude might make them feel sorry for Momma.

D

2. **inclusively.** In a way that includes everyone and everything

## Vocabulary Skills

### Standard English and Dialect

Point out to students the difference between Standard English and English dialects. Remind them that while dialects do not necessarily observe patterns of Standard English, they do follow a specific traceable system. Explain that when words or phrases within a certain dialect are unfamiliar or difficult to understand, an examination of context might help bring to light their meaning.

EXAMPLE:

Dialect: "How you, Sister Flowers?"

Standard English: "How are you, Sister Flowers?"

Context clue: Momma is responding to Mrs. Flowers salutation, "Good day, Mrs. Henderson."

## Teach the Model

### Use Reading Skills

#### Distinguish Fact from Opinion

*Answer:* Mrs. Flowers had a slow dragging smile, she made Marguerite's name sound beautiful, the looks given were "age-group," and the statement "My name was beautiful when she said it" are all opinions. **A**

### More About the Author

Tell students how Maya Angelou got her name. Her brother Bailey, who was about a year and a half older than Marguerite, nicknamed her Maya when they were very young. Later, she took the professional name Maya Angelou, using a form of her first husband's last name, Angelos. **B**

### TEACHING NOTE

If you give students definitions and context sentences, they might find it easier to understand unfamiliar words in the story.

*familiarity*—friendly closeness, 283

*The easy familiarity between them was clear from the way they laughed together.*

*merging*—joining; combining, 284

*Due to construction, traffic is merging from four lanes into two.*

*incessantly*—constantly, 284

*It's difficult to have a conversation with someone who talks incessantly.*



### DURING READING

#### Use Reading Skills Distinguish Fact from Opinion

What opinions are stated in this paragraph?

**A**

**B**

Momma? "Is"? Oh, please, not "is," Momma, for two or more. But they talked, and from the side of the building where I waited for the ground to open up and swallow me, I heard the soft-voiced Mrs. Flowers and the textured voice of my grandmother merging and melting. They were interrupted from time to time by giggles that must have come from Mrs. Flowers (Momma never giggled in her life). Then she was gone.

She appealed to me because she was like people I had never met personally. Like women in English novels who walked the moors<sup>3</sup> (whatever they were) with their loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance. Like the women who sat in front of roaring fireplaces, drinking tea incessantly from silver trays full of scones and crumpets. Women who walked over the "heath" and read morocco-bound books and had two last names divided by a hyphen. It would be safe to say that she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself.

She acted just as refined<sup>4</sup> as whitefolks in the movies and books and she was more beautiful, for none of them could have come near that warm color without looking gray by comparison.

It was fortunate that I never saw her in the company of powwhitefolks.<sup>5</sup> For since they tend to think of their whiteness as an evenizer, I'm certain that I would have had to hear her spoken to commonly as Bertha, and my image of her would have been shattered like the unmendable Humpty-Dumpty.

One summer afternoon, sweet-milk fresh in my memory, she stopped at the Store to buy provisions. Another Negro woman of her health and age would have been expected to carry the paper sacks home in one hand, but Momma said, "Sister Flowers, I'll send Bailey up to your house with these things."

She smiled that slow dragging smile, "Thank you, Mrs. Henderson. I'd prefer Marguerite, though." My name was beautiful when she said it. "I've been meaning to talk to her, anyway." They gave each other age-group looks.

Momma said, "Well, that's all right then. Sister, go and change your dress. You going to Sister Flowers's."

The chifforobe<sup>6</sup> was a maze. What on earth did one put on to go to Mrs. Flowers' house? I knew I shouldn't put on a Sunday dress. It might be sacrilegious.<sup>7</sup> Certainly not a house dress, since I was

**3. moors.** Open, grassy areas

**4. refined.** Polite; with elegant manners

**5. powwhitefolks.** Poor white families

**6. chifforobe.** Closet for clothing

**7. sacrilegious.** Showing disrespect for something holy or very important

## Differentiated Instruction

### Auditory Learning

Guide students toward the realization that they employ a teen dialect of their own. Ask them to pinpoint words and expressions that are particular to their "teen-speak" and might be difficult for younger or older people to understand. Request that student volunteers write classroom-generated

examples of teen dialect on the board. Then moderate a whole-class discussion of differences in the tone, purpose, and effect of each example and its Standard English equivalent.

## Teach the Model

### Analyze Literature

**Characterization** Ask students what this statement reveals about Maya's self-esteem. Ask: "Is she confident?" **C**

### Analyze Literature

**Setting** In this time and place, most people could not afford store-bought clothes. It was common for women to do a lot of sewing. **D**

### Use Reading Strategies

**Make Inferences** *Answer:* She is proud of her work. Also, she believes that Marguerite should not feel ashamed about taking off her clothes in front of Mrs. Flowers. **E**

already wearing a fresh one. I chose a school dress, naturally. It was formal without suggesting that going to Mrs. Flowers' house was equivalent to attending church.

I trusted myself back into the Store.

"Now, don't you look nice," I had chosen the right thing, for **C** once.

"Mrs. Henderson, you make most of the children's clothes, don't you?" **D**

"Yes, ma'am. Sure do. Store-bought clothes ain't hardly worth the thread it take to stitch them."

"I'll say you do a lovely job, though, so neat. That dress looks professional."

Momma was enjoying the seldom-received compliments. Since everyone we knew (except Mrs. Flowers, of course) could sew competently, praise was rarely handed out for the commonly practiced craft.

"I try, with the help of the Lord, Sister Flowers, to finish the inside just like I does the outside. Come here, Sister."

I had buttoned up the collar and tied the belt, apronlike, in back. Momma told me to turn around. With one hand she pulled the strings and the belt fell free at both sides of my waist. Then her large hands were at my neck, opening the button loops. I was terrified. What was happening?

"Take it off, Sister." She had her hands on the hem of the dress.

"I don't need to see the inside, Mrs. Henderson, I can tell..." But the dress was over my head and my arms were stuck in the sleeves. Momma said, "That'll do. See here, Sister Flowers, I French-seams around the armholes." Through the cloth film, I saw the shadow approach. "That makes it last longer. Children these days would bust out of sheet-metal clothes. They so rough."

"That is a very good job, Mrs. Henderson. You should be proud. You can put your dress back on, Marguerite."

"No ma'am. Pride is a sin. And 'cording to the Good Book, it goeth before a fall."

"That's right. So the Bible says. It's a good thing to keep in mind."

I wouldn't look at either of them. Momma hadn't thought that taking off my dress in front of Mrs. Flowers would kill me stone dead. If I had refused, she would have thought I was trying to be "womanish" and might have remembered St. Louis. Mrs. Flowers had known that I would be embarrassed and that was even worse.

**com • pe • tent • ly**  
(kām' pə tənt lē) *adv.*,  
*capably*

#### DURING READING

**Use Reading Strategies**  
**Make Inferences** What do Momma's actions tell you about her? **E**

MRS. FLOWERS 285

## Writing Skills

### Personal Letter

Remind students that a personal letter is a form of personal writing that you share with a friend, acquaintance, or family member. As such, its style is less formal than that of a business letter.

In the following example, select the form that is appropriate for a personal letter.

1. Salutation:
  - a. Dear Mrs. Hasan:
  - b. Hi Uncle Bobo, (*personal*)
2. Complimentary close:
  - a. Your favorite niece, (*personal*)
  - b. Sincerely,

## Teach the Model

### ➤ More About the Author

Earlier in her autobiography, Maya Angelou tells of a traumatic childhood event that occurred when she was about seven and a half. Afterward, she became mute for about five years. She was able to speak but chose not to. Apparently, Mrs. Flowers has an idea to get her to talk again. **A**

### Use Reading Skills

#### Distinguish Fact from Opinion

*Answer:* Angelou's memorization of Mrs. Flowers's words may be a fact. However, it can't be proven that Mrs. Flowers actually said them. **B**



#### DURING READING

##### Use Reading Skills Distinguish Fact from Opinion

What in this paragraph is most likely fact? Can this fact be proven? **B**

**in•fuse** (in fyūs') *v.*,  
introduce gradually, cause to  
penetrate; instill

I picked up the groceries and went out to wait in the hot sunshine. It would be fitting if I got a sunstroke and died before they came outside. Just dropped dead on the slanting porch.

There was a little path beside the rocky road, and Mrs. Flowers walked in front swinging her arms and picking her way over the stones.

**A** She said, without turning her head, to me, "I hear you're doing very good school work, Marguerite, but that it's all written. The teachers report that they have trouble getting you to talk in class." We passed the triangular farm on our left and the path widened to allow us to walk together. I hung back in the separate unasked and unanswerable questions.

"Come and walk along with me, Marguerite." I couldn't have refused even if I wanted to. She pronounced my name so nicely. Or more correctly, she spoke each word with such clarity that I was certain a foreigner who didn't understand English could have understood her.

"Now no one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals." That was a totally new idea to me, and I would need time to think about it.

"Your grandmother says you read a lot. Every chance you get. That's good, but not good enough. Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning."

I memorized the part about the human voice infusing words. It seemed so valid and poetic.

She said she was going to give me some books and that I not only must read them, I must read them aloud. She suggested that I try to make a sentence sound in as many different ways as possible.

"I'll accept no excuse if you return a book to me that has been badly handled." My imagination boggled at the punishment I would deserve if in fact I did abuse a book of Mrs. Flowers'. Death would be too kind and brief.

The odors in the house surprised me. Somehow I had never connected Mrs. Flowers with food or eating or any other common experience of common people. There must have been an outhouse, too, but my mind never recorded it.

The sweet scent of vanilla had met us as she opened the door.

"I made tea cookies this morning. You see, I had planned to

## Differentiated Instruction

### Enrichment

Some students might enjoy researching the literary works mentioned here, *Beowulf* and *Oliver Twist*. They can read all or part of these works and report their findings to the class. You might suggest that they find out why Angelou mentions a cup of mead in reference to *Beowulf* and a cup of tea and milk in reference to *Oliver Twist*.

### Reading Proficiency

Some students might benefit from working with a partner to review the selection. As they reread each paragraph, partners can discuss its meaning and determine its main idea.

## Teach the Model

### Analyze Literature

**Autobiography** *Answer:* She uses a tone that expresses awe and wonder. **C**

### Literary Connection

**A Tale of Two Cities** *A Tale of Two Cities* is a historical novel by Charles Dickens that played against the backdrop of the French Revolution. Its opening lines, read by Mrs. Flowers, and its closing lines, quoted by Angelou later, are among the most famous lines in English literature. **D**

### Use Reading Strategies

**Visualize** Many readers, young and old alike, breeze over or entirely skip descriptive portions of stories, claiming that they slow down or interrupt the action. However, if these readers are able to tap into their own sensory experiences, the importance of description in story writing and its connection to plot becomes more apparent and palpable. This section of the story is packed with imagery and sensory details. In order to foster appreciation of their significance to the character development of Mrs. Flowers and Marguerite (and thereby the plot), ask students to recall specific scents, sights, or sounds that made an impression on them.

invite you for cookies and lemonade so we could have this little chat. The lemonade is in the icebox.”

It followed that Mrs. Flowers would have ice on an ordinary day, when most families in our town bought ice late on Saturdays only a few times during the summer to be used in the wooden ice-cream freezers.

She took the bags from me and disappeared through the kitchen door. I looked around the room that I had never in my wildest fantasies imagined I would see. Browned photographs leered or threatened from the walls and the white, freshly done curtains pushed against themselves and against the wind. I wanted to gobble up the room entire and take it to Bailey, who would help me analyze and enjoy it.

“Have a seat, Marguerite. Over there by the table.” She carried a platter covered with a tea towel. Although she warned that she hadn’t tried her hand at baking sweets for some time, I was certain that like everything else about her the cookies would be perfect.

They were flat round wafers, slightly browned on the edges and butter-yellow in the center. With the cold lemonade they were sufficient for childhood’s lifelong diet. Remembering my manners, I took nice little lady-like bites off the edges. She said she had made them expressly for me and that she had a few in the kitchen that I could take home to my brother. So I jammed one whole cake in my mouth and the rough crumbs scratched the insides of my jaws, and if I hadn’t had to swallow, it would have been a dream come true.

As I ate she began the first of what we later called “my lessons in living.” She said that I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy.<sup>8</sup> That some people, unable to go to school were more educated and even more intelligent than college professors. She encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations.

When I finished the cookies she brushed off the table and brought a thick, small book from the bookcase. I had read *A Tale of Two Cities*<sup>9</sup> and found it up to my standards as a romantic novel. She opened the first page and I heard poetry for the first time in my life. **D**

“It was the best of times and the worst of times...” Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing. I wanted to look at the pages. Were they the same that I had

#### DURING READING

##### Literary Element

**Autobiography** What sort of tone does Angelou use when describing things associated with Mrs. Flowers?

**8. illiteracy.** Inability to read or write

**9. A Tale of Two Cities.** Novel by Charles Dickens about English people who get caught up in the French Revolution

## Speaking & Listening Skills

### Oral Tradition

Allow students the opportunity to appreciate “Mrs. Flowers” in the way that Marguerite learned to appreciate literature—by telling it aloud and listening to the power of its words. Pair students, and have them read to each other parts of the story that are particularly poignant to them. Remind them to employ pacing, expression, and tone to aid their partners in grasping the import of their selections.

## Teach the Model

### Use Reading Skills

#### Distinguish Fact from Opinion

Is this statement an opinion or a universal truth? Responses will vary. Some students might say that the statement is an opinion, since it cannot be scientifically proven. Others might believe it to be a universal truth that could be proven with a comprehensive poll of children and adults. Students should provide reasons to back up their statements. **A**



You may want to ask students to write a

journal entry or quick write, or divide students into discussion groups or lead a whole-class discussion about this question.

*Answer:* Students should give concrete and specific text-related personal reasons why they were affected by written and spoken language. Explanation for how texts in general can affect readers may include greater understanding of self and others, different ways of looking at issues, awareness of cultures, and ways to solve problems.



read? Or were there notes, music, lined on the pages, as in a hymn book? Her sounds began cascading gently. I knew from listening to a thousand preachers that she was nearing the end of her reading, and I hadn't really heard, heard to understand, a single word.

"How do you like that?"

It occurred to me that she expected a response. The sweet vanilla flavor was still on my tongue and her reading was a wonder in my ears. I had to speak.

I said, "Yes, ma'am." It was the least I could do, but it was the most also.

"There's one more thing. Take this book of poems and memorize one for me. Next time you pay me a visit, I want you to recite."

I have tried often to search behind the sophistication of years for the enchantment I so easily found in those gifts. The essence<sup>10</sup> escapes but its aura<sup>11</sup> remains. To be allowed, no, invited, into the private lives of strangers, and to share their joys and fears, was a chance to exchange the Southern bitter wormwood for a cup of mead with Beowulf<sup>12</sup> or a hot cup of tea and milk with Oliver Twist.<sup>13</sup> When I said aloud, "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done..." tears of love filled my eyes at my selflessness.

On that first day, I ran down the hill and into the road (few cars ever came along it) and had the good sense to stop running before I reached the Store.

I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson's grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson.

**A** Childhood's logic never asks to be proved (all conclusions are absolute). I didn't question why Mrs. Flowers had singled me out for attention, nor did it occur to me that Momma might have asked her to give me a little talking to. All I cared about was that she had made tea cookies for *me* and read to *me* from her favorite book. It was enough to prove that she liked me. ♣

**10. essence.** Most important quality of something that makes it what it is; something in its purest form

**11. aura.** Distinctive quality or atmosphere coming from a person, place, or thing

**12. Beowulf.** Famous character from literature

**13. Oliver Twist.** Famous character from literature



Marguerite is very moved by the language of poetry and novels and by the lives of characters in books. What books or poems have had that effect on you? In general, how can the reading of novels and poems expand and affect the reader's world?

### TEACHING NOTE

#### Ask the Author

Place students in pairs, and ask them to brainstorm questions for a hypothetical interview with a young Maya Angelou. Direct them to focus their queries on how her experience with the spoken word, both in literature and in the oral tradition of her community, has altered her perception of herself and the world around her. Model a

question such as: "How has the spoken word affected the way you write?" Then challenge them to answer the questions as Marguerite might. Finally, invite pairs to choose the role of either interviewer or Marguerite and conduct mock interviews for a class audience.