

Celebrated American author Maya Angelou dead at 86

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USPA News - World-renowned poet, author and civil rights activist Maya Angelou, whose 1969 book "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" became one of the first autobiographies by an African-American woman to become a bestseller, died at her home in North Carolina on Wednesday. She was 86. Angelou died before 8 a.m. local time on Wednesday at her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, according to her son, Guy Johnson, who said the beloved author passed away quietly.

"The family is extremely appreciative of the time we had with her and we know that she is looking down upon us with love," he said. No cause of death was immediately disclosed by the family, but it happened just days after she wrote on the social networking website Facebook that "an unexpected medical emergency" had forced her to cancel her upcoming appearance at the Major League Baseball's Civil Rights Game ceremony in Houston, Texas. "Her family is extremely grateful that her ascension was not belabored by a loss of acuity or comprehension," her son Guy Johnson said in Wednesday's brief statement. "She lived a life as a teacher, activist, artist and human being. She was a warrior for equality, tolerance and peace." Angelou, one of America's most celebrated writers and poets, worked with civil rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the 1960s. King's assassination, which happened on her birthday in 1968, left her devastated and she soon began writing the critically acclaimed "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." In the book, and in subsequent volumes, Angelou talks about her childhood in the Jim Crow South. And though not always strictly factual or literally true, Angelou described a difficult and endangered childhood during which she suffered from economic hardship and sexual abuse while shuttling back and forth between relatives in the North and South. President Barack Obama, who honored Angelou with the Medal of Freedom in 2011, praised the world-renowned author as "one of the brightest lights of our time". "A childhood of suffering and abuse actually drove her to stop speaking - but the voice she found helped generations of Americans find their rainbow amidst the clouds, and inspired the rest of us to be our best selves," he said. Obama added: "Like so many others, Michelle and I will always cherish the time we were privileged to spend with Maya. With a kind word and a strong embrace, she had the ability to remind us that we are all God's children; that we all have something to offer. And while Maya's day may be done, we take comfort in knowing that her song will continue, 'flung up to heaven' - and we celebrate the dawn that Maya Angelou helped bring." Former U.S. President Bill Clinton also mourned Angelou's passing, calling her "a national treasure" and a beloved friend. "With Maya Angelou's passing, America has lost a national treasure; and Hillary and I, a beloved friend. The poems and stories she wrote and read to us in her commanding voice were gifts of wisdom and wit, courage and grace," he said. Angelou also read her poem "On the Pulse of the Morning" at Clinton's inauguration in 1993, which Clinton said he is still grateful for. "I will always be grateful for her electrifying reading of 'On the Pulse of Morning' at my first inaugural, and even more for all the years of friendship that followed," he said on Wednesday. Former U.S. President George W. Bush said he and his wife Laura were also saddened to learn of Angelou's death. "She was among the most talented writers of our time," he said. "Her words inspired peace and equality and enriched the culture of our country. We are grateful for the work she leaves behind, and we wish her the peace she always sought." Angelou had also been friends with anti-apartheid icon Nelson Mandela after they first met in the Egyptian capital of Cairo in February 1962 and spent a lot of time together. When Mandela died in December, Angelou wrote: "No sun outlasts its sunset, but will rise again, and bring the dawn." The Nelson Mandela Foundation said on Wednesday that they were "deeply moved" by Angelou's "His Day is Done" poem in December. "Our archives real that today in 1986 Mr. Mandela watched, in prison, the film version of her work 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings'. May she rest in peace. Hamba Kahle (farewell)," the foundation said. Also on Wednesday, the Smithsonian said it will install a painting of Angelou at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. on Thursday. The work, by artist Ross Rossin and unveiled during a ceremony attended by Angelou in April, will be on view through June 12 in the first-floor gallery where the museum memorializes the passing and celebrates the lives of people represented in the museum's collection.

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