

## *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

### Discussion Questions

The purpose of these questions is to provide an overview of the autobiography, to allow a return to the essential questions, and to lead to the “grand conversation.”

### **Grand Conversation**

The teacher (or group leader) encourages students to join in a discussion of the text. The teacher records topics and issues discussed. At the conclusion of the grand conversation, the teacher looks for any patterns that appear in the recorded responses and reports them to the group. This strategy encourages and shares responses, expansion, inquiry and exploration of the text.

The teacher may begin: “What did you think of the story?” Teacher probes; students contribute. Everyone's contributions are accepted. The discussion is freewheeling and is not guided by the teacher. The teacher asks for clarification, elaboration, and explanation and keeps a record of the main ideas discussed. The teacher shares the record with the group for closure. The leader's role is to facilitate and encourage comments to rise to a higher level of thinking.

From: <http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/actbank/tgrandcon.htm>

Suggested questions:

1. How do the experiences of Marguerite Johnson produce a Maya Angelou?
2. Identify characters who influenced Maya Angelou.
3. 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?

4. 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."
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. What is the significance of the title?
8. What lessons can be learned about life, not just Black life in the South?
9. What are examples of adversity—for her and others—in Maya Angelou's story and examples of ways they coped with them.
10. Discuss point of view in the autobiography.
11. What are examples of themes in the novel?