

∞ READING ROUND ∞

The Writers Who Inspire Me

Deanne Heron

THE WRITERS WHO inspire me most are two strong Black women: American writer and poet Maya Angelou and Jamaican poet, writer, and educator Louise Bennett-Coverley, better known in Jamaica as Miss Lou.

Now these two women had difficult lives but didn't let that stop them from achieving their best and motivating others, like me. They have helped me on my journey to learn and share my knowledge with my writing and in many other ways.

Now Maya Angelou was born on the 4th April 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, United States. She died on the 28th May 2014 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, United States, aged eighty-six, leaving an amazing legacy.

She was a singer; civil rights activist. She published seven autobiographies, three books of essays, several books of poetry and took part in plays, films, and television shows. My most-loved of her poems is called 'Still I Rise', which reflects on the black struggles for recognition, and I also love her book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

And she says:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

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Although I had a complex and difficult childhood, like most children of my age who were left in the Caribbean with family members by parents who came to Britain after World War Two to find a better life, I did not suffer the horrific things Maya Angelou did in her childhood. She shares her experiences in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* which she wrote in 1969. And she said that ‘The honorary duty of a human being is to love.’ I believe this is so very true. Showing unconditional love to others is key for holistic growth.

Louise Bennett-Coverley, or Miss Lou, was born on the 7th September 1919 in the capital of Jamaica, Kingston, where I was born. She died on the 26th July 2006 in Toronto, Canada.

On my arrival in Britain in the 1960s, as a frightened little girl, I suffered serious racism, mainly at school, where my accent was constantly mocked and laughed at. In order to fit in, I had to lose my Jamaican accent overnight. When I left home as a teenager, determined that I would succeed at any cost, Miss Lou motivated me to learn to speak Jamaican patois again and also write my short humorous stories partly in patois, as well as some of my poetry. I have lovely nostalgic memories of sitting on my aunt’s veranda in the evenings with my cousins listening to Miss Lou on the radio; the days before television.

Miss Lou’s poem ‘Colonization in Reverse’, written in 1966, is one of my favourites, telling her version of the story of Jamaican people coming to England after the Second World War, the reverse of Europeans going to the Caribbean islands and colonising them. And I’m going to just share this in Jamaican patois:

Wat a joyful news, miss Mattie,
I feel like me heart gwine burs
Jamaica people colonizin
Englan in reverse.