

April and the Poets

In addition to my duties at the reference desk, I order books for the Dewey decimal number range of the 800s, which covers poetry, plays, and books on literature, which makes April especially notable for me. Despite being deemed “the cruelest” by poet T.S. Eliot in “The Waste Land,” April saw the births of two great poets, Maya Angelou and William Shakespeare. (Eliot himself was born in September, so maybe he was partial to fall and winter.)

Born on April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, Maya Angelou is the author of the autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and many poems, including her Pulitzer Prize nominated book of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die*. In 1993, she read her poem “On the Pulse of the Morning” at Bill Clinton’s first presidential inauguration, making her the first poet to read at an inauguration since Robert Frost at John F. Kennedy’s. Along with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou has written many other autobiographies, each time interpreting her life in a different way. In addition to poetry and autobiography, Angelou has also written books for children and acted in movies, including the miniseries *Roots*, and has been a singer and dancer, and was active in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Angelou turns 80 this year.

Although nearly everyone knows William Shakespeare’s name, historians are uncertain when he was born, exactly what he looked like, or the correct spelling of his last name. Only two reliable portraits of Shakespeare exist, the first being itself a copy of a now missing picture, and the second of Shakespeare at the end of his life. As to the spelling of his name, Shakespeare’s last name, according to one count, was spelled 4,000 different ways in his lifetime, all coming out to approximately “Shakespeare.” Regarding his birth, only the date of Shakespeare’s christening, not his the date of his birth, was recorded – April 26, 1564. Traditionally, children of the Elizabethan era were baptized three days after their birth, which is one of the reasons scholars choose April 23 to mark Shakespeare’s birthday. The other reason is a neat symmetry: Shakespeare died fifty-two years later to the day, on April 23, 1616, after writing 38 plays, 154 sonnets, and five longish poems. (Check out Sonnet 130 for one of the most unusual love poems ever!)

You can find works by and about Maya Angelou, Shakespeare, and T.S. Eliot in the Bartholomew County Public Library. In addition to their writings, we have multimedia by all three: audio recordings of Ms. Angelou’s poetry, and several movies she has acted in; movie adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays (I recommend Kenneth Branagh’s 1989 version of *Henry V* on DVD, which, along with featuring one of the best speeches ever, is also notable for having Ian Holm – Bilbo, from the *Lord of the Rings* movies – and future Batman Christian Bale in small roles); and a video and CD of the musical *Cats*, based on Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*. I hope you enjoy what you find!

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