Meet
Maya Angelou
(b. 1928)

Author of
New Directions

Maya Angelou’s life is a story of overcoming hardships and succeeding. She was raised in rural, segregated Arkansas. In 1940, she moved to San Francisco, where she worked as a waitress, cook, and dancer. In the 1950s, Angelou went to New York, where she discovered her talents as a writer.

“I am human, and nothing human can be alien to me.” Angelou wrote these words, and she lives by them. She went on to become a poet, a playwright, an editor, an actress, a director, and a teacher. Her many literary honors include a nomination for a Pulitzer Prize. She also read one of her poems at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration in January 1993.

BACKGROUND FOR THE STORY

Limited Options
In the early 1900s, job opportunities were limited for many Americans—particularly African Americans like Annie Johnson, the main character in “New Directions.” At that time, the most common jobs available for African American women were cleaning, child care, and general household labor. For women who had families, caring for someone else’s household was an extra burden.

DID YOU KNOW?
Angelou’s first name is Marguerite. Her brother gave her the nickname Maya when she was a child.
In 1903 the late Mrs. Annie Johnson of Arkansas found herself with two toddling sons, very little money, a slight ability to read and add simple numbers. To this picture add a disastrous marriage and the burdensome fact that Mrs. Johnson was a Negro.

When she told her husband, Mr. William Johnson, of her dissatisfaction with their marriage, he conceded that he too found it to be less than he expected, and had been secretly hoping to leave and study religion. He added that he thought God was calling him not only to preach but to do so in Enid, Oklahoma. He did not tell her that he knew a minister in Enid with whom he could study and who had a friendly, unmarried daughter. They parted amicably.

Annie keeping the one-room house and William taking most of the cash to carry himself to Oklahoma.

Annie, over six feet tall, big-boned, decided that she would not go to work as a domestic and leave her “precious babes” to anyone else’s care. There was no possibility of being hired at the town’s cotton gin or lumber mill, but maybe there was a way to make the two factories work for her. In her words, “I looked up the road I was going and back the way I come, and since I wasn’t satisfied, I
decided to step off the road and cut me a new path.” She told herself that she wasn’t a fancy cook but that she could “mix groceries well enough to scare hungry away and from starving a man.”

She made her plans meticulously and in secret. One early evening to see if she was ready, she placed stones in two five-gallon pails and carried them three miles to the cotton gin. She rested a little, and then, discarding some rocks, she walked in the darkness to the saw mill five miles farther along the dirt road. On her way back to her little house and her babies, she dumped the remaining rocks along the path.

That same night she worked into the early hours boiling chicken and frying ham. She made dough and filled the rolled-out pastry with meat. At last she went to sleep.

The next morning she left her house carrying the meat pies, lard, an iron brazier,\(^1\) and coals for a fire. Just before lunch she appeared in an empty lot behind the cotton gin. As the dinner noon bell rang, she dropped the savors into boiling fat and the aroma rose and floated over to the workers who spilled out of the gin, covered with white lint, looking like specters.

Most workers had brought their lunches of pinto beans and biscuits or crackers, onions and cans of sardines, but they were tempted by the hot meat pies which Annie ladled out of the fat. She wrapped them in newspapers, which soaked up the grease, and offered them for sale at a nickel each. Although business was slow, those first days Annie was determined. She balanced her appearances between the two hours of activity.

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\(^1\) brazier (brāˈ zher) noun. A brazier is a pan or bowl that holds burning coals or charcoal as a heat source for cooking. In some braziers, food is placed on a grill directly over the flames. Johnson uses hers to heat a pot of boiling fat so that she can deep-fry her pies.

Vocabulary
meticulously (mē tıkˈ yōō lās lō) adv. very carefully and precisely

Reading Skill
Make Predictions
What prediction do you make about Annie’s plans? Why?

As the dinner noon bell rang, she dropped the savors into boiling fat and the aroma rose...

Critical Viewing
Judging from this photograph, why do you think Annie Johnson felt that lumber workers would want to buy her pies? [Draw Conclusions]
So, on Monday if she offered hot fresh pies at the cotton gin and sold the remaining cooled-down pies at the lumber mill for three cents, then on Tuesday she went first to the lumber mill presenting fresh, just-cooked pies as the lumbermen covered in sawdust emerged from the mill.

For the next few years, on balmy spring days, blistering summer noons, and cold, wet, and wintry middays, Annie never disappointed her customers, who could count on seeing the tall, brown-skin woman bent over her brazier, carefully turning the meat pies. When she felt certain that the workers had become dependent on her, she built a stall between the two hives of industry and let the men run to her for their lunchtime provisions.

She had indeed stepped from the road which seemed to have been chosen for her and cut herself a brand-new path. In years that stall became a store where customers could buy cheese, meal, syrup, cookies, candy, writing tablets, pickles, canned goods, fresh fruit, soft drinks, coal, oil, and leather soles for worn-out shoes.

Each of us has the right and the responsibility to assess the roads which lie ahead, and those over which we have traveled, and if the future road looms ominous or unpromising, and the roads back uninviting, then we need to gather our resolve and, carrying only the necessary baggage, step off that road into another direction. If the new choice is also unpleasant, without embarrassment, we must be ready to change that as well.

**Critical Thinking**

1. **Respond:** What do you admire about Annie Johnson? Explain.

2. (a) Why does Annie Johnson have to find a source of income?  
   (b) Why does she decide against a job as a domestic?  
   (c) Infer: What does Annie Johnson’s decision suggest about the kind of mother she is?

3. (a) What does Annie Johnson decide to do to earn a living?  
   (b) Evaluate: How would you describe Annie Johnson’s abilities as a businessperson? Explain your response.

4. (a) What details in the text show that Annie Johnson’s business grows?  
   (b) Draw Conclusions: What does her achievement suggest about the human spirit in general?

**Can truth change?**

(a) How does the truth of Annie’s life change?  
(b) Do you think taking a “new direction” in life is worth the risk of failure? Explain.