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Wonder Woman

Maya Angelou gives a rare interview to Essence about her new book, in which she shares a private story to help women

By Katti Gray

Our cherished author says she has written her latest book for you. **Letter to My Daughter** (Random House, \$25), her twenty-ninth tome, is dedicated to women. Maya Angelou's destiny was to bear one child, her son, Guy Johnston, but the divine overlay of her life also casts her as a mother figure to a wide array of daughters, many of them strangers whose names and faces she will never know. "I have thousands of daughters," says Angelou, who turned 80 last April.

Among the myriad tales of survival and glory in her own life, in *Letter*, the author gives us a first-ever published telling of an abusive relationship she endured with boyfriend Mark when she was just 19 years old. "I was brutalized and almost killed by him," she says, recounting the time when he accused her of cheating. "He beat me so severely, then put me in his car and drove me to Betty Lou's Chicken Shack [in San Francisco]." There, he put her on public display, screaming. "This is what you do to a lying, cheating so-and-so."

Over the course of three horrifying days, he put a razor to Angelou's throat, then to his, she says now. "I was praying whenever I became conscious—praying because I couldn't move."

When Angelou's mother got word of her daughter's abduction, she rounded up a group of men to locate her child. You can read about Angelou's rescue in *Letter*, but don't expect the other essays to offer much in the way of instruction. This is by design. "In this book, I don't say what I learned from the lesson, I just offer the lesson," Angelou says. "I know women are bright and clever."

Courage is the book's connective tissue. "I encourage courage because it is the most important of all the virtues," says Angelou, who divides her time between Winston-Salem, North Carolina and Harlem. "Without courage, you can be nothing consistently. Courage is what let's you accomplish everything."