

Song of My Life: A Biography of Margaret Walker. 2014. 9781626743908. Carolyn J. Brown. Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2014. 144 pages

When I saw a biography on Margaret Walker on NetGalley I requested it and am so glad I did. The book is short, richly illustrated, and fascinating. It is appropriate for young adult readers. Her dissertation adviser directed her to the songs of slavery, negro spirituals, and other folk songs which would come to inform her novel. By early 1965 she had the first draft finished, and after a few months of serious revising and cutting she obtained her degree--and a contract from Houghton Mifflin. Margaret Walker left Chicago in September 1939 and took a train, alone, to Iowa City, Iowa, to continue her education at the university there. The University of Iowa's famed Iowa Writers' Workshop officially began in 1936, and it was to this new program that Margaret was destined. The last ten years of Margaret Walker's life parallels the final decade of the twentieth century, and, perhaps appropriately, the last two published works of Margaret's career during this time are not new works but collections that look back--essays and speeches that reflect and consider both personal memories as well as major themes and ideas of the twentieth century. Song of My Life reintroduces Margaret Walker to readers by telling her story, one that many can relate to as she overcame certain obstacles related to race, gender, and poverty. Walker was born in 1915 in Birmingham, Alabama, to two parents who prized education above all else. Obtaining that education was not easy for either her parents or herself, but Walker went on to earn both her master's and doctorate. from the University of Iowa. Margaret Walker's unpublished autobiography provided me with the raw material I needed to write my book; however, I soon discovered while reading it that she repeats herself often and tells many versions of the same events and stories. The versions are never drastically different; she may add a detail in one version that is missing in another.