

A black and white close-up portrait of Rita Dove. She has short, dark hair with bangs and is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. She is wearing large hoop earrings and a necklace. The background is blurred, showing other people.

# Smooth moves

Rita Dove  
reads from  
dance-flavored  
poetry at  
Piedmont  
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The Daily Progress Entertainment Magazine

# Extra

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# American Smooth

*poems*



RITA DOVE

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By JANE DUNLAP NORRIS  
Daily Progress staff writer

Rita Dove's latest passion helps her keep her feet on the ground — until it's time to lift them again to step, twist, rock and turn.

Listeners who head to Piedmont Virginia Community College on Tuesday evening to hear her read from "American Smooth," her eighth volume of poetry, will hear verses pulsing with dance energy.

The Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia and former U.S. poet laureate has been at home for years in the world of words and, as a soprano and cellist, the rhythms of music. But when she discovered ballroom dancing and found a comprehensive expression on the dance floor — something both forceful and graceful, strong and fluid — "it was heaven," Dove said with a lilt in her voice.

Uniting mind and movement in dance has been a precious gift for the poet. Her interest literally began with a gift — one that brightened a tough time.

Six or seven days after a September 1998 lightning fire scoured the upper floor of the home Dove shares with her

husband, Fred Viebahn, neighbors called the couple away from sorting through sooty, sodden belongings and presented tickets to a dance, saying, "Get out of the ashes," Dove said.

"It was a reminder that there were beautiful things in life," Dove said.

The evening lifted their spirits and sparked a new interest in ballroom dancing. Dove and Viebahn signed up for dance classes, and they're still learning.

## details

**Rita Dove**  
Reading from "American Smooth"  
7:30 p.m. Tuesday  
V. Earl Dickinson Building  
at Piedmont Virginia  
Community College

Free, but tickets required;  
tickets available at PVCC  
cashier's office and  
Barnes and Noble

961-5376  
984-0461

# nance of life

## POEMS PUT BEST BEATS FORWARD



Photo by Fred Viebahn  
**"American Smooth" is Rita Dove's eighth volume of poetry and her first in five years.**

For the musician and poet, dancing offered an enriching extension of the sphere "when rhythm and music become part of the way you breathe." In ballroom dancing, Dove found exhilarating exercise and creative expression wrapped in a new structure, a new language.

"It was not only a distraction, but a discipline."

Dove said. "This hobby was beginning to make demands on me. Where is this taking me?"

"Then I saw the glimmer of the book."

For Dove, the creation of a new book often begins with that glimmer. It is similar to the way a sculptor might look at a block of marble and glimpse a figure within.

Some of the poems in the book had been in the works for a decade or more. "but they'd never found their home," Dove said. "It's hard to be patient, but it's almost like magic — you get a glimmer of the book."

When she saw the words "American smooth," the name of a style of ballroom dancing, "suddenly, the shape begins to appear," Dove said. "All those disparate ideas about how we as Americans can jazz up our experiences began to inform the book."

Some of the poems address dance and facets of dance directly — the discipline of partnering, the liberation of leaving stress behind to strut onto the dance floor. Others, such as a section diving into black American soldiers' experiences fighting in World War I and the joys and pains of returning home, are "not only about dance, but about dancing through life, and dancing through minefields," she said.

Some of the poems Dove originally intended for the project will sit this one out.

"I took out about 10 poems — a whole section," she said. "For my taste, it was just too big a book. The poems are good, and they'll find their home."

Dove looks forward to reading in Piedmont's V. Earl Dickinson Building. She has happy memories of a fund-raiser for Region 10 Community Services Board that she and pianist George Francois presented on the Dickinson stage in 2002 — an evening filled with classical, jazz, torch songs and tango, in which Dove read, sang and danced.

"I knew I could rely on them, and the space is wonderful," Dove said. "It was a natural choice to debut the book there in a place fragrant with art and dance."

Although admission is free, tickets are required. They're available at the PVCC cashier's office and at Barnes and Noble, which also will donate 10 percent of book sales to Piedmont.