

WORDS

SUSAN TYLER HITCHCOCK ■ WORDS@READTHEHOOK.COM

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Dance steps

New Dove book

sure to fly

DON'T go thinking of poets as people who watch life go by as they sense deeply and utter eloquence to the wind. Take Rita Dove, for example. Read her new book of poetry, *American Smooth*, including the endnotes—peepholes into the life stream out of which these passages erupt—and you sense a woman with activities and interests, pastimes and a family, a woman who travels and observes and remembers and sometimes writes it down.

Her publisher touts *American Smooth* as Rita Dove's "eighth and perhaps most anticipated collection of poetry." She has long been in the public eye as U.S. Poet Laureate, Poet Laureate of Virginia, and winner of the Pulitzer and many other prizes.

In addition to her first book of poetry, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, which came out in 1983, Dove has published fiction and essays. Her play, *The Darker Face of the Earth*, was produced at the Kennedy Center, her song cycle premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. She writes, she teaches, she sings, and—now, her larger public learns—she dances. In this book's acknowledgments, Dove sends "a hug and a wink to all my ballroom dancing friends."

American Smooth is named for a dance style, Dove explains, "a form of ballroom dancing... in which the partners are free to release each other from the closed embrace and dance without any physical contact, thus permitting improvisation and individual expression." It's a concept that invites metaphor.

And so this book dances on, starting with Adam and Eve's dance on their way out of the garden, continuing with Salomé, coming up to private dreams and the present day. In a particularly affecting cycle of poems titled "Not Welcome Here," Dove word-dances the experience of Lt. Col. James Reese Europe, Harlem bandleader-turned World War I soldier, member of New York's all-African-American 369th Infantry.

The soldier poems are enhanced by one more personal vignette, "Ripont," in which Dove recalls a family journey when she, her husband, and their then-infant daughter happened upon an anniversary commemorative celebration for the 369th in the French countryside. "Everyone smiled at us sadly they thought / we were descendants too," Dove writes. "What else could we do we smiled back."

It was an important moment, clearly, since it spawned these eight poems, yet Dove reveals at the end of "Ripont" that from that day she "wrote nothing / for thirteen years not a word in my notebook / until today."

Rita Dove will launch her book, American Smooth, on Tuesday, September 21, 7:30pm, at the V. Earl Dickinson Building, Piedmont Virginia Community College. Free, but tickets are required from Barnes & Noble (Barracks Road Shopping Center), and the PVCC Cashier's Office. Groups of 10 or more, call 961-5378.