**In Rita Dove’s hands, poetry kicks up its feet**

**...in the hands of Rita Dove**  
  
**By KATHLEEN JOHNSON Special to The Star**  
  
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**P**oetry and dance are cognate arts. Dance is often referred to as “poetry in motion,” and the play of words across the page known as poetry is, as Kansas-born poet William Stafford called it, “a series of moves like dancing.”

It isn’t surprising, then, that a singular magic occurs when Rita Dove blends the two art forms in her latest poetry collection, *American Smooth*.

Dove, who this July was named poet laureate of Virginia, is Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia. Along with her husband, German novelist Fred Viebahn, she’s also a ballroom-dance enthusiast whom one interviewer has described as “a brilliant dancer, a showstopper.”

In this eighth book of poems — her first in five years — Dove assembles diverse subjects under the thematically broad title “American Smooth.” That, by Dove’s definition, is a ballroom dance derived from traditional forms 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.”

Within the book’s five sections, poems swing from topic to topic. One dramatizes the plight of an African-American soldier in World War I:

*Back home in Louisiana the earth is red,*

*but it suckles you until you can sing*

*yourself grown.*

*Here, even the wind has edges.*

Another shares a sensuous, Sappho-like swoon over a square of chocolate:

*dark punch*

*of earth and night and leaf,*

*for a taste of you*

*any woman would gladly*

*crumble to ruin.*

Yet another contemplates Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden:

*no whispered intelligence lurking*

*in the leaves — just an ache that grew*

*until she knew she’d already lost everything*

*except desire, the red heft of it*

*warming her outstretched palm.*

It’s Dove’s dance poems, however, that steal the show. In well-executed turns of phrase and line, carefully controlled rhythms, and language ranging from graceful to sassy, she recalls the forms and moods of dances such as the rhumba, cha-cha and waltz. Her poem “Bolero” begins this way:

*Not the ratcheting crescendo of Ravel’s bright winds  
but an older,  
crueler*

*passion: a woman with hips who knows when to move them,   
who holds nothing back   
but the hurt*

*she takes with her as she dips, grinds, then rises sweetly into   
his arms again.*

And in “Fox Trot Fridays,” Dove displays the stylistic acumen that has brought her such acclaim:

*Thank the stars there’s a day   
each week to tuck in*

*the grief, lift your pearls, and   
stride brush stride*

*quick-quick with a   
heel-ball-toe. Smooth*

*as Nat King Cole’s   
slow satin smile ...*

Ah, yes, Nat King Cole’s slow satin smile. What could be more American smooth than that?

Yet, at times, some less-than-smooth poems interrupt the elegant flow of this collection. Sharing the floor with the dance poems, they seem awkwardly out of place. A sequence titled “Twelve Chairs,” for instance, comes across as particularly wooden.

For the most part, though, *American Smooth*is a bravura performance by an incredibly accomplished poet. Dove’s numerous awards include a 1987 Pulitzer Prize for *Thomas and Beulah*, a finely imagined collection of poems based on the lives of her grandparents. She was also the first African-American to be designated poet laureate of the United States — and, at 41 in 1993, when she was sworn in, the youngest person ever to hold the position.

And if all that doesn’t impress enough, consider this: The woman can *samba.*