

DANCE SETS POET ON THE PATH TO HEALING - AND - Miami Herald, The (FL) - October 31, 2004 - page 12BF

October 31, 2004 | Miami Herald, The (FL) | AUDRA D.S. BURCH, aburch@herald.com | Page 12BF

Rita Dove hadn't really planned to write *American Smooth* (Norton, \$22.95). Hadn't planned to deliver a collection of poems that move powerfully through war and motherhood and history and music. Hadn't planned to open a notebook and pour out its contents - observations of life, really - into an eighth volume of work.

But there was the matter of the fire. Four years ago, it stole Dove's home from her, without notice or invitation. Just like that.

In the healing that followed, Dove and her husband, German novelist Fred Viebahn, took to ballroom dancing. Something about its grace brought Dove some measure of peace.

"Sudden tragedy has a way of opening you up to other possibilities," says Dove, 51, a Pulitzer Prize winner and former Poet Laureate. "We did it as an exuberant distraction from our lives. It allowed us to live again, and all of a sudden poems began to happen."

PAIN AND INSPIRATION

First, they came in fits and starts, then began to meld into something wonderful that beautifully displays Dove's rich storytelling, full imagery and sureness of ear. She decided to call the book *American Smooth*, in deference to the language and liberating nature of dance, but also because she recognized that her art and her hobby were in the same universe, and if only for a moment, one had saved the other.

It is her first collection in five years.

"When you dance, you go where the music takes you, which is what ended up happening with my poems," she says. "I found myself thinking a lot about how to make sense of my life after the fire, about the idea of finessing the things life throws at you. It was in pain that people found jazz and blues."

Once Dove freed the poems, they too began the dance and took on a bold survival quality. In *Return of Lieutenant James Reese Europe*, a poem about an African-American World War II soldier's homecoming, she writes: "We toured devastation, American good will / in a forty-piece band."

FOX TROTS & CHOCOLATE

The collection bobs and weaves in typical Dove form, wild on one page, whispering on the next, almost always personal. It artfully addresses racism; chocolate, which she adoringly calls "velvet

fruit"; the fox trot; jurors; and Hattie McDaniels, who won an Oscar for playing Mammy in *Gone With The Wind* and goes to the award ceremony, "where the maid can wear a mink and still be a maid."

Dove's poems showcase her ability to stitch together beautiful phrases, but they are also the sum of a full-bodied childhood. She grew up in Akron, Ohio, where her father was the first black research chemist with Ford.

The house was filled with books. Books on her parents' night stand. Books (and a dictionary) on her father's side table next to the big chair in the den. Stacks and stacks on his desk, too. Books on countertops and shelves.

"Books were absolutely everywhere. I was encouraged to read and write," says **Dove**, an English professor at the University of Virginia. "I had the freedom to browse."

Dove was 11 when she wrote her first poem. It was for Easter.

"I had the title before I had figured out how to write the poem. It was called *The Rabbit With One Droopy Ear*," she says, chuckling softly. "When I began writing I didn't know where it was going to take me, but in that moment I really began to get a glimpse of the lure of creation."

UNIVERSAL APPEAL

And so this art form she found so alluring became a hobby to which she would often return. She graduated *summa cum laude* from Miami University in Ohio, where she studied English, German and the cello. She started publishing her work in the 1980s and won the Pulitzer in 1987 for *Thomas and Beulah*, poems based on the lives of her maternal grandparents. Five years later, she was named the American Poet Laureate.

Upon her selection, Gwendolyn Brooks, the only other black woman to win the Pulitzer for poetry, told *Time Magazine*: "She was absolutely the perfect choice. She can be brightly irreverent, carefully humorous and mercilessly inclusive."

Dove says her inspiration - however cliché it may sound - is life. Her works transcend race and gender because they are built on the tiniest moments that have universal appeal: finding and losing love; homework; raising children; farewells. Sometimes her poetry is born from the lilt of a phrase, from a snatch of conversation, from music.

"I don't believe I could be a poet if I were not deeply and actively experiencing my life," she says. "It's not about the facts and dates; history will take care of that. My job is to record the history and be the spokesman for the human heart."

Audra Burch is a Herald staff writer.

CITATION (CMS STYLE)

BURCH, AUDRA D.S.. "DANCE SETS POET ON THE PATH TO HEALING - AND WRITING." *Miami Herald, The (FL)*, October 31, 2004: 12BF. *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*.

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