



## Best poetry whispers, Dove says

### Two-time laureate joins four honorees

By GARY SOULSMAN, The News Journal

Posted Saturday, April 1, 2006

The best poetry, says former U.S. poet laureate Rita Dove, whispers in your ear.

It heightens language and distills experience so that a writer and reader meet on the page.

In the past, she has compared poetry to a bouillon cube.

"You carry it around and then it nourishes you when you need," she's said.

Dove will be in Wilmington today to accept a Common Wealth Award along with director Mike Nichols, journalist Anderson Cooper, space pioneer John Glenn and human-rights activist Queen Noor of Jordan. The awards were created in 1979 to honor people who have improved the world through a lifetime of accomplishment to their field.

Dove will be honored for literary achievement, and she arrives in Wilmington at the start of National Poetry Month for a black-tie dinner tonight where each honoree will be recognized and given a \$50,000 award.

Dove is known for her precision in the use of words and ideas.

She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1987 for her third book of poetry, "Thomas and Beulah," which featured poems loosely based on her grandparents. They create a narrative that has been likened to a realistic novel.

Her work is "a synthesis of striking imagery, myth, magic, fable, wit, humor, political comment and a sure knowledge of history," essayist Robert McDowell writes.

And poetry is not her only art. She's a dancer, playwright, short-story writer, cellist, essayist and soprano vocalist. Moreover, she speaks with a thoughtfulness and beauty that raises conversation to an art.

"One of the things I've striven to do is go wherever the muse has taken me," she says from her University of Virginia office.

Dove and her husband, Fred Viebahn, live in Charlottesville, Va., so she can be close to the university, where she is Commonwealth Professor of English. Akron, Ohio, was her birthplace.

The second of four children, she credits her father with being a remarkable role model. As a chemist, Ray Dove was the first black man to break the color barrier at Goodyear Tire & Rubber.

Books were always present in the home, and the library was like a candy store for this young girl. Music was an influence, too, suggesting deep and hidden realms. Inspired by the many kinds of music she heard, Rita took up the cello at 10.

But most consistently in high school and college, it was language -- German and English -- that drew her. Still, when she returned home from Miami University in Ohio one Thanksgiving, her parents were shocked to learn that their future summa cum laude grad intended to be a poet.

"They swallowed hard and took a deep breath, and let me pursue my dream," she says. The reaction was a supreme act of love, she says, because they were worried she would be poor.

After a year as a Fulbright scholar at the University of Tubingen in West Germany in 1975, she returned home to earn an MFA at the Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa.

It was then that her serious output as a writer began, starting with "Ten Poems" in 1977 and her first full-length poetry collection, "The Yellow House on the Corner," in 1980.

Some of her poems -- such as those in "On the Bus with Rosa Parks" -- deal with matters of politics and race. But she is most interested in the texture of everyday moments and what this says about life's greater truths.

Today, at 53, she writes most often from midnight to dawn when the house is quiet and the phone does not ring. She talks of prowling the house, working on one piece of writing, then another and another until something is complete.

The technique is a way of loosening up and not being overly reserved by emotion or form.

"If you could see my study, you might say it's like 'The Wreck of the Hesperus,' " she says.

---

Copyright ©2006, The News Journal. Use of this site signifies your agreement to the [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#) (updated 10/3/2005)