

## ***American Smooth* by Rita Dove (Norton)**

*American Smooth* seems the ideal title for a collection by Rita Dove, as her poems are polished, confident and accomplished, without being predictable or safely repetitious. The opening pair of poems, for instance, observe Eve in the garden and demonstrate Dove's instinct for just the right amount of ellipsis to avoid being an explanation, just the right amount of observation to avoid being an evasion. The second poem, "I have been a stranger in a strange land," concludes with the first woman (*sans* serpent) discovering the forbidden apple, "just an ache that grew / until she knew she's already lost everything / except desire, the red heft of it / warming her outstretched hand." Again and again, Dove's touch is deft, her eye acute and her words both savory and tart.

This collection is notable also for its variety and its careful navigation amid the public and the private, contemplation and action, the politically edged and the openly ecstatic. Included are poems about marksmanship, Hattie McDaniel, family, the writing life, Saint Valentine, African-American WWI soldiers and Salome, but some of my favorite poems are about ballroom dance, with their quietly interlocking assonance and elegant cadences ("stride brush stride // quick-quick with a / heel-ball-toe . . .").

The pervasive element in Dove's poetry that arrests and sustains me is her willingness to restrain the poem until the exactly right surprising word or phrase eases or bursts forth, as in the third section of "Desk Dreams":

Blue-ruled paper from grade school days.  
I languish for hours  
on the near side of a hyphen: great expectations  
cut by the call  
of a single prehensile jay.

In an era when so many poets are desperate to be “experimental,” Dove demonstrates that the critical experiment is the alert extension of the proven, the slightly new turn of the narrative, the slender adjustment of lyrical pitch.

As longtime admirers know, Dove’s crafty imagination is a rigorously tuned instrument vigorously played, “bare to the stars, buoyant in the sweet sink of earth.” Few who have looked forward to this book will be disappointed as her poems, like the flowers in “Evening Primrose,” are autonomous and revel patiently in their own light:

They’ll wait until the world’s  
tucked in and the sky’s  
one ceaseless shimmer — then  
lift their saturated eyelids  
and blaze, blaze  
all night long  
for no one.

Or for any reader fortunate enough to open *American Smooth*.