A Conversation with Poet Rita Dove

February 24, 2020
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Welcome. We’re glad you’re here! Use the chat box to introduce yourselves. Let us know:

- Your first name
- Where you’re joining us from
- What you teach
Today’s Agenda

• Introductions
• Reading from Rita
• Discussion / Q&A
• Wrap Up/

Rita Dove

Melissa Alter Smith
The First Book
~ Rita Dove

Open it.

Go ahead, it won’t bite.
Well ... maybe a little.

More a nip, like. A tingle.
It’s pleasurable, really.

You see, it keeps on opening.
You may fall in.

Sure, it’s hard to get started;
remember learning to use

knife and fork? Dig in:
you’ll never reach bottom.

It’s not like it’s the end of the world—
just the world as you think

you know it.
For a fifteen-year-old there was plenty

to do: Browse the magazines,
slip into the Adult Section to see
what vast tristesse was born of rush-hour traffic,
décolletés, and the plague of too much money.
There was so much to discover—how to
lay out a road, the language of flowers,
and the place of women in the tribe of Moost.
There were equations elegant as a French twist,
fractal geometry’s unwinding maple leaf;

I could follow, step-by-step, the slow disclosure
of a pineapple Jell-O mold—or take
the path of Harold’s purple crayon through
the bedroom window and onto a lavender
spill of stars. Oh, I could walk any aisle
and smell wisdom, put a hand out to touch
the rough curve of bound leather,
the harsh parchment of dreams.

As for the improbable librarian
with her salt and paprika upsweep,
her British accent and sweater clip
(mom of a kid I knew from school)—
I’d go up to her desk and ask for help
on bareback rodeo or binary codes,
phonics, Gestalt theory,
lead poisoning in the Late Roman Empire,
the play of light in Dutch Renaissance painting;
I would claim to be researching
pre-Columbian pottery or Chinese foot-binding,

but all I wanted to know was:
Tell me what you’ve read that keeps
that half smile afloat
above the collar of your impeccable blouse.

So I read *Gone with the Wind* because
it was big, and haiku because they were small.
I studied history for its rhapsody of dates,
 lingered over Cubist art for the way
it showed all sides of a guitar at once.
All the time in the world was there, and
sometimes
all the world on a single page.
As much as I could hold
on my plastic card’s imprint I took,
greedily: six books, six volumes of bliss,
the stuff we humans are made of:
words and sighs and silence,
ink and whips, Brahma and cosine,
corsets and poetry and blood sugar levels—
I carried it home, past five blocks of aluminum
siding
and the old garage where, on its boarded-up
doors,
someone had scrawled:

I can eat an elephant
if I take small bites.

Yes, I said, to no one in particular: That’s
what I’m gonna do!
Thank you!

Questions? Post them in the chat box!
Next Steps:

- Take our survey
  https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/2020_LOC_Webinar

- Sign up for next month’s webinar on Living Nations, Living Words at
  https://ncte.org/events/opportunity-library-congress/