

Worlds to Explore

An Interview with Rita Dove

CHRISTIAN MCEWEN

Rita Dove served as the Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993–1995, and as Poet Laureate of the Commonwealth of Virginia from 2004–2006. She has received numerous awards and honors, including the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, the 1996 Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities, and the 2009 Fulbright Lifetime Achievement Award. She has published nine books of poetry, as well as a book of essays, a book of short stories, a novel, and a play, *The Darker Face of Earth*. Her latest poetry collection is *Sonata Mulattica*, published by W.W. Norton in 2009. Dove is currently Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, where she lives with her husband, the writer Fred Viebahn. She spoke with Christian McEwen at Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, on September 28, 2010.

Christian McEwen: *In one of your essays you said that you loved to read by the age of six and by seven or eight you were already writing your own poems. I wondered if you'd talk a little bit about your growing up.*

Rita Dove: I grew up in a household that had books

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on shelves in the living room. That, I think, made all the difference. My father was a research chemist. My mother was a housewife, but she had read and memorized Shakespeare in that old tradition of memorizing poems. And so every once in a while she would quote something that was appropriate. Like cutting the roast, she would say, "Is this the dagger I see before me?" So when I read Shakespeare, it didn't frighten me because I'd heard some of those words before.

The key to having this life with literature was that I felt comfortable picking up any book to see what new worlds were in it. I read all the books on those shelves. My parents didn't restrict me. They figured that if I could understand it, I was old enough to read it.

When I began to write myself, I started imitating what I had read. It seemed like the natural outcome of reading. My brother would always start a newspaper in the summer, and I would become chief reporter. We also wrote comic books. That was all part of our childhood play, except that we were playing with words.

CM: *But you also said of yourself at that time, "Though I loved books, I had no aspiration of being a writer."*

RD: I had no aspiration to be a writer because I had never met a writer and didn't think of writing as an

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occupation or something that a living person did, or that someone like me could do for a living. To me, every writer was firmly frozen between the covers of a book. And most of them were white males. It wasn't until I was in eleventh grade when an inkling of that possibility began to emerge in my thoughts. The very first day of school my English teacher walked into class and dissected the first paragraph of Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native*. She showed us how the music of that paragraph matched the mood of the heath. No one had ever done that before—no one had ever shown us how the power of writing was built by the author. And then she arranged for me and a few of my classmates to go to a book signing by John Ciardi. At that time I didn't know who John Ciardi was. He was in town to promote his translations of Dante, and so I met a real, live author. I talked to him. I saw his name on a book and I saw the author himself—a normal person. And I got his book signed. It began to dawn on me: “Oh, writers are real people. This is something possible to achieve.”

Still, I hadn't admitted to myself that I wanted to be a poet because, come on: There was no visible means of income for such occupation. I didn't know anything about MFA programs. At that age I labored under the expectation that I would become a credit to my race as a doctor or lawyer or possibly teacher. And so I went to college with those expectations in mind.

Writing with a serious purpose happened almost by accident. My advanced composition professor became ill a few weeks into the semester and was replaced by the fiction writing professor. He came into the room—I'll never forget it—in an electric blue Italian suit and said, “We're going to tell stories, and we're going to learn how to construct those

stories. And by then, you'll know everything you need to know about composition.” So I was kind of hijacked into the creative writing program. After a while it became clear to me that all I really wanted to do was to write. And that

maybe I should be thinking about finding a job that might support this habit.

CM: *And at that point were you sharing your work with your friends, the other students? Or were you still quite private about it?*

RD: I was sharing my work in writing workshops. I learned, first of all, the terrible fear of sharing, but soon followed the incredible elation that comes when something one has written resonates in someone else's experience. And I learned how to differentiate between my personal self and the writing self. In other words, not to take criticism personally but to just say to yourself: “Okay. I'm not getting this across. But I'd like to connect with the reader. That's the end game, so let's revise.” I grew to love revision. It sounds masochistic, but that's where a lot of discoveries happen.

CM: *In your book *The Poet's World* you talk about deliberately trying to remain ignorant of your own poetic process in order to keep the left side of the brain from colonizing the right. And I wondered whether you still feel that way or whether it had grown easier to talk about the process in these last years.*

RD: It has become easier to talk about the process; however, I still keep myself ignorant of that essential last bit of magic. I'm not going to examine it too closely. But the physical, external process, that I can talk about.

I like to write by hand, initially. I need that physical contact with the paper. And I do get kind of particular about what I'm using. It's strange, although I believe that everybody does that to a certain extent. I don't like pencils. Fountain pens are too prissy. Maybe I kind of got frozen in what I used

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when I first had that spark in college. So I tend to write on college-ruled notebook paper at first. With a Bic pen.

CM: *And then you go to the computer and print it out and work on the page?*

RD: Yes. At the point where I can no longer see the poem or imagine the visual shape of the poem on the page, I will type it up on the computer and print it out. Then I immediately start revising again. Occasionally I go back and write the poem out by hand again because when I'm writing it out with a pen, I hear how long the line is. I hear it in my head. I also hear the silences.

I love to revise, and so I have lots of revisions, with each revision paper-clipped on top of the next. I discovered early on that I could not write a poem from beginning to end. That isn't the way I live. I tend to do many things at once. If I walk across the room, I'm going to pick up five things along the way to distribute somewhere else. So I decided to try to organize my writing life that way. I work in fragments. Often I will start a poem and can't get any further with it, so it needs to be filed. I can't file it by topic or by theme. That doesn't make much sense to me. The themes change. So I file my poems according to color, which is a way of keeping it intuitive. The colors correspond more or less to my mood. So, for instance, a revision may go into the red folder. And then if I come in to write one day and I don't really have an idea in my head or I'm trying to remember where a certain poem is, if I feel like I'm red that day, I'll go pick up the red folder. This system works pretty well for me. And in the process, poems might change their colors, too.

CM: *That's a lovely system. I love how you manage the formal and the intuitive. It's such a sweet marriage of those two things. In The Poet's World you wrote a piece about the number of American poems that had been set in backyards, inside a house looking through a window at a yard. You said at that point, "American*

poets rarely step into the outside world." I was wondering whether you yourself had consciously tried to change the rules since that time, particularly in your last book, Sonata Mulattica, which had many, many journeys in it. Lots of outside stories. Lots of outside poems.

RD: It did go outside, didn't it? Well, I wouldn't say that I consciously tried to do that, but once I was aware that many modern and contemporary American poets rarely stepped outside, I would push myself to step out every once in a while. I even try to make my students step outside. On the first day of class, I ask them what they're passionate about. And typically, they respond: "Reading." I probe further: "Well, what else?" And they say, "Well, poetry." And I won't let go: "Well, what else?" And I say, "You must be passionate about life. Passionate about something in life, at least—something outside of these walls in order to write anything of meaning to you." This last book, *Sonata Mulattica*, does go quite a bit outside of the walls. I wanted to bring the world back to the intimate as opposed to the intimate staying within itself.

CM: *Sonata Mulattica is a verse sequence that re-creates the life of the biracial violinist George Bridgetower, best remembered for being the first performer, and the initial dedicatee, of Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata. How much research and preparation did you do in writing these poems? In a sense it must feel like a lifetime's research because of your journey with German and as a musician.*

RD: You know, that's well put: It *was* a lifetime's journey. When I look back on it, it seems almost inevitable that I would write this book. When I became aware of George Bridgetower, I thought to myself, this story is so amazing, and it not only deserves—it *needs* to be told. I know German, and I've been playing the cello for many years, so I'm familiar with classical music. I am familiar with the terri-

tory in which he moved. When I began writing the poems for the book, the sole research I had in hand were a few snippets found on the Internet. Just the basic outline of his life, plus a couple of articles from old musical quarterlies. I wrote until I realized I couldn't go any further because, for example, I didn't know what London looked like in 1790. I didn't know what this ten-year-old boy would have seen walking down the street, how many black people he would have seen and how they would have reacted. So I had to go back and do research. I would write, research, write, research.

One thing I did try to do was to keep the research under the surface of my awareness every time I sat down to write. I did not want to become too enamored of the facts. I think that one of the things that can happen in, let's say, a bad costume drama, is that one becomes enamored of the era and forgets the fact that human beings, basically, have had similar emotions since the beginning of time. All the basic emotions are the same.

CM: *You had some extraordinary stories in these poems, about Haydn's death and the Napoleonic soldiers, for instance. But often I was just drawn along by the depiction of Bridgetower as a little boy, or as a young man as he moved through that very different world.*

RD: What really interested me from the beginning—fascinated me—was to try to discover how he had felt. That was one of the major motives pushing me forward. No doubt this has something to do with the empathy that I, as an African American and a poet, felt for him, and also as someone who herself had chosen to step a bit off the beaten path. I grew up often feeling a little out of sync with the rest of the world, and yet I went on to find recognition and praise in this smaller world I had chosen, the world of poetry. I wanted my readers to become fellow

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travelers on this journey through Bridgetower's life, and to realize that this era was not anything to be studied under a glass globe. It was as vibrant, strange, and quirky as contemporary life. I didn't want my readers to be stifled by reverence for the classical era—I wanted them to think, "Gosh, they were just as loopy then as we are now!"

CM: *When I hear you read I'm struck again by how much of the joy of that book has to do with how well you inhabit all the different voices in it. Was that something that you consciously set out to do?*

RD: At the very beginning of my writing about Bridgetower, I started small. I thought, "I'm going to write a poem or two about this young man who premiered Beethoven's 'Kreutzer' sonata." That's his claim to fame. But then the project began to grow, and with it my curiosity: "Well, how did he become the young man who premiered Beethoven's sonata?" Fairly early on I realized that in order to grasp who he was and how he had become what he was, I needed to imagine and recreate for myself the world around him,

his personal circles and the wider circles of history that he was embedded in, which meant many voices. Now, I love the theater. I love the way voices sound in the air and what they tell you or can't tell you. So the prospect of bringing in many voices was a delight to me. I can't explain how much fun it was to have all of these characters around me for a good while. And I miss them now, you know? I miss Haydn and I miss George Bridgetower and Black Billy Waters and "Prinny," a.k.a. the Prince of Wales.

CM: *Is that business of other voices something you try to help your students understand and encourage them to try?*

RD: Yes. I do try to help my students go in that direction, or at least to attempt to go in that direc-

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tion, because I know that one of the hardest things for young writers is to get over their self-consciousness, that sudden sense of, “Oh, this is my voice. I am actually saying this.” Writing in different voices, in imagined or invented voices can be a very useful way to channel your emotions. As a writer, you can tell yourself, “Oh this is not me. I’m just imagining what it would be like if I were in this character’s position.” It’s a very helpful method for students to practice.

CM: *This question goes back to what you were saying about helping students find their passions other than reading, other than books. And also to something you said in The Poet’s World about the outside world and “the little window” of the television screen. People talk nowadays about “nature deficit disorder” and young people not having sufficient time outside in the great green world or the great ochre-colored world. I’m wondering if that’s come up for you with your students, whether you feel they are almost too wedded to their screens and their machines.*

RD: I don’t worry because of the technology, per se—the fact that they have all of these great tools like the Internet and Google. But I do worry that they communicate too exclusively via technology, that it has become their major mode of communication. I worry when they text each other across the room, and when Facebook has become more fascinating to them than hanging out with friends. Even in my own life I notice an interference by technology that can be at once comforting and disturbing; for example, all summer the air conditioning is running in my house, and so I don’t hear the birds in the trees or the frogs at the pond. There’s a whole layer missing—well, many, many layers and textures are actually disappearing, for better or worse. To be fair, such considerations often do pop up in the work of my students—the sense that there is a deficit, especially once they have learned to ask themselves the right questions, like: “Well, okay. So he broke your heart. But where did he do it and what could

you hear and smell around you?” To be aware that we are still, and foremost, physical beings. To be aware that the way we experience the details of our lives is connected to many little ambient sensations. And even if we no longer encounter birds and bees all summer day long and feel the grass on our bare feet, we should at least savor other small sensations, like the cool touch of the table or the warmth of it or the way that the chair fabric bristles under you—all the details that elevate our experiences beyond the mundane.

CM: *What would you like to tell the students who will read this interview—what would you advise them, suggest to them, so that they keep their poetry rich?*

RD: I used to advise students to read, read, read. The older I get, the more I also want to tell them to live, live, live—while they read, read, read, of course! If they live intensely, then they’re also attempting to read intensely because they’ll want to see what others have done. When I first went into a library as a young kid, I was struck with the notion that here were worlds to explore, worlds I couldn’t easily get to physically—but I could read about them and experience them through books. And soon enough I decided that this did not have to mean that I wasn’t going to try to get to those worlds; someday, intense reading and intense living might converge. As they did, eventually. ☺

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To hear a recording of Rita Dove reading from
Sonata Mulattica, visit our website at
www.twc.org/Magazine.