



Voices
from the
Gaps

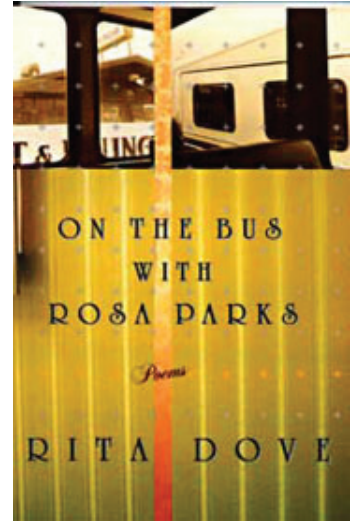
On the Bus with Rosa Parks Rita Dove

The title poem from *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* was originally published in *The Georgia Review* in 1998, but later appeared among a collection of Dove's other poems the following year. The title *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* originated from an experience in 1995 when Rita Dove and her daughter, Aviva, boarded a bus during a convention held in Virginia. Aviva leaned over to her mother and whispered, "Hey we're on the bus with Rosa Parks," a phrase that haunted Dove into a "meditation on history and the individual."

As former Poet Laureate of the United States and a Pulitzer Prize winning author, Rita Dove has released a powerful collection of poems in this 1999 publication. Currently the Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia, Dove received many honors such as the NAACP Great American Artist Award for her artistic achievements as a black writer. Dove has also received wide recognition because of another collection of poetry entitled *Thomas and Beulah*, recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in 1987, and her dramatic song cycle *Seven for Luck*, done in a 1998 collaboration with the Academy Award winning team of John Williams and Steven Spielberg.

"On the Bus with Rosa Parks" is one of several sections in her book that gives voice to young black women who speak out against the oppressive political system during the the Civil Rights movement. This following passage is taken to from "The Enactment," and it portrays a young woman speaking out against racial cruelty:

*Then all she's got to do is
sit there, quiet, till
the next moment finds her - and only then
can she open her mouth to ask
"Why do you push us around?"
and his answer: "I don't know but the law
is the law and you
are under arrest."*



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This particular poem carries a strong message, and the poetic voice speaks directly to readers. It also elicits sympathy for those who were subjected to racist actions in the 1960s. Dove writes this poem as if it were prose. It is well executed and uses dialogue and language that are associated with everyday conversation, yet in this context, such language conveys significant meaning.

Another dominant theme in Dove's poetry is the freedom and creativity of the young, female mind. Dove captures the importance of thought and imagination essential to youth, especially as they are communicated through the written word. This passage taken from "The First Book" demonstrates Dove's views on how important literature is for young people and the challenge they face in taking that first step towards its discovery:

*Sure it's hard getting started;
remember learning to use
knife and fork? Dig in:
You'll never reach the bottom.*

This poem speaks out to young people, especially to young women, of how powerful reading and writing can be. Dove clearly explains how crucial it is for women to become writers. Reading and writing are not only tools used for knowledge, she explains, but they can also be used as "a canvas" for the creation of artistic beauty. "The First Book" stands out to its readers, explaining the beginning stages towards becoming a writer. "In order to become a writer," in the words of Nobel Prize winning author Toni Morrison, "one must first become a reader."

The use of young black, female voices in her poems can be traced to Dove's own life experiences. Dove grew up in a time when the rights of blacks were infringed upon, ignored, and often abused. Her poems are not only reflections and observations, but also a reflection of her own actions and emotions in such difficult times.

Reviewed by Christian Dela Cruz