

A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit

Use this toolkit to plan book discussion groups or library programs.

Meet Ohio-born poet Rita Dove, former Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.

Select from a range of discussion questions to deepen the experience of reading and sharing *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*.

Discover additional books, videos, and websites to explore topics and themes in depth.

On the Bus with Rosa Parks: Poems

By Rita Dove



About the Book

In *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*, Rita Dove explores the intersection of individual fates and the grand arc of history. The book culminates in "On the Bus with Rosa Parks," a series which brings the reader right into the heart of the civil rights struggle with poems like "Freedom Ride" (*but where you sit is where you'll be/when the fire hits*) and "The situation is intolerable." Here are unintentional heroes, who, with simple acts of courage, change the course of history—people like Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith who violated city public transportation segregation laws by refusing to give their seats to white passengers, and of course, Rosa Parks, whose legacy for her historic refusal to move to the back of the bus defines the spirit of the struggle (*How she sat there,/the time right inside a place/so wrong it was ready*).

In these poems, Dove shows how we are all on that bus with Rosa Parks. Ordinary people with dreams for the future, with a desire for respect, with no need for celebrity but a willingness to do what needs to be done. This is how all of us, heroes or not, must reinvent ourselves each morning.

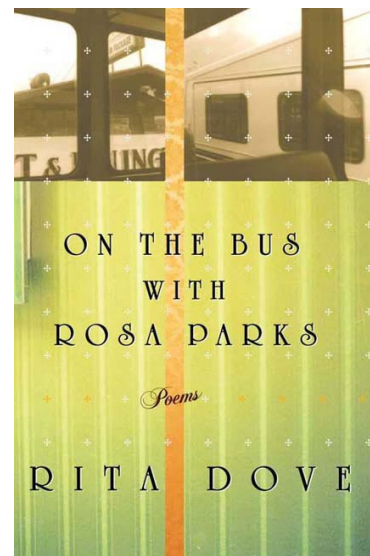
W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., ISBN 978-0-393-32026-8.
<http://books.wwnorton.com/books/detail.aspx?ID=6717>

Available through the State Library of Ohio Talking Book Program:
<http://www.klas.com/talkingbooks/ohio>.

Also by Rita Dove

Rita Dove's poetry collections include *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980), *Museum* (1983), *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), *Grace Notes* (1989), *Mother Love* (1995), *American Smooth* (2004), and *Sonata Mulattica* (2009). She has also published *Fifth Sunday* (1985), a book of short stories; *Through the Ivory Gate* (1992), a novel; *The Poet's World* (1995), essays; and *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1996), a play.

Ohioana Authors provides a complete list of Rita Dove's works:
<http://www.ohioana-authors.org/dove/works.php>.



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Biography courtesy Ohioana Authors.

About the Author

Rita Dove was born in Akron, Ohio in 1952, the second of four children. Her father was a research chemist for Goodyear Tires, and both her parents emphasized education. Dove has said of her upbringing, "The one place we were allowed to go practically any time was the library, but we had to read all the books that we got."

And she read as much as she could, from *Mad* magazine to Shakespeare, grateful that no one ever told her Shakespeare was too difficult for children. She began playing cello at age 10, and her experience with music led to her experimenting with poetry.

At Buchtel High School (now Buchtel Community Learning Center) in Akron, Dove was a straight-A student. When she was in 11th grade, her English teacher took her to a poetry reading by John Ciardi at a writers' conference downtown. This was Dove's first realization that a person could actually make a living writing poetry.

Dove graduated from Miami University, Phi Beta Kappa, in 1973, received a Fulbright fellowship to attend the University of Tübingen in West Germany, then received her M.F.A. from the University of Iowa in 1977. She published her first poetry collection, ***The Yellow House on the Corner***, in 1980. In 1987, Dove's third book of poetry, ***Thomas and Beulah*** (loosely based on the lives of Dove's maternal grandparents), won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

Rita Dove has been teaching at the University of Virginia since 1989, and is Commonwealth Professor of English. In 1993, she was named Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress., the first African-American and, at 40 years of age, the youngest person ever to hold that post. Dove saw the position as a great opportunity. Her diverse series included Crow Indian school-children reading their poems, expatriate American poets, and readings combined with improvisational jazz. In 1994, Dr. James H. Billington, Librarian of Congress, appointed her for a second term, saying she had "more ideas for elevating poetry in the nation's consciousness than there is time to carry out in one term." Dove was one few Poets Laureate to continue for two years.

Dove's 1999 book, ***On the Bus with Rosa Parks***, earned her acclaim for its powerful last cycle of poems inspired by an experience she had with her daughter, when the two found themselves on the same bus as the famous Civil Rights icon.

In addition to poetry, Rita Dove has also written fiction, essays, lyrics, and the play ***The Darker Face of the Earth***. Among her many awards and honors, she has won the Ohioana Book Award for poetry multiple times, for ***Grace Notes***, ***Selected Poems***, ***On the Bus with Rosa Parks***, and ***Sonata Mulattica***.

When she's not writing, Dove continues to play music, both jazz and classical, and she sings in operas near her home in Charlottesville, Virginia.

**"All the time in
the world was
there, and
sometimes / All
the world on a
single page."**

- "Maple Valley
Branch Library, 1967"

Biographical information courtesy Ohioana Authors, a project of WOSU Stations, in partnership with the Ohioana Library and with support from the Ohio Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Read the full Ohioana Authors biography of Rita Dove: <http://www.ohioana-authors.org/dove/highlights.php>

Author Resources

Rita Dove's official website

<http://people.virginia.edu/~rfd4b/>

In addition to a biography and information about her works, Dove's website links to dozens of videos, interviews, reviews, articles, audio of poetry readings, and other websites.

Author page on W.W. Norton website

<http://books.wwnorton.com/books/Author.aspx?id=5021>

Ohioana Authors: Rita Dove

<http://ohioana-authors.org/dove/index.php>

Poetry Foundation: Rita Dove

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/rita-dove>

White House Poetry Evening with Rita Dove

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIT82Oy9U1Y>

President Barack Obama introduces a poetry evening at the White House on May 11, 2011, and Rita Dove reads two poems: "Maple Valley Branch Library, 1967" and "Heart to Heart".

Big Think Interview with Rita Dove

<http://bigthink.com/videos/big-think-interview-with-rita-dove>

Rita Dove on the Power of Poetry (from Bill Moyers, Moyers & Company)

<http://billmoyers.com/segment/rita-dove-on-the-power-of-poetry/>

Talk About It

*Topics to share when discussing **On the Bus with Rosa Parks**.*

This collection considers the role of ordinary African American women in the Civil Rights movement. Have you, or someone you know, ever been challenged to stand up for what you believe is right or just? Share a situation from your experience, or discuss a current event and how it connects with the historical events treated in the book. If you have direct memories of the Civil Rights era, share your reflections with the group.

Which of the poems in the book impacted, surprised, or delighted you the most? What appeals to you about that poem or poems? Each person in the group might take turns reciting a favorite poem and leading discussion of that poem.

How does your favorite poem from the collection "fit" within the book? How might reading a poem as part of a collection change the experience, compared to reading it as a stand-alone work?

The first section, "Cameos", is a series of vignettes about two generations of a family over 15 years. Who is the "I" in the final piece, "Nightwatch. The Son."? To whom does this poem refer, and why are they "aggressively adult"? What blanks can you fill in about this family? What might daily life be like for Lucille? For Pearl? For the unnamed son?

The poem "The First Book" celebrates how reading transforms lives, and the next poem, "Maple Valley Branch Library, 1967" recalls a young reader's fascination with all the knowledge available at a library. How does the library of Dove's recollection compare with your childhood library experiences? Describe a book that changed "the world as you think you know it", or share your favorite library memory.

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Talk About It (continued)

Dove uses a quote from historian Simon Schama as the epigraph to the last section of this book: "All history is a negotiation between familiarity and strangeness." What does that quotation mean to you? Why did Dove choose it to introduce a sequence of poems about historical events? What impact does reading about Rosa Parks from the poet's perspective have on you as a reader?

These poems were published decades after the events they describe, and now, over 15 additional years have passed. Do you think they have a different effect on readers today than they would have when they were first published? Are the events they describe more "familiar" or more "strange" now? Why?

Explore More

*Additional ideas and resources to use with **On the Bus with Rosa Parks**.*

Interview with Rita Dove, from *The Writing Life with Michael Collier*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KRgFWvSdzo>

Rita Dove and poet Michael Collier discuss ***On the Bus with Rosa Parks*** in this video production by the Howard County Poetry and Literature Society.

Ohioana Library

<http://www.ohioana.org>

Visit the Ohioana Library in Columbus to discover the written work of Ohio's writers, artists, and musicians. The library is open from 9:00 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. weekdays. Its award program, the Ohioana Book Awards, was started in 1942 to bring state and national attention to Ohio authors and their books.

National Underground Railroad Freedom Center

<http://freedomcenter.org/>

Through permanent and traveling exhibits, the Freedom Center in Cincinnati shares the stories of freedom's heroes, from the time of the Underground Railroad, through the Civil Rights era, to contemporary times.

Ohio Poetry Association

<http://www.ohiopoeetryassn.org>

This nonprofit, educational organization promotes the art of poetry in Ohio, and connects poets and readers who appreciate poetry.

Ohio Women's Hall of Fame

<http://jfs.ohio.gov/women/index.stm>

Rita Dove is an inductee into the Ohio Women's Hall of Fame, which was established in 1978 by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice by Phillip Hoose (ISBN 9780374313227).

This is the first in-depth account of Colvin, who is considered by Dove in the poem "Claudette Colvin Goes to Work." This book for young readers also tells the story of Mary Louise Smith, another little-known young woman who contributed to the advance of civil rights and who is recalled in Dove's poem "The Enactment".

Before Rosa Parks, There Was Claudette Colvin

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=101719889>

A story from NPR's Weekend Edition, with photographs and audio.

Choose to Read Ohio, a project of the State Library of Ohio, the Ohioana Library Association, and the Ohio Center for the Book, encourages public libraries, schools, families, and others to build a community of readers and an appreciation of Ohio authors and literature. CTRO is adaptable for use in classrooms, libraries, bookstores, by book discussion groups, families, and other community groups.

Explore Choose to Read Ohio resources & toolkits:

<http://library.ohio.gov/ctro>.

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