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Dove's poetic prose fills 'Ivory Gate'

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"Through the Ivory Gate" Rita Dove. Pantheon, \$21

Reading Rita Dove's "Through the Ivory Gate" is - to borrow a phrase from poet Nikki Giovanni - like eating cotton candy on a rainy day. Such poetry aptly describes the elegant writing of Ms. Dove, herself a masterful poet, who debuts as a novelist with this powerful, poignant book.

Ms. Dove has published a collection of short stories and four books of poetry, among them "Thomas and Beulah," which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1987. In that slim volume, Ms. Dove took poetic license in recounting her grandparents' lives and proved herself an accomplished storyteller in love with language.

She continues her love affair with words in "Ivory Gate," a finely chiseled novel rich with graceful prose and informed by a poet's eye for detail.

Set in the mid-'70s, when Afros were in vogue and the Vietnam War wasn't, "Ivory Gate" chronicles the personal struggles of Virginia King, a twentysomething cellist, puppeteer, mime and aspiring actress. Seamlessly weaving past and present, the novel stitches together scraps of Virginia's memories: of her early childhood in Akron, Ohio; her family's sudden move to Arizona; her painful affair with a brilliant and confused musician during her Wisconsin college days; and her adventurous stint with Puppets and People, an experimental theater troupe.

After the group disbands, Virginia moves back to her Ohio hometown for a gig as an artist in residence at a public school. There she introduces the children to the magic of puppetry and they reintroduce her to long-buried pains from her past: her favorite little-girl doll, Penelope, "of the creamy skin and dimpling cheeks"; her first black doll, which, to her 9-year-old eyes, looked "like an overturned crab" with the brown skin, "the bulging eyes, the painted head"; a white playmate's racial epithet hurled at her like a spitball; her father's stony silences and her mother's persistent dissatisfaction.

For Virginia, these bits and pieces of memory are at once confusing and illuminating, wrenching and healing. Finally, near the book's end, a revelation from "Crazie Carrie," an aunt she hasn't seen in more than a decade, helps Virginia put the pieces together - and almost shatters the life she has come to know.

This pivotal point may come a bit late for some readers, who might lose interest in Virginia's story as she tentatively plays out her life like an unfamiliar and challenging cello sonata. While Virginia's life music is slow and sometimes muddled, the music with which Ms. Dove writes is always eloquent and lyrical.

Careful to describe the look, the sound, the smell of the moment, Ms. Dove makes Virginia an Everywoman who runs from the skeletons in her closet only to discover that she can't hide. Yet the author has not created an enduring heroine. Virginia won't haunt your thoughts for years like **Toni Morrison's** Sula. Nor does she have the easy charm and endearing humor of Terry McMillan's Zora ("Disappearing Acts").

Like that cotton candy, "Through the Ivory Gate" goes down easy. It's delightfully messy and warmly satisfying while you're consuming it, but it doesn't stick with you, though it may leave a sweet taste in your mouth and a comforting heaviness in your stomach. For a first novel, that may be just enough.

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