Rita Dove's latest passion helps her keep her feet on the ground — until it's time to lift them again to step, twist, rock and turn.

Listeners who head to Piedmont Virginia Community College on Tuesday evening to hear her read from "American Smooth," her eighth volume of poetry, will hear verses pulsing with dance energy.

The Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia and former U.S. poet laureate has been at home for years in the world of words and, as a soprano and cellist, the rhythms of music. But when she discovered ballroom dancing and found a comprehensive expression on the dance floor — something both forceful and graceful, strong and fluid — "it was heaven," Dove said with a lift in her voice.

Uniting mind and movement in dance has been a precious gift for the poet. Her interest literally began with a gift — one that brightened a tough time.

Six or seven days after a September 1998 lightning fire scorched the upper floor of the home Dove shares with her husband, Fred Viebahn, neighbors called the couple away from sorting through sooty, sudden belongings and presented tickets to a dance, saying, "Get out of the ashes," Dove said.

"It was a reminder that there were beautiful things in life," Dove said.

The evening lifted their spirits and sparked a new interest in ballroom dancing. Dove and Viebahn signed up for dance classes, and they're still learning.

By JANE DUNLAP NORRIS
Daily Progress staff writer

RITA DOVE

Rita Dove
Reading from "American Smooth"
7:30 p.m. Tuesday
V. Earl Dickinson Building
at Piedmont Virginia Community College

Free, but tickets required; tickets available at PVCC cashier's office and Barnes and Noble
961-5376 984-0461
Dance of life
POEMS PUT BEST BEATS FORWARD

For the musician and poet, dancing offered an enriching extension of the sphere "when rhythm and music become part of the way you breathe." In ballroom dancing, Dove found exhilarating exercise and creative expression wrapped in a new structure, a new language.

"It was only a distraction, but a discipline," Dove said. "This hobby was beginning to make demands on me. Where is this taking me?"

Then I saw the glimmer of the book.

For Dove, the creation of a new book often begins with that glimmer. It is similar to the way a sculptor might look at a block of marble and glimpse a figure within.

Some of the poems in the book had been in the works for a decade or more, "but they'd never found their home," Dove said. "It's hard to be patient, but it's almost like magic — you get a glimmer of the book."

When she saw the words "American smooth," the name of a style of ballroom dancing, "suddenly, the shape begins to appear," Dove said. "All those disparate ideas about how we as Americans can jazz up our experiences began to form the book."

Some of the poems address dance and facets of dance directly — the discipline of partnering, the liberation of leaving stress behind to strut onto the dance floor. Others, such as a section diving into black American soldiers' experiences fighting in World War II and the joys and pains of returning home, are "not only about dance, but about dancing through life, and dancing through minefields," she said.

Some of the poems Dove originally intended for the project will sit this one out.

"I took out about 10 poems — a whole section," she said. "For my taste, it was just too big a book. The poems are good, and they'll find their home."

Dove looks forward to reading in Piedmont's V. Earl Dickinson Building. She has happy memories of a fund-raiser for Region 10 Community Services Board that she and pianist George Francois presented on the Dickinson stage in 2002 — an evening filled with classical, jazz, torch songs and tango, in which Dove read, sang and danced.

"I knew I could rely on them, and the space is wonderful," Dove said. "It was a natural choice to debut the book there in a place fragrant with art and dance."

Although admission is free, tickets are required. They're available at the PVEG cashier's office and at Barnes and Noble, which also will donate 10 percent of book sales to Piedmont.