

RITA DOVE, reading with **MARGARET ATWOOD** and **DACIA MARAINI**, Friday (October 23) at 8:30pm in the Brigantline Room.

THROUGH THE IVORY GATE, by Rita Dove, Pantheon, \$21 paper. Rating: **NNN**

For many years Rita Dove has been a source of pride, power and inspiration for the African-American community — women in particular. The 1987 Pulitzer prize-winner for poetry continues this tradition in fine form with her impassioned debut novel, *Through The Ivory Gate*.

Set at the tail end of the Vietnam era, the novel chronicles a voyage of self-discovery of heroine Virginia King, a puppeteer and aspiring actor. As part of an "artist in residence" program, Virginia finds herself teaching a public school class back in Akron, Ohio — the home that she was suddenly forced to vacate as a child.

By returning home, Virginia opens a Pandora's box full of memories that ultimately define her self — past, present, and future. Says Dove, "Virginia is a portrait of a particular black woman and how she comes to grips with cultural and historic baggage that she carries while trying to cope with life. She is trying to discover exactly where her roots lie."

In the mid-70s, opportunities — even for some blacks — seemed bound only by imagination.

"Virginia shows what it meant to a black woman at that time," says Dove. "How does she negotiate the minefield of race, class, sex and education, and still be true to herself?"

This is just after the peak of the student protests and Dove captures the sense of floundering surrounding Virginia's age group — on the cusp of historical events. They were too young to experience the flower-child phenomenon and also too young to be directly affected by the war in Vietnam.

Dove treads far into the recesses of Virginia's mind, feeling the depth of emotion in every corner — from the devastating memory of being called "nigger" by a white childhood friend to her present realization of being in love with one of her students' father.

Just as Virginia is beginning to understand who she is and what she wants in life, a visit to an elderly aunt reveals an unthinkable family secret — one that could be the final piece in reconciling the past or totally undermining her cathartic pilgrimage home.

From her home in Charlottesville, Dove reflects on her novel with unneeded humility. "I didn't want this to sound like a poet writing a novel — but I guess others will have to decide if I've succeeded."

— **SIGCINO MOYO**