Rita Dove was poet laureate (national poet) of the United States from 1993 to 1995. The following interview took place while Rita Dove served as poet laureate. Read the selection and answer the questions that follow.

The Power of Poetry
by Rob Crisell

Q: What were your favorite books and authors as a child?

Rita: One of the books that I loved was called Harold and the Purple Crayon. It was more of a picture book. A little boy with a purple crayon would draw things, and he would walk into the drawings. And it was all in purple.

I also loved Little Women. It was one of the first big books that I read on my own. There were some books I did not know as a child that I wish had been around, like A Wrinkle in Time and the whole Narnia Chronicles by C.S. Lewis.

What I loved was a group of books on our shelves, classics retold for kids. There was the story of King Arthur, which was one of my favorites, and the Shakespeare tales retold. I loved Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy. I also loved 1001 Arabian Nights and fairy tales of any kind.

Q: When did you decide you wanted to be a poet?

Rita: Well, I didn’t decide it. It decided for me. I was writing poetry when I was a kid. I would always read the Highlights pages of poetry, of course. I never sent anything in—I didn’t have the nerve. I wrote for fun. I wrote stories and poems and sometimes plays, but I didn’t think of it as something you could do for a living.

One of the things I’ve tried to do with kids today is to show them the possibilities. I think sometimes it’s so hard to imagine what you can do because you’ve never seen anyone else do it. I had never seen or met a living writer, so it just didn’t seem possible.

Q: You once said, “Poetry is like a bouillon cube. You carry it around, and it nourishes you.” What do you mean by that?

Rita: I think when a kid likes a poem, be it Shel Silverstein or Dr. Seuss or something else, they repeat it incessantly, they walk around with it. When you read a poem and when you have a poem that means something to you, it’s not as if you read it and say, “OK, got it. Done that. Shut the book.” The poem comes back to haunt you. It brings pleasure to you in interesting moments.

Q: What is your book Thomas and Beulah about?

Rita: It’s a book of poems that tells the story of my maternal grandparents. What I was trying to do in this book was to tell their life stories in little snapshots. Not the big moments, necessarily, those dramatic, sensational moments we’re used to seeing in film. But more like the moments we remember as being special.

It just seems to me that life is not what we read in history books. The dreams and hope of each individual are the things that get left out of documents. One of the things I tried to do in those poems was to restore those moments to us, so that we can say, “Gosh, I felt like that before.” Then you feel connected to another human being with those so-called “unimportant” moments that really mean everything.

Q: What does music have to do with your poetry?

Rita: I really believe that poetry is another way of singing. Music affects us in a way that is somewhere below speech. You can’t really say what it is about music that moves us. In the same way, it seems that
the more we love a poem, the harder it is to reduce it to other words. I think poetry is the human voice whispering to you. So it’s close to music for me.

**Q: Tell us about being poet laureate.**

**Rita:** It’s been an incredibly exciting job. One of my duties here at the Library of Congress is to plan a literary season that is free and open to the public. I’ve had Crow Indian poets from age six to grade twelve. A recent event was “Young Voices, D.C.” We had kids from all these schools come to the Capitol to read their poems.

**Q: Why do you paint your fingernails different colors?**

**Rita:** I’ve been doing that since I was finally allowed to wear fingernail polish in high school. I started it because I loved colors and because I always thought it would be fun. If you’re going to decorate yourself with makeup or with nail polish, why not go all the way? So I started painting my fingernails different colors. I just think it brings a little splash of color into life. Why not?


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1. What is the **main** purpose of this selection?

   A to provide information about a famous poet  
   B to encourage people to read books of poetry  
   C to entertain people with amusing stories  
   D to give the author’s opinion about one type of poetry

2. What was the author trying to find out by asking the first question?

   A whether Rita thought her childhood was fun  
   B what types of books Rita had liked as a child  
   C what type of student Rita was as a child  
   D how many children’s books Rita had read
3. Which book did Rita discover when she was an adult?
   A  *Harold and the Purple Crayon*
   B  *Little Women*
   C  *A Wrinkle in Time*
   D  *1001 Arabian Nights*

4. When answering the second question, what does Rita mean by “It decided for me”?
   A  Her teachers wanted her to be a poet.
   B  Her parents wanted her to be a poet.
   C  She had a natural talent for poetry.
   D  Her only interest was writing poetry.

5. What is the *main* idea of Rita Dove’s third answer?
   A  A good poem will stay with the reader a long time.
   B  A good poem has lines that are repeated many times.
   C  Children are the best judges of good poetry.
   D  Children should be required to memorize poems.

6. When answering the third question, Rita says, “they repeat it incessantly.” What does the word *incessantly* mean?
   A  confusingly
   B  carelessly
   C  correctly
   D  continuously

7. Which is a comparison that Rita makes in this selection?
   A  musical notes and letters
   B  songs and poems
   C  stories and poems
   D  poems and colors
8. In Rita Dove’s fifth answer, she says, “You can’t really say what it is about music that moves us.” In which of the following sentences is the word *moves* used in the same way as in the sentence above?

A The wind moves the leaves over the lawn.
B He will announce his next moves tomorrow.
C That story always moves me to tears.
D The spider moves slowly over its web.

9. Why did the author *most likely* include the last question and answer?

A to make readers laugh at Rita and themselves
B to encourage people to paint their fingernails
C to encourage people to write funny poems
D to show another side of Rita’s personality

10. According to the interview, in which of these is Rita *most likely* interested?

A writing stories that will be made into movies
B writing poems that will be made into songs
C rewriting the story of King Arthur as poetry
D encouraging children to read and write poetry

11. Which of the following statements about Rita is *best* supported in this selection?

A She likes music more than poetry.
B She mostly writes children’s poetry.
C She believes that poetry is a basic part of life.
D She believes that schools should teach less poetry.

End of Set

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## Answers to

### Grade 5 Reading Comprehension Sample Items

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