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VINCENT ROUGEAU ON  
THEA BOWMAN

DAVID CORTRIGHT ON  
NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION

progress with the blind-and-deaf but hardly disabled little bully Helen, reaching its peak in the easily parodied but still effective water-pump epiphany.

Kate Whoriskey's uneven direction never made peace with Circle in the Square's in-the-round configuration. We seldom felt we are where we want to be as the action unfolds. But as she demonstrated in last year's "Ruined," Whoriskey excels at shaping scenes of connection, and competition, among women in close quarters. As Annie struggles first to tame, then to teach Helen, we are privy to the emergence of what will be a lifelong bond, though the play ends with but a hint of it.

We are also witness to the emergence of a true stage star—not Breslin, who was good as Helen but remained, in part because of the role's unique demands, somewhat opaque. The title, after all, tells us whom the play is really about, and the indomitable Pill worked her own brand of miracles. The first of these is to take full possession of a role created by Anne Bancroft, a stage-minted star if there ever was one. That Pill owned it so neatly and totally is cause to hope for the future of this irreducibly live art.

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**ROB WEINERT-KENDT** is an arts journalist who has written for *The New York Times* and *TimeOut New York*. He writes a blog called "The Wicked Stage."

## BOOKS | VINCENT ROUGEAU

# A SOULFUL PRAY-ER

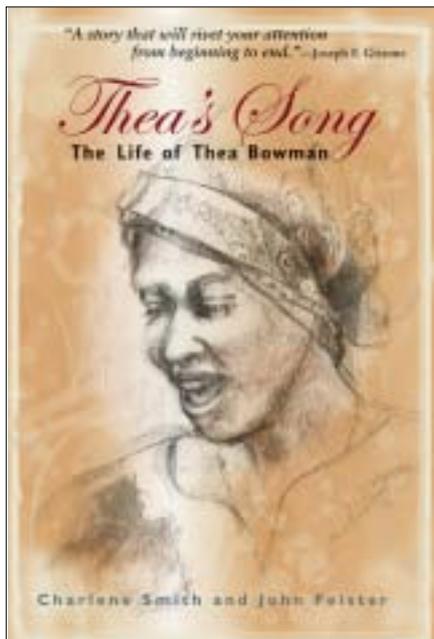
### THEA'S SONG The Life of Thea Bowman

By Charlene Smith and John Feister  
Orbis. 352p \$28

What an auspicious time for this heartfelt and inspiring book to be released. Part diary, part travelogue and part remembrance, *Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman*, tells us the story of an "unlikely black heroine," a Franciscan sister born in Mississippi at the tail end of the Depression. Given the alacrity with which many Americans have embraced the concept of a "post-racial society," Thea Bowman's long struggle to open the Catholic Church to African-American spirituality is a story all American Catholics should know. Furthermore, her life's work has much to tell us about current intellectual and cultural divisions within the church that have been exacerbated by the failure to appreciate a fundamental lesson of her witness: Universal does not mean uniform.

Thea Bowman's home was the fer-

tile Delta region of Mississippi. Its rich alluvial soil supported huge plantations that produced the prodigious



wealth on display in places like Vicksburg, Natchez and Memphis. Enormous numbers of slaves were required to keep the money flowing, and well into the 20th century the descendants of these slaves labored as

sharecroppers to provide the cheap labor vital to this economic system. A relatively small class of wealthy, white landowners and a very small white middle-class were supported by poor blacks, who far outnumbered them. Consequently, the Delta became an area of the South with some of the most rigid and harshly enforced Jim Crow laws and social practices. Thea (born Bertha) Bowman was born into the relatively privileged (but materially modest) household of the only black doctor and one of the few black schoolteachers in Canton, Miss. They were an educated couple who, when blessed with their only child late in life, provided the loving home and high expectations that would ground Sister Thea for her entire remarkable life.

It is hard for us to imagine today the leap of faith that was required for young Bertha Bowman to leave the tightly knit confines of the black community in Canton to become a nun in La Crosse, Wis. Attracted by the improved educational opportunities made available by the opening of a Catholic mission to blacks, Bertha's family had become involved with Holy Child Jesus parish and eventually converted to Catholicism. The parish school was staffed by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, strong, inspiring women who lovingly encouraged young Bertha's intellectual gifts and who modeled the unimaginable—a loving community of faith made up of blacks and whites. These women ultimately set the example that moved Bertha to leave everything she had ever known. In 1953, at the age of 15, she became a Franciscan aspirant at the motherhouse in La Crosse. In 1958, Sister Mary Thea became a professed sister. She would remain dedicated to her vocation as a nun for the rest of her life—no easy task for anyone, but particularly not for an African-American woman in an all-white congregation during the tumultuous decades that followed the Second Vatican Council.

The council created an opportunity for Sister Thea to find her authentic spiritual voice, which knitted together her black Southern self, her remarkable intellect and her fierce devotion to her Catholic faith. She earned her doctorate in English at Catholic University of America in 1972 and went on to teach in and chair the English department at Viterbo College in Wisconsin. Her life as a graduate student in Washington, D.C., exposed her to the intellectual ferment of the civil rights movement, and as she befriended men and women from around the world, she began to realize the rich possibilities offered by life in a cosmopolitan community. She would later make extended trips to Europe and Africa. Ultimately, the seeds were planted for her ministry of African-American expression in Catholic worship and, more generally, greater cross-cultural awareness within the church.

Thea Bowman's life was cut short by cancer in 1990, but during the 1980s, she achieved international renown sharing and spreading the African-American spiritual traditions of her Mississippi childhood. An accomplished singer, she demonstrated through song, dance, body movement, moaning, humming and chant that people of African descent had important messages and gifts to offer the universal church.

At a time when much of Catholic worship was suffering an identity crisis, Sister Thea reminded Americans that there was a vibrant, soulful and prayerful spirituality that had long been nurtured by their black brothers and sisters. This tradition could offer richness and authenticity to Catholic worship through its ability to reach people of all cultures emotionally, spiritually and physically. Perhaps the most enduring symbol of Sister Thea's legacy is the *Lead Me, Guide Me* hymnal, a collection of hymns in the African-American tradition for use in

Catholic churches. It can be found in parishes throughout the United States, regardless of the ethnic makeup of the congregation.

Would that Sister Thea were with us now! No doubt she would be thrilled to see the election of the nation's first African-American president, and she definitely would have something to say about those who think they can decide who is a "real" Catholic and who is not. Perhaps she would quote her grandfather, a former slave, who told her that the worst form of slavery is not that

which comes with chains and shackles from the outside, but the enslavement of the mind that "keeps us from reaching out to one another and being to one another the cause of freedom and the cause of strength and the cause of life." She would tell us to stop tolerating the boundaries of race, class, education and money. She would urge us to dance. She would definitely sing.

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VINCENT ROUGEAU is associate professor at Notre Dame Law School and the author of *Christians in the American Empire* (Oxford Univ. Press).

MATTHEW WEINER

## LIVING OUTSIDE TIME

### THE SABBATH WORLD Glimpses of a Different Order of Time

By Judith Shulevitz  
Random House. 288p \$26

The journalist and culture critic Judith Shulevitz opens her book about the Sabbath, part spiritual memoir, part history lesson, part critique of our contemporary overly busy lives, with an obvious observation: "...we all look for a Sabbath, whether or not that's what we call it." She rightly points out that our lives, through the industrial revolution, technology and the 24/7 nature of our compulsive, overworked universe could use some restructuring.

Readers who approach this elegantly written book most likely already have their idea of what the Sabbath is and agree that we all need some kind of rest from the hectic pace of our lives. At the same time the Sabbath, in its traditional context and as developed and carried out by the Jewish

people today, is something radically different from regular old rest. It has a particular theological and doctrinal meaning, as well as hyper-detailed rules of ritual practice. In this way Sabbath is a strange term, at once dramatically particular in its traditional proscriptive sense, and universally understood and looked fondly upon in its vernacular.

Shulevitz's book, if nothing else, makes this important point and argues that it is something worth thinking more about, and in a variety of ways. Why else write a book about the Sabbath, when so many are already out there, and some brilliantly conceived, the most famous

being Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Sabbath* (which everyone should read)? For Shulevitz, a personal account of Sabbath that intertwines some interesting history of Sabbath's effect on our Western and finally American society is worth writing about. For Shulevitz it is also worth arguing that a little downtime benefits everyone.

