



Vol. 22, No. 6

[November/December 2012](#)

Healing Tree



 [Printable version](#)

 **SHARE** 

Biography tells amazing story of Sister Thea, who shared her gifts through song, word

By Bruce Aguilar, BCC

Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman. By Charlene Smith and John Feister. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2009. Hard-cover, 319 pp. \$28.

This biography reads like a novel – the story of young Bertha, a young black girl from Canton, MS, who at age 15 makes a decision to commit herself to a new life in a faraway place, leaving her beloved home and family. Along the way, she falls in love with the work of a fellow Southerner, William Faulkner, becomes a teacher, studies further in our nation’s capital, and visits Europe.

Increasingly exhausted by terminal cancer, this woman perseveres to share her gifts through words and song with many, both in her church and across the land. Bertha became Sister Thea, (whose mother, a teacher, was Episcopalian and whose father, the town doctor, was Methodist), one of the most inspiring Roman Catholic nuns of the 20th century United States.

Two authors present the story: Charlene Smith, fellow Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration (FSPA), one year ahead of Thea in the convent and later her friend; and John Feister, a religious journalist and editor of Saint Anthony Messenger Press. Their book contains various writings, speeches and quotes by, and about, Thea – gathered from interviews, the FSPA archives and elsewhere. These words are complemented by photographs that run the gamut from Thea’s parents (before her birth) to Thea’s memorial liturgy. One sees her singing, hugging Muhammad Ali, being interviewed for “60 Minutes,” and, in a famous portrait while she underwent cancer treatment – dressed in African clothing with a beautiful smile, her head now bald, with Jesus on the cross behind her. The only media lacking, of course, is Thea in sound.

Consider this book if you feel curious about someone who could make, at an early age, a commitment that she kept for all her life; someone who became an expert communicator through song and word; someone who returned to her identity – as a black Southern woman – while called to conform to a curious white world up North and in many parts of the country during a time of racial struggle; someone whose life was put on pause in high school by a diagnosis of tuberculosis, and whose life ended while living with cancer; someone who managed to weave her life’s song out of all of her experiences and deeply trust that her God would let “this little light of mine ... shine.”

Perhaps one thing puzzled this reviewer. While some modern-day “saints” – Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero comes to mind or perhaps Dorothy Day – express great inner struggle and transformation as they seek God’s call, Thea seemed to live as a steady vessel through her illnesses, racial injustice, and decision to join the FSPA congregation as a teenager.

How did she decide to join the Roman Catholic church at age 9, then leave home for a motherhouse in the white North at age 15? Bertha’s friend Flonzie called attention to the impact made by the nuns in their hometown of Canton, MI, “This is one of the things that Thea talked about: one of the things that won her to the Catholic faith was not the liturgy or the doctrine, it was that these nuns would walk the streets and find these children...” (p. 36).

Bruce Aguilar, BCC, works as a staff chaplain at Spaulding Hospital Cambridge (long-term acute care facility) and Spaulding West Roxbury (long-term nursing and therapy center) in Massachusetts. He lives in Belmont with his wife and son.