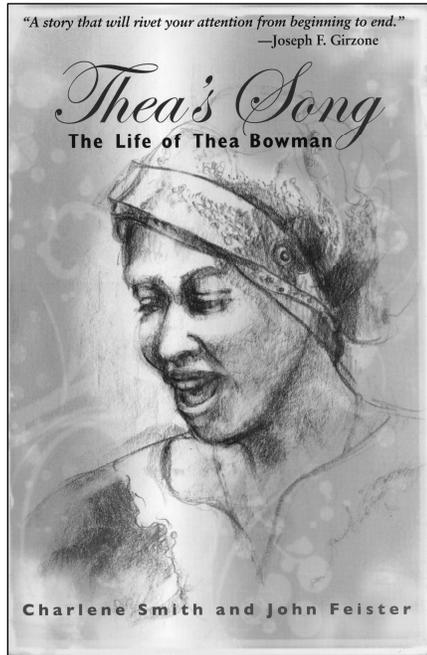


Book Reviews



Thea's Song: The Life of Thea Bowman. By Charlene Smith and John Feister. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010. 352 pp. \$28.00.

"One of the things that has made me very sad," theologian Joseph Brown reportedly said of Sister Thea Bowman, "is that she wrote almost nothing." Indeed. Stricken by cancer in the prime of her career, Thea never got the sort of break most celebrities enjoy when the pressure of fame has eased and they can compose their memoirs in relative peace. Moreover, her almost unbelievable schedule of workshops, lectures, and other personal appearances, which continued even

after illness had confined her to a wheelchair, gave "everyone's sister" little time for written reflection. The almost total absence of formal written work, apart from graduate theses and other academic assignments, stands in sharp and disappointing contrast to the brilliance of Thea's extemporaneous legacy, and poses a daunting obstacle to any would-be biographer. Smith and Feister are thus to be commended for their diligence in producing *Thea's Song*, which traces the black Franciscan's life and career from her Protestant childhood in segregated Mississippi and early calling to ministry with the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, through her attainment of advanced degrees at Catholic University, to a faculty position at Viterbo College and, ultimately, national acclaim as a community activist and icon of post-Vatican II Catholicism. Their compilation and incorporation of diverse sources is diligent and carefully critical, an aspect that comes across most clearly in the endnotes. What emerges is a highly accessible, if at times overly detailed, narrative of Thea's life and ministry geared to a nonspecialist, nondenominational audience. Church historians and other scholars will look in vain for

illumination on how Thea's "theology," such as it was, fit into the contentious intellectual landscape of Catholicism – particularly African-American Catholicism – in the late twentieth century. For despite occasional references to Thea's academic work, this is not an intellectual or theological history, but a largely personal and documentary story long overdue.

In attempting to describe someone whose personal magnetism verged on the ineffable, the authors face a particularly difficult task. In addition, much of what Thea said and wrote, recounted liberally in *Thea's Song*, became so commonplace in the decade following her death that one must continually be mindful that this was not the case during her life, lest her message seem shallow or trite. What comes across most clearly are Thea's uncanny humility, devotion to the church (despite a period of soul-searching doubt), quintessentially Franciscan rapport with children and animals, and unflinching acceptance of suffering, both in caring for her aging parents and in coming to terms with her own advancing cancer. To their resounding credit, Smith and Feister do not shrink from Thea's engagement with death – as much a part of her life and witness, in the final analysis, as any of her myriad commitments – to which they devote an entire chapter. It has become common, in our age, to remember and celebrate those individuals who "knew how to live." Thea Bowman, more importantly, also knew how to die.

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