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A review of 'Thea's Song' 'Every word,' she said, 'was uttered in love'

By Mary Queen Donnelly

It takes a lot of guts to write a biography, especially a biography of Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA, about whom everyone who knew her has his and her own unique memories of that remarkable nun.

In addition to a plethora of perspectives on Thea, the biographers had to be very aware of the movement to promote Thea's canonization to sainthood. Do you put everything in the book? Do you include opinions – even those contrary to your perspective? Where do you draw the line, or do you?

Add to the complexity of the task the fact one of the authors, Sister Charlene Smith, is a member of the same religious community of Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration (FSPA) and is a former classmate of Thea's.

Whereas Sister Charlene's proximity to Thea during those formative years in religious life was an advantage, she had to set aside any attachments she may have had to the public record of life with the Franciscans of her congregation in order to tell the truth about racism in the convent. The authors give more than one example of racism and racist remarks, some of which were directed toward Thea.

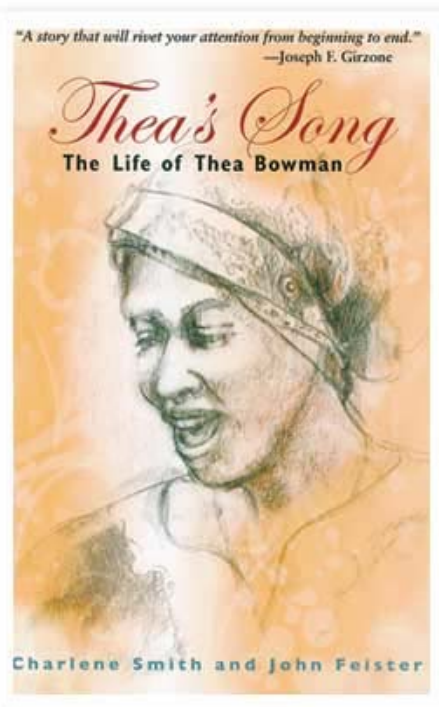
"Words are not docile," Sister Thea once said. She knew the power of words and she used them without apology. One summer I attended an evening session at Xavier University of the Institute of Black Catholic Studies during which the Jesuits from Loyola University, New Orleans, were invited to the Mass celebration and to hear Sister Thea speak.

They heard her all right. This night, she was preaching about the necessity of the leaders in the Catholic Church to recognize and invite all its members, whatever race or color, to be full-functioning Catholics. She went on to explain in order to do this, we must recognize and come to terms with our past history and relationship with the members of a diverse church. She praised the Jesuits for their legendary missionary spirit, and then she reminded them they once owned slaves. She even asked them to stand up and be recognized.

The next day I was scheduled to continue my three-day interview with Thea. I said, "You sure gave it to the Jesuits last night." She was lying in bed, her eyes closed, and, I am sure she was in pain. She replied in a barely audible whisper, "Every word was uttered in love."

That was Thea. She loved so deeply, she would never insult you with anything other than the truth. And so, I think Sister Thea would be mighty proud of the biography that Sister Charlene and John Feister wrote of her.

Thea's Song rings true from start to finish. From Thea's own shocking rendition of racism in her hometown of Canton, Miss., to the graphic description of racism in her religious community of Franciscans; the conflicts she faced within herself as a Southern African-American in an all-white religious community in La Crosse, Wis.; the doubts



and the bare-boned honesty she expresses as she struggled to discover her own “vocation” within a vocation; the physical fight with first tuberculosis as a young postulant and the final battle with cancer which overcame her at age 52.

This is not a wimpy, sentimental biography.

But to borrow an often used line from Thea herself: I’m not here to talk about all that today. I want the reader to notice some of the most poignant testimonies of love ever portrayed in the life of an individual.

The authors had access to the scrapbooks that Thea’s mother chronicled of young Bertha Bowman as a child. Mrs. Bowman noted every movement of the long awaited Bertha, from the time she came into the world screaming like a hyena to her joyous laughter and the practical jokes she pulled on her parents.

It was not that her parents were permissive. In fact, her father – and her mother – had high expectations of Thea and they let her know that she was “privileged” by comparison to others in her race in Canton. They expected her to live up to that privilege and to give back as she climbed the ladder of success.

Thea learned that lesson well and often used it in her presentations and her actions.

However, most of the lessons from her parents were learned through observation, not preaching.

The reader should not miss the loneliness the young Thea felt in the tuberculosis sanatorium with her parents miles away. Were it not for the faithful visits of her postulant mistress, Sister Charlotte Bonneville, FSPA, who was Thea’s lantern in the icy snows of Wisconsin, Sister Thea may not have withstood the bouts of separation from her loving parents.

When her mother travels over a thousand miles to far away Wisconsin with her own brand of southern delicacies from Mississippi, one can almost taste them, whether you are a Southerner or not.

Upon Thea’s graduation with a doctorate in English Language and Literature from The Catholic University of America, her parents gifted her with a trip to Europe. Thea was in troubadour heaven.

She romped across Europe visiting all the haunts she had read and studied about: Shakespeare’s Stratford, Sir Thomas More’s journey (the subject of her dissertation), the cathedrals, and the home of her beloved patron, St. Francis of Assisi.

She mailed a diary of each day’s journey to her parents, but when she did not hear from them (unaware of the mail delivery problems over the Atlantic,) a sadness overcame her. She had not heard from her parents in too long a time. One day she finally received their letters, and her spirits lifted.

When Thea’s aging parents became ill, she asked to go home and take care of them.

The Franciscans agreed. She was the only one left to care for her parents, having no siblings and very few relatives who were able to provide sufficient care.

Using her old homestead in Canton as her base, Thea continued her mission in the Diocese of Jackson and around the country. What the reader should note is that Thea, using that root source of love she received from her parents and the community around her, was sustained to spread the message of love from Canton to Nigeria and around the world.

Reader, do not miss those last moments of Sister Thea’s life. Because of the love bestowed on her by her parents, Thea was able to give love unconditionally to those around her, not the least among them, Sister Dorothy Ann Kundinger (Dort).

As many times as I have heard Thea’s final hour described, particularly by Dort herself, I was totally moved by the rendition of the deathbed scene with Sister Dorothy in “Thea’s Song.”

Dort, Thea’s caretaker, friend, and fellow troubadour, asks for a few moments alone with Thea when her friend was dying. The reader should know that Dort buried an entire family from this house on Hill Street: Thea’s mother, Thea’s father, and finally Thea. A candle was lit. (This little light of mine!)

Dort cradled Thea in her arms and said, “Thea, it’s Dort.” Thea straightened her head, this woman who prayed, “Let me live until I die.” Dort continued but was brief.

“It’s okay to die, Thea ... don’t be afraid. Your Mama and your Daddy ... are waiting for you in heaven. You are not alone ... Don’t be afraid ... I love you. Goodbye, Thea.”

Thea’s head turned to the side. Her shoulders dropped. She didn’t try to open her eyes anymore. With that, Thea left her earthly abode at about 5:20 a.m. on March 30, 1990.

“Thea’s Song” is a must. Will there be other biographies written? I hope so. There are as many biographies of Sister Thea Bowman out there as there are lights in a prism.

However, “Thea’s Song” is a good start. Herein lay the facts. Congratulations to the authors.

(Mary Queen Donnelly is a contemporary of Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA, and a native of Canton, Miss. Donnelly has published articles on Sister Thea in America Magazine, and The Times Picayune in New Orleans. She is the author of a prize winning play "Thea's Turn.". The Carmelite Gift Shop in Jackson has copies of the book "Thea's Song" for sale.)

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