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**We Review the Best of the Latest Books**

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**Religion & Spirituality / Biographies & Memoirs**

[Thea's Song](#): The Life of Thea Bowman by Charlene Smith and John Feister (Orbis Books)

As told in [Thea's Song](#), Thea Bowman (1937-1989) was a black girl born in civil-rights-era Mississippi who joined a convent of white Catholic sisters in Wisconsin, and went on to inspire millions of all faiths and none. She fought prejudice, sadness, and brought joy to others even during her struggle with cancer and long after her untimely death in 1990.

Authors are Charlene Smith, FSPA, a friend of Thea Bowman for 35 years, former coordinator of the Thea Bowman Legacy and executive editor of Thea News, and current treasurer of the Thea Bowman Black Catholic Education Foundation and John Feister, general editor of periodicals at St. Anthony Messenger Press and founding editor of AmericanCatholic.org.

According to [Thea's Song](#), Thea's grandfather's family was freed slaves; she held a PhD in English language and literature. She was an expert on William Faulkner and a gifted vocalist and speaker. Echoing across a Mississippi church leading a schoolchildren's choir or in a northern cathedral filled with people of all races; across the United States in one parish or another; in New Orleans at the Institute for Black Catholic Studies; eventually, on national television, or, even later, stricken with cancer leading "We Shall Overcome" in the halls of the U.S. Catholic bishops; written about in newspaper after newspaper – all along the way her voice and her presence were unforgettable.

She was Sister Thea Bowman, a sister both in the African American, soulful sense of the term and also a sister in the more formal, vowed sense of the Roman Catholic community. As a teen, she moved a thousand miles from home, outside of her culture, yet developed a deep sense of her cultural identity nonetheless. As she discovered her identity, the identity of a beautiful, black, Mississippi woman, she couldn't contain it. And people around her couldn't help but notice.

In the years after the peak of the civil rights movement, in the 1960s and especially in the 1980s, as the nation grappled with the questions of racial identity and equality, hers became a mesmerizing presence wherever she went. Singing the songs of her African American people with operatic skill, she worked with people of all races to help them to see their own lives in a new light. Through music and reflection, she helped people everywhere she went to explore their identity and to find their deepest humanity.

As told in [Thea's Song](#), the balm in Gilead, that Old Testament image of comfort for a people in captivity, was the Spirit that drove her from her Mississippi roots to a Franciscan convent in La Crosse, Wisconsin. It was that Spirit that gave her the comforting, enlivening gift of music, a music that flowed from her to become both a balm and a challenge for others. It was that Spirit that brought her back to Mississippi as an accomplished adult, in 1978, where her career blossomed.

It is one of life's mysteries that a life so engaging, so promising, could fall to a terminal illness 'midlife.' Yet that is a key part of Thea's story, one of a black childhood in a majority-black region, among the former plantations of central Mississippi, of formative adulthood in an all-white setting far north of her home, then of a growing national reputation as a beacon of intercultural awareness. [Thea's Song](#) is a story of a person who ultimately said, "Let me live until I die," and showed those around her how to drink deeply of life's promise to the very end, even as she spent her final years struggling against cancer.

Sister Thea Bowman gained world renown as a scholar, singer, and speaker, promoting intercultural awareness and connectedness in the Catholic Church, which

had been fairly cool to African Americans. Despite the culture shock of white La Crosse, Wisconsin, and the racism and sexism within the broader church, Bowman found confirmation of her calling and eventual acceptance of her exuberance and push for inclusion. She was resistant to social injustice and insistent on the healing power of religion and music. As a teacher and a founder of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans, she helped to promote the black Catholic identity movement.

... Thea's own writings, interspersed throughout the book, give the reader a sense of her lively voice. Personal stories and family photographs add to the warmth of this recollection of the life of an extraordinary woman. – Vanessa Bush, Booklist

Captivating.... This is a story that will rivet your attention from beginning to end. – Fr. Joseph F. Girzone, author, Joshua

The authors have chosen a very appropriate title for Thea's biography, for in the words of the psalmist, God put a new song in her mouth which she continues to sing today, challenging us to be instruments of God's peace and love. – Sister Antona Ebo, FSM, National Black Sisters Conference

One of the most significant figures in modern Catholicism.... Read this marvelous new biography and meet a woman who will show you what it means, even in the midst of death, to live. – James Martin, SJ, author, My Life with the Saints

Given the power Sister Thea still has to move, challenge and inspire, this wonderful new biography will be greeted with joy.... – St. Anthony Messenger

What an auspicious time for this heartfelt and inspiring book ... Would that Sister Thea were with us now! – America

Rings true from start to finish... [Thea's Song](#) is a must. – Mary Queen Donnelly, author, Thea's Turn

Such a rich and loving life as Thea Bowman's certainly needs to be talked about! . . . Read, and be transformed yourself! – Richard Rohr, O.F.M

[Thea's Song](#) is the definitive, authorized biography of Thea Bowman, a modern-day heroine, with never-before-seen writings, interviews, and photographs.  
Religion & Spirituality / Theology / Evangelism

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