

Three Books in One

By Katharyn L. Waldron, on Amazon.com March 1, 2010

Three books in one surprised me. Thea Bowman's life radiates throughout the "first book" of THEA'S SONG, a biography wrapped around a young black woman in Canton, Mississippi, who dared become the first black to enter the all white Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in La Crosse, Wisconsin, where not only the women in her religious community but also nearly the entire population of the city was and is as white as Wisconsin winters. Readers learn first of her converting to Catholicism as a child, later of her becoming acclimated both to weather and white folks far from her home in which she had been the only child of highly educated parents, and of her at every age sharing the suffering of others, e.g., Thea's heartbreak upon learning a black sister in another community did not invite her own parents to witness her final vows after she was told she would have to make her vows apart from the other young sisters because the superiors did not want to make white parents uncomfortable.

Reflections on Thea's spirituality are the core of the seminal "second book" of THEA'S SONG. Authors Franciscan Sister Charlene Smith and John Feister masterfully weave together the struggles of an extraordinary woman (1937-1990) who died of cancer at an early age, with civil rights struggles in this country, and the largely unacknowledged disparity of color in the Catholic Church still overwhelmingly top heavy with white European men. Thea's challenging the U.S. Bishops to be open to the fullness of black spirituality is communicated colorfully as are anecdotes about her. One pellucid example is magnificent black liturgist J-Glenn Murray's response to fellow Jesuit Joseph A. Brown's question: "Who is that woman? She looks half crazy to me." Murray aptly answers, "That's Sister Thea Bowman.... People either love her or loathe her; I decided it was altogether easier to love her. So I do."

Whether one is young and unacquainted with the civil rights struggles of the 60s or older with memories seared deeply from one's own intense involvement in trying to end racial injustices, the "third book" of THEA'S SONG rattles in the souls of its readers. One of the authors' strengths is taking Thea's mantra, "Lord, use me!" and creating not a trilogy but three books in one. Although this volume is about Sister Thea Bowman, the reader cannot examine only the biography of a particular woman or get a glimpse only of civil rights issues past and present. The "third book" is actually written with the pen of each reader's own conscience. The reader is necessarily drawn back to times and places where one did or did not take a stand, where one did or did not reach out to someone else, where one did or did not embrace diversity...and is gently confronted with, "And what of my life now?" Charlene Smith and John Feister score big with THEA'S SONG, one that will resonate in readers long after the back cover is shut.