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Sr. Sandra Smithson, a School Sister of St. Francis (School Sisters of St. Francis)

Nate Tinner-Williams

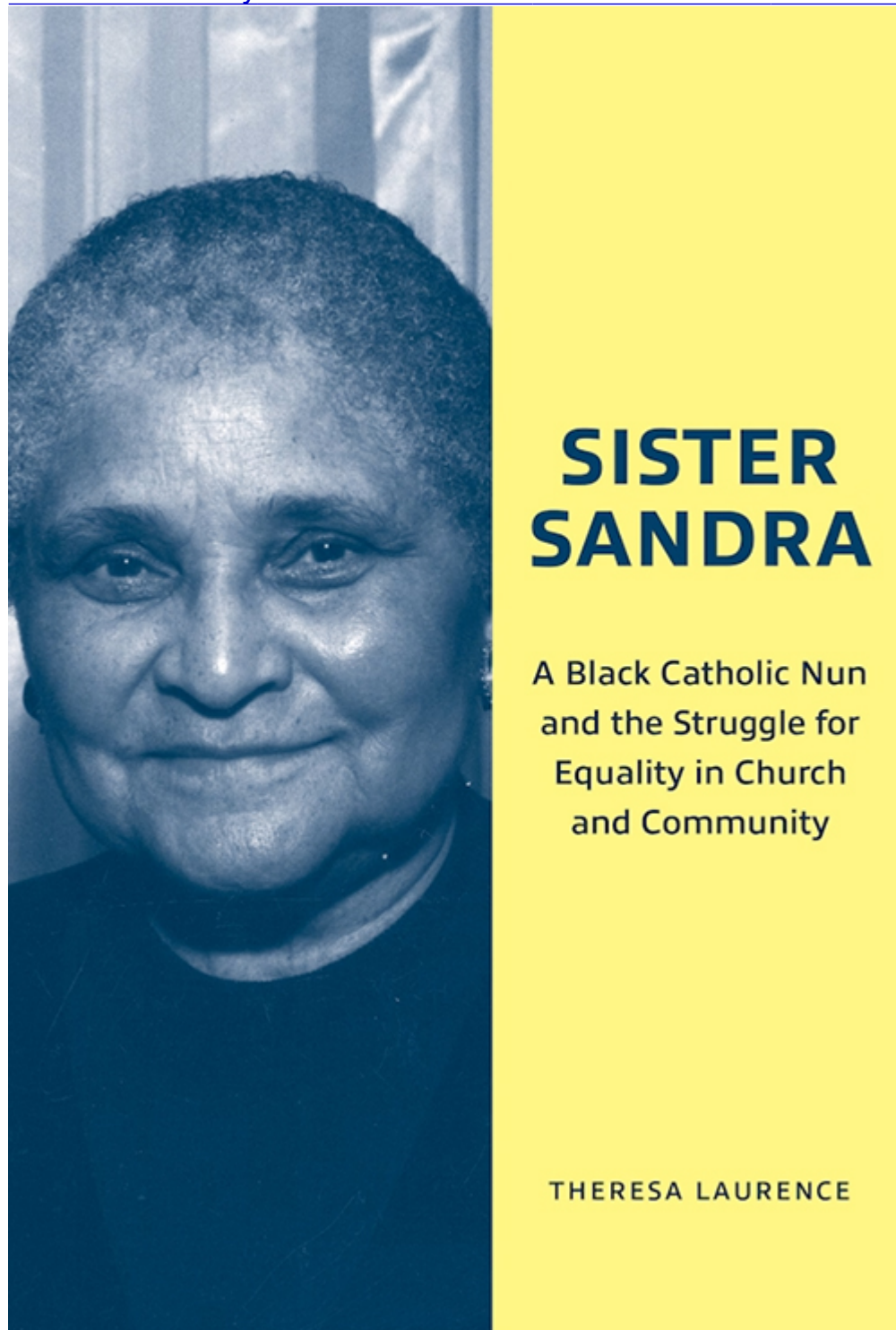
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Sister Sandra: A Black Catholic Nun and the Struggle for Equality in Church and Community

Theresa Laurence

156 pages; University of Tennessee Press

\$19.95

A new book on the life and ministry of Black Catholic pioneer Sandra Smithson, a School Sister of St. Francis who left an indelible impact on education in Nashville, Tennessee, and beyond.

[*Sister Sandra: A Black Catholic Nun and the Struggle for Equality in Church and Community*](#) was released in May from journalist [Theresa Laurence](#), who knew Smithson as a close friend. They first met when Laurence was on assignment covering [Smithson Craighead Academy](#) — the charter school founded by Smithson and her sister in 2003 — and continued to correspond for nearly two decades.

From that relationship, Laurence was inspired to pen her biography of Smithson, which spans from her time facing racism as she entered religious life, up to her later years as an outspoken advocate for public schools in her home state.

Even so, Smithson's humility at first gave her pause about the idea of Laurence writing a book with her at the center.

"I thought this could be something that needs to be recorded and and shared before these stories and this history is lost," said Laurence.

"I kind of brought her along with it and, I guess, convinced her that it in fact was a worthwhile endeavor."

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Initially, the book was to focus on Smithson Craighead, which was the first public charter school in Middle Tennessee. It was founded to give students from low-income families the opportunity to attend a school that would help them bridge the early childhood education gap.

However, *Sister Sandra* quickly became a more expansive work, integrating insights from Smithson's early life, religious vocation, educational work overseas in Latin America, and from her extensive written reflections describing her spirituality and inner life.

Smithson, a graduate of Black Catholic schools in Nashville and Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, was a popular radio host in her hometown before deciding to enter religious life, sensing a higher calling. The racist climate of the 1940s in the

U.S. Catholic Church, however, was reflected in her rejection from even her alma maters' [Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament](#) — an order founded in part to serve African Americans.

The School Sisters of St. Francis accepted her in 1953, being one of the few religious communities in the nation willing to accept Black candidates. Even so, her religious superiors compelled her to pass for white in an attempt to make her more palatable in their all-white Catholic schools.

"Her story is one of perseverance, certainly, in the face of so many obstacles that she faced," said Laurence.

"She was always waiting to be guided, waiting with hopeful prayer for guidance on which direction that she needed to go next."

[Read this next: Q & A with Sr. Sandra Smithson on being both black and Catholic in the South](#)

Smithson, with the help of countless co-conspirators in good trouble, ultimately became a pioneer not only in religious life but in Black Catholic activism in political spaces. She and her sister were active in lobbying the Tennessee state legislature to approve alternative schooling options for low-income families, leading to the Public Charter Schools Act of 2002, signed into law just before the founding of Smithson Craighead.

Smithson continued to serve as an advocate even in her later years, working with partners on the Metro Nashville Public School Board and the Metropolitan Council, and helping to lead [Project Reflect](#), which she founded to steer educational resources into Nashville's underserved neighborhoods.

She was also the author of a number of her own books, including on race and the Catholic Church, spirituality, a young adult fiction text, and a historical fiction novel co-authored with her niece.

Written over the course of a decade, *Sister Sandra* is ultimately the story of a woman Laurence calls an "unforgettable real-life hero," who tapped into her faith to beat the odds for the sake of the less fortunate, and to inspire unity informed by justice rather than the status quo — even within the Catholic Church.

"In a time of division sown by those who claim to be Christians, her desire for unity and her vocation to truly follow the Gospel call to serve the poor can be an excellent example for us all," said Laurence.

"I would love to see her story more widely known."

Editor's note: This story was [originally published](#) at Black Catholic Messenger.