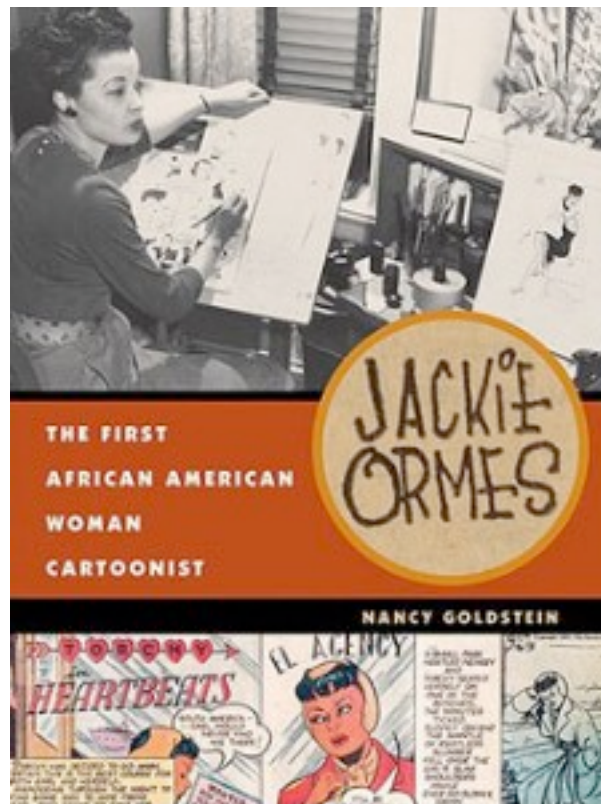


Black and White and Color

By Karen Green

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In the early summer of 1930, pretty and artistic Zelda Mavin Jackson graduated from Monongahela High School near Pittsburgh. Just about two months later, on August 10 1930, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith were lynched in Marion, Indiana, a horrific event which was photographed (the photos were sold as postcards) and which inspired the poem and in turn the song "Strange Fruit," which became a hit for Billie Holiday in 1939. This was in turn only a couple of years after young Zelda—now Jackie Ormes—began drawing the comic strip *Torchy Brown* in 'Dixie to Harlem' for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, an African-American newspaper.

There isn't necessarily a correlation between these events. It would be irresponsible to say there was. It's just that I've only very recently discovered Jackie Ormes: a discovery that plunged me into the often-political world of comics in African-American newspapers—a world of which I had lived in almost total ignorance until last month. So, I've been trying to understand the Zeitgeist, the feeling of the times in which Ormes worked.

See, the nice thing about being a librarian is that you're always getting books. Some you order, some are sent automatically by a vendor, some come to your colleagues but are slung your way because they seem more in line with your own subject interests.

I don't have an arrangement with any vendor to send graphic novels automatically—I order title by title from Jim Hanley's—but sometimes a book will get sent to the library because it falls more formally into "American Studies," or whatever, even though it's technically a graphic novel, or something about the medium of comics.

And that, Gentle Reader, is how I came across *Jackie Ormes: the first African American woman cartoonist*, by Nancy Goldstein. Goldstein herself discovered Ormes by scrolling through microfilmed newspapers in her library; happily, nowadays much of Ormes work is available electronically at large libraries—like [ahem] Columbia's—that subscribe to full-text databases such as *Historical Black Newspapers*. But now you can get a healthy sampling of Ormes' work in Goldstein's book, without straining your eyes on microfilm or worrying about expensive database access.



Ormes' story is a fascinating one. Born of a middle-class family in 1911, she went to what appears to have been an integrated high school and was tapped to do art work for her senior yearbook. After graduating in 1930, she worked as a freelance reporter for the *Pittsburgh Courier*—she appeared to enjoy covering boxing matches—and by 1937 she had begun drawing her first comic strip, which chronicled the journey of a young southern black woman, Torchy Brown, to the big city in the north. Torchy's story only ran for a year, and it was seven years before Ormes returned to comics, in 1945, with a single-panel comic called *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger*. Ginger was a stylish and shapely young woman, bearing—one feels—a strong resemblance to Ormes herself; Patty-Jo was her sassy and strong-minded younger sister. Each week, Patty-Jo would let loose some sort of pronouncement to an often oblivious and always silent Ginger. These pronouncements might be as innocuous as your average *Family Circus* panel, but more often they reflected Ormes' own concerns and interests, as well as the events of the day.

Ormes was a staunch supporter of the March of Dimes and of the right to vote, and both issues saw plenty of play and support in her weekly cartoon. In the 1948 panel above (click image for full-sized view), which ran about a week before the presidential election, Patty-Jo comments on the hot topic of racial inequality in the year's political campaigns: Goldstein notes that Harry Truman had been flogging his civil rights cred (he had just integrated the military with Executive Order 9981), Thomas Dewey was running ads in the *Courier* itself promising "citizenship for all," and Strom Thurmond and the Dixiecrats were in the vanguard of segregation protection, for the sake of "the integrity of each race," of course. Ormes pulled no punches, and didn't shy away from addressing critical events in the African-American experience: the 1955 cartoon below, in which Patty-Jo refers to a white boy whistling at her like a tea-kettle, appeared six weeks after the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till, beaten to a pulp in Mississippi for whistling at a white woman. Maybe discussing Ormes' development along with the history of the song "Strange Fruit" isn't such a stretch after all.

Over the eleven years of *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger*, Ormes' drawing style became more sophisticated. In the later panels, Ginger seemed to me to take on the look of a Milton Caniff beauty, and Goldstein mentions an indirect effect: Caniff's work had influenced the work of Oliver Harrington, creator of the cartoon *Dark Laughter*, and a colleague of Ormes on the *Courier*, and he in turn had influenced her. Ginger's outfits reflected changes in fashion, too, incorporating elements of Dior's "New Look" in the late 1940s. Ormes was also an early exploiter of licensing options—the Terri Lee company produced a doll modeled on Patty-Jo, sending blanks to Ormes so that she might handpaint the faces.



"I don't want to read truthfully on the subject... but, that new little white tea-kettle just whistled at me!"

In 1950, while *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* continued to run, Ormes branched out in a new direction, introducing a weekly color Sunday romance comic called *Torchy in Heartbeats*. Romance comics are a rich source for academic inquiry, offering as they do a vivid view of gender roles in mid-20th century America. *Torchy* married romance comic conventions to a strong social conscience, sending *Torchy's* love interest—Young Doctor Paul Hammond—to run a small clinic in a southern town, and investigating environmental issues, while also including "Torchy's Togs," an addendum to the strip that provided readers with a paper cut-out of *Torchy* surrounded by a variety of fashionable outfits. Ormes managed to combine style and substance in her own life as well as in her art.



As I was writing this column, news broke that DC Comics is planning to begin incorporating the minority characters from Milestone Comics into the DC Universe, and will be issuing trade paperback reprints of the multicultural superhero series. The East Coast Black Age of Comics Convention is now in its seventh year, and their Glyph Awards 'honoring the best in black comics and creators' are in their third year. Perhaps one day panels on minorities in comics will become as passé as panels on women in comics are fast becoming. But, as we look at the possibility of the first African-American president in our nation's history, it's instructive to take a moment to look at some of the African-American trailblazers.

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