

PREFACE

I first encountered Jackie Ormes's remarkable cartoons in the microfilm room of the University of Michigan Library. A friend who shares my interest in dolls and their history had asked for my help in researching the connection between Ormes's cartoon series *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* and the Patty-Jo doll that the long-running and popular series spawned in the late 1940s. What began for me as a small hobby project turned into an exploration of previously uncharted territory: the life and art of the first black woman newspaper cartoonist.

Ormes (1911–85) was the creator of four cartoon and comics series that ran in African American newspapers at various intervals from 1937 to 1956. Her single panel cartoon *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* appeared in the weekly *Pittsburgh Courier* from 1945 to 1956 and led to the creation of the Patty-Jo doll, modeled after one of the cartoon's characters and manufactured by the Terri Lee company of Lincoln, Nebraska. My friend had asked me to help her research the doll's appearance in the cartoon and how Ormes may have used the cartoon to promote the doll during the late 1940s. As the microfilm rolled through the viewer, I duly documented instances of cartoon character Patty-Jo dressed in the clothing of Terri Lee dolls, but I became fascinated by the crisp artwork, entertaining gags, and audacious commentary in Jackie Ormes's cartoons and the extraordinary visual and verbal messages they contained.

In this cartoon series, cute five-year-old Patty-Jo and her beautiful older sister, Ginger, are depicted in upscale surroundings that at first might seem at odds with some of the provocative messages in the captions. Precocious Patty-Jo could be satiric and biting, ingenuously commenting on complex political and social events that affected the average person in mid-twentieth-century Chicago and America. Patty-Jo not only has the best lines, but she has the only lines. Ginger remains speechless as Patty-Jo expounds on a range of

subjects, including racism, education, housing, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), the atomic bomb, taxes, Truman, boyfriends, and modern art, to name only a few. The other pages in the *Pittsburgh Courier* offered exciting fare, including headlines of Jim Crow laws overturned or upheld, shocking stories of lynchings, articles on personalities like boxer Joe Louis and dancer Josephine Baker, passionate editorials, and society and fashion news, as well as other cartoons and comic strips. Jackie Ormes's perspective on American life, revealed in her artwork with compelling immediacy, intrigued me. I suspected that few people had looked at her entire oeuvre in its original context, and I made it my task to exhume every cartoon and comic strip she published.

My discovery at the library that day led me to a deeper exploration of the life, career, and work of Ormes, who was the only African American woman cartoonist in the heyday of newspaper comics in the mid-twentieth century.

Jackie Ormes enjoyed a close family, and today her sister, Delores Towles, embodies their legacy of support, pride, and love. Chatting with this lady gave me a sense of the enriched world from which Jackie Ormes came. I am deeply grateful for Mrs. Towles's assistance, her unflagging encouragement, and her friendship. Vivian (Ormes) Mason, Jackie Ormes's sister-in-law, gave colorful descriptions of the years her brother Earl and Jackie lived in Salem, Ohio, and her visits with them later in Chicago. Gayle Ormes Hawthorne permitted me to photograph her Patty-Jo doll, which "Aunt Jackie" had given to a family member and was passed on to Gayle. More good fortune arrived in the person of Tim Jackson, whom I encountered first on his Web site, *Salute to Pioneering Cartoonists of Color*. A Chicago-based syndicated cartoonist and cartoon historian, Tim had been gathering information on early black cartoonists. His hope "to bring Jackie Ormes's work to the world" dovetailed with my study of her life and art. Tim contributed greatly by scanning into digital format the original art cartoons for this book. He also shared his knowledge on some of the technical aspects of cartooning.

Despite my best efforts, I could not locate certain information that would have been useful to anyone writing about Ormes's life and career. Nowhere to be found were things such as her personal letters,

letters to the editor commenting on her cartoons, articles about her cartooning, or essays or papers she had written that would reveal her thoughts or chronicle her life. In the expectation that more information about Ormes can be recovered in the future, I have set forth what is available at this time.

I hope that this preliminary exploration of her life and work will open doors for scholars and other researchers. My objective in writing this book has been to draw greater attention to the life of an extraordinary artist and to present a significant portion of her work, in its historical context, for others to see and enjoy. To this end, every attempt has been made to identify the correct copyright ownership of Jackie Ormes's published work.

A note on terminology: for purposes of describing the multiple communities that intersect in such forums as the black press, I employ the phrase "the black community" and other expressions referring to African Americans as a group. These expressions are meant not to convey a simplified view of African American life but to provide a shorthand phrase for the multiplicity of experiences and understandings in the many-layered and complex lives of black Americans.