

Nancy Goldstein, author of *Jackie Ormes: The First African American Woman Cartoonist*
University of Michigan Press, 2008.
www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=150236

Q&A with Nancy Goldstein

University of Michigan Press: Talk a bit about why and how you came to write this book. You have a long-standing interest in dolls, right?

Nancy Goldstein: Yes, I came to write this book through my interest in dolls. I am a doll collector and have written about doll history—dolls, . . . playthings, in the image of human beings, usually made for girls. There are a couple of doll history books that have information about the Patty-Jo doll by cartoonist Jackie Ormes. She transformed her cartoon character, Patty-Jo, into a doll. This is a beautiful, upscale doll in an era when most black dolls were rag mummies and Topsy-types. So, I was curious to learn more about the woman who created this extraordinary doll.

UMP: What caught your eye to lead you to launch a full-scale investigation and then a book about Jackie Ormes?

NG: I had heard that Jackie Ormes actually promoted her doll in her cartoons, in the newspaper. What were those cartoons? . . . I wondered, so I went to the University library and pulled a reel of microfilm off the shelf—the *Pittsburgh Courier* of 1947. The *Courier* was at that time the biggest circulating African American newspaper with 14 editions coast to coast. They claimed to have over a million readers! It was a weekly, came out on Saturday. Wow—as I cranked through the microfilm, I was thrilled by what I saw, a piece of American history suddenly came to life, in headlines that seemed so urgent and immediate! Here was news and commentary from the perspective of the black community. These were the days before the civil rights movements. There were page after page of stories and photos of achievement, struggle, celebration, controversy—all from an African American point of view. And then there were . . . the funnies! All the characters were African American! And not a minstrel show either, not the stereotypes or caricatures you'd see in comics of those days in the mainstream press. These cartoon people had real lives, real issues, and dealt with them on their own terms. Well, here Jackie Ormes's cartoon—*Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger*—stood out on the page: clear, crisp, black-outlined drawings of a beautiful woman dressed in high fashion, and her little sister, who always had something smart to say. These are charming drawings, so fun to look at! Patty-Jo does all the talking, and Ginger reacts to her words, like wide-eye surprise at whatever Patty-Jo is saying. But . . . as I said, I had started by searching for the Patty-Jo doll, and yes I found lots of doll images . . . the character Patty-Jo holding the doll, or Patty-Jo telling readers to save their money for a doll, or even carrying in her hand a coupon to order the doll . . . with Jackie Ormes's own home address in Chicago where she lived. It was audacious product placement! But then the cartoons themselves began to capture my interest. In the cartoons, Ormes satirizes issues that are in the news headlines. I wondered, who IS this person, Jackie Ormes? Why has no one written about her? and these amazing

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cartoons? So, it was Jackie Ormes's cartoons on their original pages, ensconced as they were in the news of the time, that opened the door to this larger project. Jackie Ormes died in 1985 at age 74, and I knew that many of her contemporaries were gone, or would soon be. So it seemed important to get what information I could as soon as possible.

UMP: Apart from being the only black cartoonist of her time—a huge accomplishment in itself—what else do you see as particularly unique about Jackie Ormes as a person and a cartoonist? How does she fit into the canon of American cartoonists and social commentators?

NG: Actually there were a number of male cartoonists in the black press, but yes, she was the first woman, and the only black woman cartoonist.

Ormes stepped out of a comfortable, traditional middle class place in rather high society in South Side Chicago, and entered a man's world, the profession of newspaper cartooning. This was something women just didn't do. Her social and political commentary could be compared to the editorial cartoons of Herblock and Bill Mauldin in the mainstream papers, and also Oliver Harrington in the black press. Like them, she was a presence on the national scene, and used her soap box—the newspaper—to talk about important issues—like foreign policy, the arms race, jobs, housing, education. But political comics were just a part of her work. There was also her humorous satire about everyday situations and human foibles.

Jackie Ormes's drawings are unique and remarkable, perhaps especially since she was a self-taught cartoonist. Her women are drawn with great sensitivity, the lines of their faces, bodies and clothes are supple and quite believable. When you see her work on the page, next to the other cartoonists, you can tell she was a great natural draftsman. . . . compared to hers, the others sometimes look stiff and static.

Outside of cartooning, Jackie Ormes was a fashion leader in South Side Chicago, and she had a business training models. She thrived on high fashion . . . her comics reflect her love of fashion. For instance, her characters talked about Christian Dior's New Look . . . Ormes would move their hemlines up or down, depending on the fashion dictates of the time. Her characters' hair was always in style. They wore fashionable shoes, and she'd have Ginger for instance stepping right out of the cartoon, over the border, almost it would be into the reader's lap, to draw attention to these great high heels or cute flats or string sandals, and of course Ginger's beautiful legs. Torchy in *Torchy Togs* paper dolls had clothes like mink-trimmed evening gowns, smart day suits with matching hats and gloves, and lots of trendy casual wear. Then, in her cartoons, Ormes would turn the humor on herself and make fun of fashion . . . the style

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dictators, how they kept changing their minds, and how people—like her—followed the fads.

But she also did a lot of volunteer work, and worked for progress in South Side Chicago. Ormes produced fashion shows and other entertainments, bringing in top entertainers to star in fund-raisers for the Urban League, and the NAACP, and the Chicago Negro Chamber of Commerce. For almost two decades, when the childhood disease of polio was rampant, she supported the March of Dimes in her cartoons and also organized her neighborhood for the door to door campaign. There are letters of thanks from state congressional representatives for her work as precinct captain, and letters from schools for her appearances at career days—to name a few.

And then, there's the fascinating way they lived . . . Jackie was in the center of things. Her husband, Earl Ormes, at one time managed the upscale Sutherland Hotel, and they lived at the Sutherland. Blacks couldn't get a room at a hotel in the Loop, so here was a high quality South Side accommodation for travelers, like entertainers, politicians, and others. Jackie and Earl socialized with celebrities and persons of some fame. She fit right in, and made contacts—like with bandleader Billy Eckstine, Duke Ellington, and singer Sarah Vaughn—she would later ask some of these friends and acquaintances to perform in her fund-raising shows.

UMP: Cartoons seem to have come of age. Was Jackie Ormes ahead of her time? And if so, how?

NG: Oh yes, Ormes was especially ahead of her time in bringing the serious issues of racism and the environment into her comic themes. In 1954, Ormes's character Torchy in *Torchy in Heartbeats* battled the owner of a factory that was polluting a little southern town and making the people sick. This is about the same time that cartoonist Walt Kelly had Pogo walking through the filthy, polluted Okefenokee Swamp, saying, "We have met the enemy and he is us . . ." But Ormes went further to show that the polluter in her comic, the factory owner, was also a racial bigot. Torchy and her doctor boyfriend bring the factory owner around and the story ends with the industrialist changing his ways, and, in the comic, there's an image of reconciliation, a closeup of a handshake between white and black hands. Today the struggle to cleanup our poorer neighborhoods is called "environmental justice," and I'm not sure any cartoonist even yet has addressed it . . . maybe Aaron McGruder in *Boondocks*, he makes racially relevant protest comics.

UMP: What do Ormes' cartoons say about the times in which they were written?

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NG: Ormes was a great observer of the world around her. Looking at her work is a time-travel—through cartoons! One *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* cartoon has Patty-Jo complaining about President Truman's foreign policy; another has children in a run-down tenement, a protest of inferior housing; another makes fun of abstract art; and then there was cartoon after cartoon railing on about the HUAC, and Senator Joseph McCarthy with his now much reviled hearings on television. It's striking that some of these are issues that are still with us today! like free speech, the arms buildup, taxes, fashions and fads. Occasionally she has cameo appearances of celebrities. Her late 1930s *Torchy* series takes her from a Mississippi farm to Harlem's Cotton Club, with cartoon images of entertainers Bill Bojangles Robinson, Cab Calloway, and Josephine Baker. But much of her work was simply humorous observation of human foibles, funny takes on everyday life. Her beautiful characters are dressed in contemporary clothing, in carefully drawn, detailed surroundings, like their homes or city streets, department stores, parks, movie houses. Ormes shows how people dressed, how they furnished their homes, how they traveled: trains, cars, and in 1937 even airplane travel. Really so much fun to look at, but also a visual commentary on modern life, a window into an era.

It's pretty clear that Ormes was fascinated with the image of the pinup girl, so popular at the time. Her characters Ginger and Torchy are very curvaceous and beautifully dressed—or not much dressed!—but for all that they appear quite modest and acceptable, really. These pinup images must have helped sell newspapers! All the popular print media was doing pinups at the time, they had become popular especially as morale boosters during wartime. People who knew her say she looked and dressed like many of her characters.

UMP: Describe the world of women cartoonists, if you can, at the time of Jackie Ormes' prominence. Ormes was the only black woman cartoonist in the heyday of newspaper comics in the mid-twentieth century. What sort of obstacles would a woman cartoonist encounter in her work to become recognized?

NG: In one interview in 1947 Ormes said, "Women cartoonists are not so rare as you think." So she obviously was thinking of others like Gladys Parker who drew Flapper Fanny and later she drew Mopsy; Ormes's art work is in fact quite reminiscent of Parker's, clean crisp lines, and pinup figures. It was tough for women to crack into this man's profession of newspaper cartooning. Some people say, even today it's especially hard for women cartoonists. Some of the other women cartoonists who came before, were Nell Brinkley, Grace Drayton, Ethyl Hays, Hilda Terry, and female characters starred in their comics. One strategy to get past the gender bias back then was using an ungendered name—probably the most famous woman cartoonist for us today like this was Dale Messick, a woman who drew *Brenda Starr Reporter*, and also Tarpe Mills who drew *Miss Fury*. Maybe even "Jackie" might have been understood as a

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man's name, like Jackie Robinson. But why was this opposition? Some obstacles may have been men editors who may have thought readers were mostly men who didn't want to read about a female central character. Women were supposed to depend on men, sidekicks at best, like Lois Lane in *Superman*. Or maybe they thought there would be too much romance and not enough action if a woman did the story. Certainly the strong, independent Brenda Starr and Miss Fury proved them wrong on those counts! But then there must have been some support, because Brenda Starr ran for over 30 years. It's interesting with Jackie Ormes, in 1978, 20-some years after her cartooning ended she wrote a little piece about herself for a club she was in, and she said about professional cartooning, "It was strictly a man's world!"

UMP: Was Ormes influenced by any other cartoonists? Who were they?

NG: Jackie left behind no statements about who influenced her. But she did say that as a youngster, she taught herself to draw by copying comics out of the newspaper. One of the comics she would have seen, and looks like her early work, is George McManus's story of Jiggs and Maggie in *Bringing Up Father*. Ormes's *Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem*, from 1937-38, has similar delicate ink pen outlines, interiors of homes, and expressive faces. The story is similar as well, with both Jiggs in *Bringing Up Father* and Torchy in *Dixie to Harlem* both in rags to riches stories. Each one climbs above their station and gets into lots of messes and funny situations! Then I mentioned before Gladys Parker similar in artistic style, and of course Dale Messick's *Brenda Starr Reporter*, with the independent, adventurous woman who dresses beautifully and has paper dolls panels with the strip, something like the later *Torchy in Heartbeats*.

UMP: In a similar vein, did Jackie Ormes influence other cartoonists of her day or later?

NG: About 30 years after Ormes, Barbara Brandon-Croft had a comic strip, *Where I'm Coming From*, in the Universal Press Syndicate. Brandon-Croft has credited Jackie Ormes as the pioneer who inspired her work. There is now a group called The Ormes Society, African American women cartoonists and illustrators who have taken the legacy of Jackie Ormes as their inspiration. A few scholars and cartoon historians have found her work and written about it. So her influence is felt, though late in coming. But as for immediate successors—not really. The *Pittsburgh Courier* was a weekly African American paper and small in comparison to the mainstream papers. Ormes's work was just not as widely appreciated at the time as she deserved.

UMP: Patty-Jo the cartoon character seems to have a liberal view. Despite the fact that you point out that very little if any information was found that might reveal Ormes' thoughts or chronicle her life, do

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you know anything about her politics? Was she involved in any political or social movements in her day?

NG: Her best political statements are right there in the *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* cartoons. Here's a cartoon with Patty-Jo and Ginger at a Halloween party and they're dressed as witches. Patty-Jo says, "It's a good thing we're dressed as witches, in Hollywood the scouts are simply hunting them these days!" Then another complains about the FBI following people who speak out, or politicians hunting Communists in government, and in the 1950s during the Montgomery Alabama bus strike, Patty-Jo in a cartoon sends her roller skates to help people get around. These were the days when FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was obsessed with hunting Communists. He thought that Communists were hiding in government, in the military, in Hollywood, and certainly in the black community, and he thought they were engaged in treasonous activity. Naturally as a biographer, I wondered if she might have had an FBI file, and sure enough she did. They kept a file on her for about 10 years. Interestingly not because of her cartoons, but on account of friendships and her attendance at events where Communists or suspected Communists were present. When you read it, and see the informant statements and the assumptions made by the FBI agents, there is a lot of conflicting information. You have to be skeptical about some of it. It's clear Ormes was never a member of the Communist Party. For sure, she sympathized with some of their goals, like fairer treatment in housing, education, and jobs. When the FBI interviewed her in her home, it's very impressive, her words in the transcript reveal how strong this five-foot 110-pound woman was, to stand her ground with the interviewing agents. On the other hand, she also stood up to the CP when they tried to recruit her, and she refused to become a member.

Other political comments are her many *Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger* cartoons telling readers to get out and "VOTE!" and there's one with Patty-Jo lobbying for a civil rights plank at a presidential nominating convention. Other cartoons make statements about labor solidarity. During the Korean War days, her New Year's greeting would always be for "PEACE". And in her souvenirs are letters and papers that show how she supported and helped organize peace movements right up through the Vietnam War.

UMP: Tell us a bit about the Patty-Jo doll. What kind of doll is Patty-Jo and what significance does she have in the world of dolls?

NG: The Patty-Jo doll is an extraordinary creation—she's an elegant little black girl doll with lots and lots of beautiful clothes, made at a time when most black dolls were babies, or stereotypes and caricatures, dolls advertised as picaninnies, or mammies. She stands sixteen inches high and is made of hard plastic. The Patty-Jo doll was manufactured by the Terri Lee company of Lincoln, Nebraska, for two years, from 1947 to 1949. We don't know why the

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production ended; but today a company called Terri Lee Associates is now producing likenesses of this historic Patty-Jo doll for Kmart.

UMP: Do you know why the Patty-Jo doll was created in the first place? Did Ormes see a gap that needed to be filled?

NG: Imagine how it was in the years just after the war ended—America was going through the greatest economic expansion in history. There were lots of new materials and products on the market. Mothers and Fathers wanted to buy their children toys and playthings they had been missing for so many years, and dolls were at the top of the list for little girls. For African American parents, the only dolls of quality were white dolls; brown dolls were Topsy and mammies. The message was once again that of second class citizenship. Jackie Ormes was very much aware of this discrepancy, and when her Patty-Jo doll came out, she is quoted as saying "No more raggedy Sambos—just kids!" She was making an effort to instill pride in African American children. But also Ormes was a businesswoman, and she knew this was an untapped market. She would've loved to have a best seller!

It's interesting how Jackie Ormes was ahead of her time once again. A few years later, NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall used dolls to argue in *Brown v Board of Education*, at the Supreme Court. His argument included the so-called "doll test." In the test, psychologists asked black children to choose between black or white dolls. The children overwhelmingly chose white dolls, and when asked about this, they said the white dolls were "nicer" and "prettier." Well it was very dramatic, and helped convince the justices to order the integration of public schools in America. After that case, it was believed that there was an epidemic of low self-esteem among black children, and that they needed more positive self-images, including those in dolls. Jackie Ormes had tried to redress this inequality years before.

Some people feel that the cartoon character and the doll were modeled after Jackie and Earl's little daughter who died at age three. But it wasn't in Jackie's nature to be sad and she didn't talk about her grief. Creating Patty-Jo turned out to be a joyful relationship for her, here was a little girl at her fingertips, a child who was always in the pink of health. Jackie and Earl had no more children, but they did have a happy, 45-year marriage.

UMP: What is Jackie Ormes' greatest legacy, in your opinion?

NG: Her greatest legacy is the prideful images of African American experience. Week after week, she presented to over a million readers from coast to coast images of black people traveling, graduating from schools, taking music lessons, attending art galleries, shopping in fine stores, well informed and speaking out at political conventions, challenging racist attitudes, and more. From our

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perspective today, we have to admire Ormes's confidence . . . in what African Americans were achieving and could achieve in the future. By extension, we can all benefit from her example of courage and hard work, and her life of tragedy and joy, and her great good humor.

UMP: Tell us about the illustrations that are in the book.

NG: There are 24 *Torchy* color comic strips from the early 1950s, and the color is so vibrant, apparently back then they could use ink in stronger colors than we see today. And then, there's a portfolio of 88 single panel *Patty-Jo 'n' Gingers* from the mid-40s and 50s. This is the biggest section, we thought these would be most surprising for readers, our outspoken little Patty-Jo declaiming on all sorts of topics. And they are so topical . . . dealing with everyday news, so we have annotated each one, explaining it, and putting it in historical context, so the reader can learn what Ormes is talking about. Some of these *Patty-Jo 'n' Gingers* are from original drawings, and on these originals you can see some erasures, and white-outs, and you can almost feel Jackie Ormes's own hand, and the captions on these are written in her hand, this was before they were typeset. Then, we have a selection of the 1937 *Torchys*. These are her earliest, drawn with a very delicate, fine black line. There's some *Candy* cartoons, from the World War II era, these are bolder, now Ormes is using strong black lines that almost look like they're carved into the page. For cartoon historians, these are exciting—they're very rare, hard to find. And for the rest of us, they're just great to look at and read. Most of these comics and cartoons haven't been seen in over 50 years, and here they are now documented and taking their place as part of our comics heritage. I have to compliment the University of Michigan Press, and the production staff who really threw themselves into this project. Once they got to know Jackie Ormes and her work, everyone became so enthused, and took a great deal of care with the art work, as well as the photographs—there's photos of Jackie as a youngster, then as a socialite in an evening gown, posing with celebrities, and a real cute one, Jackie posing as a self-styled pin-up.

By the way, I would love to hear from anyone who might have known Jackie Ormes, or read her comics back then, or could add information to her story. My email address is nancy@jackieormes.com And people can see examples of illustrations from the book at my web site, www.jackieormes.com, and also on the web site of the University of Michigan Press.

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