This Issue in Three Sections

READER®

Friday, August 16, 1985 Volume 14, No. 46 CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY

THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF JACKIE O[illegible]ES

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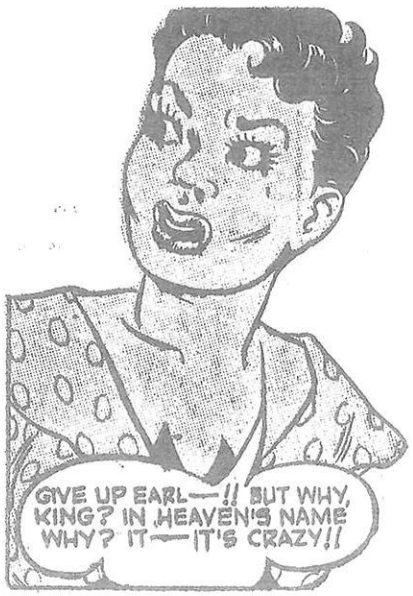

THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF JACKIE OMES

A black comic-strip heroine! Who battles sexism, racism, and environmental pollution! Created by a black female cartoonist! In 1937!

By David Jackson

Torchy is aboard a tramp freighter, bound for South America. Fred Fromer, the freighter's burly first mate, has made advances toward her. Now, as Torchy stands on the deck catching a few moments of sun, Fromer comes up behind her. He grabs Torchy's shoulders roughly—

"You're beautiful!"

"Please—don't! Please, Mr. Fromer!"

"Come here gorgeous. I can make this trip real nice for you—if you cooperate!"

Suddenly Fromer steps forward and pins the girl against the side of the cabin. He pulls her toward him, and his lips seek hers—

"C'mere, I said!"

"N-no—get away from me!"

Torchy frees one hand, and strikes with all her might—

CR-RACK!

The blow resounds sharply. The

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Photographs by Mike Tappin

JACKIE ORMES

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mate steps back, his cheek red and smarting—

"I said let me alone! And stay away from me! Do you hear? I don't want you bothering me! Get away and stay away!"

Fromer rubs his cheek and glares at Torchy. "You'll be sorry you did that, sister. Very sorry!"

* * *

Most comic-strip artists have names like Walt, Stan, Eugene, Seymour, Gus, and Harry. Most comic-strip artists are men. Most of the women in their strips do things like dangle from window ledges and scream for help, or look up at their heroes with round, admiring eyes. Comics are usually a male escape—a stretch on the couch, unsurrounded by reality.

Torchy Brown is a jump into the unexpected. Torchy Brown was a black comic-strip heroine who was drawn by a black woman. When Torchy appeared in the black-owned *Pittsburgh Courier* and its 14 syndicated papers, in 1937, she was the first and only black woman ever to star in a comic strip. Torchy was smart, self-reliant, and constantly butting up against bigotry and sexism. Her creator, Jackie Ormes, is also an original: the first and perhaps only black woman ever to create a comic strip. And she's smart and funny and self-reliant too.

Jackie Ormes lives on East 33rd Street now, in an apartment filled with bright fabrics and strong colorful portraits, at least one cat, and an array of hand-carved figurines and dolls—including Patty Jo, "America's first Negro character doll," designed by Ormes in 1948. The television in the bedroom chatters softly, and Ormes stands by the mirror, straightening her hair and talking.

"I'm so surprised when people remember me," she says. "The people are dying away that knew 'Torchy' when it was really going strong. The ones that are still alive, some of them know me and they don't know for sure why."

Most of the pictures in the apartment were done by Ormes herself. The one you notice first is of a woman standing alone in a jungle. Her body is arched like a sapling tree, and her face is strong and defiant. Ormes walks slowly into the living room, touching her plants and statues as she passes them. "Now listen, I can run my mouth all day, so tell me what you want to talk about."

"Everything. How did you make your career and what do you think of the world today and where did you grow up?"

Ormes giggles. A cat has nestled by her leg. She scratches it and sits down.

"I grew up in Monongahela—right outside of Pittsburgh. My mother had

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just the two of us, my sister and me. I was six when my dad died—in an automobile wreck. My mother married an older man, P.M. Simmons. We called him Pop. He was almost 50, she was still in her 30s. He had property in Monongahela. That's where we went to live after they married.

"Monongahela was like suburbia: spread out, and simple. Nothing momentous ever happened there. Nobody had much, but we were OK. We grew up around music—nice sounds!—and no bad language and no violence. So we thought the world would be a pretty nice place to go chop up. I was ready for it, honey."

All through high school Ormes drew and wrote poems and essays and a regular column for the school paper. One day she wrote a letter to Robert Van, publisher of the *Pittsburgh Courier*.

"I wrote a letter to Mr. Van, and I guess I said something funny in it. He said, 'Write us another letter.' I wrote another letter. He said, 'How would you like to go to a boxing match?' This was my first assignment."

Chuck Washington, the *Courier*'s sports editor, escorted Ormes to her first match. "I couldn't go by myself. I was just a punk—still in school. But my mother, she thought the world of Chuck Washington. He had a car and he was older and able to look after me. She trusted him."

After the fight Ormes went home and wrote about the ring as she saw it. "It wasn't a ring at all," she remembers. "It was a square—square as all git out. The sportswriters were sitting around the edges. They were getting splattered. With sweat. It was nasty, and I was enjoying it!"

* * *

An excerpt from a weekly column Ormes sent to the *Philadelphia Afro-American*. By the time she wrote this, in 1939, Jackie was 24, and a die-hard boxing fan. The column appeared three days before the heavyweight bout between John (Jawn) Henry Lewis and Joe Louis.

Spin on through the weekend, Public! Jawn and Joe have gone and done it, and the winnah will be right with the world. The loser, well he'll only lose the fight, bless him, 'cause he'll still have us, won't he, Public?

Whatever happens, I'm not betting a dazzlin' dime! Y'see, Pub, tho I'm awfully fond of brown gravy, I wouldn't want to be left holding the pan.

Of course I've put forth every effort to be in my boots for the occasion. Soon as [Lewis's manager] Gus Greenlee hit town last Wednesday, from camp, I dashed down to the Grille so I could pester him personally on the subject. Diving headlong through that milling throng of first-one-thing-and-then-another, I came upon him in a rear booth, sitting for all the world like Ferdinand, quietly smelling flowers.

Only Gus was playing solitaire with the cutest deck of purple cards y'ever saw, marked $16.50 each! This pile was for Wogie, this pile for so an' so an' so. I slipped into the seat and watched him. Fight tickets! Golly how my fingers itched! Sisters, I reflected hungrily, miss all the breaks.

"H'lo there," muttered Manager Greenlee, and kept on counting. "D'you wanta see me?" Slightly grinning, but still counting.

"Well rather," I said, eyeing a ringside row five with profoundest affection. "Will you give me a scoop for my column?"

* * *

Ormes had gone to work for the *Courier* right after high school. She proofread, edited, and "had a great career running around town looking into everything the law would allow, and writing about it. I had a whole lot of comeuppance, and I found that I could make people laugh. I said, well that's fun, but I want to draw.

"I said, I'm going to draw a cartoon strip where a little girl is the star."

In her 28-year career Ormes ended up drawing four cartoon stories: "Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem" (a daily strip in the *Courier*, 1937-40); "Candy" (a daily panel in the *Chicago Defender*, in the mid-1940s); "Patty Jo 'n' Ginger" (a front-page daily panel in the *Courier* feature section, 1946-65); and "Torchy Brown's Heartbeats" (a weekly color feature in the Sunday *Courier*, 1950-55).

Ormes's first strip, "Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem," opened with young Torchy selling her farm animals and spending the money on a train ticket. Torchy was beautiful and talented and she wanted to leave the south.

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JACKIE ORMES

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"I had never been to Dixie, but I worked in a newspaper office, and I read everything that was in the paper. It was a whole lot about struggles. Segregation."

"Torchy Brown" has a lot about struggles and segregation in it—mixed in with a rich aunt, a long-separated mother, success at the Cotton Club, danger, trouble, and romance. The serial was an instant hit. But during its first year the fellows in the art room stood over the drawing board every week as Ormes drew: "Looks all right, looks all right," they'd say. "Think you got something there—but it won't hold on, it won't hold on."

* * *

In the wild Brazilian jungles Torchy and Paul flee from the evil LeGran and his men. They have outdistanced their pursuers, but only after foiling the attack of an anaconda, and suffering the bites of ravenous insects. Now they pause beside a jungle pool—

"I'll try to get our bearings while you bathe, Torchy."

"All right, Paul!"

Paul disappears into the thick brush. Alone, Torchy pulls off her dress and slides into the cool clear water. Almost instantly she feels the red soreness of the insect bites begin to heal. Torchy leans back, and lets herself float in the pool. Only the bright-plumed jungle birds, winging overhead, disturb the still reverie of the moment.

"It's beautiful here," Torchy says out loud. "The real beauty of nature, unspoiled by man! I think the garden of Eden must have been like this."

"And I'm sure Eve was no more beautiful!"

"Oh, Paul!" Torchy sits up quickly, and smiles. "You startled me!"

* * *

In 1942, 37 newspapers dropped the comic strip "Miss Fury" because one of the female leads appeared in a bikini. Torchy Brown often appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier* wearing next to nothing at all. In 1942 a lot of men probably read "Torchy Brown" alone, with the door closed. Torchy has an outrageous body—a 1940s fantasy of What Guys Want: her legs stretch for a mile then plummet into a pair of tiny pointed shoes. Her waist is taut and muscular and her breasts are obvious, like traffic lights.

Two times men try to rape Torchy. In both episodes she fights her way out of trouble. No hero steps in to save her. And Torchy has no super-gadgets to rely on—she doesn't have a golden lasso, or X-ray vision. She has only the strength of her own spirit to fight with.

Three times Torchy flings herself into a doomed love affair. She never exactly has a steady man to count on. She counts on herself.

"When women's lib came along, I said it's about time!" says Ormes. "I thought it was a good thing and I was always for it. A lot of men are wonderful—wonderful to work with—but they just presume to be on top."

In 1936 Jackie married Earl Ormes, a gentle, soft-spoken man. Earl was an accountant. Jackie quit writing, and they moved to Earl's hometown, Salem, Ohio. There were not a lot of outlets for Jackie's talent in Salem, Ohio, and she grew restless. "Earl wanted to be near his family. He wanted to feel secure—that was his big need. I needed Chicago. I talked him into it."

Earl worked for Supreme Life Insurance Company of America, on what is now called King Drive, and managed the Sutherland, one of Chicago's classiest and busiest black hotels. Jackie took a job as a reporter with the *Chicago Defender*. The *Defender* didn't hire her to write funny articles on boxing or bake sales. They wanted straight news. They sent her to report on racial tensions at Great Lakes Naval Training Center, to Saint Charles Penitentiary, to courts, and to raucous jitney-cab meetings. Soon her by-line was bobbing up beneath the headlines.

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JACKIE ORMES

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"Boy reporters would go to court and the people there would never even tell them what was coming up. I'd go over, and the bailiff would let me read the docket. When a case had been continued they'd tell me. I got in. Because they trusted me to do the story right."

* * *

Torchy has traveled to a small southern town to help a young black doctor, Paul Hammond, set up his practice. Hammond works in a ramshackle cottage, using outdated equipment. Across the tracks from Hammond's cottage stands the gleaming new Fuller Chemical Plant, run by the prejudiced and bigoted Colonel Fuller.

Waste products from the Fuller plant have seeped into the groundwater, and are poisoning the community. Dr. Hammond discovers the poison, and begins developing an antidote to it, but his assistant, Torchy, decides to go directly to the source of the problem: she takes Dr. Hammond's findings and walks over to Colonel Fuller's office.

A blond secretary stops Torchy at the door. "Colonel Fuller can give you only five minutes—"

Torchy heads for the inner private office.

"—and he'll come out to see you!"

The implication is clear, but Torchy holds her temper. Presenting Paul's findings is the important thing.

The door opens, and Torchy's eyes meet the clear, hard eyes of Colonel Joshua Fuller, head of Fuller Chemical Industries. His are unyielding eyes, the eyes of a man who wears authority like a cloak about his soul—

"Yes? You wanted to see me?"

"I—I've come for Dr. Hammond at the clinic. I've brought his findings, here in this folder."

"Findings? I don't follow you."

"I'll be frank, Colonel Fuller. Dr. Hammond has suspected for some time that waste products from your plant are poisoning the entire community through absorption in the water. The very land itself is poisoned. These analyses of blood samples from the clinic prove he is right!"

The man says nothing for a long moment. His hard eyes probe hers. Torchy begins to wonder if Fuller heard her, when suddenly his body relaxes. Throwing back his head, Fuller begins to laugh—a laugh that grows until it fills the room!

"Haw-haw-haw! Did you hear that? Haw-haw-haw-haw! That's rich—really rich!"

But the man's roaring laughter ends as suddenly as it began. Now amusement—a sardonic, superior amusement—dances in his cold blue eyes. "Yes—that's really rich! You don't expect me to believe that, do you now?"

"Yes—but then I thought you had some trace of decency and plain ordinary common sense about you!"

Torchy saw the amusement quickly leave the man's eyes.

"I don't intend to look at those findings because they're pure rubbish—trumped-up charges to create dissension and trouble!"

"No," Torchy fires back. "You won't look at them because they come from Paul Hammond! It must be terrible to be so twisted up inside that you no longer think straight!"

* * *

Going back as far as anybody goes, women have been making comic strips. In 1909 Rose O'Neill drew some "Kewpies" who went on to become a national craze. In the 1920s Nell Brinkley's frothy-headed "Brinkley Girls" sent thousands of women out to buy hair curlers, but when Ethel Hays came up with Flapper

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JACKIE ORMES

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Fanny—a sort of satiny tomboy—short hair was in again. Brinkley and Hays were staples of the 1920s "women's page." In the 1930s Martha Orr developed "Mary Worth," who began her career dispensing apples and high-toned advice from a street corner. "Mary Worth" has survived 55 years of the all-purpose funny papers, although she still reminds me of the Depression. Then in 1940 came Dale Messick—fresh from six years of high school and one summer at the Art Institute—to draw "Brenda Starr, Reporter."

Compare "Torchy Brown" (which premiered in 1937) and "Brenda Starr." Forget the characters of the leading women, forget the lessons in the story lines, just look at the art: "Brenda Starr" was brushed onto the page—Messick was proud of that. "Torchy Brown" looks as if it were carved. Messick owed her wispy, delicate lines to Nell Brinkley's "feminine" style. The art in "Torchy Brown" was derived from the male-drawn comics of the day.

But "Torchy Brown" is completely different from any male-drawn comic of its day—at least from those that appeared in the white-owned papers. When she fought, Torchy Brown didn't fight the Nazis or the Tigermen from Mars, she fought everyday attitudes: white people are better than black, men are better than women. She fought people who are twisted up inside. "Torchy Brown" included a cast of laborers and jazz musicians; the background for the action was often a tenement or a shack; the sexuality was direct; the characters did a lot of praying and an awful lot of moralizing.

But then, "Torchy Brown" was also very different from the other black-drawn comics of its day. "There were two other strips at the *Courier* when I got there," Ormes recalls. "One was called 'Sonny Boy.' It was a family-related thing full of typical kids' mishaps. It would always end on the fourth frame with a splash or a bang.

"Then there was a strip drawn by a man named Holloway. Holloway was raggedy as a batch of sauerkraut, but he always had 'lottery winning numbers' hidden in the drawing. So he got fan mail from all over the place: 'I hit the number! I got it outa your cartoon!'

"Now there was a lot of news in the *Courier* about segregation and such, but these things never made it into the comics. They didn't deal with it at all.

"Me, I was always fighting battles. I was antiwar—I was anti-everything-that's-smelly."

In 1950 the Smith-Mann syndicate asked Ormes to start drawing "Torchy" again, this time as a four-color feature in the Sunday comics. Ormes was ready for the job: the *Defender* had been running her cartoon panel "Candy" (about a wily and sometimes nutty maidservant) but never paid her for it. In 1948 Ormes had created a black character doll—"America's first"—named Patty Jo, and by 1950 the doll was being manufactured by the Terri Lee Company of Lincoln, Nebraska, and sold in department stores across the country.

Ormes was ready for something new. She jumped at the Smith-Mann offer. But it had a hitch: the newspaper syndicate wanted to pay a

writer, John Messmann, to supply her with a story each week. "Messmann's idea of a surefire hit was some kind of mushy soap opera," Ormes recalls. "I had to convince him that Torchy was no moonstruck crybaby, and that she wouldn't perish between heartbreaks. I have never liked dreamy little women who can't hold their own. I argued with Messmann to make Torchy into the kind of woman I wanted. At first he made a few changes, then he said, 'Here, you do it!' The dialogue, frames, and balloons became my responsibility."

In 1955 John Sengstacke (the owner of the *Defender*) bought the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and stripped away its comic section, among other things. Jackie took clips of "Torchy" and the humorous "Patty Jo 'n' Ginger" over to the *Tribune*. "They sat down and just howled," she remembers. "We had a ball. Then I found out that the *Tribune* had a stable of seven people to turn out each cartoon. That's ridiculous. No one person did any of it. I said, oh dear, I can't handle that. I think there's no use asking for something you can't handle."

In the early 1970s the *Tribune* ran a comic feature starring a black woman, Friday Foster, by Lawrence and Longaron. Oddly enough, Friday—a go-go-booted girl photographer—gets into many of the same situations as Torchy, but she reacts very differently. When Friday is attacked by a giant snake in the jungle, for example, she drops her camera and screams. "Okay," she says, "maybe I'm acting like a baby! Who cares?! I just don't happen to dig your kind of embrace Mister Python!" Friday runs until she trips over a root, smacks her head against a tree, and falls unconscious.

In the 1960s Ormes concentrated on her paintings, working on oils, murals, and portraits until her hands stiffened up and she became unable to hold a brush.

She's lived alone since the death of her husband in 1978. Now she keeps her old comic strips and clips in the bottom drawer of a dresser. She doesn't look at them often. In fact it's hard for her to open the drawer. She tries to do it as I stand beside her, then giggles and stands back. "I'm so broken up, I can't do anything anymore. I'm arthritic. Rheumatoid. My hands are no good."

I open the drawer, and look at Ormes's hands. They're closed. The fingers are small and twisted together.

"I had surgery," Ormes turns her hands around. "Those are new knuckles implanted there. But all it did was open my hand up a little bit. I still can't move the fingers. I'm scared to death over hot things. I can't pick up heavy stuff. And I can't draw."

She smiles again, and starts to leaf through the bright pile of cartoons, each of which was numbered years ago. More than half the numbers are missing.

"I haven't saved a lot because it just looked like—oh it looked like it would never stop. That's how you think when you're busy. You think it'll never stop."

Ormes spreads a set of cartoons out on the dresser. "Here, look at these." They're squares of color. In each square the action's stopped. The figures stand with clouds of words around them—as if they're speaking in a very cold place. Their eyes burn. Their faces are animated, in the old sense of that word: they're filled with life—anima—breath and soul. On one page Torchy walks with a man into a lattice-framed garden, and they kiss; on another page she fights to keep her balance in a storm; on a third she laughs with a child—a nephew of the "prejudiced and bigoted Colonel Fuller."

The messages here, drawn in clear bold lines, can be gotten across even by a person with both fists closed:

The inner clock—the heart—weighs time and knows it. The clock on the wall just spins in circles.

We always struggle between reality and wish.

Disaster purges us of what doesn't matter.

Love fights against prejudice. Knowing the facts defeats it.

I ask Ormes what she thinks about growing old. She laughs, and looks across her airy animated room. "Oh I still go out and enjoy myself and look around," she says. "I like people—from all walks of life. People are folks and I get along with them. I'm an optimist. I always like to see the cheerier side of everything and everybody."

* * *

Torchy has found love with Earl Lester, the brilliant young jazz pianist. Earl's had an operation on his injured hands, but with Torchy beside him he's learned to play all over again. After a hard practice session, Torchy and Earl walk together in the garden by Earl's little house on Willow Street.

They pause beside a rose trellis. Torchy raises her arms about Earl's neck. He looks at her, and his lips find hers, sweet and warm. She replies with unashamed desire.

Inside the house, Earl's friend and teacher, King Ivory, watches them. King Ivory's face is serious, his heart heavy. "Yes, she's happy—really happy," the old musician thinks. "I just don't know how to tell her. I guess I can't yet. If you love Earl, Torchy, you'll give him up!"

What do King Ivory's words mean? What could they mean? Follow Torchy's heartbeats next week and every week in your Courier Comics!

Almanac

On Jan. 3, 1777, Gen. George Washington's Continental Army routed the British in the Battle of Princeton, N.J.

In 1876, the first private kindergarten in the United States to offer free instruction opened in the Florence, Mass., home of its founder, Samuel L. Hill.

In 1938, the March of Dimes campaign to fight infantile paralysis was organized. It was an outgrowth of President Franklin Roosevelt's Warm Springs Foundation.

In 1959, Alaska was admitted to the Union as the 49th state.

In 1961, the United States severed relations with Cuba.

In 1974, Kuwait announced a pact with Gulf Oil and British Petroleum for a 60 percent takeover of their operations in the Persian Gulf state.

In 1979, Gen. Alexander Haig announced that he would resign as NATO commander and leave the Army at the end of June.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter asked that the Senate refrain from any action on the SALT II treaty because of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.

Obituaries

Jackie Ormes, 68; drew comic strip 'Torchy'

By Kenan Heise

Jackie Ormes, 68, a former cartoonist and newspaper reporter, created the comics "Torchy," "Patti-Jo 'n' Ginger" and "Candy" that appeared in the Pittsburgh Courier, the Chicago Defender and many other newspapers.

She is believed to be the first and possibly the only black woman to have drawn her own syndicated comic strip.

A memorial service for Mrs. Ormes, a resident of Lake Meadows, will be held at 7:30 p.m. Friday in the chapel at 4114 S. Michigan Ave. She died Thursday in Michael Reese Medical Center.

"Most comic strip artists are men," said David Jackson in an Aug. 16 article in the Reader. "Most of the women in their strips do things like dangle from window ledges and scream for help, or look up at their heroes with round, admiring eyes.

" 'Torchy' Brown is a jump into the unexpected. Torchy Brown was a black comic-strip heroine drawn by a black woman," he wrote.

"When Torchy Brown appeared in the black-owned Pittsburgh Courier in 1937, she was the first woman to star in a black strip. . . . Torchy was smart, self-reliant and constantly butting up against bigotry and sexism," he wrote.

"Jackie's philosophy of life," said Mrs. Ormes' sister, Delores Towles, "was that you don't wait for someone to encourage you to do things. If you want to do it, then do it. She was that way since she was little in doing sculpting, painting, writing, drawing, whatever."

Mrs. Ormes was born in Pittsburgh and got her start in journalism by writing letters to the editor of the Courier. He asked her to cover fights while still a high school student. She then became a reporter, but loved to draw even more.

She got her opportunity and titled the comic strip "Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem."

In 1942, Mrs. Ormes and her husband, Earl, moved to Chicago, where he worked for Supreme Life Insurance Co. of America. She worked as a general assignment reporter for the Chicago Defender.

She drew other comic panels and strips, including "Patti-Jo 'n' Ginger."

Jackie Ormes

Her cartooning ended in the late 1960s when rheumatoid arthritis made drawing too difficult.

She was a member of the board of directors of the Du Sable Museum and was active in many other community projects.

Her sister is her only immediate survivor.