



Helicopter Holding Her Own: The Exceptional Life of Jackie Ormes

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a book review of a new picture book biography based on the life and times of Jackie Ormes, a woman who should be famous but isn't, and shares an instructional strategy that teachers can use with this, and other picture book biographies, to support student reading and learning in the classroom.

KEYWORDS

Picture book, biography, Jackie Ormes, story frames

What do Charles M. Schulz, Walt Disney, Berkeley Breathed, Al Capp, Gary Larson, and Ralph Steadman have in common? Individually and collectively, they are all famous nationally syndicated cartoonists. There are, of course, many other famous syndicated cartoonists, but these artists have been nationally and internationally recognized and continue to be so today.

Unfortunately, the same is not true for Jackie Ormes. Unlike other famous nationally syndicated cartoonists, she is not famous but should be. *Holding Her Own: The Exceptional Life of Jackie Ormes* is a new picture book that finally recognizes and pays tribute to a woman who rightfully deserves recognition and a place alongside the most famous nationally recognized cartoonists in history.

Not surprisingly, this is an award-winning picture book. So far, it has won the Robert F. Sibert Honor Book Award and the Coretta Scott King Book Award. Artfully written by Traci N. Todd and beautifully illustrated by Shannon Wright, it is a remarkable biography of the life and times of Jackie Ormes.

As a child, Jackie loved to paint. Later, she became a poet and storyteller. She dreamed of writing for the powerful and influential Black newspaper, *Pittsburgh Courier*. Jackie applied for a job with the newspaper and the editor assigned her as a reporter on boxing matches. She was successful writing columns in the newspaper about boxing and boxers, but preferred painting.

Jackie created a comic strip about Torchy Brown, a fictional character who dreams of moving from Mississippi to seek her fame and fortune in New York. This character was inspired by stories published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in which Black people left southern towns for the hope and promise of northern cities. Jackie wrote and illustrated the courageous ways Tory Brown confronted and overcame prejudice and fear.

Later, Jackie married Earl Ormes from Salem, Ohio. They moved to Chicago, and she started to write a column in the *Chicago Defender* newspaper. Her topic was not new. During World War II, many Black people from the south moved to northern cities in pursuit of the promise and hope of wartime jobs. Chicago was one of those cities.

After the war, however, the jobs disappeared. Picket lines and protest marches were organized. Many of these lines and marches were led by black women. Jackie didn't march. It wasn't her style. She protested in a very different way.

Jackie created an imaginary, but endearing cartoon character named Patty-Jo. The purpose of this character was to make people smile even though they were experiencing hard times. Patty-Jo was a national success. Jackie also was a successful fundraiser to solve social problems important to her. She collaborated with a toy company to make a beautiful doll named, of course, Patty-Jo. It was a huge success.

After 12 years, Jackie wrote and drew her last Patty Joe comic. She was offered other opportunities to write and draw comic strips but declined because she was a one woman show. She spent her remaining days painting because ultimately, she was an artist. Her legacy is echoed in her own words, “I always like to see the cheerier side of everything and everybody.”

In addition to a fascinating story, this picture book includes valuable information about Jackie Ormes in the form of a note from the author, a note from the artist, and selected bibliography for further reading. Most importantly, this picture book recognizes Jackie Ormes as a famous nationally syndicated cartoonist who should not be overlooked anymore.

Instructional Strategy

I am a teacher educator in literacy education. I always want my students to personally experience instructional strategies as part of classroom instruction. *Story Connections* is an effective strategy to use with biography because it focuses on story elements, especially characterization (Burke et al., 1995). More specifically, this strategy helps students see the concept of a story as consisting of the connections between story elements.

It is also based on the process of transmediation, a process in which students create personal meaning from one communication system (language, music, etc.) and recast that meaning in another communication system (art, drama, etc.). For example, learners explore aspects of meaning they may have captured in art that they were not aware of having understood in language. *Story Connections* uses transmediation by inviting students to respond using both writing and drawing.

Typically, before reading I introduce *Story Connections* by first displaying the strategy on the whiteboard or on a PowerPoint slide (see Appendix A). Then, I discuss the strategy with the class. The following is an example of my introduction and discussion.

“Today, we are going to learn about the exceptional life of Jackie Ormes. She is a woman who should be very famous but isn't. We're also going to use a new reading strategy called Story Connections. Everybody should already have a copy of the strategy. Here's what we will do. [I display the front cover of the picture book.] I'll start to read aloud the picture book and pause at episodic changes in the story. Remember, episodic changes can include the introduction of a new problem or character, a different setting, a change in time, etc. I'll pause at each episodic change for about 1-2 minutes. During that time, I want you to share your impressions and questions about the story with the class. After reading the entire story, I want each of us to spend time completing the *Story Connections* strategy. You can complete the strategy by responding to the first four questions in numerical order. Then, respond to the last two prompts by drawing, not writing, your response. After everybody has completed their story connection strategy, we will get into literature circles and discuss our responses with others. As a culminating event, I want you to flip the strategy over and write personal reflections on the whole experience. Questions? Let's begin.”

Moving Forward

I hope this short article will do for readers what this new picture book about Jackie Ormes did for me. It motivated me, taught me new information, and inspired me to read more picture book biographies about people who should be famous but are not. Happy reading!

Literature Cited

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References

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Author

Dr. William P. Bintz is Professor of Literacy Education in the School of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum, College of Education, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio. His academic background includes a B.A. in English from Christian Brothers College in Memphis, Tennessee, a M.A. in Educational Administration and Supervision from the Universidad de Puerto Rico in San Juan, Puerto, a M.A. in Secondary Education from the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma, and Ph.D. from Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. He has taught English Language Arts (ELA) in grades 9-12 in Chicago, Illinois, grades 7-12 in Aquadilla and San Juan, Puerto Rico, and grades 7-8 in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. In higher education, Dr. Bintz has been a Visiting Lecturer at the Armidale College of Advanced Education in Armidale, Australia. He has also been a faculty member teaching literacy courses at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, KY, James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and The University of Kentucky in Lexington, KY. Presently, he is a faculty member at Kent State University. His professional research interests involve conducting action research projects that investigate the use of picturebooks to teach reading comprehension across the curriculum, K-12, and explore the power and potential of postmodern picturebooks to reconceptualize traditional notions of a picturebook.

Appendix A: Story Connections Strategy

Name of Student:

Name of Book:

Story Connections

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| 1. What is the setting(s) of the story? | 2. What is the goal(s) of the main character? |
| 3. What problem(s) does the main character encounter? | 4. How is the problem(s) solved? |
| 4. Draw what the main character means to you. | 6. Draw what the story means to you. |