

# Walter and Poppy

The True Story of Walter White,  
America's Forgotten Civil Rights Leader,  
and Poppy Cannon, the Woman Who Loved Him

by Nava Atlas

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## Sample layouts

Following is a sample of preliminary layouts that include text and low-resolution images. You'll find sample spreads from several chapters, as well as a full and partial chapter. This is shown in two colors, though it would be possible to produce this in one color as well. Please note that these should not be considered final layouts. If further editing is to be done on the text, then it may lay out a bit differently with the images. In addition, comments and collaborative efforts on the design and images will also be taken into consideration when creating the final pages.

A spread from Chapter 2, "I Learn What I Am"



Walter's parents, Madeleine Harrison and George White, around the time they married, early 1880s.

three dozen other slaves. After his death, the owner passed the plantation on to his sister, and under her watch, a young doctor named Augustus Ware came to board at the house. Marie, one of Harrison and Dilsey's daughters, was among the four siblings who had been sold to this plantation. She caught Dr. Ware's eye and became his mistress. He set up separate housekeeping for her, and together they had four children, one of whom was Madeleine. Like her mother, she retained the Harrison surname.

Dr. Ware married a white woman and raised a second family with her, keeping Marie in a house next door. She tended to all the children, did the laundry and took care of all other housekeeping chores for both households. White neighbors turned a blind eye to this kind of arrangement. It was fairly common for prosperous plantation owners — presidents and statesmen among them — to have separate families with a favored female slave. Dr. Ware bequeathed a portion of his substantial wealth to his enslaved family, ensuring that Marie had the means to support their children after his death. After emancipation, Madeleine was able to attend Clark University in Atlanta, one of a small number of all-black colleges in the South.

Walter's father, George White, had a more ambiguous background. He was quite young when he and his enslaved parents were emancipated. His lineage may have been unclear even to himself, explaining why Walter's was ever in dispute. It was no easy feat for children of former slaves to attend college, but George managed to work his way into Atlanta University (an-



And that's why this platinum blond toddler (Walter, age three) was considered black by Southern standards.



A spread from Chapter 3, How Lillian Gruskin Became Poppy Cannon

The shifting fortunes of the Gruskins were reflected in their various name changes. It might seem trivial, but changing names, sometimes multiple times (as was the case for Poppy and her family), symbolized loss — of homeland, connections with relatives, and one’s very identity. The youngest Gruskin, Janet, eventually changed her already American name to Anne. Henrietta became an even less telling Marion. Together, she and Anne changed their last name to Whitney. The Whitneys were a wealthy and socially prominent American family, so this choice couldn’t have been random.

The four Gruskin children each wound up with completely altered first and last names, no longer linking them as a family unit. Feigi had become Cecilia, shortened to Ceci, or the odd nickname “Snips.” Even the common name Max wasn’t neutral enough for the family’s only son — he ended up



Poppy at age 14, bottom row center, graduating from the primary school for Jewish students in Kittaning, circa 1918. She then attended the public high school, where she developed the kind of drive and determination that marked her young adulthood.

renaming himself Alexander Mack. They did share one powerful bond — a desire to bury their Jewish roots and leave their fractured family behind. Poppy cultivated a fierce drive that would help her escape provincial life. She won the lead role in the senior play and was named valedictorian of her graduating class. Entering and winning essay contests was a sideline that put real money in her pockets. The themes of these competitions — such as extolling the benefits of life insurance — could hardly have mattered to a teenage girl in 1921. But no matter; if she could net twenty-five dollars (a tidy sum at the time), it was worth her effort.

The academic strivings of Poppy and her siblings were rewarded with scholarships to prestigious private colleges. Poppy’s took her to Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. Though academics were never a problem, she felt stifled and out of sync in the cloistered atmosphere of the all-girls college. Many of the students were from wealthier backgrounds completely unlike her own. Just a train ride away, New York City beckoned with its culture and diversity. After her junior year, she moved to Manhattan and continued her education at New York University. She graduated with an English degree (class of 1927), and cast her lot as an aspiring writer.

Before completing her studies, Poppy met Carl Cannon while working part-time for the New York Public Library. A quiet, studious librarian about eighteen years older than she, Carl was a U.S. Army veteran of World War I. Once married, she completed her transformation from Lillian Gruskin, with its Jewish overtones, to the perky, less revealing Poppy Cannon. For a young woman of twenty-one to marry in those days wasn’t unusual, though the age difference between her and Carl was notable.

Carl Cannon may have had some connection with (or perhaps worked at) the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture). Under the direction of Ernestine Rose, a prominent Jewish library specialist and social activist, the branch became Harlem’s most vibrant intellectual meeting place, with readings, lectures, exhibitions featuring black artists, and a collection that emphasized black literature. Miss Rose encouraged interracial participation

## Full Chapter 4: Southern Perils

Walter's relationship with the scholarly W.E.B. Du Bois was contentious from the start.



Diplomatic, talented James Weldon Johnson would become a mentor and close friend.

## Chapter 4

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# Southern Perils

Walter arrived in New York City to report for work as Assistant Secretary, the second-highest post in the NAACP's national office, on a frigid day in early 1918. Jim Johnson had arranged for him to room in a respectable boarding-house whose proprietor promised to provide comfort food to replace his mother's cooking:

My landlady was a retired caterer and one of the three or four best cooks whose food I have been privileged to taste. She could, for example, prepare ninety-two different soups, and I never did decide during all the years I lived at her house which of the ninety-two was most delicious.

Walter's youthful energy permeated the workplace, delighting many of his new colleagues. Richetta Randolph, the office manager, was something of a mother hen who took to Walter at once, teasing him gently about his tendency to blush when spoken to by attractive female employees. With the young ladies, she wasn't as indulgent. Treating the secretaries and stenographers like naughty schoolgirls, Miss Richards strode up and down the aisles scowling to make sure that knees were covered at all times by proper-length skirts.

William Edward Burghart (better known as W. E. B.) Du Bois took an immediate dislike to Walter. As one of the original founders of the NAACP and the editor of its monthly journal, *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*,



Walter proposed a stunningly audacious plan. He would infiltrate towns where lynchings had just taken place by posing as a white journalist. Then, he'd gather the facts and submit firsthand reports to major publications. His colleagues balked at what sounded like an incredibly dangerous, even preposterous idea. He might be lynched himself, they argued, if he were found out. Walter insisted. Having been born and raised in Georgia, his accent was "sufficiently Southern to allow me to talk with locals without arousing their suspicion that I was an outsider." A long and perilous phase in his career was about to begin. Walter wasn't naïve about what he was about to take on. "Dear Jim," he wrote to his mentor as his first journey drew near, "I understand this is dangerous. I take full responsibility if anything happens to me. And I hold you not liable in the event of my injury or death."

As a native Southerner, Walter was familiar with the deep suspicion and resentment local authorities had for outsiders in matters of culture and law. Though aware of the enormous risk he'd be taking by passing for white, he was eager to see if the ploy would work. His mission was to investigate the lynching of ten men and a pregnant young woman in a small town in Georgia. Having no real plan of action on the morning of his arrival, he dropped into the general store. He struck up a conversation with the shop owner about the weather, the outlook for crops, and the war in Europe. When the merchant let his guard down, Walter brought up the subject of the recent lynching. He found that it wasn't at all difficult to get the grisly facts from the merchant, who chuckled and slapped his thighs as he spilled the details of what had happened.

"Covering the nausea the story caused me as best I could, I slowly gained the whole story, with the names of the other participants. Among them were prosperous farmers, businessmen, bankers, newspaper reporters, and editors, and several law enforcement officers." Walter spent too much time poking around and asking questions of the townspeople, raising alarm. The locals began spreading the word that Walter was probably a federal agent from the Justice Department, and that something had to be done about him.

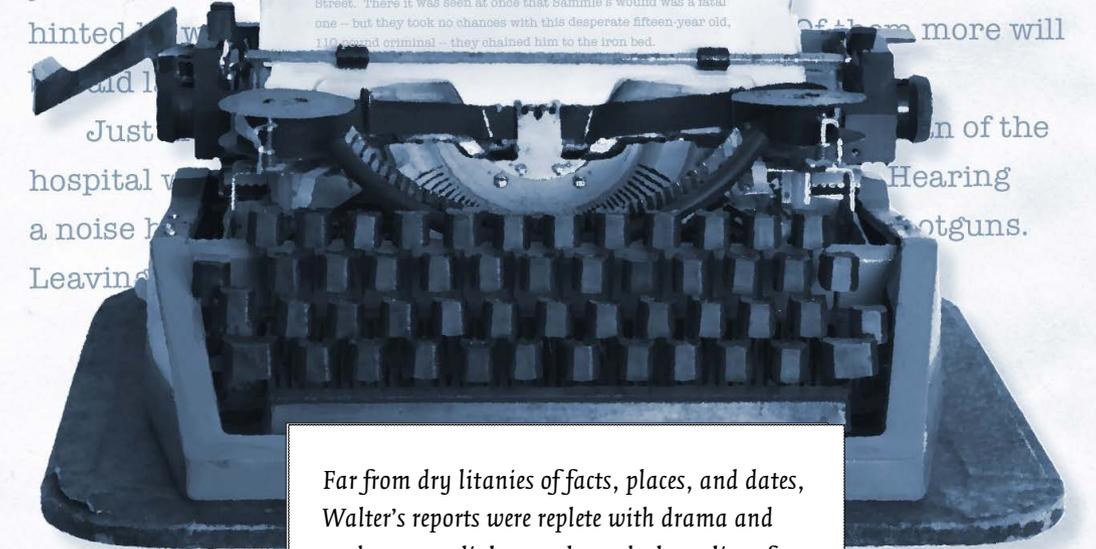
Sammie whipped out a gun and fired. The white man returned the fire, shooting Sammie through the stomach. Sammie dropped his gun and fled while the white man held his gun on Eugene until others roused by the shots came and took him to jail. All the rest of the rest of the night they sought Sammie. Early the next morning they found him in a field nearby, lying unconscious from the loss of blood and the raw, stinging cold. Sheriff Bob Briley carried him to the county jail but soon removed him to the Nashville General Hospital on Nance Street. There it was seen at once that Sammie's wound was a fatal one -- but they took no chances with this desperate fifteen-year old, 110 pound criminal -- they chained him to the iron bed.

Through Saturday, Sunday and Monday he lingered on while life slowly slipped away from him. On Sunday afternoon around two o'clock two white boys from Smyrna called at the hospital to see if Sammie was yet

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Far from dry litany of facts, places, and dates, Walter's reports were replete with drama and pathos, even dialog, to draw the brutality of mob violence with razor precision.

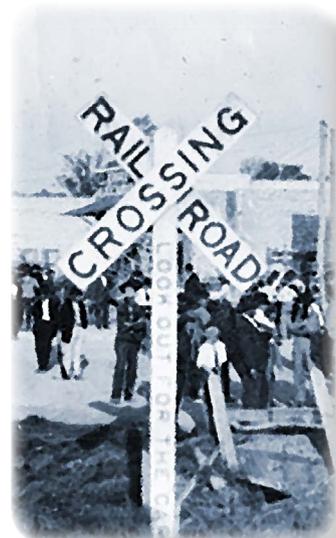
He didn't stay a minute longer once he realized he was the talk of the town.

Another early investigation in Phillips County, Arkansas, would for all time remain one of his most harrowing. An attempted uprising by black sharecroppers to protest exploitation by white land owners ended in a bloodbath. For their effort to form a union, scores of African-Americans were killed. Soon after it happened, Walter arrived in Little Rock and presented himself to the governor and other officials as a reporter from the *Chicago Daily News*. Unconcerned and hardly interested, they gave him the bare facts, which left him unsatisfied.

He traveled to Elaine, the scene of the massacre, and from the moment he stepped off the train, he felt he was being watched. Someone in Little Rock had doubted his story and sent word to Phillips County. Soon after he began pressing the local folks a little too insistently about the area's sharecropping and tenant farming system, suspicion was in the air. Rumors began to swirl that there was "a Negro in town passing for white." Walter feared that if he didn't leave at once, he might pay with his life. He dropped what he was doing and looked for the railroad tracks. Following them would be the most direct route to the station, and he ran as if his life depended on it — in this case, it did.



Walter in his late twenties, during the height of his investigative journeys



Elaine, Arkansas, 1919

I sped down the railroad tracks, keeping out of sight as much as was possible. Just as the train pulled in I climbed aboard from the side opposite the station platform. The conductor looked at me quizzically when I offered payment of my fare in cash. I explained to him that I had important business in Memphis that evening and had not time to buy a ticket.

"But you're leaving, mister, just when the fun is going to start," he told me.

Walter asked what was meant by "fun," and the conductor told him of the stranger in town — though "stranger" wasn't the word he used — who was going around passing for white. And when the locals got through with him, he told Walter, "he won't pass for white no more!" "No matter what the distance," Walter recalled, "I shall never take as long a train ride as that one seemed to be ... Late that evening in Memphis I had learned that the news had been circulated that I had been lynched in Arkansas that afternoon."

Walter submitted his formal investigative report to the NAACP detailing what came to be known as the Elaine Massacre of 1919. The articles he fashioned from it were published nationally, describing the carnage as "an extreme response by white landowners to black unionization." He also wrote a more personal view of the experience, "I Decline to be Lynched," which appeared first as an article in *The Crisis*. Going forward, Walter worked the story into numerous speeches. Given Walter's flair for dramatizing, his telling of the hairbreadth escape thrilled audiences, though just how true it was to how the event actually unfolded was for him alone to know.

Brushes with death and narrow escapes became less frequent as Walter

toughened with each investigation. He learned how to extract information from local residents without raising suspicion, though what he discovered on these journeys continued to sicken him. Lynching by any other name was torture — the mutilating, maiming, and burning of people while they were still alive. Its instruments were ropes, iron rods, pokers, machine guns, rifles, coal, wood kindling, and gasoline cans. The incidents weren't isolated. Most of the thousands of lynchings that had occurred weren't furtive acts carried out in the dark of night, but were carried out in the open. Some were spontaneous acts of vengeance and anger, while others were planned and even advertised in advance. Occasionally, they were held on Sunday afternoons so that white townspeople, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, could come directly from church services to witness the painful deaths. With extra forethought, organizers of lynch spectacles documented the grizzly killings in photographs, then printed and distributed them as souvenir postcards.

Hardening himself to the task, Walter dove into the pursuit wholeheartedly; the reception of his published reports encouraged him to keep at it. They were among the first stories distributed in national press that covered the subject of lynching with a sense of urgency.

Walter was often complimented on his courage, and he responded with uncharacteristic modesty. Lynchings weren't terribly difficult to investigate, he insisted, because their perpetrators were simple-minded idiots who were easily fooled. "Like most boastful people ... they just can't help but talk about their deeds to any person who manifests even the slightest interest in them ... They gabble on *ad infinitum*, apparently unable to keep from talking."

From the start of this pursuit, Walter reserved his most withering contempt for lynch mobs and their isolated communities, as displayed in this segment of his report from the 1919 Elaine Massacre.

Most lynchings take place in small towns and rural regions where the natives know practically nothing of what is going on outside their immediate neighborhoods. Newspapers, magazines, theaters, visitors, and other vehicles for the transmission of information and ideas are usually as strange among them as dry-point etchings.

In any American village, North or South, East or West, there is no problem which cannot be solved in half an hour by the morons who lounge about the village store. World peace, or the lack of it, sex, religion, the settlement of war debts, short skirts. Prohibition, the carryings-on of the younger generation ... all these controversial subjects are disposed of quickly and finally by the bucolic wise men. When to their isolation is added an emotional fixation such as the rural South has on the Negro ... one can see why no great amount of cleverness or courage is needed to acquire information in such a forlorn place about the latest lynching.

## Partial Chapter 5: New York Pleasures



It's a pity that there are no photographs together as adults of the stunning twin sisters who caught Poppy's eye on the night she met Walter. Here, Gladys and Madrenne are several months of age, circa 1893.

## Chapter 5

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### New York Pleasures

In 1920, Leah Gladys Powell joined the staff of the New York NAACP to work as a stenographer. The quiet, strikingly beautiful young woman came to the city two years earlier to pursue her dreams of singing and acting on stage. Born in Philadelphia and raised in Ithaca, New York, Gladys (who went by her middle name) came from a family whose background was a mixture of black, white, and Cherokee. She shared a café au lait complexion and delicately chiseled features with her parents, siblings, and twin sister, Madrenne. Her father, William Powell, was a concert baritone. It was from him that she inherited a love of music.

Stage roles in New York City were scarcer for actors of color, and as a result more competitive. Gladys relied on her clerical skills for a steady income as she pursued her goals, and succeeded in landing several small roles and chorus parts in Broadway musicals.

It took Walter the better part of a year to work up the courage to begin courting Gladys, and when he finally did, his colleagues were struck by the odd match. Mary Ovington was especially skeptical. The Association's "wealthy maiden aunt" described Gladys as "a statuesque creature; a bronze Galatea." Walter didn't fare as well in her estimation; in her eyes, he was a "small, insignificant-looking man with poor delivery."

Though she had no shortage of admirers, Gladys was dangerously close to ending up an old maid as she approached thirty. Though he was about the same age, Walter was still considered an eligible bachelor and



Gladys in her early twenties, shortly before moving to New York City from Philadelphia around 1918.

man about town. Learning of Walter and Gladys's engagement, Miss Ovington said, "Mr. White, being excitable himself, has incurred the proper contrast. He got his salary jacked up to \$3,000 by the board on the matrimonial prospect."

Though Walter and Gladys weren't considered an interracial couple, they certainly looked like one. Gladys worried that she was being mistaken for a black woman with a white lover when strangers stared at them in public. The couple adopted the conceit of speaking French to one another when they felt themselves being watched. They imagined that people whispering about them were wondering if they might be nobility from a French colony, or creative types from Paris. In any case, the ploy worked — stares turned less hostile when the sound of French filled the air. When Walter and Gladys were taken for tourists or visitors, Americans became more tolerant, because that meant they'd eventually leave.

Walter and Gladys married in early 1922. If either suspected that Gladys was expecting when they took their vows, they never said as much, though it may have explained the whirlwind courtship. After the hopeful couple — virtual strangers to one another — were joined in matrimony, Gladys quit her job and settled into a role as helpmate to her ambitious husband. Their first child, Jane, was born less than nine months later at Edgcombe Sanitarium, a small hospital cofounded by Walter's best friend, Dr. Louis Wright. The arrival of the lovely baby girl eased Gladys's loneliness and created a much-needed bond between her and Walter.

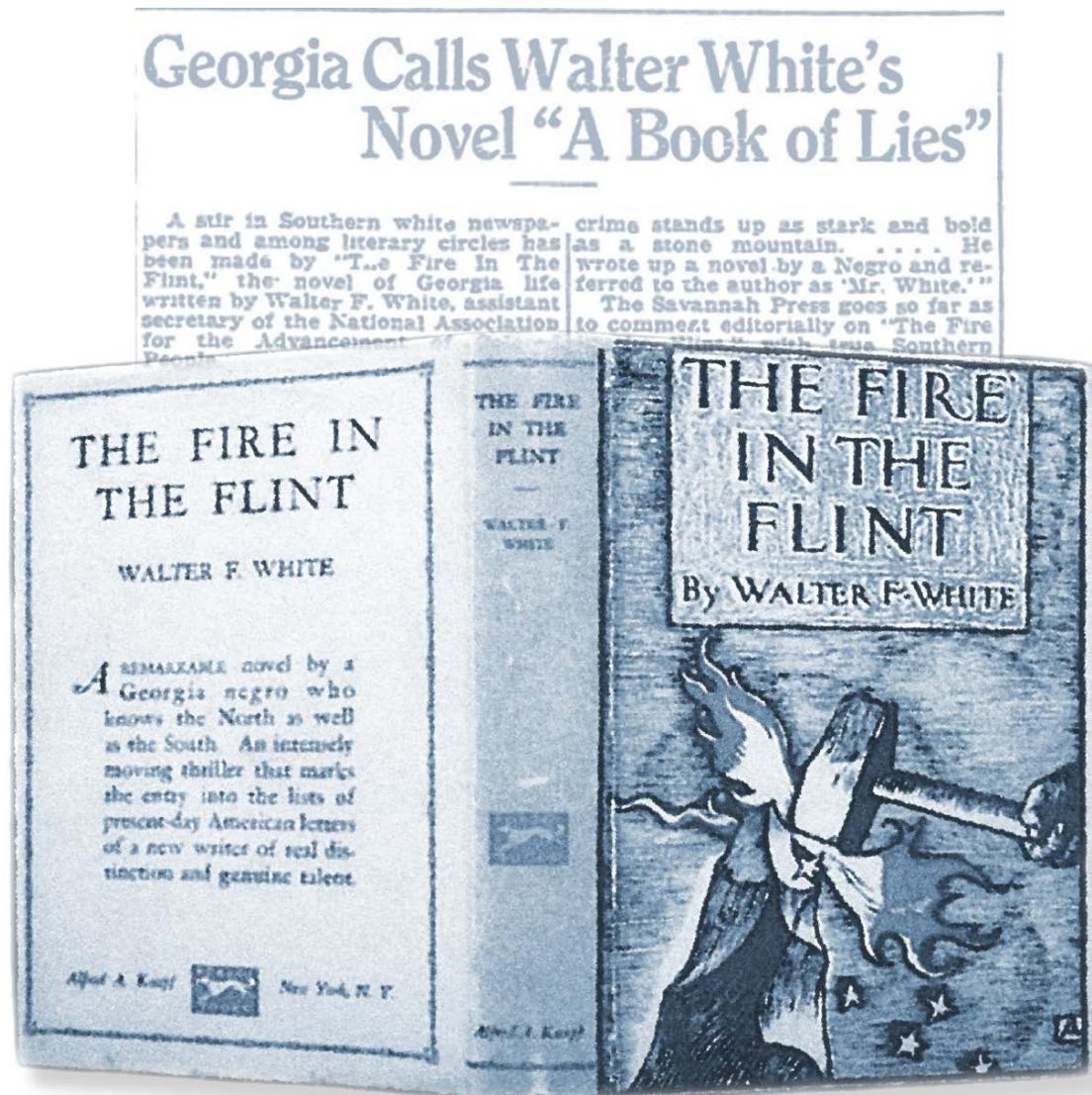
Gladys impressed others with her striking looks and outward serenity. Poet Langston Hughes considered her "the most beautiful brown woman in New York." Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein, an occasional guest at Black and White parties when visiting New York, considered Gladys the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen anywhere. Those who didn't know better found her aloof or haughty, misreading her shyness. Unlike Walter, who instantly befriended everyone he met, Gladys grew close to no one. Rarely uttering a word, she was completely overshadowed by her motor-mouthed, chain-smoking husband.

The life Gladys signed onto when she married the intensely gregarious Walter was far more public than suited her temperament. And it wasn't long before it became clear that "opposites attract" wasn't a solid foundation for a relationship. Walter worked long hours in the NAACP office when he wasn't traveling, and he was away nearly as much as he was home — off somewhere near or far to lecture, lobby in Washington D.C., or investigate yet another lynching.

Gladys made a last-ditch effort to jump-start her stage career when Jane was going on four years old. In 1926, she was cast in a small role in the musical *Deep River*. Like *Shuffle Along* and others of the time, it featured an all-black cast. These shows had become all the rage in Harlem theaters and on Broadway in the twenties, but *Deep River* wasn't one of the best. With a New Orleans setting, the show's voodoo themes and "quadroon balls" couldn't have sat well with Walter, who was dead-set against stereotyping in entertainment. To Gladys's disappointment, the show closed after a only a few weeks. Despite the short run, the experience thrilled her, and gave her a rare chance to showcase her gorgeous soprano voice and stunning stage presence. What Gladys may have been lacking was the single-minded determination needed to persevere in a highly competitive creative arena like theater. *Deep River* drew the final curtain on her aspirations, and she fully immersed herself in motherhood.

His wife may have set aside her creative dreams, but Walter still held out hope for his own. *The Fire in the Flint*, his first novel, was written in a twelve-

day, caffeine-fueled marathon and published in 1924. It told the story of Kenneth Harper, a talented black doctor who returned to his home town, a small Southern community, only to be lynched for events beyond his control. This protagonist was inspired by Dr. Wright, who had taken his own advice and followed Walter to New York City. The book was generally well received by critics, especially in Northern newspapers: “The novel has much of the epic quality in it, and much greatness,” wrote *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. That was gratifying, but what Walter preferred was controversy. In the



South, his book was often referred to as “the most cussed and discussed book of the year.”

Two years later, Walter brought out his second novel, *Flight*. An advertisement placed by Alfred A. Knopf describes how “Mr. White here writes of an aspect of Negro life hitherto untouched. Through the eyes of his Creole heroine, Mimi Daquin, who goes white and marries a millionaire, but finally returns to her own people, he discovers the true genius of the race.” Critiqued as somewhat stiff and labored, *Flight* wasn’t as successful as *The Fire in the Flint* (though a decade later it would find new life as a regional stage play). Once Walter established his own reputation as an author, he used his clout to promote other talented strivers of the New Negro Movement. He parlayed his growing influence to forge connections between his fellow artists and those who might publish their writings, exhibit their art, or stage their music and plays.

Walter continued to move back and forth from the rarefied atmosphere of the city’s New Negro Movement to Southern backwaters from which he reported on unfathomable violence and cruelty. In his adopted home in Harlem, he threw himself into the heady brew of parties, nightclubs, literary readings, concerts, and theater. For those involved in the movement (now more commonly referred to as the Harlem Renaissance), the arts promised to break racial barriers where legislation and agitation had thus far failed. Walter recalled:

Jim and Grace, his beautiful and charming wife, were responsible more than any others for the so-called Negro Renaissance of the early twenties. Frequently their apartment was the gathering place of writers, poets, singers, and men and women of the theater. Many an evening we talked until long after midnight. The color line was never drawn at Jim’s. It was there that many who were later to do much in wiping out the color line learned to know each other as fellow human beings and fellow artists without consciousness of race.

Whenever Walter met anyone he considered influential or important, he became their new best friend. From the start of his career, he never felt inferior to anyone more renowned, talented, or wealthy than himself. On the contrary, being accepted by accomplished people of any race reflected well on his own status. His courtship of philanthropists resulted in their funding grand publication parties, concerts, and art exhibits. He arranged fabulous fundraisers showcasing black talent while encouraging an interracial atmosphere of culture and class. Walter made sure to get recognition for his efforts, not content to be the man behind the scenes, as Jim Johnson preferred for himself.

Walter's role in promoting the stars of the Harlem Renaissance was so significant that he was referred to as one of the movement's "midwives." Yet, his name has largely faded from this circle of fame and influence, while the reputations of many of his contemporaries live on.



To the left of Walter, from top: Nella Larsen, Paul Robeson, and Bessie Smith. To the right, from top, Louis Armstrong, Zora Neale Hurston, and Duke Ellington,

Black musicians brought jazz and blues to the nightclub scene; playwrights and librettists crafted stories and musicals for the stage. Nearly every season featured a hit Broadway play with an all-black cast. Poetry collections and fiction by writers such as Countee Cullen, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and Langston Hughes were being published at an impressive clip as traditional publishers clamored for their work. The budding actor and singer Paul Robeson left a career in law to pursue his theatrical aspirations. Musical talents such as Josephine Baker, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Bessie Smith gained international fame, performing abroad as much or more than they did at home. While Harlem's venues were more open than others in America, it was a limited milieu for such huge talents. In Europe they found a more open, less racially divided climate. On European stages, African-American performers were artists first and foremost, not merely talented outliers symbolizing a beleaguered people.

Women of the New Negro Movement were encouraged in their creative endeavors, though like women of any community, they were often eclipsed by men. Nella Larsen was the first African-American female to receive a Guggenheim fellowship. Boisterous Zora Neale Hurston was not only a rising literary star but had also completed a degree in anthropology at Barnard College, where she'd been the only black student. Alice Dunbar-Nelson was as known for her accomplishments as a journalist and poet as for political



Josephine Baker, a friend of Walter's, was one of a number of African-American performers who found Europe more welcoming.

activism. A'Lelia Walker, known for her spectacular parties, oversaw the hair-care empire started by her late mother. Madame C. J. Walker had been not only the first female African-American millionaire, but one of the first American female millionaires of any race or background.

“Negrotarians” was a mostly affectionate, mildly ironic term coined by Zora Hurston to describe white people who were interested in black advancement — and at the same time, who wanted to enjoy the social scene. Some were activists like Mary Ovington one of the founders of the NAACP, or attorneys like Charles Studin and the Spingarn brothers, devoted to the cause of black advancement. Others were businessmen recognizing the profitability of being patrons of black artists. Still others were fellow artists of all creative stripes: George Gershwin must have found inspiration in Harlem’s music scene — his one-act jazz opera *Blue Monday* (later renamed *135th Street*) set the stage for the creation of *Porgy and Bess*. Heywood Broun and literary critic H. L. Mencken gathered pithy cultural observations for their columns. Alfred Knopf, among a number of other publishers, was keen to discover African-American literary talent. Writer and photographer Carl Van Vechten became the movement’s chief chronicler. White women authors including Dorothy Parker, Pearl Buck, and Zona Gale dropped in on Black and White parties and events for the same reason everyone else did — they were immensely entertaining and incredibly fun.

In 1927, not long after Gladys gave up the theater, the couple had a son they named Walter Carl Darrow White. “Carl” was for Carl Van Vechten, and “Darrow” was in honor of attorney Clarence Darrow, another one of Walter’s influential friends. There was a bit of gossip in Walter’s social circle over their having named the baby after two white men with egos to match his own. Walter Carl Darrow White, or even Walter White, Jr., might have been a cumbersome name to carry. The handsome baby boy was nicknamed “Pidge,” short for *le petit pigeon*, or “little pigeon” during the time that the family kept Walter company in southern France. For his Guggenheim fellowship, Walter’s plan was to write a multigenerational novel about an African-American family, and to work on a study of lynching. The stacks



Jessie Redmon Fauset, literary editor of *The Crisis*, was one of the many talented women with whom Walter worked to advance black literature.

Langston Hughes observed a blurring of boundaries: “Almost any Harlem Negro of any social importance at all would be able to say casually: ‘As I was remarking the other day to Heywood, meaning Heywood Broun, or ‘As I said to George,’ referring to George Gershwin.”



George Gershwin frequented Harlem parties. It’s been said that he gave his first private recital of “Rhapsody in Blue” on the Whites’ piano.



Rhapsody  
In Blue  
by  
George Gershwin

FOR THE FOLLOWING ARRANGEMENTS

| Instrument | Arrangement     | Price |
|------------|-----------------|-------|
| Piano      | George Gershwin | 1.00  |
| Piano      | Paul Simon      | 2.00  |
| Piano      | Sam             | 3.00  |
| Piano      | Sam             | 4.00  |
| Piano      | Sam             | 5.00  |
| Piano      | Sam             | 6.00  |
| Piano      | Sam             | 7.00  |
| Piano      | Sam             | 8.00  |
| Piano      | Sam             | 9.00  |
| Piano      | Sam             | 10.00 |

A spread from Chapter 9, Eat and Run

As the Depression gave way to an improving economy, the food industry began a concerted push to convince women that kitchen shortcuts were a must. Even housewives without outside jobs, it was none-too-subtly implied, were too busy to cook. There were floors to be waxed, and laundry whites to be made whiter. Kiddies needed to be carted around, and husbands returning from work hungry and parched had to be catered to.

Packaged products were how the good folks in food manufacturing had done the tedious prep work for the busy housewife or single gal (in those days, food preparation, with the exception of barbecue, was in women's domain), leaving it in each cook's hands to give the dish a personal touch. Ingredients that had been tenderly harvested from the kitchen garden were never, ever to be considered superior to those from a can or box, as long as the end result was presentable and vaguely palatable. At first, American housewives resisted the lure of canned and frozen vegetables, cake mixes, and pre-made meals. But through a barrage of repetition and marketing dollars, the food industry eventually won out.



Poppy was a gleeful if somewhat guileless participant in the campaign to ruin America's palate. It wasn't a matter of merely going along with it or compromising her principles as a way to make a living. She loved eating, adored thinking about food, and concocting with cans and packages — but cooking from scratch, not so much. To be fair, Poppy wasn't encouraging her fellow females to cut corners in the kitchen so they'd have more time to wax floors and cater to their families. Poppy believed that women had the right to work at meaningful jobs and do fascinating things, if that's what they wanted.



For a woman of that era, it was hard to avoid the bombardment of media messages that depicted a narrowing narrative for women's lives, with the idea that domestic bliss was the only true contentment.

Poppy wrote her Mademoiselle columns under noms de plume — first as “Snack,” and then, with a nod to her husband's surname, “Filip.” With his classic European training as a chef, what did Philippe make of his wife's culinary eccentricities? Her columns might have been a bit over the top, but since she produced them for nearly a decade, they must have resonated with the magazine's audience. She invented a culinary vocabulary that was unmistakably her own, calling for “a splotch of wine,” “a fleck of spice,” “a flutter of herbs,” “a drift of caraway seeds,” “a flurry of fresh coconut,”

A spread from Chapter 11, Passing for Happy



Jane was thrilled to make her Broadway debut so soon after completing her studies, but was uncomfortable with doors being opened for her because she was Walter White's daughter.

“It was not an easy household, and my mother would retreat from the challenge of living with a man like my father,” Jane admitted. With the perspective of years, Jane revealed that theirs was a tense household, and that taking pleasure in one another’s company was rare. She admitted that though she was deeply hurt at the time, she had misunderstood certain aspects of her parents’ divorce. “I have my suspicions about what happened but it’s not really for me to tell, for it was between my parents and it was their life and no one else’s ... you also have to be aware that the whole institution of marriage was quite different

in that era.” Her mother, she observed, blithely assumed the culturally preferred homemaker role and became used to self-denial. Walter just as unquestioningly accepted what Jane called Gladys’s “bondage” while taking for granted his own freedom to come and go at will.

Walter and Poppy’s abandoned cookbook project, already shelved for a decade, was cryptically alluded to in the article: “He loves good food and got together a cookbook which has recipes for many rare dishes and traces the crops and customs from which the dishes came.” Poppy’s name and her involvement in the project went unmentioned.

.....

Meanwhile, in her own snapshot of family life taken around the time that the *Ebony* story appeared, Poppy is surrounded by her children, all looking content in a cozy room. Taken toward the end of her increasingly unhappy marriage to Philippe, husband number three was absent from the picture. No photographs are to be found of Poppy and Philippe with the kids, nor even of the two of them together — a reflection on their tenuous relationship. Like Walter, Poppy was living out lies of her own — making a failing marriage look as if it was working, longing for the only man she’d ever really loved, and thinking of herself as a devoted mother. Just as Jane remembered her father as absent, Poppy was remembered by Cynthia as “a mother who was not around.”



A spread from Chapter 13, To Secure These Rights

Walter still held out hope that the project could be completed: “Excuses are useless, but we still hope to do the book when the pressure of time eases up,” he replied. “If, however, you want to cancel the contract, I would not want you to forego the advance of \$250. I would prefer paying that back.” The “pressure of time” never eased up. It turned out not to be the case, as Poppy thought — or claimed she thought — that Walter had returned the advance when he broke off with her years back.

A consummate name-dropper, Walter made sure that everyone was impressed with his collection of world-class friends. Poppy wasn’t nearly as famous as some of the others, but at the NAACP office, she was becoming known as his special friend, Mrs. Cannon. There was plenty of gossip about just how close they were. In his cluttered office, Walter displayed a large photo of Poppy looking her most fetching. She had signed the back “To Walter, a Gentle Knight.” It was the first of many times she would use Chaucer’s reference to chivalry to describe the love of her life.

Poppy’s little apartment must have been a convenient place to entertain Walter, and as their social circles began to overlap, she invited some of their mutual friends over to visit. One her favorites was Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, sister of Jawaharlal Nehru. Walter called her by her nickname — Nan, Hindu for “little sister.” Madame Nan



Poppy adored wearing festive hats.

Pandit, the first woman to have held a post in India’s cabinet, was on course to become ambassador to the United States and Mexico. In Poppy’s first invitation to her, she wrote: “Walter White tells me you might be able to come to my flat in Old Chelsea ... we could have a cocktail and maybe I’ll be able to persuade you and Walter to stay and sample some of my ‘hurry-up’ cooking.”

Poppy felt an immediate affinity with Nan Pandit. A dramatically attractive woman a few years older than herself, Nan dressed in vividly colored saris and gold-studded sandals with high platform heels. Walter told Poppy that even on the few occasions when she’d been jailed as a political pris-

oner, Nan was never less than perfectly groomed and dressed. Poppy discovered that Nan loved to cook, and carried her own collection of spices, condiments, and cooking utensils when she traveled the globe on political missions and lecture tours.

What a glimpse this was of a life they could share if only it were possible, the work they could do together, the mutual friends they’d enjoy spending time with. If only it didn’t seem so out of reach ...



Madame Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit enjoyed combining tradition and high fashion.

A spread from Chapter 15, Global Honeymoon



### Walter F. White Marries Advertising Woman

NEW DELHI, India, Aug. 13 (AP)—Walter F. White, 56, executive secretary for the National Association for Advancement of Colored People, said today he was married July 6 to Poppy Cannon, New York writer and advertising woman.

The couple flew to Europe after the ceremony in New York to join representatives of U. S. organizations making a world tour sponsored by the radio program "America's Town Meeting of the Air" (ABC).

White said his wife is not Negro. They are collecting material for a book on "The Color Line Around the World" which the couple will write as co-authors, White said.

White was divorced from his first wife, Leah Gladys Powell, whom he married in 1922.

### Negro Leader Takes White Bride

NEW DELHI, India, Aug. 13 (AP)—Walter F. White, American Negro author and executive secretary of the National Assn. for Advancement of Colored people, said today he and Poppy Cannon, a white woman, were married July 6 in New York.

White, 56, said he and his 42-year-old bride are gathering material for a book on racial discrimination which they will co-author. Mrs. White, who attended Vassar College, is a writer and former advertising executive. She now is food editor of "Mademoiselle" magazine.



Facing the Indian press had proven to be a trial by fire, so with a mixture of trepidation and excitement, Walter and Poppy proceeded with releasing the news of their marriage. The story sped across global newswires, landing around the world and interpreted blandly and sometimes a bit oddly in newspapers: "White, Author, Weds Graduate of Vassar," "Negro and Vassar Graduate Married," (never mind that Poppy received her degree from NYU) and "White Woman Marries Secretary of NAACP" were among the mild — or mildly inaccurate — headlines tacked on by wire services. Poppy was sometimes cast as a wealthy white socialite; other stories highlighted her looks. Some articles portrayed her as a knockout: "Walter White, NAACP Executive secretary on leave, announced Saturday that he had been married to the stunning and glamorous white advertising executive, Mrs. Poppy Cannon, since July 6." Reading between the lines, some of the stories left readers to wonder whether this temptress had seduced Walter White with money, position, and beauty.

The couple's official announcement also included news of their plan to research and write a new book titled *The Color Line Around the World*. "It will not be the first attempted collaboration between the talented couple," reported some of the wire stories. "More than a decade ago, Mr. White and Mrs. Cannon, close friends for nearly twenty years, started collecting material for an authoritative cookbook, but the project was never completed."

Poppy was excited by the prospect of collaborating on another book with Walter. For her part, she planned to gather observations on the condition of women around the world. She was eager to explore how food was affected by politics and upheaval. In her list of ideas she mused, "Every scrambling population in the past has brought about interesting variations in food. In Sweden, for instance, they serve a stuffed cabbage leaf called Dolma which is a direct steal from the Turkish recipe, and which dates back to the days of Charles I and his military campaigns in the Middle East." Concluding with a typical Poppy-ism, she noted, "Right now I dare say ... I have heard that Spam and Heinz ketchup are among the accessories to the famous Rice Tavel served with such a ceremony in Java!" *The Color Line Around the World*

A spread from Chapter 17, The Newlyweds

The clothing that Poppy's sister created was elegant and affordable, ensuring her place as one of the most successful midcentury fashion designers.

Poppy's sister Anne, in the intervening years, had become Anne Fogarty, the renowned women's clothing designer. Her stature in the world of fashion far eclipsed her older sister's accomplishments in food journalism and advertising. She and her artist husband Tom Fogarty were searching for a house in the city. After touring a compact attached house on East 68th Street, Anne urged Poppy to take a look: "I knew right away it was not for us but perfect for you." Tempted by the prospect of a home office, a bigger kitchen, more space for entertaining, and room for the kids, Poppy and Walter agreed that it was the right house in the right location.

Securing a mortgage was another matter. A number of banks turned down their application. It's hard to know whether it was because of their stretched finances or that they were considered an interracial couple. After all, this was New York City, where attitudes were changing rapidly. Walter was still paying for the Edgecombe Avenue apartment occupied by Gladys and Jane, and other financial obligations resulting from his divorce. Even Poppy's children couldn't help but notice his lack of financial sense, and teased him in good nature that he was "allergic to money."

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After the couple exhausted other options, a fabulously wealthy friend of Walter's helped them arrange financing, and the house became theirs.

The house did prove perfect for them. The kitchen wasn't as large as Poppy would have liked, but provided adequate space for her culinary knickknacks. Collected over the years from her travels, they included santos from Puerto Rico, a string of dried eggplants from Syria, a handmade colander, tiny okra on a string, a Swedish betrothal bundle, a gigantic Hungarian noodle strainer, a ravioli cutter, Turkish coffee pots, a Japanese fish-shaped dish, and spices from far and wide arranged alphabetically. A small terrace just off the kitchen was just right for a potted herb garden. For the art of dressing up prepared foods — sauces started with canned soups, especially — there was still no better topping than a "flurry" of fresh herbs.



Best of all, they now had a dining room that would accommodate large dinner parties. Poppy adored proving her adage that food was the best "bringer-together" of people. "Walter and I have been talking about food since the first time we met," she liked to tell guests. When it goes beyond providing sustenance, food can be a way to show love, but for Poppy, it was theater above all. Nothing could be more dramatic than setting dishes like Crepes Suzette (or anything that could be doused in brandy) aflame at the table. Poppy rarely missed a chance to set food on fire — she was a culinary pyromaniac.

A spread from Chapter 20, A Gentle Knight

Walter's funeral took place on the following Thursday in Harlem, just like he'd envisioned. It was ceremony fit for a statesman — even royalty. Throngs of people, estimated at between two and three thousand, crowded the streets leading to St. Martin's Episcopal Church. Loudspeakers carried the service to the overflow crowds in the street. Mourners waited patiently for hours to file past the open casket, from the working people who always had Walter's respect to the members of Congress that he'd lobbied and befriended. Civil rights activists that he had fought alongside (and had sometimes fought with) were there by the dozens.



Publications from coast to coast ran reverent tributes, many of them noting Walter's ambiguous racial heritage. The *New York Times* obituary said that "only five thirty-seconds of his ancestry was Negro," a fraction that appeared nowhere else, and that even Walter would have acknowledged was overestimated. In a glowing tribute *The Pittsburgh Courier* characterized Walter as

"biologically white" and that he was a "unique man, the creation of a particular period in history ... We shall scarcely see his like again." Some tributes alluded to the stormy fights Walter had been embroiled in, both within and without the NAACP. Though it had become old news, his divorce, remarriage, and the ensuing controversy were frequently recalled: "An air of drama, fit for a Hollywood scenario writer, surrounded the merger of Mr. White and Poppy Cannon," wrote the *Courier*.

Throughout the funeral, Poppy was in the kind of numb shock that comes before grief sets in. Cynthia and Alf stayed close to her side, almost as if they were propping her up by the elbows. Walter's children attended

The April 1955 issue of *The Crisis* would sum up the outpouring of tributes: "Thus came to an end the spectacular career of the greatest campaigner for Negro rights thus far this century. Walter White kept everlastingly at the job...day and night, Sunday and holiday, on vacation and at his desk, in America and abroad. His tongue was never silent, his pen never inactive."

