

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 9: Rudolph Fisher (1897-1934)

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(Source: [RF: The Black Renaissance in Washington, DC](#))

Primary Works

Novels: *The Walls of Jericho*, 1928; *The Conjure Man Dies: A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem*, 1932.

Periodical Publication: "The City of Refuge," 1925; "South Lingers On," 1925; "Ringtail," 1925; "High Yaller," 1925; "The Backslider," 1927; "The Caucasian Storms Harlem," 1927; "Miss Cynthie," 1933.

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| [Top](#) | Rudolph Fisher (1897-1934): A Brief Literary Biography

A Student Project by Mary-Yvonne Martin

Keep it real. This is the philosophy of the American novelist, essayist, critic, dramatist, conversationalist, music arranger, short story writer, civic leader and volunteer Rudolph Fisher. Amazing accomplishments for a man who only wrote *part-time*, while maintaining his bread and butter job as a doctor of *roentgenology* (the diagnostic and therapeutic uses of x-rays) (Gates 1775). It is noted in the Norton Anthology edition of African American Literature that "by many accounts [Fisher is] probably the most gifted member of the Harlem Renaissance" (1174).

On May 9, 1897 in Washington D. C., the middle-class family of Pastor John Wesley Fisher and his wife, Glendora Williamson Fisher welcome their new son Rudolph John Chauncey Fisher into the world (Harris 86). The Fishers move to Providence, Rhode Island where the young Fisher, nicknamed *Bud*, and his two siblings attend schools. After graduating from Classical High School in 1915 with honors (Gates 1175), Fisher enters Brown University as a James Manning and Francis Wayland Scholar (Harris 86), studying English and then Biology.

During his college years Fisher becomes a successful orator. Competing and winning the Caesar Misch Premium (in German) his freshman year, the Carpenter Prize Speaking Contest his sophomore year, and then later an inter-collegiate contest of public speaking at Harvard University (87). These achievements lead to his listing as Class Orator in the 1919 Class Day Program at Brown University, as well as the notation of him delivering his oration, *The Emancipation of Science* (87). Fisher graduates Phi Beta Kappa, Delta Sigma Rho, Sigma Xi (Gates 1175), earning his B. A. and M. A. in 1919 and 1920, respectively (Barksdale 590).

Fisher continues his education at Howard University where he earns his medical doctor's degree in 1924, graduating summa cum laude (Poupard 209). He briefly interns at Howard

University's Freedman General Hospital before going onto Columbia University where he advances both his biological research and his specialized interest in roentgenology. He will teach embryology at Howard University Medical School through the years of 1920 to 1924 (Harris 87).

It is during this time that Fisher publishes his first literary work, *The City of Refuge*, in the February issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* (Lewis 110). He and his novel are an immediate success. This proves to be an important moment for the community of Black writers, because it is the first literary work to be published in the *Atlantic* by one of "the young writers of the New Negro Movement" (Harris 86). Soon Fisher becomes the buzz of Harlem as the Black author who has finally punctured through the crystal White ceiling. Impressed by *Refuge* and Fisher's other short story, *High Yaller*, author Walter White sends Fisher a letter informing him that he plans to pass along both of these works and spread the word about Fisher and his writing (Lewis 139). *Yaller* is awarded "the Amy Springarn fiction contest in *Crisis Magazine* in 1925" (Poupard 212).

Along with *Atlantic*, Fisher contributes articles to *McClure's*, *The Survey*, *Redbook*, *Junior Red Cross News*, *Metropolitan*, *Story*, *The Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and a variety of Black published newspapers. He also finds time to work at the New York Department of Health in the x-ray department (Barksdale 590), as well as writing for medical journals in the fields of his expertise (Poupard 202).

Fisher meets and marries Jane Ryder, a Washington, D. C. grade-school teacher, on September 22, 1924 (Harris 87). He and his bride soon move to New York City where at the National Research Council at Columbia University's College of Physician and Surgeons he becomes a fellow (87). For two years he will study the fields of pathology, roentgenology, and bacteriology before opening his own practice in Harlem in 1927 (Gates 1775). Within these years the Fishers first and only child, Hugh, is born in 1926. Fisher quickly christens his baby boy with the nickname, "the new Negro" (Black).

Fisher does not appear to be a tormented writer as so many other writers before, during, and since him. In fact, *The Walls of Jericho* published in 1928 is written "on a bet" (Poupard 206). A challenge is presented to him that he cannot develop and "blend the extremes of Harlem society into a single cohesive story successfully" (206). Fisher not only takes on this challenge and wins the bet, he also finds an audience with the literary heavyweights such as W. E. B. Du Bois who normally objects to Fisher's depiction and treatment of Blacks as lower-class citizens. Du Bois concedes in his 1928 review of *Jericho* that the novel is "a strong, long, interesting step up from the works of Claude McKay and Carl Van Vechten" (Ligotti 203).

However, there does appear to be a feeling of angst and pull between Fisher's medical and writing professions. He conveys these concerns in letters to Carl Van Vechten, "I am Moses on the mount, gazing hopelessly into the promised land" (Harris 87). He also writes in the 1927 August issue of *McClure's*, "A.B. degree . . . in '19 urged me into science; and so I studied medicine to heal my fractured ambition. An M.D. in '24 saved my life by permitting me to write both fiction and articles for literary journals and research reports for the scientific journals" (87).

In 1929, Fisher takes a position at the New York City Health Department as a roentgenologist. In 1931, he begins serving in the 369th Infantry as a lieutenant. He participates as a committee member at the YMCA and as a lecturer at

the New York Public Library both located in 135th street in Harlem (92).

| [Top](#) | Fisher's second novel *The Conjure-Man Dies: A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem* is published in 1932. This novel is celebrated as the first detective novel written by an American Black author (Barksdale 590). At the time of his death he is developing the novel into a play. However, because of his untimely death the revisions will be left to his colleagues Countee Cullen and Arna Bonatemp, and then posthumously produced on the stage as *The Conjure-Man Dies* in 1936. The play is a replacement for the scheduled play *Hamlet* on the stage of the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem for the Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre Project (Woll 204). *Conjure* continues to find an audience on the stage, having been performed as recently as January and February of this year at Woodie King, Jr.'s New Federal Theatre in Manhattan (Newsletter). Hollywood is even calling on Fisher and his stage production for the big screen. Paramount Pictures is now in production of *Conjure* with film actor Morgan Freeman set to play Dr. Archer (Entertainment).

The distinguishing characteristics of Fisher from his contemporaries are that instead of becoming a reactionary writer to the racial stereotyping of Blacks, he writes with "an unbiased, though sympathetic detachment" (Poupard 202). He allows his readers to develop their own judgements, moral and otherwise. In the short story *Miss Cynthia*, the title character travels by train to visit her grandson, David, in New York City. Although David is not a malicious character and he dearly loves his grandmother, he does deceive her into falsely believing that he is a well-respected and affluent citizen. Miss Cynthia envisions David as a doctor or at the very least an *undertaker*. Upon her arrival, she learns that he is actually a cabaret entertainer who is secure in wealth, but not all that respected. The story of *Miss Cynthia* ends with both David offering the truth and his grandmother accepting it without further judgement.

It is a light-hearted tale with a strong message of the balancing of the old- and new-worldviews of the cultural and caste differences.

One of the main differences in Fisher's writing with his Black contemporaries is that he chooses to direct his satire "at the black community," instead of at the White community. Although this proves to become a heated debate between his critics, most of whom, however, find this to be "a skillful and sophisticated innovation" (Poupard 203). "Fisher exploits the Black population in that his characters are mostly Black," Isaac Anderson notes in his review of Fisher's novel *Conjure* (203). The fact that Fisher does make use of his Black characters is better understood after reading his essay *The Caucasian Storms Harlem* published in 1927 where Fisher records his observations of the Harlem he revisits after a five-year absence, "Outsiders know nothing of Harlem life as it really is. What one sees in a night club or dance hall is nothing, doesn't scratch the surface&endash;is in fact, presented solely for the eyes of the outsider" (Poupard 203).

Fisher tries his hand at children's stories in March 1932 with the short story *Ezekiel* in the *Junior Red Cross News*. The sequel *Ezekiel Learns* will follow in the same publication in the February 1933 issue. A trilogy is planned, but before he can complete it he will die (Harris 94). Fisher will also leave four more manuscripts, which are currently located at Brown University: *Across the Airshaft*, *The Lost Love Blues*, *The Man Who Passed* (also known as *False Face*, and *The Lindy Hop* (94).

Fisher often portrays stock characters in his stories as is noted previously with the *Ezekiel* series. *Miss Cynthia* travels through two short stories, *Miss Cynthia* and *Guardian of the Law* (94) and Perry Dart follows the mysteries in *Conjure* and then again in *John Archer's Nose* (95).

Writer and historian David Levering Lewis writes that on December 26, 1934, physician and writer Rudolph Fisher dies at the age of thirty-seven from intestinal cancer "caused by his own x-ray machines" (304). Officers from 369th Infantry Regiment attend, along with scores of others within Harlem and beyond, while Jules Bledsoe sings (304). Upon hearing of his loss, Zora Neal Hurston is reported as saying, "the world has lost a genius" (Rud-Canon).

In the course of his short life Fisher publishes two novels, a play, several sketches, numerous short stories, and many essays. His writing style has been compared to contemporary American writers such as Jean Toomer and Ring Lardner (Poupard 202). In his 1974 essay, Arthur P. Davis examines Fisher's writing style as one that is "clear and uncomplicated" (208). Davis adds that Fisher has a definite understanding of Blacks and the life they lead in Harlem., and thus he is able to grasp a *comedic realism* often unseen in many of his contemporaries.

In my opinion the phrase *Renaissance Man* was coined for Rudolph Fisher. He accomplished so much in such a short time. I can't help but wonder if, in fact, he was alive today what else could he achieve since it appears he has done it all? Simply amazing, this *Renaissance Man*! In my research I found many passages from Fisher's writing that are worth mentioning. However, the following quote seems to display the kind of man that Fisher was:

"Whatever you do, do like a church steeple: aim high and go straight" (Newman 383).

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1897, 05/09 - Rudolph Fisher is born

1915 - Graduates from high school with honors

1919/1920 - Graduates from Brown University

1920 thru 1924 - Teaches at Howard University Medical School

1924 - Graduates from Howard University Medical School

- Marries Jane Ryder

1925 - *City of Refuge* is published

- Wins Springarn fiction contest

1926 - Son, Hugh, is born

1927 - Opens private practice

1928 - *Walls of Jericho* is published

1932 - *The Conjure-Man Dies: A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem* is published

1934, 12/26 - Dies

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