

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

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## Chapter 9: Walter White (1893-1955)

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*Although of only partial African ancestry, NAACP leader Walter White chose to be recognized as an African American.*  
(Schomburg Center, NY Public Library)

"White's life stands as testimony to what can be achieved "in the tradition of militant democracy, seeking to enforce existing laws which promise equality and to secure further legislation in protection of the civil rights of all." - Morroe Berger, *New York Times*

### Major Awards

Guggenheim Fellowship Grant (1926), Spingarn Medal from NAACP (1937), the Sir James Jeans Award from New London Junior College (1943), the Haitian Order of Honor and Merit (1950), the Star of Ethiopia (1953) and an Honorary Doctor of Law Degrees from Howard University (1939) and Atlanta University (1943).

### Primary Works

*The Fire in the Flint* (1924), *Flight* (1926), *The American Negro and His Problems* (1927), *The Negro's Contribution to American Culture* (1927), *Rape and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (1929), *What Caused the Detroit Riot?* (1943), *A Rising Wind: A Report on the Negro Soldier in the European Theatre of War* (1945), *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (1948), *How Far the Promised Land?* (1955).

## Selected Bibliography 1980-Present

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Nelson, Emmanuel S. ed. *African American Authors, 1745-1945: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000.

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### A Student Project by Merrily Kelley

Walter Francis White was born on July 1, 1893, in Atlanta, Georgia. White was the son of George and Madeline White. From the very beginning of his life, White was indeed "white" although he contained African American blood. Both of his parents were light skinned, and White himself had blond hair and blue eyes. In White's autobiography *A Man Called White* (1948), White related many instances when his appearance caused problems in predominantly "black" neighborhoods. Many times, he was attacked or almost attacked by blacks that thought he was just another white man looking for trouble. Yet, his ability to "pass" as a white man would prove very helpful later in his life.

Walter White had a pleasant childhood with his father working as a mail collector for the post-office in Atlanta. White's family was not wealthy but lived a relatively comfortable life. "In 1906, when Walter was thirteen, a terrible riot broke out in Atlanta, the result of a number of events: the late summer's heat; a bitterly contested gubernatorial campaign; an inflammatory series of headline stories about brutal attacks by black men on white woman" (4). During this riot, White's house was attacked by men intent on hurting the "nigger mail carrier" and evicting him from the house that was "too nice for a nigger". White said this about the attack:

" In the flickering light the mob swayed, paused, and began to flow toward us. In that instant there opened within me a great awareness: I knew then who I was. I was a Negro, a human being with an invisible pigmentation which marked me a person to be hunted, hanged, abused discriminated against, kept in poverty, and ignorance, in order that those whose sin was white would have readily at hand a proof patent and inclusive, accessible to the moron and the idiot as well as to the wise man and the genius. No matter how low a white man fell, he could always hold fast to the smug conviction that he was superior to two-thirds of the world's population, for those two-thirds were not white."

White family's survived the riot and their life became stable once again. White Father was a very religious man and held Bible sessions in their parlor every Sunday morning. His mother was meticulous and demanded neatness from every member of her family. The family was very close although there were seven children, five girls and two boys. Ironically, the family home was situated right on the border between the "white" and "black" sections of town, adding to confusion of which world they actually fit in.

When Walter White decided to attend college, he received much support from his father and his mother. His father was unable to finish college because of his father's and mother's death his freshman year, but wanted to have his children to have the chance to attend. His mother had been a teacher and had always stressed education. From a young age, White had enjoyed reading. By the time, he was thirteen; he had read "Shakespeare, Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, and some other Harvard Classics." (5). From 1908, White attended public school and Atlanta University, "because the schools opened for black children were so inferior, a student hoping to attend an institution of higher learning did his secondary work at that institution before entering the college program." (5). Not much is known of White's college years, only that he received his B.A. in 1916, from Atlanta University. It has also been learned the White was student body president his senior year. During his senior year, White prepared "simple mathematical tables dealing with net and differed premiums and ... actuarial tables required simply care and the following formulae." (5). Because of this work, White was offered a clerical position at the Standard Life Insurance Company right after he graduated. During the summers White also worked as a Salesman for the company and out of these experiences came the material for his first novel, *The Fire in the Flint* (1924).

White was always mindful of civic concerns and when the funding for Black schools began to get cut, White and several other men decided to petition the NAACP. White was to write the letter, explaining that after eighth grade had already been cut, the government in Atlanta was threatening to cut seventh grade as well. After several meetings with the school board and the support of the NAACP, the schools were able to keep seventh grade. Because of this issue, the Atlanta chapter of the NAACP was formed and White was elected its secretary. After a latter meeting, which James Weldon Johnson attended, in which White had given an impromptu speech, the national office of the NAACP offered White the job of assistant secretary in the New York office. The decision to take the job was a hard one for White. First, because it paid less than he was making at the Insurance Company, second, because it meant the White had to leave Georgia. After the advice of his father and another close friend Dr. Louis Wright, White moved to New York and started at his position on January 13, 1918.

Quite by accident, White began investigating lynchings. "When James McIlherron, a black sharecropper in still Springs, Tennessee, was burned to death by a lynch mob after he had defended himself from a beating by his employer, White asked Johnson permission to go to Tennessee and investigate firsthand what had happened. Posing as a white man interested in buying some cotton land nearby, White insinuated himself into the local gossip circle at the country store, and by feigning indifference, goaded the locals into telling all." (7). After returning to New York, White published the facts he had found, and started his career of investigating lynchings. This work was not easy and always dangerous. While pretending to be a white reporter for the *Chicago Daily News*, White was almost lynched himself. White wrote James Weldon Johnson on October 13, 1919, from his hotel in Little Rock:

"I have just been informed that if I go to Helena [the country seat where the men are being held] tomorrow, I may meet with foul play. I leave here at seven-tomorrow morning for Helena. If you haven't received a telegram from me by Thursday night, it might be well for you to start a discreet inquiry... As for myself, I don't believe there is going to any trouble and I can get away with it." (7).

White did "get away with it", narrowly. After being warned by an African American in Helena, that he was about to be caught, White took the first train out of Helena. The conductor told White that men inside the city were going to teach a "yellow nigger" who was passing as a "white" man a lesson. The conductor had no idea he was talking to the intended victim.

White also worked on different court cases fought by the NAACP. One of the most famous cases was one, which involved the family of Dr. Osian Sweet, a black physician in Detroit. Dr. Sweet and his family moved into an all white neighborhood on September 8, 1925. The first night an angry mob surrounded the house and the police were called, but did not respond. The second night another mob formed and this time shots were fired. The Sweets returned fire and the police arrested them. White had this to say of the conflict:

"If the Sweets were not given adequate legal defense, if the ancient Anglo- Saxon principle that "a man's home is his castle" were not made more applicable to Negroes as well as to others, we knew that other and even more determined attacks would be made upon the houses of Negroes throughout the country. we are equally convinced that legal affirmation that a Negro had the right to defend his home against mob assault would serve to deter any other mobs in Detroit and elsewhere." (9).

There were two cases filled for the Sweet case. The first ended in a mistrial and the second cleared the men of guilt. The first case cost the NAACP \$22,000. The case cost more than money, as it cost Mrs. Sweet and Henry, a brother-in-law, both died of tuberculosis that they contracted from colds caught in prison. In the end, the NAACP had gained a little ground.

White also had an extensive career as a public speaker, part of the routine of being an officer with the NAACP. In 1918, White traveled over 12,000 miles and in 1919, he traveled over 26,000 miles and made eight-six speeches. The audiences varied from PTA meetings to groups of college students. White was popular wherever he spoke and was able to raise money for the NAACP.

White was even able to find love through his association with the NAACP. In 1922, he married Leah Gladys Powell, a member of the NAACP staff. In 1924, *Alfred A. Knopf published The Fire in the Flint*. In 1926, *Flight*, his second and last novel was published. Both were received well by the public, although his first novel sold more copies. White also wrote many articles for the *American Mercury* and the *Century* magazines. In 1926, he began a column for the *Pittsburgh Courier* an influential African American newspaper. In addition, In 1926 White was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship. After receiving the fellowship, Gladys and their two children sailed for France. While there White wrote his study of lynchings, *Rope and Faggot: The Biography of Judge Lynch*. For this book, he won the Harmon Medal. White also won the Spigarn Medal in 1937.

In 1931, when James Weldon Johnson stepped down in his position, White took it and served the NAACP as executive

secretary for the rest of his life. White took great care of the finances of the association and kept careful records. White assisted with all the issues of the NAACP and continued to write until he died in March 21, 1955.

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