

The

COMPLETE FICTION OF



Nella

LARSEN

PASSING, QUICKSAND,
and THE STORIES

"Discovering THE COMPLETE FICTION OF NELLA LARSEN is like finding lost money with no name on it. One can enjoy it with delight and share it without guilt."

—Maya Angelou

ORIGINALLY TITLED AN INTIMATION OF THINGS DISTANT

The
Complete Fiction of
Nella Larsen



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Nella Larsen



Edited and with an introduction by Charles R. Larson

With a foreword by Marita Golden



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Foreword

Nella Larsen's heroines are emotional nomads, women whose intelligence and genius for rebellion make them ill suited for the proscribed existence ordained by whites for blacks in 1920s and '30s segregated America. No tragic mulattoes here. These prim, proper colored ladies bristle with discontent and yearning. But, most important, they are driven by the impulse to shape their lives rather than suffer them, even when their grasp is unsure and they are careening full tilt towards disaster.

In Helga Crane and Clare Kendry, Nella Larsen has created two characters that are rich, complex, and contradictory. *Quicksand* and *Passing* launch each woman on a quest for self that predicts the themes

Introduction

Until a decade ago, the erroneous "facts" concerning the life and career of Nella Larsen were nothing less than legion. Her brief literary career was said to have come to an abrupt halt because of the charges of plagiarism concerning her only published short story. After that awkward incident in 1930, she was said to have ceased her creative efforts and disappeared not only from the Harlem artistic scene but also from the consciousness of her many friends as well. Some of Larsen's readers speculated that she passed for white—in the manner of the heroine of her 1929 novel, *Passing*. At the time of her death, there were no published obituaries. Her childhood, her parentage, and the date of her birth were incorrectly recorded, as

Note:

This is the only complete edition of Nella Larsen's fiction, including her three published stories and the correct ending for *Passing*. Deborah E. McDowell argues erroneously for omitting the final paragraph of *Passing* because the second printing of the 1929 Knopf edition inadvertently omitted it. McDowell argues that Larsen was a perfectionist and decided to change the ending of her novel. Perfectionist she may have been, but there is no evidence for this conjecture. Rather, the missing final paragraph of the second printing would appear to be the result of a dropped printer's plate.

Bibliography:

- DAVIS, THADIOUS M. *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994.
- HUTCHINSON, GEORGE. "Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race." *American Literary History* (Summer 1997), 329-49.
- LARSON, CHARLES R. *Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993.

A Note on the Texts

To make these texts from the 1920s more accessible to the contemporary reader, minor changes have been made with spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and spacing. British spellings ("colour" instead of "color") have been altered throughout. Obvious typographical errors in the original texts have been corrected.

The Wrong Man



Freedom



Sanctuary



Quicksand



Passing



*For Carl Van Vechten
and Fania Marinoff*

*One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?*

—COUNTEE CULLEN

Irene, whose head had gone up with a quick little jerk, now said in a voice of whose even tones she was proud: "One of my boys is dark."

Gertrude jumped as if she had been shot at. Her eyes goggled. Her mouth flew open. She tried to speak but could not immediately get the words out. Finally she managed to stammer: "Oh! And your husband, is he—is he—er—dark too?"

Irene, who was struggling with a flood of feelings, resentment, anger, and contempt, was, however, still able to answer as coolly as if she had not that sense of not belonging to and of despising the company in which she found herself drinking iced tea from tall amber glasses on that hot August afternoon. Her husband, she informed them quietly, couldn't exactly "pass."

At that reply Clare turned on Irene her seductive caressing smile and remarked a little scoffingly: "I do think that colored people—we—are too silly about some things. After all, the thing's not important to Irene or hundreds of others. Not awfully, even to you, Gertrude. It's only deserters like me who have to be afraid of freaks of nature. As my inestimable dad used to say, 'Everything must be paid for.' Now, please, one of you tell me what ever happened to Claude Jones. You know, the tall, lanky specimen who used to wear that comical little mustache that the girls used to laugh at so. Like a thin streak of soot. The mustache, I mean."

At that Gertrude shrieked with laughter—"Claude Jones!"—and launched into the story of how he was no longer a Negro or a Christian but had become a Jew.

"A Jew!" Clare exclaimed.

"Yes, a Jew. A black Jew, he calls himself. He won't eat ham and goes to the synagogue on Saturday. He's got a beard now as well as a mustache. You'd die laughing if you saw him. He's really too funny for words. Fred says he's crazy and I guess he is. Oh, he's a scream all right, a regular scream!" And she shrieked again.

Clare's laugh tinkled out. "It certainly sounds funny enough. Still, it's his own business. If he gets along better by turning—"

At that, Irene, who was still hugging her unhappy don't-care

actually she
is
proud

feeling of rightness, broke in, saying bitinglly: "It evidently doesn't occur to either you or Gertrude that he might possibly be sincere in changing his religion. Surely everyone doesn't do everything for gain."

Clare Kendry had no need to search for the full meaning of that utterance. She reddened slightly and retorted seriously: "Yes, I admit that might be possible—his being sincere, I mean. It just didn't happen to occur to me, that's all. I'm surprised," and the seriousness changed to mockery, "that you should have expected it to. Or did you really?"

"You don't, I'm sure, imagine that that is a question that I can answer," Irene told her. "Not here and now."

Gertrude's face expressed complete bewilderment. However, seeing that little smiles had come out on the faces of the two other women and not recognizing them for the smiles of mutual reservations which they were, she smiled too.

Clare began to talk, steering carefully away from anything that might lead towards race or other thorny subjects. It was the most brilliant exhibition of conversational weight lifting that Irene had ever seen. Her words swept over them in charming well-modulated streams. Her laughs tinkled and pealed. Her little stories sparkled.

Irene contributed a bare "Yes" or "No" here and there. Gertrude, a "You don't say!" less frequently.

For a while the illusion of general conversation was nearly perfect. Irene felt her resentment changing gradually to a silent, somewhat grudging admiration.

Clare talked on, her voice, her gestures, coloring all she said of wartime in France, of after-the-wartime in Germany, of the excitement at the time of the general strike in England, of dressmakers' openings in Paris, of the new gaiety of Budapest.

But it couldn't last, this verbal feat. Gertrude shifted in her seat and fell to fidgeting with her fingers. Irene, bored at last by all this repetition of the selfsame things that she had read all too often in papers, magazines, and books, set down her glass and collected her bag and handkerchief. She was smoothing out the tan fingers of her

genial tea party, all smiles and jokes and hilarious laughter. She said humorously: "So you dislike Negroes, Mr. Bellew?" But her amusement was at her thought, rather than her words.

John Bellew gave a short denying laugh. "You got me wrong there, Mrs. Redfield. Nothing like that at all. I don't dislike them, I hate them. And so does Nig, for all she's trying to turn into one. She wouldn't have a nigger maid around her for love nor money. Not that I'd want her to. They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils."

This wasn't funny. Had Bellew, Irene inquired, ever known any Negroes? The defensive tone of her voice brought another start from the uncomfortable Gertrude, and, for all her appearance of serenity, a quick apprehensive look from Clare.

Bellew answered: "Thank the Lord, no! And never expect to! But I know people who've known them, better than they know their black selves. And I read in the papers about them. Always robbing and killing people. And," he added darkly, "worse."

From Gertrude's direction came a queer little suppressed sound, a snort or a giggle. Irene couldn't tell which. There was a brief silence, during which she feared that her self-control was about to prove too frail a bridge to support her mounting anger and indignation. She had a leaping desire to shout at the man beside her: "And you're sitting here surrounded by three black devils, drinking tea."

The impulse passed, obliterated by her consciousness of the danger in which such rashness would involve Clare, who remarked with a gentle reprovingness: "Jack dear, I'm sure 'Rene doesn't care to hear all about your pet aversions. Nor Gertrude either. Maybe they read the papers too, you know." She smiled on him, and her smile seemed to transform him, to soften and mellow him, as the rays of the sun does a fruit.

"All right, Nig, old girl. I'm sorry," he apologized. Reaching over, he playfully touched his wife's pale hands, then turned back to Irene. "Didn't mean to bore you, Mrs. Redfield. Hope you'll excuse me," he said sheepishly. "Clare tells me you're living in New York. Great city, New York. The city of the future."

In Irene, rage had not retreated but was held by some dam of caution and allegiance to Clare. So, in the best casual voice she could muster, she agreed with Bellew. Though, she reminded him, it was exactly what Chicagoans were apt to say of their city. And all the while she was speaking, she was thinking how amazing it was that her voice did not tremble, that outwardly she was calm. Only her hands shook slightly. She drew them inward from their rest in her lap and pressed the tips of her fingers together to still them.

"Husband's a doctor, I understand. Manhattan, or one of the other boroughs?"

Manhattan, Irene informed him, and explained the need for Brian to be within easy reach of certain hospitals and clinics.

"Interesting life, a doctor's."

"Ye-es. Hard, though. And, in a way, monotonous. Nerve-racking too."

"Hard on the wife's nerves at least, eh? So many lady patients." He laughed, enjoying, with a boyish heartiness, the hoary joke.

Irene managed a momentary smile, but her voice was sober as she said: "Brian doesn't care for ladies, especially sick ones. I sometimes wish he did. It's South America that attracts him."

"Coming place, South America, if they ever get the niggers out of it. It's run over—"

"Really, Jack!" Clare's voice was on the edge of temper.

"Honestly, Nig, I forgot." To the others he said: "You see how henpecked I am." And to Gertrude: "You're still in Chicago, Mrs. —er—Mrs. Martin?"

He was, it was plain, doing his best to be agreeable to these old friends of Clare's. Irene had to concede that under other conditions she might have liked him. A fairly good-looking man of amiable disposition, evidently, and in easy circumstances. Plain and with no nonsense about him.

Gertrude replied that Chicago was good enough for her. She'd never been out of it and didn't think she ever should. Her husband's business was there.

"Of course, of course. Can't jump up and leave a business."

believe that there was nothing but generous friendship between those two, she was very tired of Clare Kendry. She wanted to be free of her, and of her furtive comings and goings. If something would only happen, something that would make John Bellew decide on an earlier departure, or that would remove Clare. Anything. She didn't care what. Not even if it were that Clare's Margery were ill, or dying. Not even if Bellew should discover—

She drew a quick, sharp breath. And for a long time sat staring down at the hands in her lap. Strange, she had not before realized how easily she could put Clare out of her life! She had only to tell John Bellew that his wife— No. Not that! But if he should somehow learn of these Harlem visits— Why should she hesitate? Why spare Clare?

But she shrank away from the idea of telling that man, Clare Kendry's white husband, anything that would lead him to suspect that his wife was a Negro. Nor could she write it, or telephone it, or tell it to someone else who would tell him.

She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be, all three. Nothing, she imagined, was ever more completely sardonic.

Sitting alone in the quiet living room in the pleasant firelight, Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved. Surely no other people so cursed as Ham's dark children.

Nevertheless, her weakness, her shrinking, her own inability to compass the thing, did not prevent her from wishing fervently that, in some way with which she had no concern, John Bellew would discover, not that his wife had a touch of the tar brush—Irene didn't want that—but that she was spending all the time that he was out

of the city in black Harlem. Only that. It would be enough to rid her forever of Clare Kendry.

Three

As if in answer to her wish, the very next day Irene came face to face with Bellew.

She had gone downtown with Felise Freeland to shop. The day was an exceptionally cold one, with a strong wind that had whipped a dusky red into Felise's smooth golden cheeks and driven moisture into Irene's soft brown eyes.

Clinging to each other, with heads bent against the wind, they turned out of the Avenue into Fifty-seventh Street. A sudden bluster flung them around the corner with unexpected quickness and they collided with a man.

"Pardon," Irene begged laughingly, and looked up into the face of Clare Kendry's husband.

"Mrs. Redfield!"

His hat came off. He held out his hand, smiling genially.

But the smile faded at once. Surprise, incredulity, and—was it understanding?—passed over his features.

He had, Irene knew, become conscious of Felise, golden, with curly black Negro hair, whose arm was still linked in her own. She was sure, now, of the understanding in his face, as he looked at her again and then back at Felise. And displeasure.

He didn't, however, withdraw his outstretched hand. Not at once.

But Irene didn't take it. Instinctively, in the first glance of recognition, her face had become a mask. Now she turned on him a totally uncomprehending look, a bit questioning. Seeing that he still stood with hand outstretched, she gave him the cool appraising stare which she reserved for mashers, and drew Felise on.

Felise drawled: "Aha! Been 'passing,' have you? Well, I've queered that."

"Yes, I'm afraid you have."

They glared at each other.

"I tell you, Irene, they've got to know these things, and it might as well be now as later."

"They do not!" she insisted, forcing back the tears of anger that were threatening to fall.

Brian growled: "I can't understand how anybody as intelligent as you like to think you are can show evidences of such stupidity." He looked at her in a puzzled harassed way.

"Stupid!" she cried. "Is it stupid to want my children to be happy?" Her lips were quivering.

"At the expense of proper preparation for life and their future happiness, yes. And I'd feel I hadn't done my duty by them if I didn't give them some inkling of what's before them. It's the least I can do. I wanted to get them out of this hellish place years ago. You wouldn't let me. I gave up the idea, because you objected. Don't expect me to give up everything."

Under the lash of his words she was silent. Before any answer came to her, he had turned and gone from the room.

Sitting there alone in the forsaken dining room, unconsciously pressing the hands lying in her lap tightly together, she was seized by a convulsion of shivering. For, to her, there had been something ominous in the scene that she had just had with her husband. Over and over in her mind his last words: "Don't expect me to give up everything," repeated themselves. What had they meant? What could they mean? Clare Kendry?

Surely she was going mad with fear and suspicion. She must not work herself up. She must not! Where were all the self-control, the common sense, that she was so proud of? Now, if ever, was the time for it.

Clare would soon be there. She must hurry or she would be late again, and those two would wait for her downstairs together, as they had done so often since that first time, which now seemed so long ago. Had it been really only last October? Why, she felt years, not months, older.

Drearly she rose from her chair and went upstairs to set about

representative of her growing affection
idea: ignorance is bliss

Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark.

Centuries after, she heard the strange man saying: "Death by misadventure, I'm inclined to believe. Let's go up and have another look at that window."

Nella Larsen—A Chronology

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| April 13, 1891 | Born |
| 1898 | First trip to Denmark |
| 1908–1909 | Second trip to Denmark |
| 1912–1915 | Nursing Degree, Lincoln Hospital and Home |
| 1915–1917 | Works as a nurse at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, Tuskegee Alabama |
| 1918 | New York City Department of Health |
| May 3, 1919 | Marries Elmer S. Imes |
| 1919 | “Three Scandinavian Games,” <i>The Brownies’ Book</i> (June); “Danish Fun,” <i>The Brownies’ Book</i> (July) Both published under the name Nella Larsen Imes |

- 1921–1926 Librarian, New York City Public Library
(Harlem Branch)
- 1926 “The Wrong Man,” *Young’s Magazine* (January);
“Freedom,” *Young’s Magazine* (April)
Published under pseudonym, Allen Semi
- 1928 *Quicksand*
Awarded Bronze Award for Literature
(Harmon Foundation)
- 1929 *Passing*
- 1930 “Sanctuary,” *Forum* (January)
Accused of plagiarism
- 1930–1931 Guggenheim Fellowship in Europe
Working on *Mirage*
- 1932 Nashville, with Elmer
- August 30, 1933 Divorces Elmer Imes
- September 11, 1941 Elmer Imes dies
- February 14, 1944 Appointed Chief Nurse at Gouverneur
Hospital, New York City
- September 1954 Night Supervisor at Gouverneur Hospital
- 1962 Supervisor of Nurses, Metropolitan
Hospital, New York City
- September 12, 1963 Retires from nursing
- March 30, 1964 Discovered dead in her apartment

Charles R. Larson is Professor of Literature at American University in Washington, D.C., where he pioneered courses in non-Western literature. In addition to several novels, his critical works include: *The Emergence of African Fiction* (1972), *American Indian Fiction* (1978), *Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen* (1993), and *The Ordeal of the African Writer* (2001).

Marita Golden is the author of four novels, most recently *The Edge of Heaven*. She has also written *Saving Our Sons: Raising Black Children in a Turbulent World*; edited *Wild Women Don't Wear No Blues: Black Women and White Women Writers on Men, Love and Sex*; and coedited *Skin Deep: Black Women and White Women Write About Race*. Executive Director of the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation, Marita Golden is also on the faculty of the M.F.A. Graduate Creative Writing Program at Virginia Commonwealth University. She lives in Mitchellville, Maryland, with her husband and son.

With a new introduction by
 CHARLES R. LARSON

Foreword by
 MARITA GOLDEN

"Highly charged interior dramas of the black middle class in Harlem [by] an original and hugely insightful writer." —THE NEW YORK TIMES

A light-skinned beauty who spends years passing for white finds herself dangerously drawn to an old friend's Harlem neighborhood. A restless young mulatto tries desperately to find a comfortable place in a world in which she sees herself as a perpetual outsider. A mother's confrontation with tragedy tests her loyalty to her race.

The gifted Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen wrote compelling dramas about the black middle class that featured sensitive, spirited heroines struggling to find a place where they belonged. *PASSING*, Larsen's best-known work, is a disturbing story about the unraveling lives of two childhood friends, one of whom turns her back on her past and marries a white bigot. Just as disquieting is the portrait in *QUICKSAND* of Helga Crane, half black and half white, who can't escape her loneliness no matter where and with whom she lives. Race and marriage offer few securities here or in the other stories in a collection that is compellingly readable, rich in psychological complexity, and imbued with a sense of place that brings Harlem vibrantly to life.

"[Nella Larsen's novels] open up a whole world of experience that seemed to me, when I first read them years ago, absolutely absorbing, fascinating, and indispensable. They

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