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—RICHARD BERNSTEIN, *The New York Times*

PASSING



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NELLA LARSEN

PASSING

Introduction by Ntozake Shange

Critical Foreword and Notes

by Mae Henderson



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NEW YORK

2002 Modern Library Paperback Edition

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Larsen, Nella.

Passing/Nella Larsen ; introduction by Ntozake Shange ; critical
foreword and notes by Mae Henderson.—2002 Modern Library
pbk. ed.
p. cm.

ISBN 0-375-75813-5

1. African American women—Fiction.
2. Passing (Identity)—Fiction. 3. Race relations—Fiction.
4. New York (N.Y.)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3523.A7225 P37 2002
813'.52—dc21 2001045037

Modern Library website address: www.modernlibrary.com

Printed in the United States of America

12 14 16 18 19 17 15 13

NELLA LARSEN

Nella Larsen, one of the most promising if enigmatic writers of the Harlem Renaissance, was born in Chicago of interracial parentage on April 13, 1891. Her father, who came from the Virgin Islands, died when she was two; her mother was of Danish origin. She grew up in a white world, primarily among people of German and Scandinavian stock. Her first experience with an all-black world occurred in 1909, when she matriculated at the high school division of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. After studying at the University of Copenhagen for two years, Larsen moved to New York City in 1912 to study nursing at Lincoln Hospital. She later would train as

sance writers in the kinds of questions she posed in her novels," judged Thadious M. Davis, Larsen's biographer. Mary Helen Washington, writing in *Ms.* magazine, claimed, "The women in her novels, like Larsen, are driven to emotional and psychological extremes in their attempts to handle ambivalence, marginality, racism, and sexism. She has shown us that behind the carefully manicured exterior, behind the appearance of security is a woman who hears the beating of her wings against a walled prison." Alice Walker concurred: "*Quicksand* and *Passing* are novels I will never forget. They open up a whole world of experience and struggle that seemed to me, when I first read them years ago, absolutely absorbing, fascinating, and indispensable."

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INTRODUCTION

Ntozake Shange

As a person of color—light brown by most standards, but not light enough to pass—I've often wondered about the lives of childhood friends and family members who took that precipitous step and crossed over the color line to become white. Remembering that I am of a generation that straddled the era of strict segregation of the races and the toppling of that abominable separation of black and white, I've experienced the denigration that Clare Kendry, Nella Larsen's protagonist in *Passing*, sought to escape. So I understand the impulse not to announce to everyone that which they can't ascertain on their own. Or as Larsen writes:

population is growing. She offers characters so honest and desperate to be whole that we cannot help but champion their humanity.

NTOZAKE SHANGE is a renowned playwright (*for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*), poet (*Nappy Edges* and *The Love Space Demands*), and novelist (*Betsey Brown*; *Liliane*; and *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*). She lives in Texas with her daughter.

CRITICAL FOREWORD

Mae G. Henderson

Like other novels of the Harlem Renaissance, Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) has been read in terms of African American modernism, a term linking the aesthetic and political dimensions of this outpouring of work by black artists in the 1920s, and designating literary techniques ranging from the experimentalism of Jean Toomer to the realism of Rudolph Fisher to the romantic racialism of Claude McKay. In *Passing*, as in other novels of the Harlem School, the city—particularly Harlem—functions as a kind of topos that becomes a site of transformation and, potentially, liberation in that decade of black cultural and social awakening.¹ Although the opening scene of what

Notes

1. See James de Jongh's *Vicious Modernism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
2. Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 247–48.
3. Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 13.
4. Arthur Davis, for instance, speculates that “the present-day reader may wonder at this morbid concern . . . with the passing theme” (*From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers, 1900–1960* [Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974], 6). This sentiment is shared by Amritjit Singh, Hoyt Fuller, and other earlier critics of the genre.
5. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Crisis* (1929); also cited in Hoyt Fuller's Introduction, Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Collier Books, 1971), 13.
6. According to Gayle Wald, the “postpassing” narratives “[articulate] collective values of pride in the ‘Negro’ identity and [challenge] the social and economic pressures that promote passing as an ‘alternative’ to racial segregation.” Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Color Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 119.
7. See Claudia Tate, “Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation,” *Black American Literary Forum* (Winter 1980), 146.
8. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Crisis* (1928); also cited in Hiroko Sato, “Under the Harlem Shadow: A Study of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen,” in *Harlem Renaissance Remembered: Essays*, Arna Bontemps, ed. (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1972).
9. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Crisis* (July 1929), 234; also cited in Fuller.
10. Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958; revised 1965), 102.

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FOR

Carl Van Vechten

AND

*Fania Marinoff*¹

One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?¹

—COUNTEE CULLEN

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."³

NOTES

DEDICATION

1. *For Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff*: Larsen's dedication acknowledged her friends and supporters Carl Van Vechten (1886–1964) and his wife, Fania Marinoff (1887–1972). Novelist, photographer, and music and drama critic, Van Vechten was a patron of the arts and black artists during the Harlem Renaissance. Author of the controversial novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926), he was also a bohemian bon vivant and habitué of Harlem's exotic nightlife. He and his wife were widely known for their lavish interracial parties downtown, and acted as a kind of bridge between the Harlem Renaissance artists and their white publishers and promoters. It was Van Vechten who recommended Larsen's work—along with

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. *Passing* is set in the 1920s, before the Supreme Court declared “separate but equal” facilities for nonwhites unconstitutional. What privileges are Irene Redfield denied as a black person? What do men and women gain by passing?
2. In Part One, Irene has tea with Gertrude and Clare, her two childhood friends. Compare the attitudes each woman has toward passing. To what degree does each pass for white?
3. *Passing* presents two women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, who make very different choices yet whose lives intertwine in startling ways. Compare the charac-

- ters of each. What are each woman's strengths? Her weaknesses? What are each woman's attitudes toward race? How do these attitudes influence the novel's plot?
4. Consider Irene's fear that Brian and Clare may be having an affair. Does her anxiety seem reasonable to you? Why, or why not?
 5. Compare different characters' attitudes toward sexuality. For instance, in what ways are Irene's and Clare's thoughts on sex similar? How are they different? How might these attitudes be related to each character's thoughts on race?
 6. Discuss the novel's ending. Do you think Irene pushed Clare? What evidence does the novel offer either for or against this interpretation?
 7. Certain critics have suggested that an erotic attachment exists between Irene and Clare. Do you agree with this reading? What evidence can you find in the novel to support this idea?



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Introduction by NTOZAKE SHANGE
Critical Foreword and Notes by
 MAE HENDERSON

First published to acclaim in 1929, *Passing* tells the story of two black women who cross the color line. Irene Redfield has an enviable life with her husband and sons in a comfortable Harlem town house. But Irene's hold on this life begins to slip the day she encounters Clare Kendry, a lost childhood friend. Clare—light-skinned, beautiful, charming—has for years passed for white, hiding her true identity from her racist husband. As Clare begins inserting herself into Irene's life, Irene is thrown into a panic, terrified of the consequences of Clare's dangerous behavior.

Brilliantly plotted and elegantly written, *Passing* offers a gripping psychological portrait of emotional extremity.

NTOZAKE SHANGE is a renowned playwright, poet, and novelist. She lives in Texas with her daughter.

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