



NELLA LARSEN

Passing

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PASSING

Nella Larsen, one of the most acclaimed and influential writers of the Harlem Renaissance, was born Nellie Walker on April 13, 1891, in Chicago. In the 1910s she came to New York, where she worked as a nurse and as a librarian, and in 1919 she married a research physicist. She began publishing stories in the mid-1920s and published her first novel, *Quicksand*, in 1928. *Passing* came out the following year. Larsen was awarded a William E. Harmon Bronze Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes and a Guggenheim fellowship. Encountering personal and professional struggles, she was unable to have her third novel accepted for publication and by the end of the 1930s had stopped writing altogether. She worked full time as a nurse until her death in 1964.

Thadious M. Davis is G. C. Vanderbilt Professor of English at Vanderbilt University and the author of *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*. She previously taught at Brown University and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

PASSING

NELLA LARSEN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
THADIOUS M. DAVIS



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane,
London W8 5TZ, England
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood,
Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road,
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:
Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published in the United States of America
by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1929

This edition with an introduction and notes by
Thadious M. Davis published in Penguin Books 1997

7 9 10 8

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA
Larsen, Nella.

Passing / Nella Larsen ; with an introduction and notes by
Thadious M. Davis.

p. cm.—(Penguin twentieth-century classics)
Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0 14 11.8025 0 (pbk.)

1. Afro-Americans—Fiction. I. Title. II. Series.

PS3523.A7225P37 1997

813'.52—dc21 97-9482

Printed in the United States of America
Set in Stempel Garamond

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INTRODUCTION

A little more than a century ago, Homer A. Plessy argued that he was seven-eighths white and one-eighth black and thus, for all legal purposes, should be accorded all the rights and privileges of a white citizen. His lawyers, Louis A. Martinet and Albion W. Tourgee (a North Carolina Superior Court Judge during the Reconstruction), conceptualized the argument to complicate the process of discriminating on the basis of race. Visibly white in skin color, hair texture, and facial features, Plessy no doubt assumed, as did his distinguished lawyers, that racial designations at the end of the nineteenth century followed some discernable logic.

As Plessy's image of himself resulted from a perceived similarity to the majority population, so his lawyers constructed his social self and legal identity in close proximity to white America, believing that the justice system would recognize both Plessy's whiteness and the absurdity of separating him on the basis of so artificial a designation as his "race." While they may have skirted the issue of perceptible or observable racial difference that affected the vast majority of people of African descent in the United States, they rooted their argument in logic and reasoning.

In the United States of the 1890s, however, racial categorization did not follow any clear logic for biracial individuals, like Homer Plessy, whose white features and white ancestry dominated their physical appearance. Plessy's lawsuit, a strategic challenge to an 1890 Louisiana state law mandating the strict racial segregation of railroad cars, did not achieve legal success. In its May 18, 1896 ruling in the now famous case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court of the United States maintained the legitimacy of "separate but equal" public facilities and institutions for non-white citizens. By an eight-to-one vote, the Supreme Court upheld the Louisiana Separate Car law and made a mockery of equality, as Justice John Marshall

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The text of this edition is based on the first edition, first printing of *Passing*, which was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1929. The first printing of the first edition included a brief final paragraph that was dropped in the third printing of the novel: "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.'" Although it is possible that the revised ending conformed to the author's sense of her novel, there is no indication that Nella Larsen herself recommended, sought, or approved the excision of the final paragraph. The text of this edition, therefore, follows the original Knopf first printing.

With the exception of a few minor typographical errors, which have been silently corrected, the original punctuation, spelling, and division of words, such as "kerb," "favourite," "for ever," and "week end," have been retained throughout this text.

PASSING

FOR
*Carl Van Vechten*¹
AND
*Fania Marinoff*²

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

—COUNTÉE CULLEN²

ONE

It was the last letter in Irene Redfield's little pile of morning mail. After her other ordinary and clearly directed letters the long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien. And there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it. A thin sly thing which bore no return address to betray the sender. Not that she hadn't immediately known who its sender was. Some two years ago she had one very like it in outward appearance. Furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting. Purple ink. Foreign paper of extraordinary size.

It had been, Irene noted, postmarked in New York the day before. Her brows came together in a tiny frown. The frown, however, was more from perplexity than from annoyance; though there was in her thoughts an element of both. She was wholly unable to comprehend such an attitude towards danger as she was sure the letter's contents would reveal; and she disliked the idea of opening and reading it.

This, she reflected, was of a piece with all that she knew of Clare Kendry. Stepping always on the edge of danger. Always aware, but not drawing back or turning aside. Certainly not because of any alarms or feeling of outrage on the part of others.

And for a swift moment Irene Redfield seemed to see a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together, while her drunken father, a tall, powerfully built man, raged threateningly up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses and making spasmodic lunges at her which were not the less frightening because they were, for the most part, ineffectual. Sometimes he did manage to reach her. But only the fact that the child had edged herself and her poor sewing over to the farthest corner of the sofa suggested that she was in any way perturbed by this menace to herself and her work.

Clare had known well enough that it was unsafe to take a portion of the dollar that was her weekly wage for the doing of many errands for the dressmaker who lived on the top floor of the building of which Bob Kendry was janitor. But that knowledge had not deterred her. She wanted to go to her Sunday school's picnic, and she had made up her mind to wear a new dress. So, in spite of certain unpleasantness and possible danger, she had taken the money to buy the material for that pathetic little red frock.

There had been, even in those days, nothing sacrificial in Clare Kendry's idea of life, no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire. She was selfish, and cold, and hard. And yet she had, too, a strange capacity of transforming warmth and passion, verging sometimes almost on theatrical heroics.

Irene, who was a year or more older than Clare, remembered the day that Bob Kendry had been brought home dead, killed in a silly saloon-fight. Clare, who was at that time a scant fifteen years old, had just stood there with her lips pressed together, her thin arms folded across her narrow chest, staring down at the familiar pasty-white face of her parent with a sort of disdain in her slanting black eyes. For a very long time she had stood like that, silent and staring. Then, quite suddenly, she had given way to a torrent of weeping, swaying her thin body, tearing at her bright hair, and stamping her small feet. The outburst had ceased as suddenly as it had begun. She glanced quickly about the bare room, taking everyone in, even the two policemen, in a sharp look of flashing scorn. And, in the next instant, she had turned and vanished through the door.

Seen across the long stretch of years, the thing had more the appearance of an outpouring of pent-up fury than of an overflow of grief for her dead father; though she had been, Irene admitted, fond enough of him in her own rather catlike way.

Catlike. Certainly that was the word which best described Clare Kendry, if any single word could describe her. Sometimes she was hard and apparently without feeling at all; sometimes she was affectionate and rashly impulsive. And there was about her an amazing soft malice, hidden well away until provoked. Then she was capable of scratching, and very effectively

too. Or, driven to anger, she would fight with a ferocity and impetuosity that disregarded or forgot any danger; superior strength, numbers, or other unfavourable circumstances. How savagely she had clawed those boys the day they had hooted her parent and sung a derisive rhyme, of their own composing, which pointed out certain eccentricities in his careening gait! And how deliberately she had—

Irene brought her thoughts back to the present, to the letter from Clare Kendry that she still held unopened in her hand. With a little feeling of apprehension, she very slowly cut the envelope, drew out the folded sheets, spread them, and began to read.

It was, she saw at once, what she had expected since learning from the postmark that Clare was in the city. An extravagantly phrased wish to see her again. Well, she needn't and wouldn't, Irene told herself, accede to that. Nor would she assist Clare to realize her foolish desire to return for a moment to that life which long ago, and of her own choice, she had left behind her.

She ran through the letter, puzzling out, as best she could, the carelessly formed words or making instinctive guesses at them.

“ . . . For I am lonely, so lonely . . . cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life. . . . You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of. . . . It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases. . . .” Sheets upon thin sheets of it. And ending finally with, “and it's your fault, Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago. . . .”

Brilliant red patches flamed in Irene Redfield's warm olive cheeks.

“That time in Chicago.” The words stood out from among the many paragraphs of other words, bringing with them a clear, sharp remembrance, in which even now, after two years, humiliation, resentment, and rage were mingled.

never for an instant fell or wavered. Irene made a little mental shrug. Oh well, let her look! She tried to treat the woman and her watching with indifference, but she couldn't. All her efforts to ignore her, it, were futile. She stole another glance. Still looking. What strange languorous eyes she had!

And gradually there rose in Irene a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar. She laughed softly, but her eyes flashed.

Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?

Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. No, the woman sitting there staring at her couldn't possibly know.

Nevertheless, Irene felt, in turn, anger, scorn, and fear slide over her. It wasn't that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her.

But she looked, boldly this time, back into the eyes still frankly intent upon her. They did not seem to her hostile or resentful. Rather, Irene had the feeling that they were ready to smile if she would. Nonsense, of course. The feeling passed, and she turned away with the firm intention of keeping her gaze on the lake, the roofs of the buildings across the way, the sky, anywhere but on that annoying woman. Almost immediately, however, her eyes were back again. In the midst of her fog of uneasiness she had been seized by a desire to outstare the rude observer. Suppose the woman did know or suspect her race. She couldn't prove it.

Suddenly her small fright increased. Her neighbour had risen and was coming towards her. What was going to happen now?

"Pardon me," the woman said pleasantly, "but I think I know you." Her slightly husky voice held a dubious note.

Looking up at her, Irene's suspicions and fears vanished. There was no mistaking the friendliness of that smile or resisting its charm. Instantly she surrendered to it and smiled too, as she said: "I'm afraid you're mistaken."

"Why, of course, I know you!" the other exclaimed. "Don't tell me you're not Irene Westover. Or do they still call you 'Rene?'"

In the brief second before her answer, Irene tried vainly to recall where and when this woman could have known her. There, in Chicago. And before her marriage. That much was plain. High school? College? Y. W. C. A. committees? High school, most likely. What white girls had she known well enough to have been familiarly addressed as 'Rene by them? The woman before her didn't fit her memory of any of them. Who was she?

"Yes, I'm Irene Westover. And though nobody calls me 'Rene any more, it's good to hear the name again. And you—" She hesitated, ashamed that she could not remember, and hoping that the sentence would be finished for her.

"Don't you know me? Not really, 'Rene?'"

"I'm sorry, but just at the minute I can't seem to place you."

Irene studied the lovely creature standing beside her for some clue to her identity. Who could she be? Where and when had they met? And through her perplexity there came the thought that the trick which her memory had played her was for some reason more gratifying than disappointing to her old acquaintance, that she didn't mind not being recognized.

And, too, Irene felt that she was just about to remember her. For about the woman was some quality, an intangible something, too vague to define, too remote to seize, but which was, to Irene Redfield, very familiar. And that voice. Surely she'd heard those husky tones somewhere before. Perhaps before time, contact, or something had been at them, making them into a voice remotely suggesting England. Ah! Could it have been in Europe that they had met? 'Rene. No.

As from a long distance she heard Ralph Hazelton's voice saying: "I was looking right at her. She just tumbled over and was gone before you could say 'Jack Robinson.' Fainted, I guess. Lord! It was quick. Quickest thing I ever saw in all my life."

"It's impossible, I tell you! Absolutely impossible!"

It was Brian who spoke in that frenzied hoarse voice, which Irene had never heard before. Her knees quaked under her.

Dave Freeland said: "Just a minute, Brian. Irene was there beside her. Let's hear what she has to say."

She had a moment of stark craven fear. "Oh God," she thought, prayed, "help me."

A strange man, official and authoritative, addressed her. "You're sure she fell? Her husband didn't give her a shove or anything like that, as Dr. Redfield seems to think?"

For the first time she was aware that Bellew was not in the little group shivering in the small hallway. What did that mean? As she began to work it out in her numbed mind, she was shaken with another hideous trembling. Not that! Oh, not that!

"No, no!" she protested. "I'm quite certain that he didn't. I was there, too. As close as he was. She just fell, before anybody could stop her. I—"

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."

EXPLANATORY NOTES

DEDICATION

1. *Carl Van Vechten*: (1886–1964), *New York Times* music critic (1906–12), drama critic, novelist, and photographer, a leading white supporter of the 1920s black cultural and literary movement in New York, known for his interracial parties and excursions to Harlem. Controversial during the Harlem Renaissance or New Negro movement because of his novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926), he was Larsen's friend and mentor, instrumental in the publication of her first novel, *Quicksand* (1928).

2. *Fania Marinoff*: (1887–1972), New York stage and film actress, Russian-born wife of Carl Van Vechten, and hostess of interracial gatherings during the Harlem Renaissance.

EPIGRAPH

1. "One three centuries removed/ . . . /What is Africa to me?": Lines from the poem "Heritage," from *Color* (Harper, New York, 1925), a volume of poetry by Countée Cullen. Perhaps his best-known poem, "Heritage" examined the role of culture in the shaping of identity and questioned the dialogic between an African past and an European-influenced present for African-Americans.

2. *Countée Cullen*: (1903–46), one of the celebrated poets of the Harlem Renaissance, known for his lyrical voice and evocation of the British Romantic poet, John Keats (1795–1821). The precocious adopted son of a leading Harlem minister, Rev. Frederick Asbury Cullen (1868–1946), he began publishing poetry at the age of fifteen. When he graduated Phi Beta Kappa from New York University in 1925, he was widely recognized as a poet whose poems had already appeared in prestigious national magazines and whose first collection of poems, *Color*, was to be published by Harper & Brothers in the year of his college graduation. Throughout the remaining years of the 1920s, Cullen amassed prizes, awards, and an M.A. in English from Harvard University (1926). Although his verse frequently examined

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NELLA LARSEN

Passing

With an Introduction and Notes by Thadious M. Davis

*A landmark novel about the cultural meanings of race by
the Harlem Renaissance's premier woman writer*

The beautiful, elegant, and ambitious Clare Kendry leads a dangerous life. A light-skinned African American married to a white man unaware of her racial heritage, Clare has severed all ties to her past to become part of white, middle-class society. Clare's childhood friend, Irene Redfield, as light-skinned as Clare, has chosen to remain within the African-American community. Married to a successful doctor and the mother of two boys, Irene refuses to acknowledge the racism she grew up with and that continues to set limits on her family's happiness. A chance encounter forces both women to confront the lies they have told others and the secret fears they have buried within themselves.

First published in 1929, *Passing* is a remarkably candid exploration of the destabilization of racial and sexual boundaries. As Larsen's biographer Thadious M. Davis writes in her introduction, Larsen depicts with trenchancy "the golden days of black cultural consciousness" and unapologetically "critiques a societal insistence on race as essential and fixed."

"Miss Larsen has produced a work so fine, sensitive, and distinguished that it rises above race categories and becomes that rare object, a good novel."

—*Saturday Review of Literature*

Cover painting: Archibald J. Motley, *The Octoroon Girl*, 1925. Collection of Carroll Greene. Photograph: Archie Motley.



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