

NELLA
LARSEN

PASSING

INTRODUCTION BY
NTOZAKE SHANGE



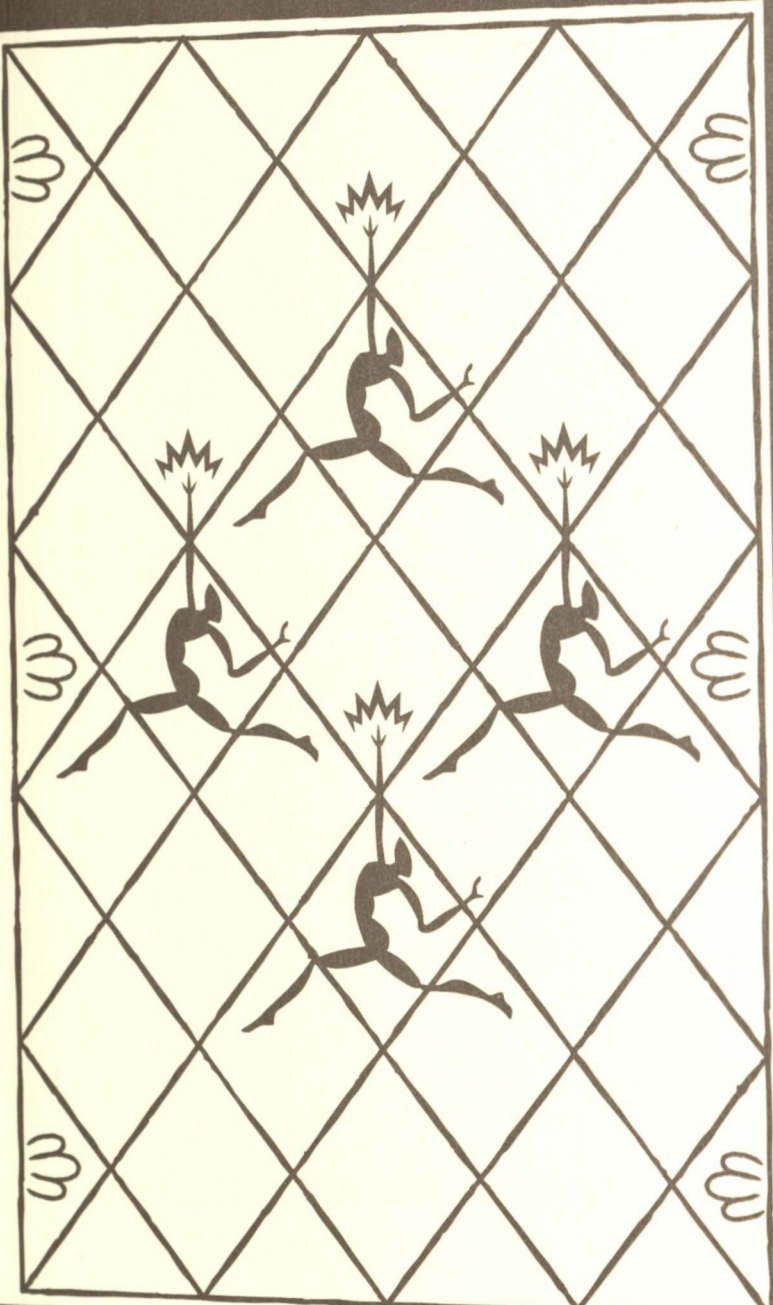
U.S.A. \$18.95
Canada \$28.95

First published to critical acclaim in 1929, *Passing* firmly established Nella Larsen's prominence among women writers of the Harlem Renaissance. The Modern Library is proud to present *Passing*—an electrifying story of two women who cross the color line in 1920s New York—together with a new Introduction by the Obie Award-winning playwright and novelist Ntozake Shange.

Irene Redfield, the novel's protagonist, is a woman with an enviable life. She and her husband, Brian, a prominent physician, share a comfortable Harlem town house with their sons. Her work arranging charity balls that gather Harlem's elite creates a sense of purpose and respectability for Irene. But her hold on this world begins to slip the day she encounters Clare Kendry, a childhood friend with whom she had lost touch. Clare—light-skinned, beautiful, and charming—tells Irene how, after her father's death, she left behind the black neighborhood of her adolescence and began passing for white, hiding her true identity from everyone, including her racist

(continued on back flap)





PASSING

NELLA LARSEN

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Introduction by Ntozake Shange



THE MODERN LIBRARY
NEW YORK

2000 Modern Library Edition

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Larsen, Nella.

Passing/Nella Larsen.

p. cm.

With new introduction by Ntozake Shange.

ISBN 0-375-50446-X

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

PS3523.A7225 P37 2000

813'.52—dc21 00-55047

Modern Library website address: www.modernlibrary.com

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

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."

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.

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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

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."

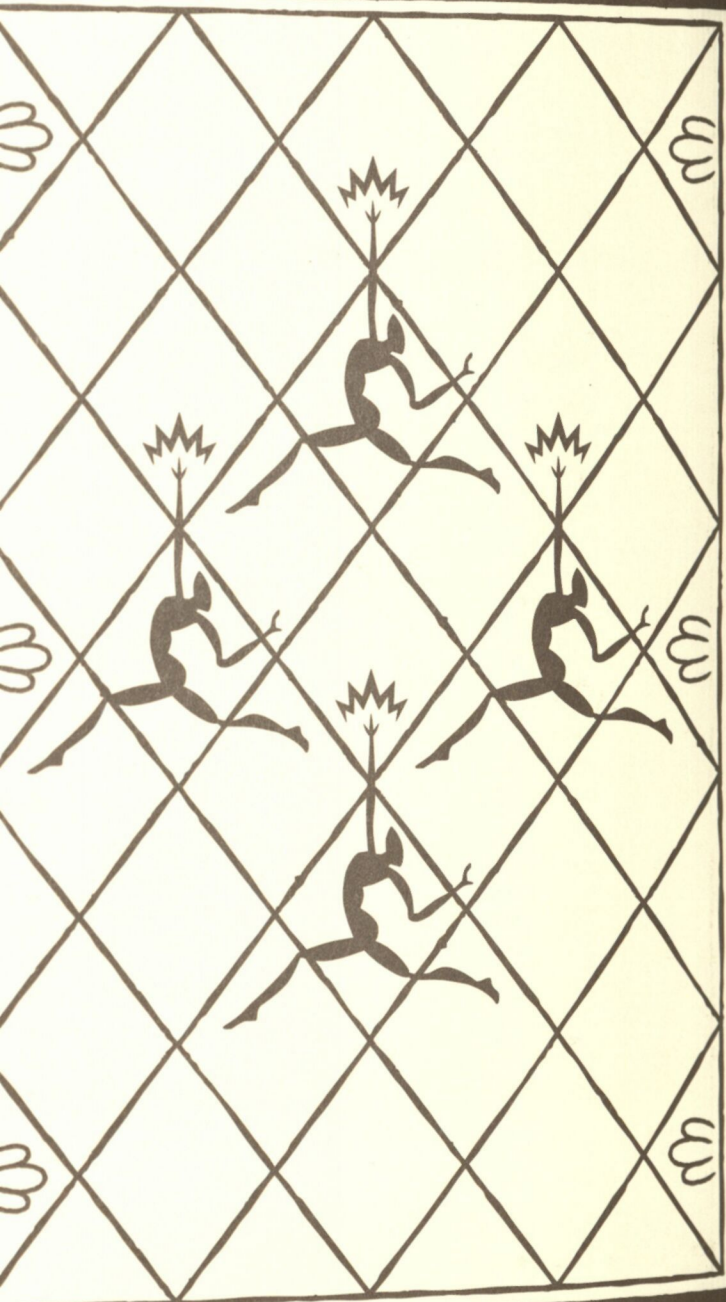
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(continued from front flap)

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. And when Clare witnesses the vibrancy and energy of the community she left behind, her burning desire to come back threatens to shatter her careful deception.

Brilliantly plotted and elegantly written, *Passing* offers a gripping psychological portrait of emotional extremity. *The New York Times Book Review* called Larsen "adroit at tracing the involved processes of a mind divided against itself, that fights between the dictates of reason and desire." *The Saturday Review of Literature* said, "[Larsen] has produced a work so fine, sensitive, and distinguished that it rises above race categories and becomes that rare object, a good novel."

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permission from the Van Vechten Trust; print
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Modern Library, New York, N.Y. 10171

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Printed in U.S.A. 12/00

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"[NELLA LARSEN'S NOVELS] 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."

—ALICE WALKER

"[NELLA LARSEN] OFFERS CHARACTERS SO
HONEST AND DESPERATE TO BE WHOLE THAT
WE CANNOT HELP BUT CHAMPION THEIR
HUMANITY."

—FROM NTOZAKE SHANGE'S
INTRODUCTION



ISBN 0-375-50446-X FICTION/
LITERATURE ·
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