The genius of this book is that its protagonists...are complex and fully realized. . . . The work of a highly talented and thoughtful writer."

—RICHARD BERNSTEIN, The New York Times

PASSING
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."
CONTENTS

Introduction by Ntozake Shange  xi

Critical Foreword by Mae Henderson  xvii

PASSING

Part One
Encounter
1

Part Two
Re-encounter
71

Part Three
Finale
127

Notes
183

Reading Group Guide
205
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.
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. Although the opening scene of what
Notes

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.
Selected Bibliography


Bullock, Penelope. “The Mulatto in American Fiction.” *Phylon* 6 (First Quarter 1945).


———. "'Then everything was dark'? The Two Endings of Nella Larsen's *Passing*." *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 84:4 (Dec. 1990).


Mae G. Henderson is professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Author of numerous articles on African American and feminist criticism and theory, pedagogy, and cultural studies, she is also editor of *Borders, Boundaries, and Frames;* co-editor (with John Blassingame) of the five-volume *Antislavery Newspapers and Periodicals: An Annotated Index of Letters, 1817–1871.*
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."
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
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?
A Note on the Type

The principal text of this Modern Library edition was set in a digitized version of Janson, a typeface that dates from about 1690 and was cut by Nicholas Kis, a Hungarian working in Amsterdam. The original matrices have survived and are held by the Stempel foundry in Germany. Hermann Zapf redesigned some of the weights and sizes for Stempel, basing his revisions on the original design.
Also available from the Modern Library

Clotel
WILLIAM WELLS BROWN
Introduction by Hilton Als
978-0-679-78323-7; trade paperback

The House Behind the Cedars
CHARLES W. CHESNUTT
Edited, with an Introduction and Notes, by Judith Jackson Fossett
978-0-8129-6616-9; trade paperback

My Bondage and My Freedom
FREDERICK DOUGLASS
Edited, with a Foreword and Notes, by John Stauffer
978-0-8129-7031-9; trade paperback

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave and Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl
FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND HARRIET JACOBS
Introduction by Kwame Anthony Appiah
978-0-679-78328-2; trade paperback

John Brown
W.E.B. DU BOIS
Edited and with an Introduction by David Roediger
978-0-679-78353-4; trade paperback

The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison
PREFACE BY SAUL BELLOW
Edited and with an Introduction by John F. Callahan
978-0-8129-6826-2; trade paperback

Living with Music
RALPH ELLISON
Edited and with an Introduction by Robert G. O'Meally
978-0-375-76023-5; trade paperback

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano
OLAUDAH EQUINO
Edited and with Notes by Shelly Eversley
Introduction by Robert Reid-Pharr
978-0-375-76115-7; trade paperback

Imperium in Imperio
SUTTON E. GRIGGS
Preface by A. J. Verdelle; Introduction by Cornel West
978-0-8129-7160-6; trade paperback
MODERN LIBRARY IS ONLINE AT
WWW.MODERNLIBRARY.COM

MODERN LIBRARY ONLINE IS YOUR GUIDE TO CLASSIC LITERATURE ON THE WEB

THE MODERN LIBRARY E-NEWSLETTER

Our free e-mail newsletter is sent to subscribers, and features sample chapters, interviews with and essays by our authors, upcoming books, special promotions, announcements, and news.

To subscribe to the Modern Library e-newsletter, send a blank e-mail to: sub_modernlibrary@info.randomhouse.com or visit www.modernlibrary.com

THE MODERN LIBRARY WEBSITE

Check out the Modern Library website at www.modernlibrary.com for:

• The Modern Library e-newsletter
• A list of our current and upcoming titles and series
• Reading Group Guides and exclusive author spotlights
• Special features with information on the classics and other paperback series
• Excerpts from new releases and other titles
• A list of our e-books and information on where to buy them
• The Modern Library Editorial Board's 100 Best Novels and 100 Best Nonfiction Books of the Twentieth Century written in the English language
• News and announcements

Questions? E-mail us at modernlibrary@randomhouse.com.
For questions about examination or desk copies, please visit the Random House Academic Resources site at www.randomhouse.com/academic
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.

**Mae Henderson** is a professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.