

Passing

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A stunning novel about the cultural and emotional conflicts faced by two light-skinned African American women in the 1920s. One marries a white man and "passes." The other marries within her race but denies prejudice. First published in 1929, *PASSING* is a remarkably candid exploration of racism and of the morally ambiguous consequences of even the most carefully made decisions.

The heroine of *Passing* takes an elevator from the infernal August Chicago streets to the breezy rooftop of the heavenly Drayton Hotel, "wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below." Irene is black, but like her author, the Danish-African American Nella Larsen (a star of the 1920s to mid-1930s Harlem Renaissance and the first black woman to win a Guggenheim creative-writing award), she can "pass" in white society. Yet one woman in the tea room, "fair and golden, like a sunlit day," keeps staring at her, and eventually introduces herself as Irene's childhood friend Clare, who left their hometown 12 years before when her father died. Clare's father had been born "on the left hand"--he was the product of a legal marriage between a white man and a black woman and therefore cut off from his inheritance. So she was raised penniless by white racist relatives, and now she passes as white. Even Clare's violent white husband is in the dark about her past, though he teases her about her tan and affectionately calls her "Nig." He laughingly explains: "When we were first married, she was white as--as--well as white as a lily. But I declare she's getting darker and darker." As Larsen makes clear, *Passing* can also mean dying, and Clare is in peril of losing her identity and her life.

The tale is simple on the surface--a few adventures in Chicago and New York's high life, with lots of real people and race-mixing events described (explicated by Thadious M. Davis's helpful introduction and footnotes). But underneath, it seethes with rage, guilt, sex, and complex deceptions. Irene fears losing her black husband to Clare, who seems increasingly predatory. Or is this all in Irene's mind? And is everyone wearing a mask? Larsen's book is a scary hall of mirrors, a murder mystery that can't resolve itself. It sticks with you. --Tim Appelo

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 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."

Other Books

The Passing Show,

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