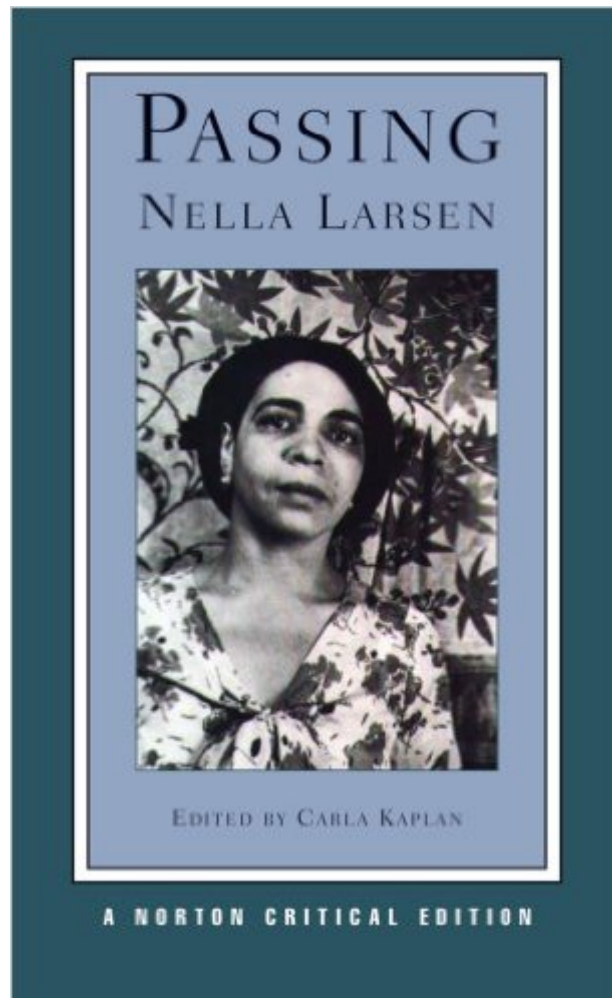


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# Passing (Norton Critical Editions)



## Synopsis

Nella Larsen is a central figure in African American, Modernist, and women's literature. Larsen's status as a Harlem Renaissance woman writer was rivaled by only Zora Neale Hurston. This Norton Critical Edition of her electrifying 1929 novel includes Carla Kaplan's detailed and thought-provoking introduction, thorough explanatory annotations, and a Note on the Text. An unusually rich "Background and Contexts" section connects the novel to the historical events of the day, most notably the sensational Rhinelander/Jones case of 1925. Fourteen contemporary reviews are reprinted, including those by Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Mary Griffin, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Published accounts from 1911 to 1935 by Langston Hughes, Juanita Ellsworth, and Caleb Johnson, among others provide a nuanced view of the contemporary cultural dimensions of race and passing, both in America and abroad. Also included are Larsen's statements on the novel and on passing, as well as a generous selection of her letters and her central writings on "The Tragic Mulatto(a)" in American literature. Additional perspective is provided by related Harlem Renaissance works. "Criticism" provides fifteen diverse critical interpretations, including those by Mary Helen Washington, Cheryl A. Wall, Deborah E. McDowell, David L. Blackmore, Kate Baldwin, and Catherine Rottenberg. A Chronology and Selected Bibliography are also included.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Nella Larsen's 1929 novella, "Passing," is an incredible, dark exploration of the lengths to which

people go to secure personal happiness. Coming out just four years after "The Great Gatsby," "Passing" can be seen in more than one way as the Harlem Renaissance's response to and a parallel text of Fitzgerald's acknowledged masterwork. Not to limit Larsen's skills by strict comparison to "Gatsby," "Passing" should of course, be considered on its own merits, which are considerable. Difficult to place as simply the work of a talented black woman writer, Larsen's "Passing" is a novella with carefully nuanced and complicated views of racial, sexual, economic, and more generally personal and national identity. Indeed, the narrative is right to suggest that these are inextricable and forces the reader to adjudicate the struggle. "Passing" begins with a letter received. By inviting us to peer into the contents of personal correspondence in the grand tradition of the epistolary novel, then denying us the full contents, the reader must come to terms with a limited, and even deceptive narrative style. Irene Redfield refuses to open a letter she has just gotten from a childhood acquaintance with whom she has had only brief communication with since, Clare Kendry. Irene then reflects on the time, two years ago, when she happened unexpectedly upon Clare at a rooftop restaurant in Chicago. As 'black' women who can 'pass' for 'white,' they meet at this decidedly white restaurant, after gauging each other in confused silence.

It only takes Nella Larsen one hundred and fourteen pages to produce a thought provoking and imaginative story about the Black bourgeoisie in 1920s Harlem. At a time when men were the prominent literary figures, Larsen was the first writer to explore the issues facing the fair skinned middle class. Larsen confronts racy issues such as sexism and racism while using language so potent it sparks rivers of curiosity to flow from the reader's mind. Through the provocative relationship between friends Clare and Irene, Larsen manages to captivate the audience with a story full of jealousy, lies, and ultimately betrayal. The story revolves around the protagonist, Irene Redfield's, encounters with Clare Kendry. Irene and Clare are both of mixed ancestry, and as a result have very fair complexions. Clare uses this to escape what she perceives as the "burden" of being a part of the African-American community so that she can advance socially. "You can't know, 'Rene, how, when I used to go over to the south side, I used almost to hate all of you. You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others" (26). After not seeing Clare for years, Irene inadvertently runs into her. Irene eventually discovers how Clare chose to ignore her Black heritage, and even married a white man who assumes Clare is white. Following an awkward experience with Clare and her husband, Irene returned home, under the assumption that Clare would never again be a part of her life. This holds true until a letter from Clare leads to Clare making habitual visits to see Irene and her family and accompanying them to

parties whenever she can escape her husband's grasp.

Written in 1929, *PASSING* is a product of the Harlem Renaissance. Nella Larsen, a biracial woman, relates the story of Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. Both are fair skinned black women who can pass for white and grow up together in a black neighborhood. When Clare is orphaned she moves with white relatives and deserts her black heritage. She sees it as the only means of escape from the poverty that she detests. She marries John Bellows, escaping her past and could have disappeared into the white world. But through a chance meeting, where Irene is also passing for white, they meet after many years of separation. Irene has married a black doctor, who wants to move to Brazil and in effect pass as a Latin American. He wants physically out of America while Irene wants out of the racial tensions of America. Clare is drawn back to her racial roots by some mystery. She can't let go even though she knows it will be the end of her marriage and perhaps the loss of her daughter. Clare's husband, John Bellows, is an avowed racist who calls Clare "Nig" because he jokes that she is getting darker, totally unaware of her race. Irene and another friend who is also passing endure Bellows's racist remarks but do not respond. The book takes place over about a 2 year period as Clare flirts with the danger of discovery and also Irene's husband. Irene is in conflict as to whether to reveal the truth to John, which would get Clare out of her life. But she can't bring herself to do it. The book tells of the conflict of being black and living white; it tells of the interracial circles of Harlem of the 1920's. It's a period of high racial tensions, but yet whites flock to Harlem because some see it as in vogue not because they seek an interracial culture.

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