**Larsen, Nella (1891-1964)**

Nella Larsen was an American novelist, active in the 1920s, who was one of the central figures of “Manhattan modernism.” She is best known for two short novels, *Quicksand* (1928), and *Passing* (1929). While she is now considered a key American modernist writer, both Larsen and her work were unheard of for much of the mid-twentieth-century, only returning to prominence from the 1980s. The “rediscovered” Larsen was initially claimed predominantly by black and feminist schools of criticism, although, Larsen’s passage into the canon has since involved the work of literary critics from almost every field.

Larsen was born in Chicago, the daughter of a (white) Danish mother and a (black) West Indian father; soon after her birth, however, Larsen’s mother married a fellow Dane. The experience of growing up as a mixed-race child in a white family was difficult, and provided material for Larsen’s later works. She briefly attended university in Nashville, and then spent several years with her mother’s family in Copenhagen. She trained as a nurse upon her return to the U.S, and started work in the Bronx. During this time she married Elmer S. Imes, a physicist who was socially connected to a number of leading black intellectuals, many of them members of the NAACP. Larsen, however, was drawn towards the more bohemian fringes of the Harlem Renaissance and one of her closest friendships was with Carl Van Vechten, whose photographs of Larsen, among others, are some of the most iconic images of American modernism.

In 1922 Larsen entered the School of the New York Public Library (NYPL), becoming only the second formally trained black American librarian in the country, and worked in various NYPL branches, where she organised a number of cultural events featuring Harlem Renaissance figures. Her first known fiction was published in the “pulp” *Young’s Magazine* in 1926, under the pseudonym “Allen Semi;” the two stories, “The Wrong Man” and “Freedom,” centre on sensationally-depicted love triangles.

*Quicksand*, Larsen’s first novel, published by Knopf in 1928, was hailed at the time as a successful reworking of the “tragic mulatto” theme – although it should also be seen in the context of the work by Scandinavian modernist writers, Henrik Ibsen and Jens Peter Jacobsen in particular, that Larsen was especially interested in. The novel follows Helga Crane as she moves between jobs, countries and social circles in an unsuccessful search for a sense of belonging, and much of the trajectory of Helga’s early education, travels and career are a thinly veiled re-working of Larsen’s. With *Passing*, published in 1929, Larsen produced her most complex and powerful work; short and expressionistic, it centres on the re-encounter between two black American women, childhood friends, who meet again as adults, by which point one of them is “passing” as white. As well as its exploration of issues of race and identity, the novel also questions the construction of gender, class, and objective “truth,” partly though its use of unreliable, limited narration.

Larsen won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1930, the first black American woman to do so, and used this to travel to Europe. In the same year, she was accused of plagiarism, over a magazine short story, “Sanctuary” (the plot was similar to that of an English short story), and – although the accusations were never proved – was forced to publish an “Author’s Explanation.” While abroad, Larsen worked on her next novel, “Mirage;” this was rejected by Knopf, however, and never published. Larsen and Imes divorced in the mid-1930s, and Larsen returned to nursing work soon after. She worked as a nurse until her death, having broken all ties to her past life, including literary work and friendships. All manuscripts of Larsen’s work are lost (including those of two unpublished novels); many of her letters to friends survive, however, and are held in various collections.

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