

= Passing ( novel ) =

Passing is a novel by American author Nella Larsen , first published in 1929 . Set primarily in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City in the 1920s , the story centers on the reunion of two childhood friends ? Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield ? and their increasing fascination with each other 's lives . The title and central theme of the novel refer to the practice of racial " passing ; " Clare Kendry 's passing as white with her white husband , John ( Jack ) Bellew , is its most significant depiction in the novel , and a catalyst for the tragic events .

Larsen 's exploration of race was informed by her own mixed racial heritage and the increasingly common practice of racial passing in the 1920s . Praised upon publication , the novel has since been celebrated in modern scholarship for its complex depiction of race , gender and sexuality . As one of only two novels by Larsen , Passing has been significant to her ranked at the forefront of several literary canons and has been the subject of considerable scholarly criticism .

= = Background = =

= = = Biographical context = = =

As early as 1925 , Nella Larsen had decided that she wanted to be among the " New Negro " writers who were receiving considerable attention at the time . Initially writing short stories that were sold early in 1926 to a ladies magazine , she was rumored that year to be writing a novel . In a letter to her friend Carl Van Vechten , she acknowledges that " it is the awful Truth . But , who knows if I 'll get through with the damned thing . Certainly not I . " In April 1927 , Larsen and her husband Elmer Imes moved from Jersey City , New Jersey to Harlem in order to be closer to this cultural phenomenon . The following year , Larsen published her first novel Quicksand with New York @-@ based publisher Knopf , and its favorable critical reception encouraged her ambitions to become known as a novelist . She published only these two novels ( including Passing ) and some short stories .

= = = Historical context = = =

The 1920s in the United States was a period marked by considerable anxiety and discussion over the crossing of racial boundaries ? the so @-@ called " color line " between blacks and whites ? exacerbated by the Great Migration , in which hundreds of thousands of blacks left the rural south for northern and midwestern cities where , together with new waves of immigrants , they changed the social makeup . The practice of persons crossing the color line and attempting to claim recognition in another racial group different from the one they were believed to belong to was known as " passing , " even when it was based on a person 's ancestry . As many African Americans had European ancestry in varying proportions , some appeared visibly European . The US history of slavery as a racial caste , together with the imposition of the " one @-@ drop rule " in the early 20th century , were used by whites to try to harden racial lines that were more fluid in history ; at any time , the concept of race was " historically contingent . " Although the exact numbers of people who passed is , for obvious reasons , not known , many estimates were made at the time ; the sociologist Charles S. Johnson ( 1893 ? 1956 ) calculated that 355 @,@ 000 blacks had passed between 1900 and 1920 .

A significant precedent for Larsen 's depiction of Clare Kendry 's and Jack Bellew 's relationship was the 1925 legal trial known as the " Rhinelander Case " ( or Rhinelander v. Rhinelander ) . Wealthy , white Leonard Kip Rhinelander sued his wife , Alice Beatrice Jones , for annulment and fraud ; urged by his family , he alleged that she had failed to inform him of her " colored " blood . The case was also about status and class , as he had met her when she was working as a domestic . She contended that her mixed race was obvious and she had never denied it . Although the jury eventually returned a verdict for Alice , it came at a devastating social cost for both parties ; intimate

exchanges between the couple were read out in court , and Alice Rhinelander was forced to partially disrobe in front of the jury in the judge 's chambers in order for them to assess the darkness of her skin . Larsen refers to this case near the end of the novel , when Irene wonders about the consequences of Jack discovering Clare 's racial status : ? What if Bellew should divorce Clare ? Could he ? There was the Rhinelander case ? . The case received substantial coverage in the press of the time , and Larsen could assume that it was common knowledge to her readers .

= = Plot summary = =

The story is written as a third person narrative from the perspective of Irene Redfield , a light @-@ skinned black woman who lives in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City . Part One of the book , titled " Encounter , " opens with Irene receiving a letter from Clare Kendry , causing her to recall a past chance encounter she had with her at the roof restaurant of the Drayton Hotel in Chicago , during a brief stay in the city . The women grew up together but lost touch when Clare 's white father died and she was taken to live with her two paternal white aunts . Irene learns that Clare " passes " for white , living primarily in Europe with her unsuspecting , rich , white husband and their daughter . Although Irene tries to avoid further engagement with Clare , she later visits Clare for tea along with another childhood friend , Gertrude Martin . Toward the end of the visit , Clare 's husband John ( Jack ) Bellew arrives . Unaware that all three women are black , Jack expresses some very racist views and makes the women uneasy . However , the women play it off in an effort to maintain Clare 's secret identity . Afterward , Irene and Gertrude decide that Clare 's situation is too dangerous for them to continue associating with her . Irene receives a letter of apology from Clare but destroys it and goes on with her life with her husband , Brian , and two sons .

Part Two of the book , " Re @-@ encounter , " returns to the present , with Irene having received this new letter from Clare . After Irene ignores Clare 's letter , Clare visits in person so Irene reluctantly agrees to see her . When it is brought up that Irene serves on the committee for the " Negro Welfare League " ( NWL ) Clare invites herself to their upcoming dance , despite Irene 's advising against it for fear that Jack will find out . Clare attends the dance and enjoys herself without her husband finding out , which encourages her to continue spending time in Harlem . Irene and Clare resume their childhood companionship , and Clare frequently visits Irene 's home .

The third and final part of the novel begins before Christmas , as Irene 's relationship with her husband has become increasingly fraught . Aware of her friend 's appeal , Irene becomes convinced that her husband is having an affair with Clare . During a shopping trip with her visibly black friend Felise Freeland , Irene encounters Jack , who becomes aware of her ? and by extension , Clare 's ? racial status . Irene considers warning Clare about Jack 's new @-@ found knowledge but decides against it , worried that the pair 's divorce might encourage her husband to leave her for Clare . Later , Clare accompanies Irene and Brian to a party hosted by Felise . The gathering is interrupted by Jack , who accuses Clare of being a " damned dirty nigger ! " Irene rushes to Clare , who is standing by an open window . Suddenly , Clare falls out of the window from the top floor of the building to the ground below , where she is pronounced dead by the guests who eventually gather at the site . Whether she has fallen accidentally , was pushed by Irene or Bellew , or committed suicide , is unclear . The book ends with Irene 's fragmented anguish at Clare 's death .

= = Themes = =

= = Race and the " Tragic Mulatto " = = =

Passing has been described as " the tragic story of a beautiful light @-@ skinned mulatto passing for white in high society . " The tragic mulatto ( also " mulatta " when referring to a woman ) is a stock character in early African @-@ American literature . Such accounts often featured the light @-@ skinned offspring of a white slaveholder and his black slave , whose mixed heritage in a race @-@ based society means she is unable to identify or find a place with either blacks or whites . The

resulting feeling of exclusion was portrayed as variably manifested in self @-@ loathing , depression , alcoholism , sexual perversion , and attempts at suicide .

On the surface , *Passing* conforms to this stereotype in its portrayal of Clare Kendry , whose passing for white has tragic consequences ; however , the book resists the conventions of the genre , as Clare refuses to feel the expected anguish at the betrayal of her black identity and socializes with blacks for the purposes of excitement rather than racial solidarity . Scholars have more generally considered *Passing* as a novel in which the major concern is not race . For instance , Claudia Tate describes the issue as " merely a mechanism for setting the story in motion , sustaining the suspense , and bringing about the external circumstances for the story 's conclusion . "

= = = Homosexuality = = =

Scholars have identified a homoerotic subtext between Irene and Clare , centered on the erotic undertones in Irene 's descriptions of Clare and appreciation of her beauty . In this interpretation , the novel 's central metaphor of " passing " under a different identity " occurs at a surprisingly wide variety of levels , " including sexual . The apparently sexless marriage between Brian and Irene ? e.g. , their separate bedrooms and identification as co @-@ parents rather than sexual partners ? allows Larsen to " flirt , if only by suggestion , with the idea of a lesbian relationship between [ Clare and Irene ] " . With Irene considered " an unreliable narrator " , she is portrayed as mistaken about events and her interpretations of them . The character of her husband Brian has been subject to a similar interpretation : Irene 's labeling of him as queer and his oft @-@ expressed desire to go to Brazil ? a country then widely thought to be more tolerant of homosexuality than the United States ? are given as evidence . It is also shown that Brazil is considered to be a place with more relaxed ideas about race .

= = = Identity = = =

The 1920s witnessed violent attempts to establish and regulate social and racial boundaries , and there was a great deal of national discourse on the so @-@ called " color line " . Larsen , however , challenged the traditional ideologies of identity politics at the time ; her " nuanced handling of Clare 's passing and Irene 's ' allegiance ' demonstrates that ideologies which conceptualize race as an ethics , whether originating in black pride or white racism , vary enormously , depending in large part , upon whether they attempt an answer to ... ' what race is . ' " Rather than reflect that rigid views of race that were prevalent and resulting in violence and deaths , Larsen portrays race as fluid , identity politics as complex .

= = Critical reception = =

*Passing* was published in April 1929 by Knopf in New York City . Sales of the book were modest ? Knopf produced three small print runs each under 2 @, @ 000 copies . While early reviews were primarily positive , it received little attention beyond New York City . Reviewers writing for mostly black audiences praised the book much more than reviewers writing for mostly white audiences . Comparing it to Larsen 's previous novel *Quicksand* , Alice Dunbar @-@ Nelson 's review in *The Washington Eagle* began by declaring that " Nella Larsen delights again with her new novel " . Writer and scholar W. E. B. Du Bois hailed it as the " one of the finest novels of the year " , and believed that its limited success was due to its treating a " forbidden subject " : the marriage of a white man to a mixed @-@ race girl who did not reveal her ancestry .

A common criticism of the novel is that it ends too suddenly , without a full exploration of the issues . Mary Rennels , writing in the *New York Telegram* , said that " Larsen didn 't solve the problem [ of passing ] . Knocking a character out of a scene doesn 't settle a matter . " An anonymous reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* similarly concluded that " the most serious fault with the book is its sudden and utterly unconvincing close " , but otherwise considered it an effective treatment of

the topic . On the other hand , Dunbar @-@ Nelson found that the ending confirmed to the reader that " you have been reading a masterpiece all along . "

In modern scholarship , Larsen is recognized as one of the central figures in the African @-@ American , feminist and modernist canons , a reputation that is based on her two novels ? Passing and Quicksand ? and some short stories . As of 2007 , Passing is the subject of more than two hundred scholarly articles and more than fifty dissertations , which offer a range of critical interpretations . It has been hailed as a text helping to " create a modernist psychological interiority ... challenging marriage and middle @-@ class domesticity , complexly interrogating gender , race , and sexual identity , and for redeploying traditional tropes ? such as that of the tragic mulatta ? with a contemporary and critical twist " . However , literary critic Cheryl A. Wall summarizes the critical response to Passing as less favorable than to Larsen 's first novel Quicksand . On the one hand the significance of sexual jealousy in the story has been seen to detract from the topic of racial passing ; conversely , even if racial passing is accurately treated in the novel , it is considered a historically specific practice , and therefore Passing appears dated and trivial .