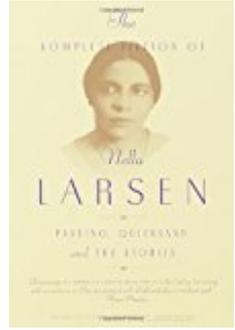


Nella Larsen's Fantastic Motley of Ugliness and Beauty

The story of Nella Larsen's literary career is one of the great tragedies of American letters. One of the Harlem Renaissance's most influential and enigmatic writers, she published two novels and several short stories before disappearing into obscurity. Surely the work of countless black American women writers never reached the audience it deserved or was never even published, but Nella Larson's story is exceptionally heartbreaking because the two great novels she did produce suggest the terrible loss of all those she never wrote. After reading her extraordinary, transcendent short novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing* (recently reissued by Serpent's Tail), I can only imagine the masterpieces she might have written had her career not been cut short by a combination of being a mixed-race woman writer in a white man's world, a plagiarism scandal, and her own demons.



Both novels were critically successful and widely acclaimed. Unflinching, richly detailed, and emotionally intense, they vividly depict from a woman's perspective black middle-class life in 1920s America, particularly New York City during the "Jazz Age." Each easily holds its own next to *The Great Gatsby*. In a society that still today persists in refusing to listen to women, especially to black women, the loss of her extended, fully developed voice is profound. Through her nuanced, uneasy, and startling depictions of race, sex, and class, Larsen's slim but essential oeuvre rigorously challenges her readers to do what any great book does: examine our humanity.

Despite numerous academic articles and two excellent biographies -- Thadious M. Davis's meticulous *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled* (1994) and George Hutchinson's insightful *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (2006), the facts known about Larsen are few. She was born in Chicago in 1893 to a white mother, an immigrant from Denmark. Her father, it seems, was a mixed-race immigrant from the Danish West Indies. Thereafter the story becomes hazy. Speculation abounds whether Nella's father disappeared, died, or stayed with the family. After the birth of Nella's light-skinned sister, one theory goes, Nella was the only recognizably black family member so her parents decided to claim that Nella's father had died and that the man calling himself her father was actually her stepfather. Thus, the family could pass for white. The great migration from the south had not yet happened and Chicago's black population was under two percent. Nella grew up in a poor white neighborhood and attended white public schools, but as migration to the city increased and racial tensions flared, her mother decided Nella would fare better being

brought up as a middle-class black woman and sent her away at 16 to a high school run by Fisk University, a historically black middle-class institution, in Nashville, Tennessee. Evidence of any contact with her family in Chicago thereafter is virtually nil.

Larsen's novel *Quicksand* opens with protagonist Helga Crane, also of mixed race and from a poor, broken home, seething over a recent speech given at Naxos, the Southern school where she teaches dedicated to "negro education." The speaker, "one of the renowned white preachers of the state," described Naxos as "the finest school for Negroes anywhere in the country north or south," declaring that "if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products, there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them." Disgusted by this "show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's inefficiency," before the school year's end, Helga heads for New York City.

Larsen also abandoned her Southern boarding school after a year, though it remains unclear if she left voluntarily or was expelled for violating Fisk's strict code of conduct. She went to Denmark, living for four years with relatives, probably in Jutland. There, she read Henrik Ibsen and Jens Peter Jacobsen, who would greatly influence her own writing in its uncomfortable dismantling of social facades, her relentless exposure of how we build our lives on secrets, her stringent challenging of assumptions, and her psychologically complex female characters.

Helga Crane, too, lives in Denmark for an extended period, initially enjoying being free of American-style racial prejudice, being the object of attention and admiration, and giving "herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired." But she soon begins to feel another sort of irrelevance: "The women too were kind, feeling no need for jealousy. To them this girl, this Helga Crane, this mysterious niece of the Dahls, was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn't one of them. She didn't at all count."

Returning to New York City in 1914, Larsen attended nursing school at Lincoln Hospital's new South Bronx campus where patients and nurses were black, doctors predominantly white males. After graduating, she became head nurse at Alabama's Tuskegee Institute but after a year returned to Lincoln Hospital. In 1919, she married Elmer Imes, the second black man to receive a PhD in Physics and a prominent member of the Harlem elite. The couple settled there and became leading figures in the neighborhood's social, artistic, and intellectual life, counting among their friends W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, and Walter White. They also frequented white intellectual circles in Greenwich Village.

In 1921, Larsen became the first black woman to graduate from the New York Public Library School run by Columbia University. While a librarian at the NYLP's Harlem branch, she began to write. Throughout the '20s she published short stories, poems, and articles, often under a pseudonym. Soon she devoted herself full-time to her writing. In 1928, her close friend Carl Van Vechten, the writer, photographer, and promoter of the Harlem Renaissance, showed his

publisher Alfred A. Knopf Larsen's manuscript for *Quicksand* -- the story of Helga Crane, a restless, mixed-race, middle-class, highly intelligent young woman whose turbulent search for home and self ends in her being subsumed by religion, patriarchy, and motherhood.

Larsen writes brilliantly and courageously about female sexual desire and its perpetual thwarting by society. She captures the thrill and severe limitations of being a single woman in the city and, though childless herself, she pointedly describes women's conflicting attitudes towards motherhood. In *Quicksand*, Helga, struggling as the mother of three young children, wonders how "did other women, other mothers, manage? Could it be possible that, while presenting such smiling and contented faces, they were all always on the edge of health? All always worn out and apprehensive?"

In 1929, Larsen published *Passing*, the story of Clare and Irene, childhood friends who lose touch and meet again as adults. Both are mixed race and can pass for white. Irene identifies as black, Clare, beautiful and blonde, as white, but as much as each pretends, neither woman is reconciled with her choice. Their lives become ever more entwined: old jealousies and new betrayals arise, leading each woman to her tragic end. Larsen again addresses themes of race, class, sexuality, and motherhood. When Irene, afraid her husband may be having an affair with Clare, urges her friend to stay with her abusive white husband for the sake of Clare's daughter, Clare responds, "I think that being a mother is the cruellest thing in the world."

In 1930, Larsen published her short story "Sanctuary." A very public scandal followed in which she was baselessly accused of plagiarism. Despite the controversy, she received a Guggenheim Fellowship, the first black woman to do so, for her next novel. She used the money to go to Europe to write, fleeing the lingering scandal and her failing marriage -- her husband was having an affair with a white woman. When she returned to New York, Knopf rejected her new novel about a love triangle involving all white characters, she divorced her husband and, struggling with depression, moved to the Lower East Side, resuming her job as a nurse and disappearing from the literary world. Unfinished manuscripts found after her death suggest she continued to write, though she never published again. She died in 1964 at the age of 72.

Larsen's own experience as a mixed-race woman who never quite belonged anywhere and who fervently questioned what was expected of her as a middle-class woman, allowed her a uniquely compelling perspective on our strange, absurd, onerous social constructions. Ultimately, her novels revolve around the elusiveness of identity. Who we are, she asserts through her characters' stories, whatever our race, class, or gender, is never as stable as we suppose or hope, but always shifting, fluid, inconsistent, inconstant, at worst fatally oppressive, at best magnificently surprising. Nella Larsen's body of work reminds us that much of great literature is written in and from the margins.

In a stunning passage from *Quicksand*, Helga describes the people she sees in Harlem, making a lyrical mockery of society's rigidly monochromatic view of the world:

For the hundredth time she marvelled at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers. A dozen shades slid by. There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach ivory, pinky white, pastry white. There was yellow hair, brown hair, black hair; straight hair, straightened hair, curly hair, crinkly hair, woolly hair. She saw black eyes in white faces, brown eyes in yellow faces, gray eyes in brown faces, blue eyes in tan faces. Africa, Europe, perhaps with a pinch of Asia, in a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty, semi-barbaric, sophisticated, exotic were here.

Larsen's literary legacy is just that: "a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty, semi-barbaric, sophisticated, exotic." Our world is better because of her books. I only wish she had been able to leave us more of her astounding words.

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