



Jessie Redmon Fauset

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Her mother had never seemed to consider [passing] as anything but a lark. And on the one occasion, that terrible day in the hospital when passing or not passing might have meant the difference between good will and unpleasantness, her mother had deliberately given the whole show away. But her mother, she had long since begun to realize, had not considered this business of colour or the lack of it as pertaining intimately to her personal happiness. She was perfectly satisfied, absolutely content whether she was part of that white world with Angela or up on little Opal Street with her dark family and friends. Whereas it seemed to Angela that all the things which she most wanted were wrapped up with white people. All the good things were theirs. Not, some coldly reasoning instinct within was saying, because they were white. But because for the present they had power and the badge of that power was whiteness, very like the colours on the escutcheon of a powerful house. She possessed the badge, and unless there was someone to tell she could possess the power for which it stood.

— Plum Bun

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Quick Facts

- * 1882-1961
- * African-American novelist, poet, and activist
- * Editor of *The Crisis* during the Harlem Renaissance

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Jessie Redmon Fauset

Biography

Jessie Redmon Fauset was born in 1882 in Frederickville, New Jersey into an affluent family. Her father, Redmon Fauset, was a minister whose family hailed from Philadelphia. Her mother, Anna, died when Jessie Fauset was a child. Fauset attended Cornell University from which she graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1905. She began her professional life as a teacher, taking a teaching post in French and Latin in Washington DC in 1906. In 1919 she received a Master's degree in French from the University of Pennsylvania and honed her skills at the Sorbonne before coming to New York City.

Between 1919 and 1926, at the height of that explosion of creative activity centered in New York which was known as the Harlem Renaissance, Jessie Fauset was the literary editor of the NAACP's publication *The Crisis*, under the direction of W.E.B. DuBois. In addition to writing regular articles for the magazine, Fauset was responsible for fostering such notable literary greats as Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer. In the early 1920s, she also edited *The Brownies Book*, an NAACP publication geared toward African American children. Upon leaving her post at *The Crisis*, Fauset returned to teaching and taught French in the New York City schools for much of the rest of her life.

Jessie Fauset wrote all four of her novels in the remarkably prolific years between 1924 and 1931. All of these works explore race through characters and situations in which the division between black and white seems to blur. In *Plum Bun*, arguably Fauset's strongest work, the blurring occurs as the novel's protagonist, Angela Murray, a very light-skinned black woman, alienates herself from her remaining relative, her sister, in order to pursue a life of passing as white in New York City. Though the book is subtitled "A Novel Without a Moral," Fauset's message at the end couldn't be clearer: by passing and effectively separating herself from her family and community, Angela has become alienated from herself.

The issue of skin color is raised quite differently in the ironically titled *Comedy American Style*; here Olivia, another light-skinned protagonist, has become so obsessed with the desire for whiteness -- marrying a light-skinned man in order to bear lighter-skinned children, and rejecting the one among them, Oliver, who turns out dark -- that she ends up destroying her family and herself. Fauset's remaining novels, *The Chinnaberry Tree* and *There is Confusion*, both hinge upon the complications which arise in a culture in which procreative relationships between the races are common but are not legally sanctioned. These novels question the validity of the basis on which the color line is maintained. In addition to her novels and the essays she wrote for *The Crisis*, Fauset also wrote and published poetry.



Jessie Redmon Fauset

Biography continued

Jessie Fauset has often been criticized for portraying her almost exclusively upper-middle class characters as exemplars of “what the race is capable of doing” (Christian 41). Her detractors argue that her emphasis on blacks of so-called “genteel” culture as standard-bearers for the race silences the lives and contributions of others who are not so economically advantaged. Others assert that a close examination of the novels themselves reveals “a thematic and ironic complexity, a stylistic subtlety that few critics have seen” (McDowell x), which makes her seeming adherence to bourgeois “conventions seem less the badge of a hidebound traditionalist with prudish mid-Victorian sensibilities, and more that of a burgeoning progressive.”

Selected Bibliography

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