



Nella Larsen

“

Helga Crane couldn't, she told herself and others, live in America. In spite of its glamour, existence in America, even in Harlem, was for Negroes too cramped, too uncertain, too cruel; something not to be endured for a lifetime if one could escape; something demanding a courage greater than was in her. No. She couldn't stay. Nor, she saw now, could she remain away. Leaving, she would have to come back.

— Quicksand

”

Quick Facts

- * 1891-1964
- * African-American short story writer and novelist
- * Influential member of the Harlem Renaissance

Biography

The details of Nella Larsen's life, which she herself obscured in biographical statements, have been painstakingly reconstructed by her biographer, Thadious M. Davis. She was born in Chicago in 1891 to a Danish mother, Mary Hanson Walker, and an African-American father, Peter Walker. Her parents separated shortly after her birth and her mother married the white Peter Larson, from whom Nella took her surname. (Davis speculates that Walker and Larson might, in fact, be the same person -- a possibility that does much to explain the secrecy with which she guarded her history.) Larsen grew up in Chicago and attended the public schools there before Peter Larson enrolled her in Fisk University's Normal School in 1907, an event that marked her permanent alienation from her birth family.

This page was researched and submitted by: Laurie Dickinson on 8/8/96.



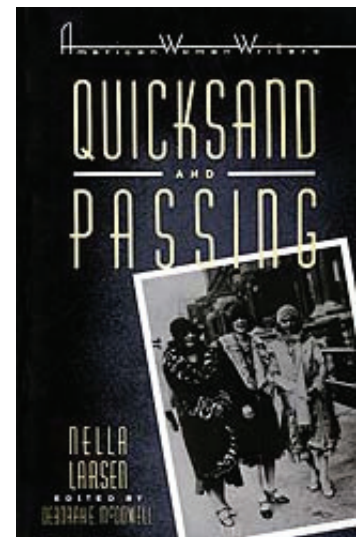
Nella Larsen

Biography continued

Between 1912 and 1915, Larsen trained as a nurse in New York and, upon her graduation, went down to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to work as head nurse at John Andrew Memorial Hospital and Nurse Training School. By 1916, however, Larsen returned to New York and took a nursing post there. Here she met Elmer Imes, a physicist, whom she married in 1919, and began her acquaintances with people influential in the burgeoning Harlem arts movement -- what would later be known as the Harlem Renaissance.

It was in this environment that Nella Larsen Imes' interest in literature began to blossom. Her first publications were two articles about Danish games, published in the *Brownies' Book*, a children's magazine edited by Jessie Redmon Fauset. In 1921 Larsen left her nursing position and took a job at the New York Public Library's 135th Street branch in Harlem and attended library school at Columbia University. She continued at the NYPL until 1926 and worked at honing her writing skills, writing several pieces of short fiction which she published, some under the pseudonym Allen Semi (her married name reversed). She was also at work on her first novel, *Quicksand*, which would be published in 1928 to some critical acclaim.

Shortly after the publication of Larsen's second and last novel, she published the story "Sanctuary" which concerns a man who, after shooting someone, seeks refuge in the home of a friend's mother, not realizing that it is the friend who he has shot and killed. The power of this story paled when it was revealed that it bore too striking a resemblance to another story to be passed off as coincidence. In 1930, Larsen won a Guggenheim Fellowship (the first African-American woman to receive this award) and travelled to Europe to work on her next novel, which was subsequently rejected by Knopf Publishers. In 1933 she divorced Imes, who had been carrying on an affair for some time, and by 1934 she had retreated into obscurity. In fact, Larsen would live another thirty years as Nella Larsen Imes, a nurse living and working in Brooklyn, with no contact with her Harlem friends. Though there is evidence that she worked on up to two other novels, she would not publish another word.





Nella Larsen

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

“Sanctuary” (1930).

Passing (1929).

Quicksand (1928).

Works about the author

Davis, Thadious M. *Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled* (Louisiana State University Press, 1994).

Larson, Charles R. *Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer & Nella Larsen* (University of Iowa Press, 1993).

McLendon, Jacquelyn Y. *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* (University Press of Virginia, 1995).