



Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A Woman's Life Unveiled

Thadious M. Davis

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Nella Larsen (1891-1964) is recognized as one of the most influential, and certainly one of the most enigmatic, writers of the Harlem Renaissance. With the instant success of her two novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), she became a bright light in New York's literary firmament. But her meteoric rise was followed by an equally sudden fall: In 1930 she was accused of plagiarizing a short story, and soon thereafter she disappeared from both the literary and African-American worlds of New York. She lived the rest of her life - more than three decades - out of the public eye, working primarily as a nurse. In a remarkable achievement, Thadious Davis has penetrated the fog of mystery that has surrounded Larsen to present a detailed and fascinating account of the life and work of this gifted, determined, yet vulnerable artist. The exact circumstances of Larsen's birth, especially the racial identities of her parents, probably cannot be definitively sorted out; but what is certain and most significant is that Larsen was a child of mixed race who was raised for a few years in Chicago as if she were white but then, while an adolescent, sent off to the Fisk University Normal High School with the understanding that she would prepare to assume a position among the black middle class. Throughout her life Larsen appears to have cultivated a sense of mystery about herself. She was born Nellie Walker but from childhood on changed her name several times to reflect different self-conceptions, and when she did offer information about herself, she gave differing versions of the basic facts. At first glance Larsen seems to have been a strange amalgam of arrogance and insecurity. But Davis' analysis of Larsen's personality and her position as a woman of mixed race in the America of her time - a person whom society defined as marginal in several ways - shows that such contradictions were only to be expected. In addition to unraveling the details of Larsen's personal life, Davi

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