



## In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line

*By George Hutchinson*

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**In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line** By George Hutchinson

Born to a Danish seamstress and a black West Indian cook in one of the Western Hemisphere's most infamous vice districts, Nella Larsen (1891-1964) lived her life in the shadows of America's racial divide. She wrote about that life, was briefly celebrated in her time, then was lost to later generations--only to be rediscovered and hailed by many as the best black novelist of her generation. In his search for Nella Larsen, the "mystery woman of the Harlem Renaissance," George Hutchinson exposes the truths and half-truths surrounding this central figure of modern literary studies, as well as the complex reality they mask and mirror. His book is a cultural biography of the color line as it was lived by one person who truly embodied all of its ambiguities and complexities.

Author of a landmark study of the Harlem Renaissance, Hutchinson here produces the definitive account of a life long obscured by misinterpretations, fabrications, and omissions. He brings Larsen to life as an often tormented modernist, from the trauma of her childhood to her emergence as a star of the Harlem Renaissance. Showing the links between her experiences and her writings, Hutchinson illuminates the singularity of her achievement and shatters previous notions of her position in the modernist landscape. Revealing the suppressions and misunderstandings that accompany the effort to separate black from white, his book addresses the vast consequences for all Americans of color-line culture's fundamental rule: race trumps family.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In this biography of novelist Nella Larsen, Hutchinson (*The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*) explores her work, life and place in social history, positing that the reason for Larsen's shadowy status as a writer of the Harlem Renaissance is tied to the shifting color line in American society. Larsen, whose mother was a Danish immigrant and whose father was a black laborer, identified with her blackness yet also confronted and struggled with prejudice within the Harlem literary community. She eventually withdrew from her friends and colleagues and pursued a successful career as a nurse. Cracking open the few authoritative narratives on Larsen, Hutchinson finds a noteworthy theme: "As I read these books, I recognized a pattern not atypical of the way children from interracial families had often been misunderstood and—there is no other word for it—pathologized." Not only does he put forth a correct and complete narrative of Larsen's life, but he also uses Larsen's story as a mixed-race woman of the Harlem Renaissance to portray the lasting issues of race and color politics from then until now.

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From [Booklist](#)

\*Starred Review\* Larsen's racial heritage—black West Indian father, Danish mother—was further complicated by her mother's later marriage to a white man, the birth of a white half sister, and an early life spent between Chicago's vice district and Copenhagen in the late 1800s. Estranged from her family, Larsen spent the remainder of her life looking for a place to belong, finding it, for a while, in the glittering Harlem Renaissance. Hutchinson draws on previously unused resource material to offer a startlingly intimate portrait of a woman often presented as an obscure figure in accounts of the literary scene of the time yet who was, in actuality, smack-dab in the middle of debates about racial uplift and about black writers selling out amid the vogue among white bohemians to associate with black artists. Hutchinson disputes earlier portraits of Larsen as pathological and instead offers a nuanced look at a complicated woman wrestling with racial identity and a fear of abandonment through her novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Primarily through her relationships, and correspondence, with luminary figures of the Harlem Renaissance, Hutchinson brings Larsen to life in all her glorious complexity in this sparkling examination of a critical period in American racial and literary development. *Vanessa Bush*

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Review

*In Search of Nella Larsen* is a true challenge to conventional wisdom; there is no book like it in existence. The readings of Larsen's two novels make the case that she deserves to be reevaluated and considered the major Harlem Renaissance novelist of the 1920s. (Werner Sollors, author of *Neither Black nor White yet Both* and Henry B. and Anne M. Cabot Professor of English and Afro-American Studies at Harvard University)

This biography of Nella Larsen, as much a cultural biography of Larsen's times as it is a story of her life, is a labor of love. It is extraordinarily well researched, comprehensive, and certain to be regarded, henceforth, as the definitive biography of Larsen's life. Larsen is a central figure for African Americanists, feminists, Americanists, and those interested in the Harlem Renaissance. In arguing that literary studies has worked to reinforce a black/white, either/or binary, this book complicates our picture of both Larsen and the Harlem Renaissance. And, perhaps most importantly for readers outside the Larsen/ Harlem Renaissance circle, this book complicates our picture of racialized America by focusing on the cultural erasure of biraciality and by

making vivid what that erasure has cost, not only for biracial Americans, but all of us. This is a major book. It will be widely read, widely discussed, and highly influential. It is, in every way, a big book. (Carla Kaplan, author of *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* and Professor of English at the University of Southern California)

This book is above all, about how one reconstructs a life when there's little evidence but the life is important; and how one does so when that person was, in addition, an African-American woman who flourished during a crucial era--the Harlem Renaissance--before vanishing in broad daylight, as it were. Other biographers have constructed their own intriguing accounts, but they did so without the seminal facts now available to us. This excellent biography, building on those accounts but also bold, fresh, and original, tells the story of a writer who was in her mind neither black nor white and who lived much of her time feeling like a shadow, but who created invaluable art out of her pain. (Arnold Rampersad, Sara Hart Kimball Professor of the Humanities, Stanford University, and author of the two-volume *Life of Langston Hughes*)

George Hutchinson has delivered a definitive biography of the acclaimed Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen (1891–1964)...[An] exhaustive and masterfully rendered narrative...[A] brilliant biography. (Evelyn C. White, *Washington Post Book World* 2006-05-21)

Hutchinson draws on previously unused resource material to offer a startlingly intimate portrait of a woman often presented as an obscure figure in accounts of the literary scene of the time yet who was, in actuality, smack-dab in the middle of debates about racial uplift and about black writers selling out amid the vogue among white bohemians to associate with black artists. Hutchinson disputes earlier portraits of Larsen as pathological and instead offers a nuanced look at a complicated woman wrestling with racial identity and a fear of abandonment through her novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Primarily through her relationships, and correspondence, with luminary figures of the Harlem Renaissance, Hutchinson brings Larsen to life in all her glorious complexity in this sparkling examination of a critical period in American racial and literary development. (starred review) (Vanessa Bush *Booklist* 2006-05-15)

Nine years in the making, George Hutchinson's exhaustively researched new biography offers a revelatory new reading of Larsen's life and work...*In Search of Nella Larsen* is a definitive biography. (Martyn Bone *Weekendavisen* 2006-06-15)

George Hutchinson...has produced what must be the definitive biography of Larsen. It's hard to think of a stone he hasn't looked under in his quest to establish the facts, correct mistakes and trace her private life. But Hutchinson's biography also manages to be an insightful reconsideration of a much-studied period in American literature and black cultural history...Hutchinson's respect for his subject is so great that one feels Nella Larsen can at last be at rest. (Darryl Pinckney *The Nation* 2006-06-28)

Remarkable...*In Search of Nella Larsen* is three books in one: in the words of the subtitle, it is "a biography of the color line," a study of official racism; it also incorporates a lively history of the Harlem Renaissance; and, most engagingly, it is a record of the hunt for a significant literary figure who slipped into oblivion at the moment she should have been making the most of her modest but genuine success (two well-received novels, garlanded by awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship)...Hutchinson's tenacious adherence to documentary evidence, wherever he can find it, makes even his account of Larsen's later nursing career absorbing. (James Campbell *London Review of Books* 2006-10-05)

George Hutchinson demonstrates a keen capacity for meticulous research in his exhaustive unraveling of the life of Nella Larsen, a biracial novelist and shining light of the Harlem Renaissance...[*In Search of Nella Larsen*] is essential for history buffs and students of the Harlem Renaissance. (Sandra Rattley *Black Issues*)

*Book Review 2006-09-01)*

Hutchinson takes the reader on an intriguing journey through Larsen's mysterious, often-befuddling life. He debunks the myths and lies about her, which were held as finite truths for most of the 20th century, by investigating primary sources that, for whatever reason, have been ignored by other Larsen biographers. Exploring more than the superficial aspects of her life as a biracial woman, the author presents as complete a picture as possible and does it without slighting her, as others have, for choosing to pursue a life outside the literature in her later years. This fluid, engrossing book not only treats the reader to a wonderful biography of one woman's life but also serves up a feast of literary and US history, setting Larsen against a visceral backdrop of a moment in time when anything and everything seemed possible for a race seeking its rightful place in the arts and politics. In short, Hutchinson paints a captivating image of a woman for too long overshadowed by literary figures considered more worthy of praise. (A. F. Winstead *Choice* 2007-03-01)

Hutchinson's work brilliantly reinterprets Larsen's life in the context of early twentieth-century race, class, and gender restrictions and is now the definitive biography of this key figure of the Harlem Renaissance. (Jerry Gershenhorn *American Historical Review* 2007-04-01)

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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Have you spare time to get a day? What do you do when you have considerably more or little spare time? That's why, you can choose the suitable activity intended for spend your time. Any person spent their spare time to take a stroll, shopping, or went to the particular Mall. How about open or perhaps read a book titled *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*? Maybe it is to get best activity for you. You realize beside you can spend your time using your favorite's book, you can smarter than before. Do you agree with it is opinion or you have different opinion?

#### **Christopher Jones:**

Spent a free a chance to be fun activity to do! A lot of people spent their down time with their family, or their friends. Usually they doing activity like watching television, likely to beach, or picnic from the park. They actually doing ditto every week. Do you feel it? Would you like to something different to fill your own free time/ holiday? Could be reading a book could be option to fill your no cost time/ holiday. The first thing that you will ask may be what kinds of reserve that you should read. If you want to attempt look for book, may be the e-book untitled *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* can be excellent book to read. May be it may be best activity to you.

#### **Francine Nott:**

A lot of people always spent their very own free time to vacation or maybe go to the outside with them household or their friend. Do you know? Many a lot of people spent they will free time just watching TV, or playing video games all day long. In order to try to find a new activity that's look different you can read any book. It is really fun in your case. If you enjoy the book that you read you can spent all day long to reading a reserve. The book *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* it is quite good to read. There

are a lot of people that recommended this book. They were enjoying reading this book. In case you did not have enough space to create this book you can buy the e-book. You can more easily to read this book from your smart phone. The price is not too costly but this book has high quality.

**Jessie Loudermilk:**

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