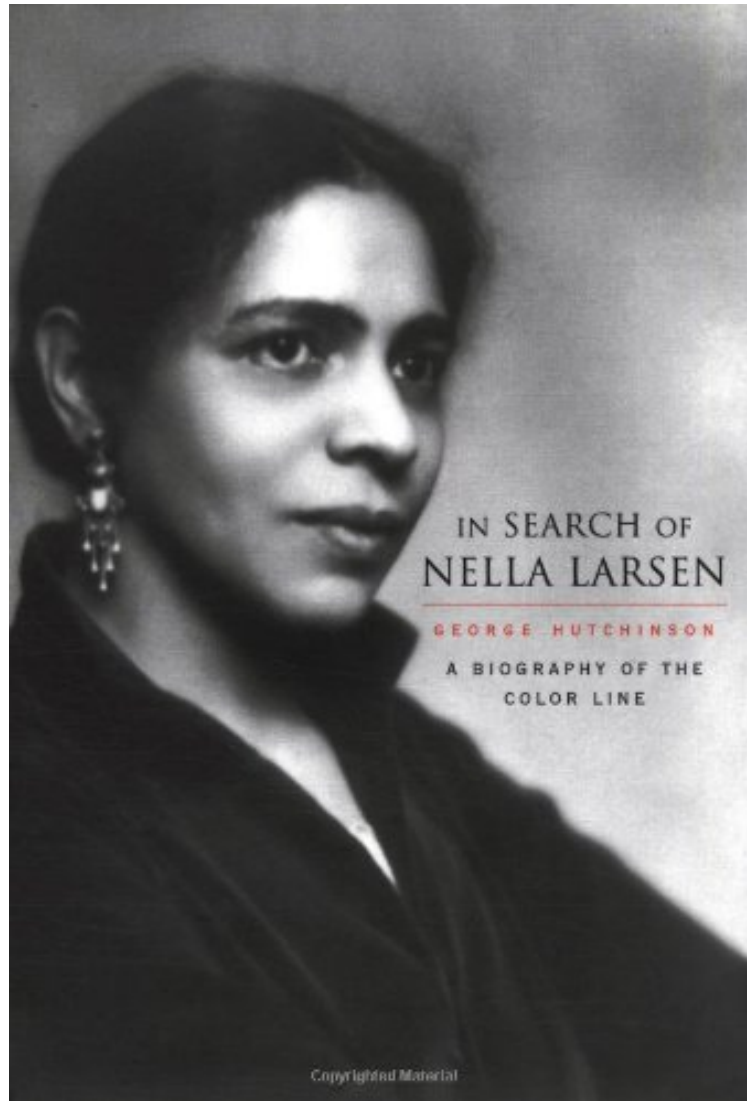


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## In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line

*George Hutchinson*

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File size: 62.Mb

**George Hutchinson : In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line** before purchasing it in order to  
gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color  
Line:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. thought-provoking nuanced look at the color line and the life of a  
woman far ahead of her timeBy K. MatternThis book answered all my questions about Nella Larsen, and I appreciated  
the author's very readable style coupled with meticulous historiography. I did try to read Thadious Davis' book first,

but it felt like reading a legal brief and I just couldn't take it :-). However, it did make me realize that in some ways Nella Larsen has been brought to trial - people felt she had done wrong and needed to exonerate herself (so to speak) but that task turned out to be more daunting than might be supposed. My own reading of her, as a woman who was neither white nor black, and was perhaps more white than black culturally, although she had a dark complexion, was accessible through Hutchinson's book. I read "Passing" first and became completely fascinated by Larsen, perhaps not least because my mother and her parents were dealing with color-line issues in the 1920's as well. I followed up "Passing" with "Quicksand" - and having Danish relatives myself, having visited Denmark too - I found her depiction of Danish culture to be quite true to form. Sprinkled through the book's pages were also anecdotes of many leading lights and important events and incidents of the various eras covered by Larsen's life. I especially enjoyed the recounting of her nursing work during the Spanish Influenza epidemic in New York City. So, I have to say, I found the book very entertaining and informative on a much wider scale than just one person's life. Nevertheless, I found her particular life - a woman far ahead of her time - very fascinating, and the whole treatment of the dynamics and politics of the color-line as it played out in her particular life nuanced and extremely thought-provoking. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. In Search of Nella Larsen is the best history, biography. By Sarah Elbert In Search of Nella Larsen is the best history, biography, literature study I have read in years. Having studied Larsen and many other writers in the "Renaissance", I think Hutchinson's study treats Larsen's life and works in the fullest contexts, with impressive attention to textual analysis. Given the renewed attention to "Passing" and passing across racial, ethnic, religious, gender lines past and present "In Search" is newly important. Hutchinson's fascinating nursing history locates and appreciates Larsen's long, distinguished nursing career before and after her literary success. He has restored Larsen's life including her novels, nursing career, racial origins, class consciousness, loves and betrayals from speculative half truths. In particular his research on Larsen's poor Danish and West Indian immigrant parents, and her Danish mother's second "white" marriage created Larsen's "step sister" problems. Alas, she was no Cinderella, her handsome, Physician husband, a Fiske member of the "black bourgeoisie" had an adulterous affair with a white administrator. Larsen divorced him and he married his lover. Nella Larsen never remarried, and she negotiated diverse social and cultural milieus in the U.S. and abroad throughout her life. Hutchinson brings to life the complexities of Larsen's class, bi-racial, gender, friendships, and loves in 20th century. The excellent photos help as Nella Larsen's fictions are refreshed, polished, dazzling. 15 of 15 people found the following review helpful. Unveiling Nella Larsen. By Michele L. Simms-Burton Nella Larsen was an enigmatic writer of the Harlem Renaissance, whose background has been highly speculated by other biographers, Charles Larson and Thadious Davis. George Hutchinson's superb biography of Nella Larsen puts to rest a lot of the speculation about Ms. Larsen's background. Mr. Hutchinson unveils some of the more complicated issues regarding Larsen's relationship with her mother and family, her life in Denmark, and her obscurity as a writer after the Harlem Renaissance. By thoroughly examining the papers of Carl Van Vechten, passenger ship logs, and other archives untouched by previous biographers, Hutchinson gives voice to the complicated negotiations regarding race that plagued Larsen during an era when the color line figured so prominently in most American's lives. Hauntingly told and beautifully written, this biography of Nella Larsen is essential to not only putting her life in perspective but also for enriching any reading or teaching of Larsen's novels. Hutchinson places Larsen, the writer, and her works within the center of the Harlem Renaissance, and he contextualizes Larsen and her work within the larger modernist moment when Larsen meets Federico Garcia Lorca during his brief stay in New York when he was studying at Columbia. Even biographers of Lorca have neglected to put a face to the "Negroes" that Lorca wrote about as being the only authentic and uncorrupted aspect of U.S. culture and life that he found palatable. Hutchinson's biography paves the way for refiguring Larsen and the significance of her work to both the African American and American literary canons.

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.

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. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From Booklist \*Starred\* 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 Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved 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 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* 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 Gershonhorn *American Historical* 2007-04-01)