



Nellalitea "Nella" Larsen

1891-1964

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# Passing

- ❖ Betteridge's Law: "Any headline that ends in a question mark can be answered by the word *no*."
- ❖ The traits we regard as "raced" don't correspond meaningfully to anything at a genetic level, and tell us only some about population, descent, history
- ❖ Our concept of race did not exist until the modern age (say, 1650-); it appears to have been invented to justify European colonialism and slavery, which became race-based
- ❖ Does race exist? As a social and cultural phenomenon, definitely. Scientifically, biologically, not really. We could have collected other, arbitrary markers and "parsed" humanity up differently.





# Passing

- ❖ Some identities are potentially invisible; race only sometimes less so, given human variation
- ❖ Minority groups might choose to “pass” as dominant group
- ❖ Minority groups are generally more familiar with dominant codes than the reverse (II.3: “It’s easy for a Negro to ‘pass’ for white. But I don’t think it’d be so simple for a white person to ‘pass’ for colored.”)
- ❖ Passing reveals race in a performance, not in the skin





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# Passing narratives

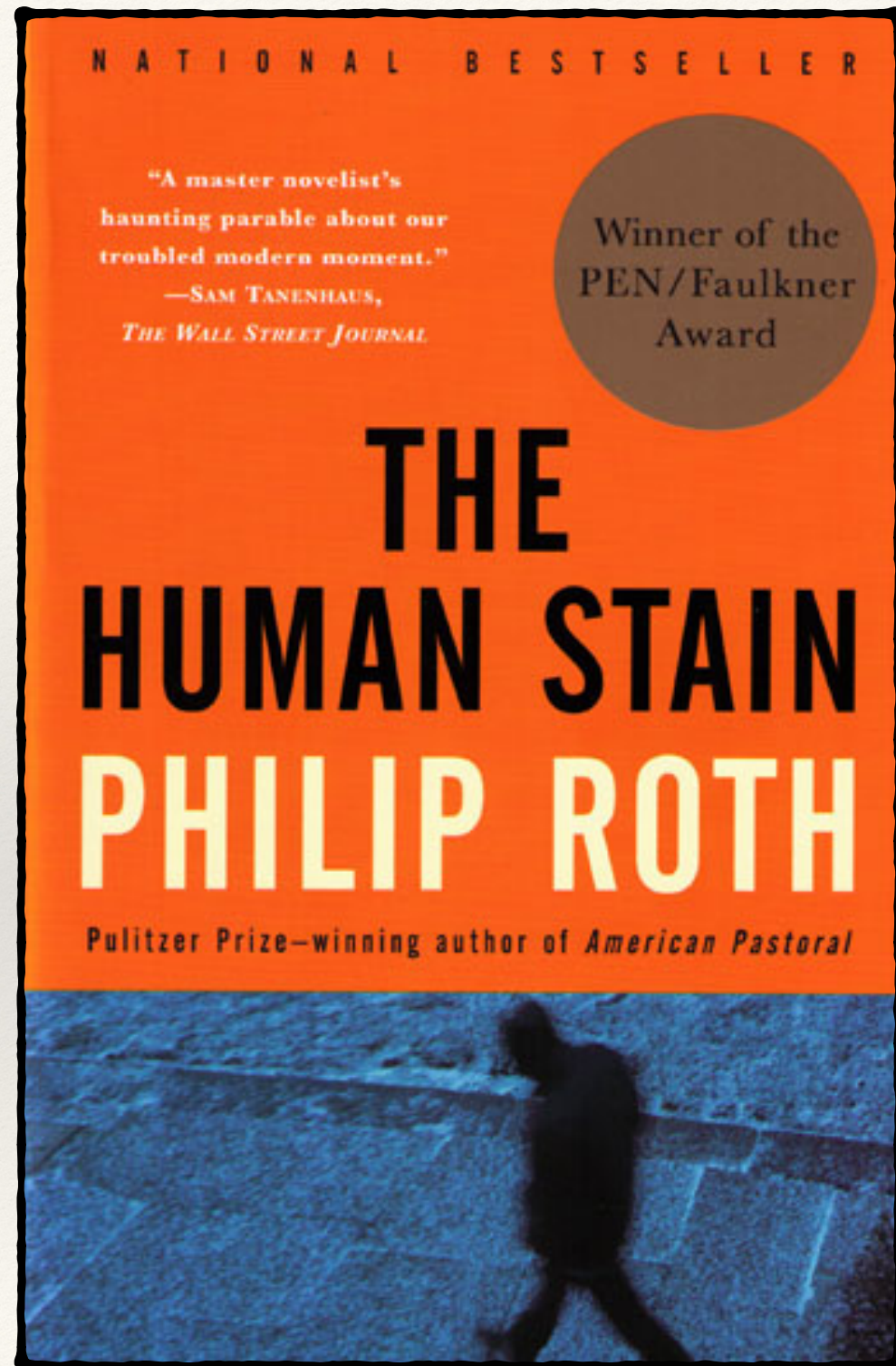
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- Charles W. Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) and *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* (c. 1920)
- James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912; 1927)
- Walter White's *Flight* (1926)
- Jessie Fauset, *Plum Bun* (1928)
- George Schuyler, *Black No More* (1931)
- Nella Larsen's *Passing*
- Rebecca Harding Davis, *Waiting for the Verdict* (1867)
- William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty* (1892)
- Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894)
- Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)
- William Faulkner, *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936).
- Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* (1933)
- Danzy Senna, *Caucasia* (1998)
- Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (2000)



# The Human Stain

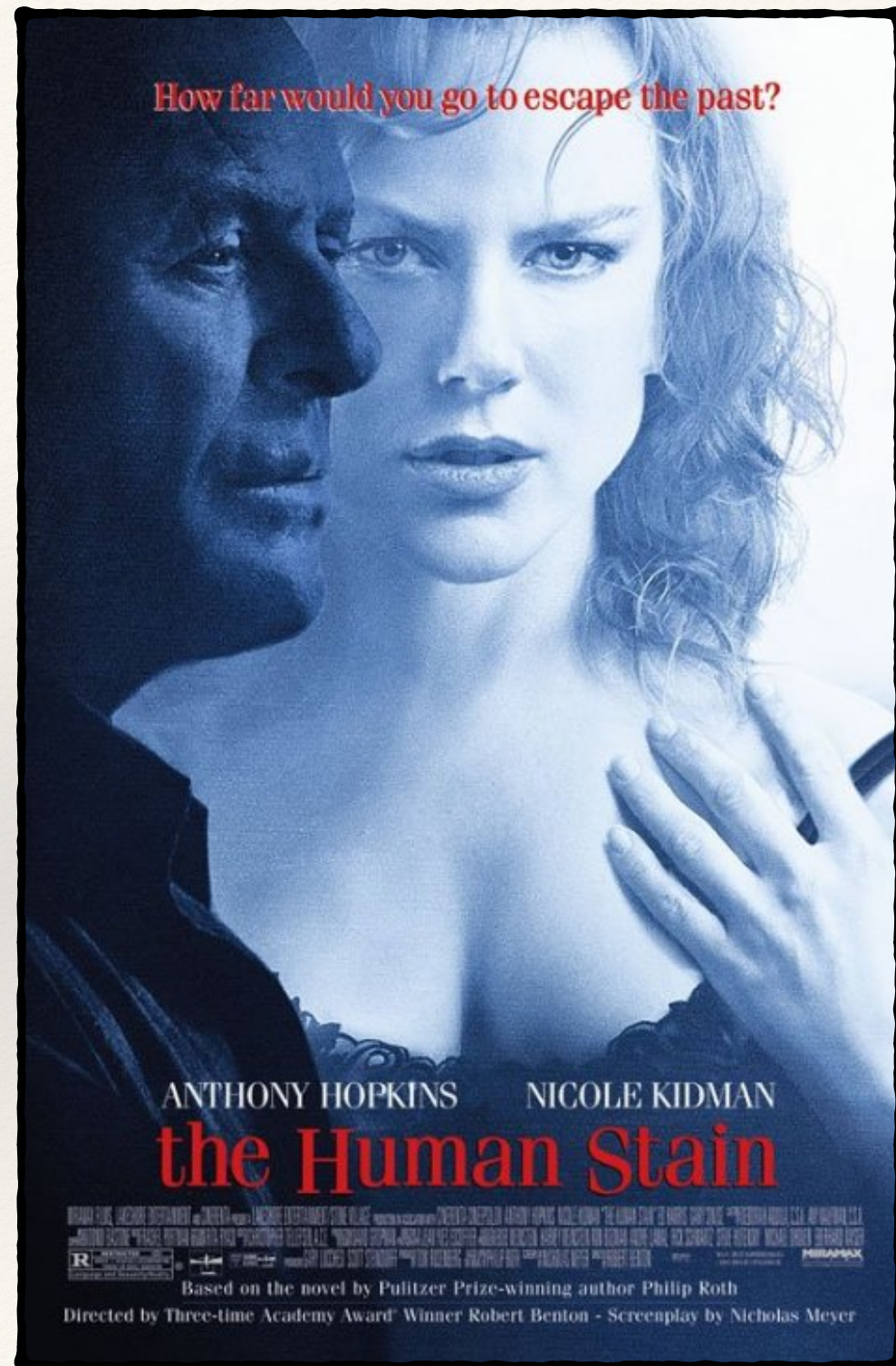
- ❖ A man named Coleman Silk is a Jewish Dean at fictional “Athena College”
- ❖ Accused of racist remarks by African American students, forced to resign
- ❖ Revelation: Silk is not Jewish, but African-American, passing
- ❖ Perhaps based on Anatole Broyard, literary critic at the *New York Times*
- ❖ Both of Broyard’s parents also “passed” for job opportunities





# The Human Stain

- ❖ What's going on here?
- ❖ The books seem “hysterical,” overwrought and panicked
- ❖ The movies even more so
- ❖ The real life scenarios are no less overwrought
- ❖ Two impulses, profoundly in contradiction:
  - ❖ Race is socially constructed, just an “image” (films)
  - ❖ Race is the inescapable “inner truth” of a person (the Return)



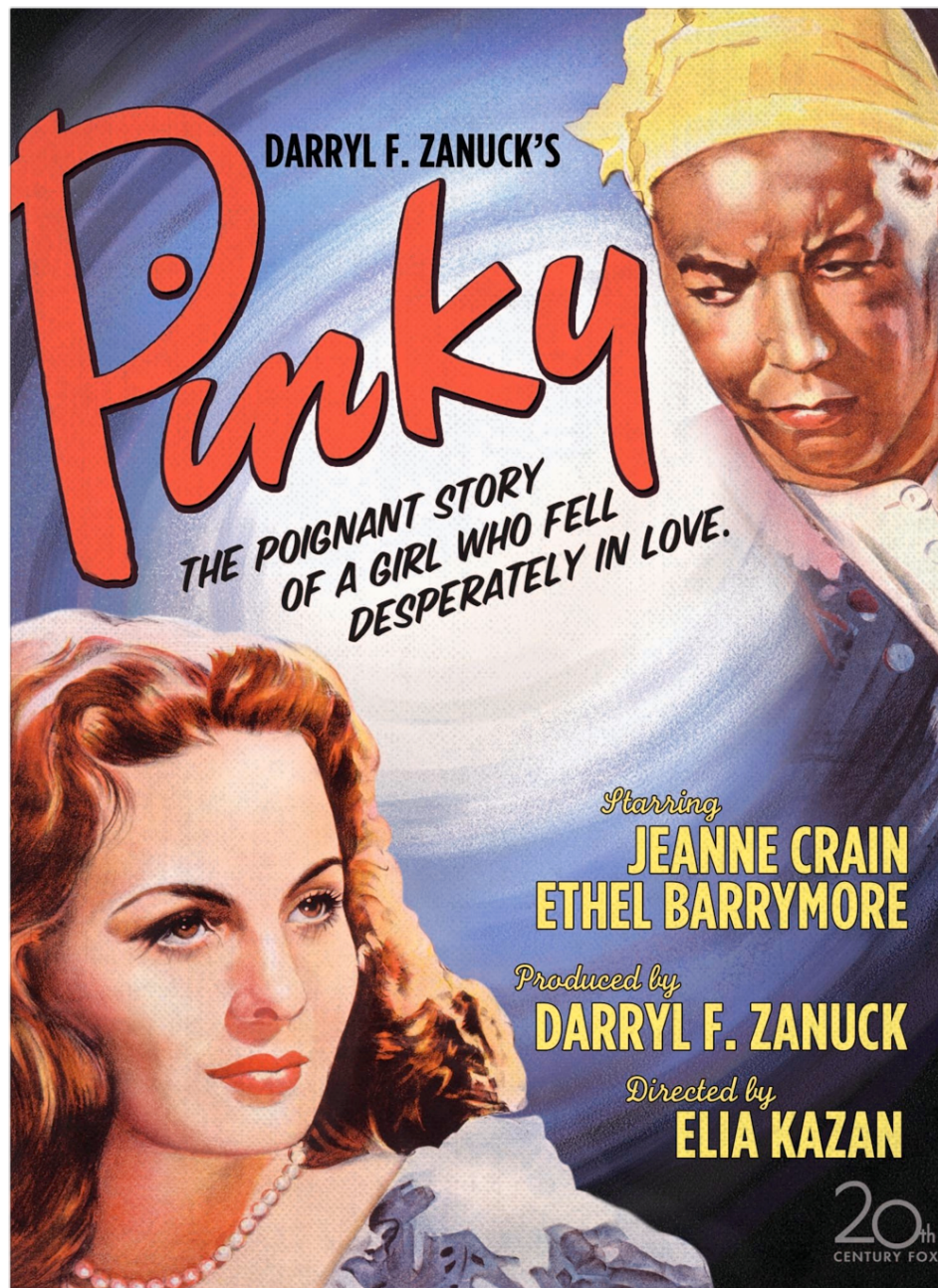


# Passing

- ❖ Racial passing a long theme in American letters and film
- ❖ Blurs racial lines, but also reinforces them (the Return)
- ❖ Examples include black to white, woman to man, Jew to Gentile, gay to straight; tend to be tragic (the “tragic mulatto”).
- ❖ Also narratives of white to black, man to woman, Gentile to Jew, straight to gay: usually comic or self-congratulatory









Comment devenir noir,  
funk et fauché  
quand on est blanc,  
rock et riche.

hi-fi  
stereo  
MONO COMPATIBLE



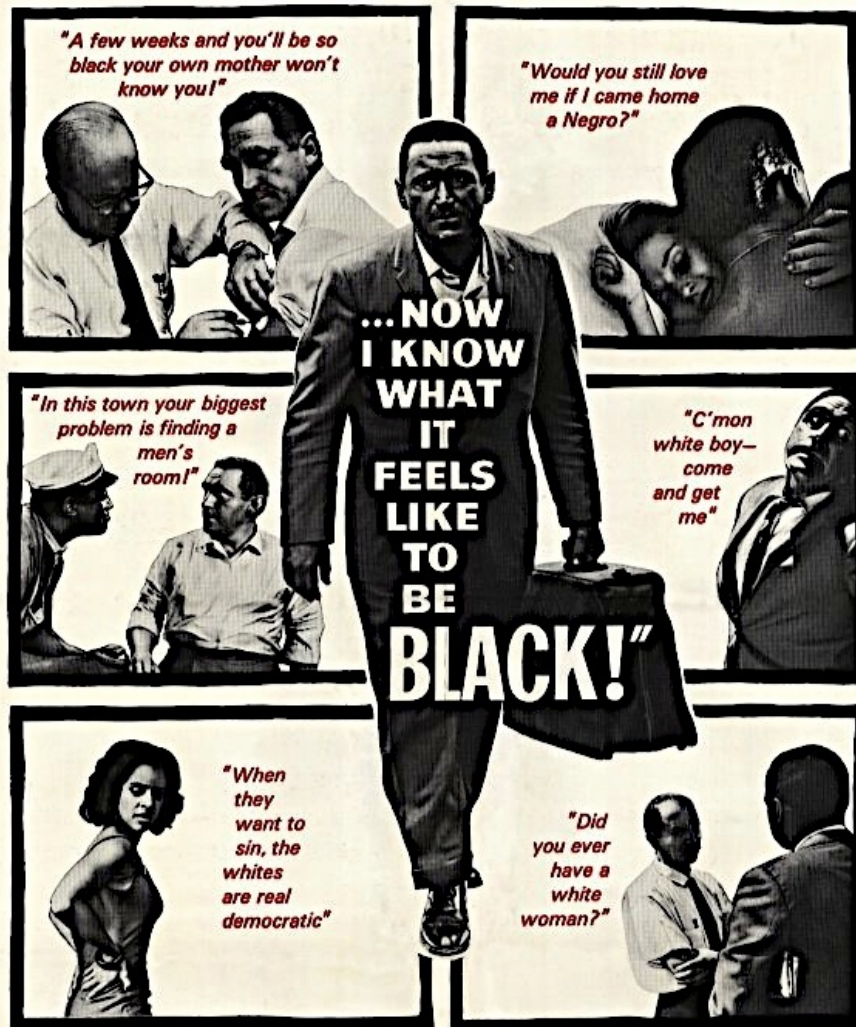
UNE COMÉDIE QUI A LE RYTHME DANS LA PEAU



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**"BLACK LIKE ME"**

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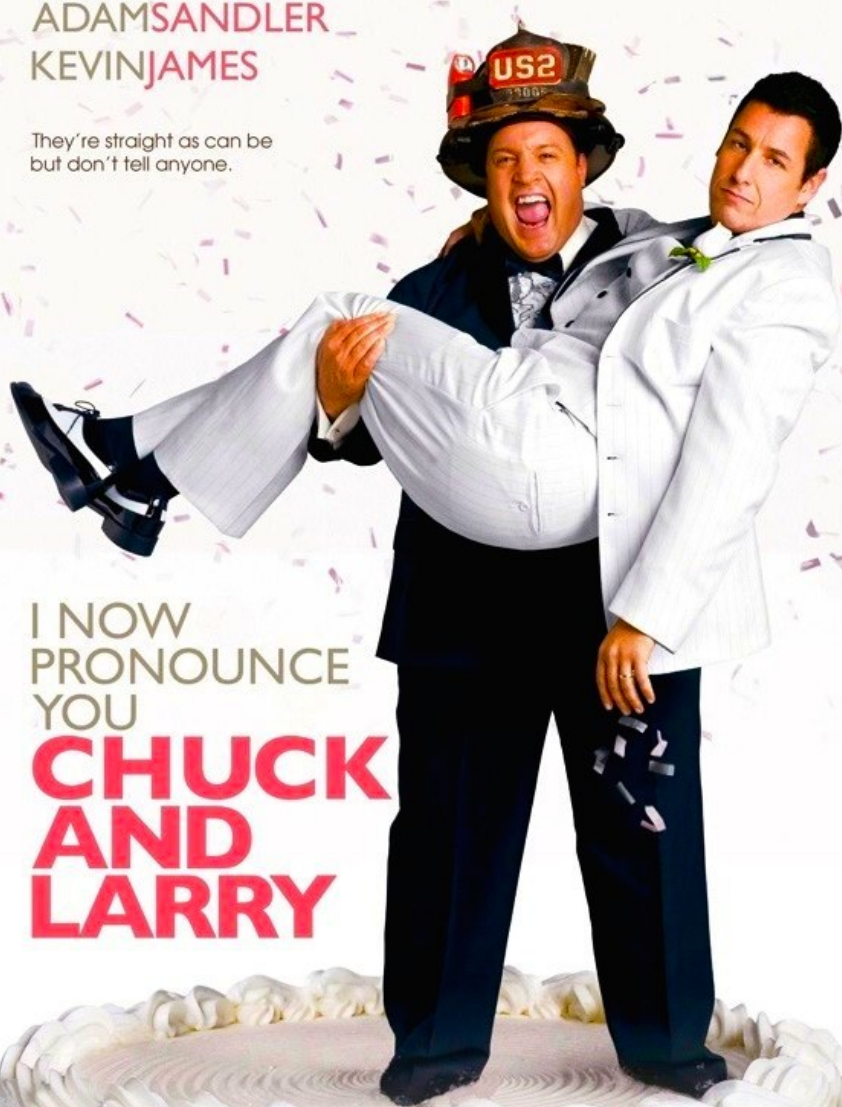
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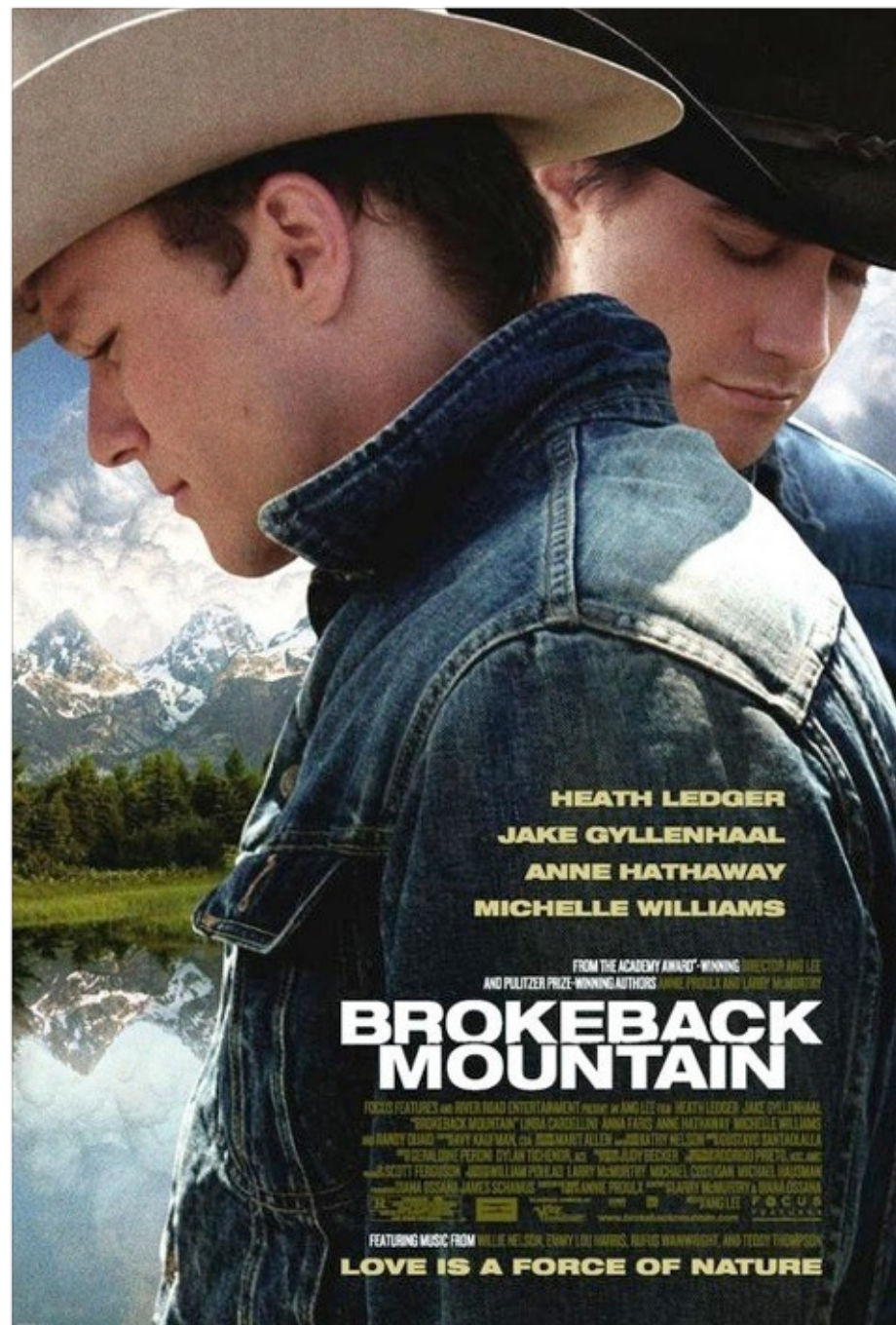
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KEVINJAMES

They're straight as can be  
but don't tell anyone.



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PRONOUNCE  
YOU  
**CHUCK  
AND  
LARRY**

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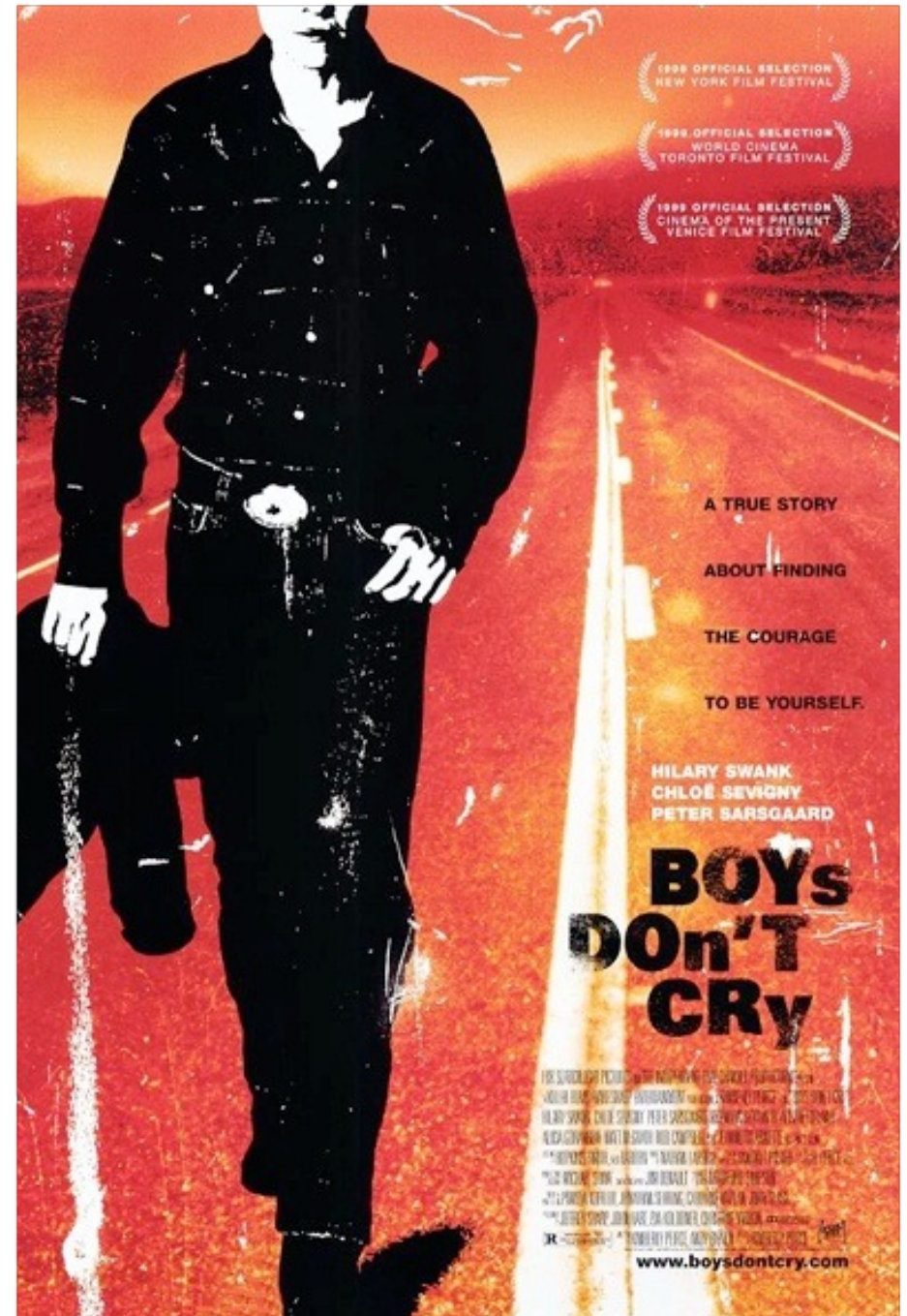
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**"SOME  
LIKE  
IT  
HOT"**





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# EUROPA EUROPA

A TRUE STORY

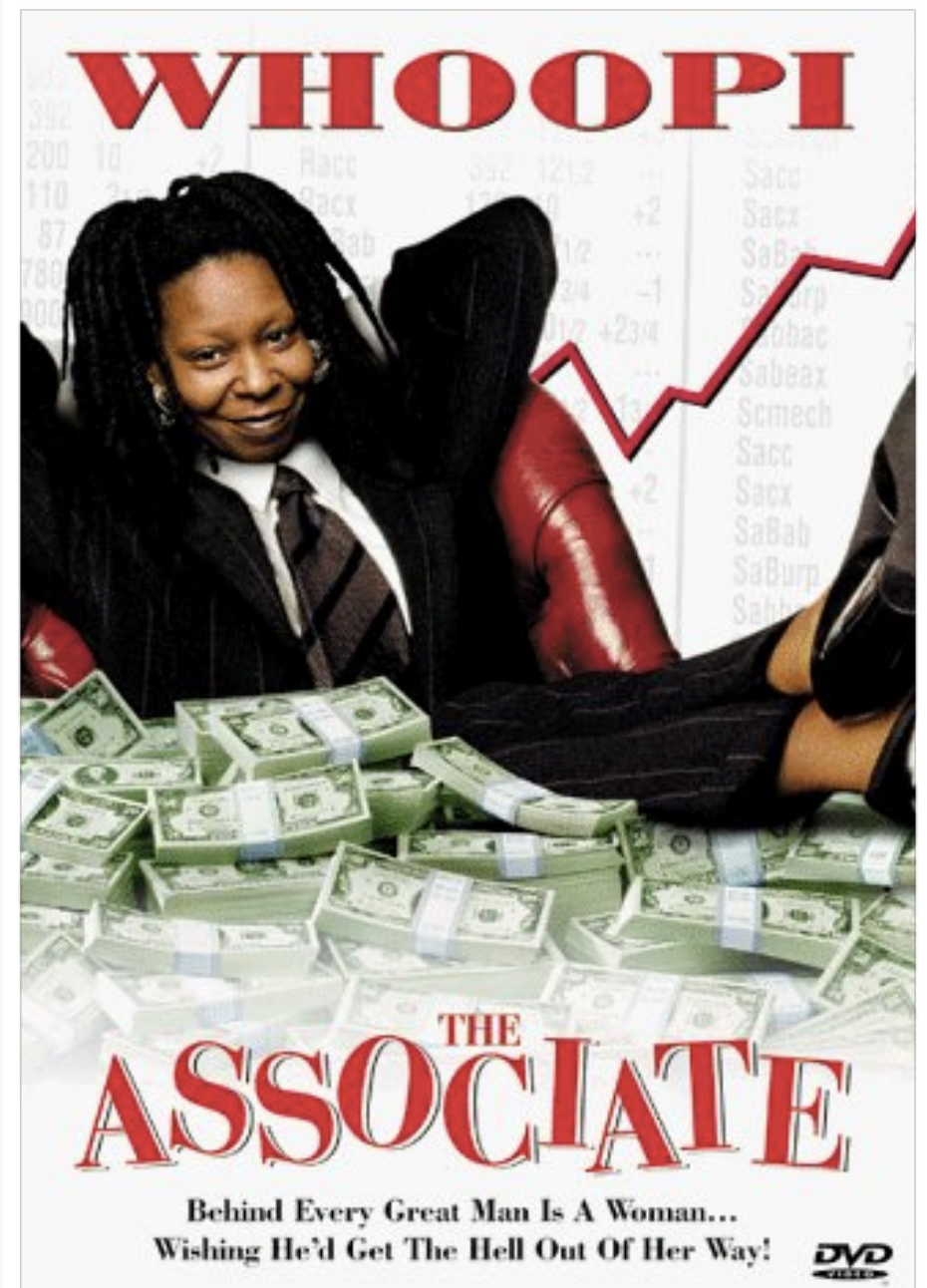
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# Larsen's Life

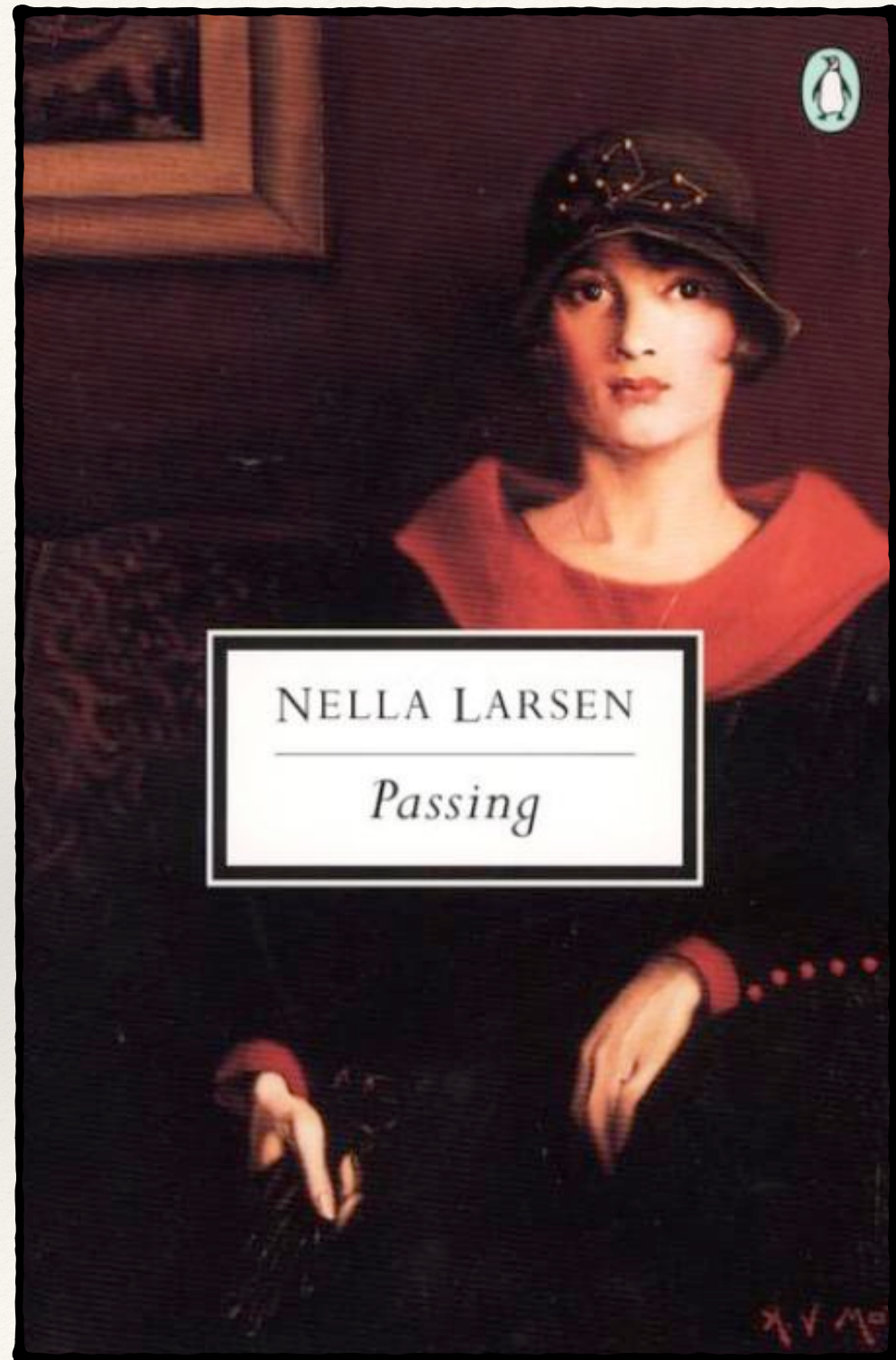
- ❖ Born in Chicago, half-Danish, half-West Indian; lived in Denmark for several years
- ❖ Was never really accepted as either Black or white; found a home in the Harlem Renaissance
- ❖ Married to Elmer Imes, prominent physicist; her novels had critical success, but not financial
- ❖ Worked as a nurse and a librarian; writing career ended in mid-1930s; withdrew, suffered from depression





# *Passing*

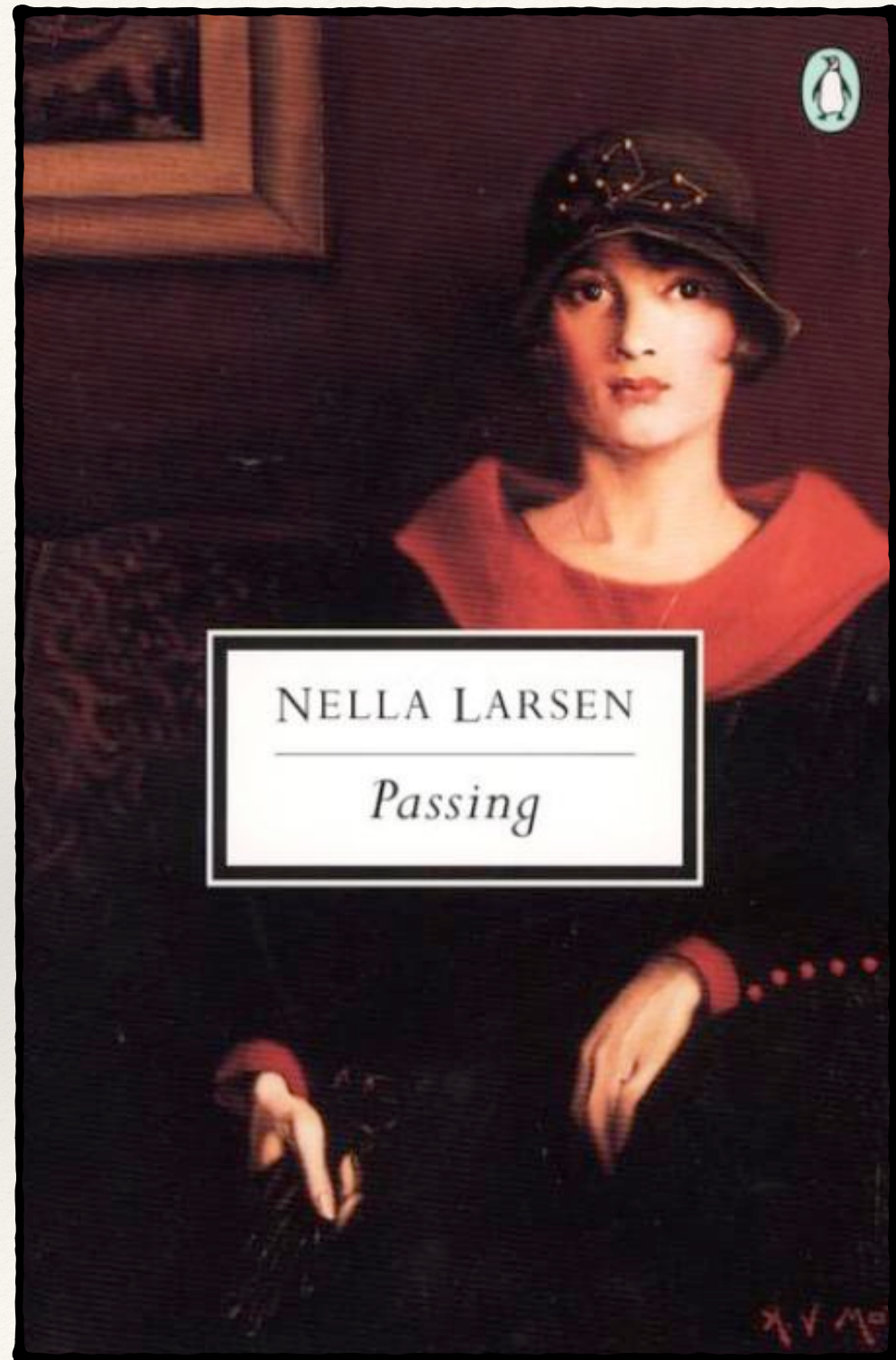
- ❖ Key text of the Harlem Renaissance (Hurstun, Hughes, Toomer, and many others)
- ❖ Highly *focalized* narrative
- ❖ Structured by temporal gaps (“centuries later...”); ambiguous ending (slip, suicide, pushed?).
- ❖ Reflects changing codes of the 1920s (novel published in 1929); homoerotic subtext (what’s being passed?) (I.2-3, “queer,” III.3)





# *Passing*

She tried to treat the woman and her watching with indifference, but she couldn't. All her efforts to ignore her, it, were futile. She stole another glance. Still looking. What strange languorous eyes she had! And gradually there rose in Irene a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar. She laughed softly, but her eyes flashed. Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro? (I.2)

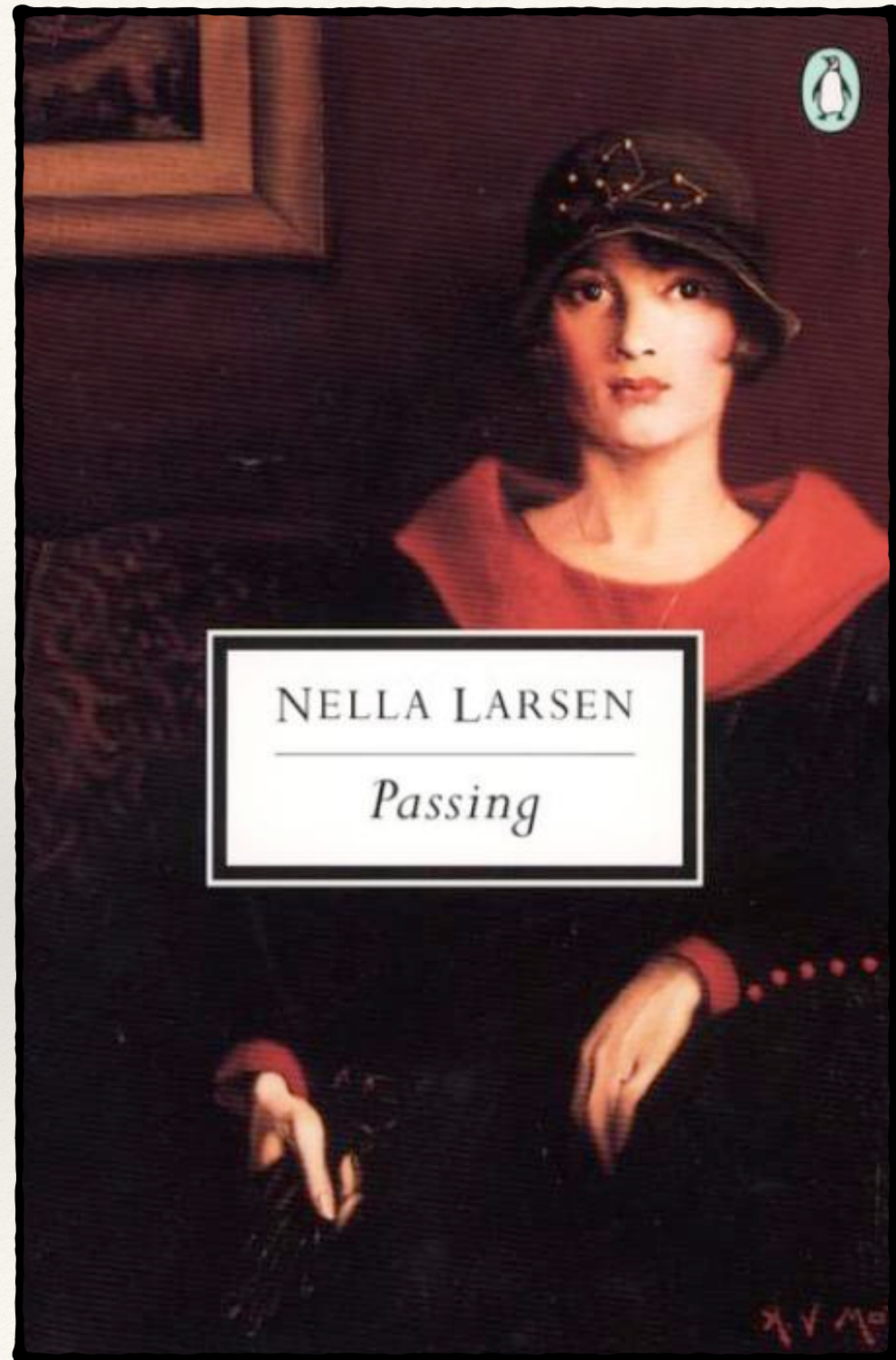




# *Passing*

But she had had something more than a vague suspicion of its nature. For there had been rumors. Rumors that were, to girls of eighteen and nineteen years, interesting and exciting.

And the eyes were magnificent! dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous, and set in long, black lashes. Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, and with, for all their warmth, something withdrawn and secret about them.

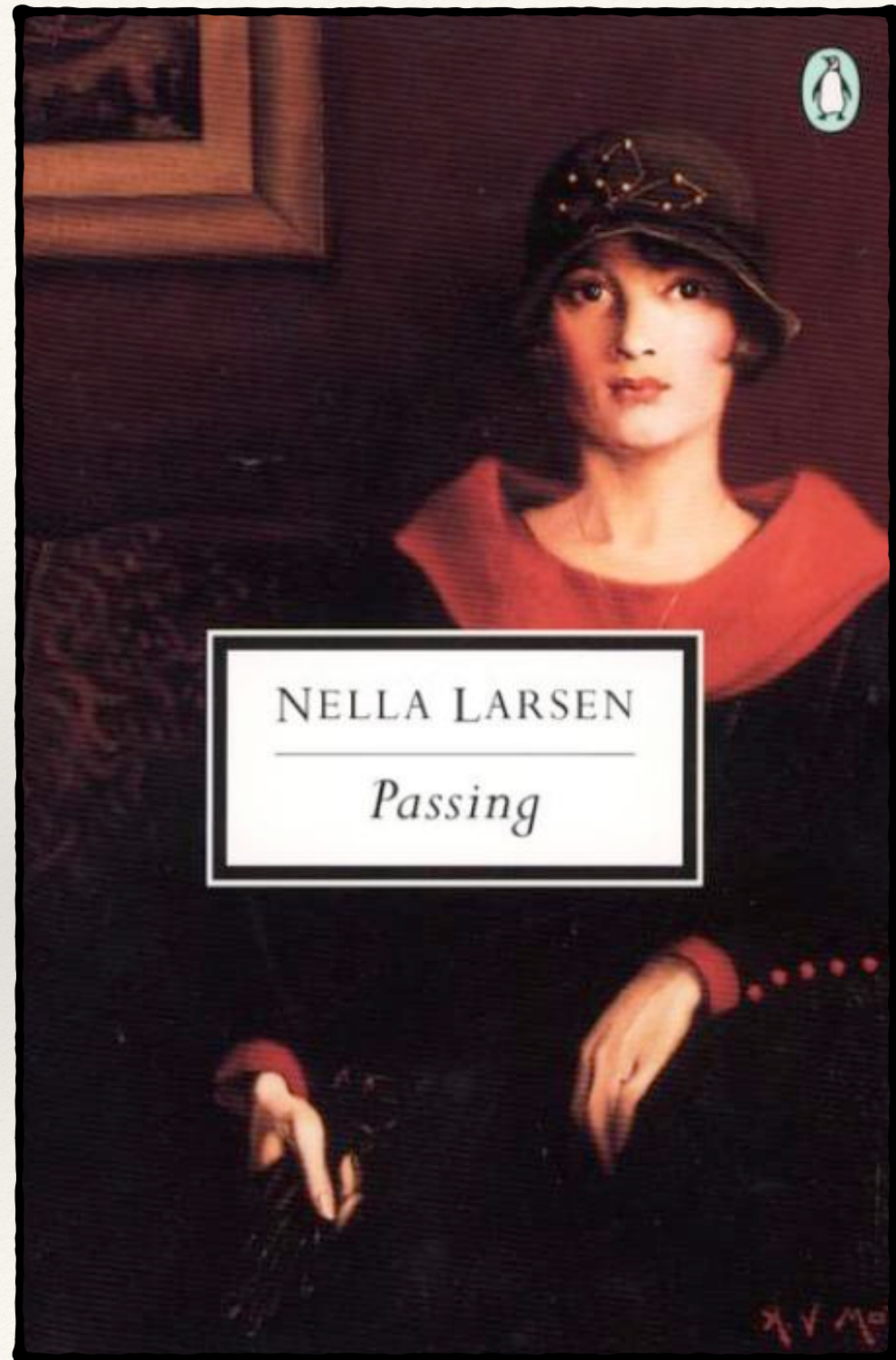




# *Passing*

What was it about Clare's voice that was so appealing, so very seductive?

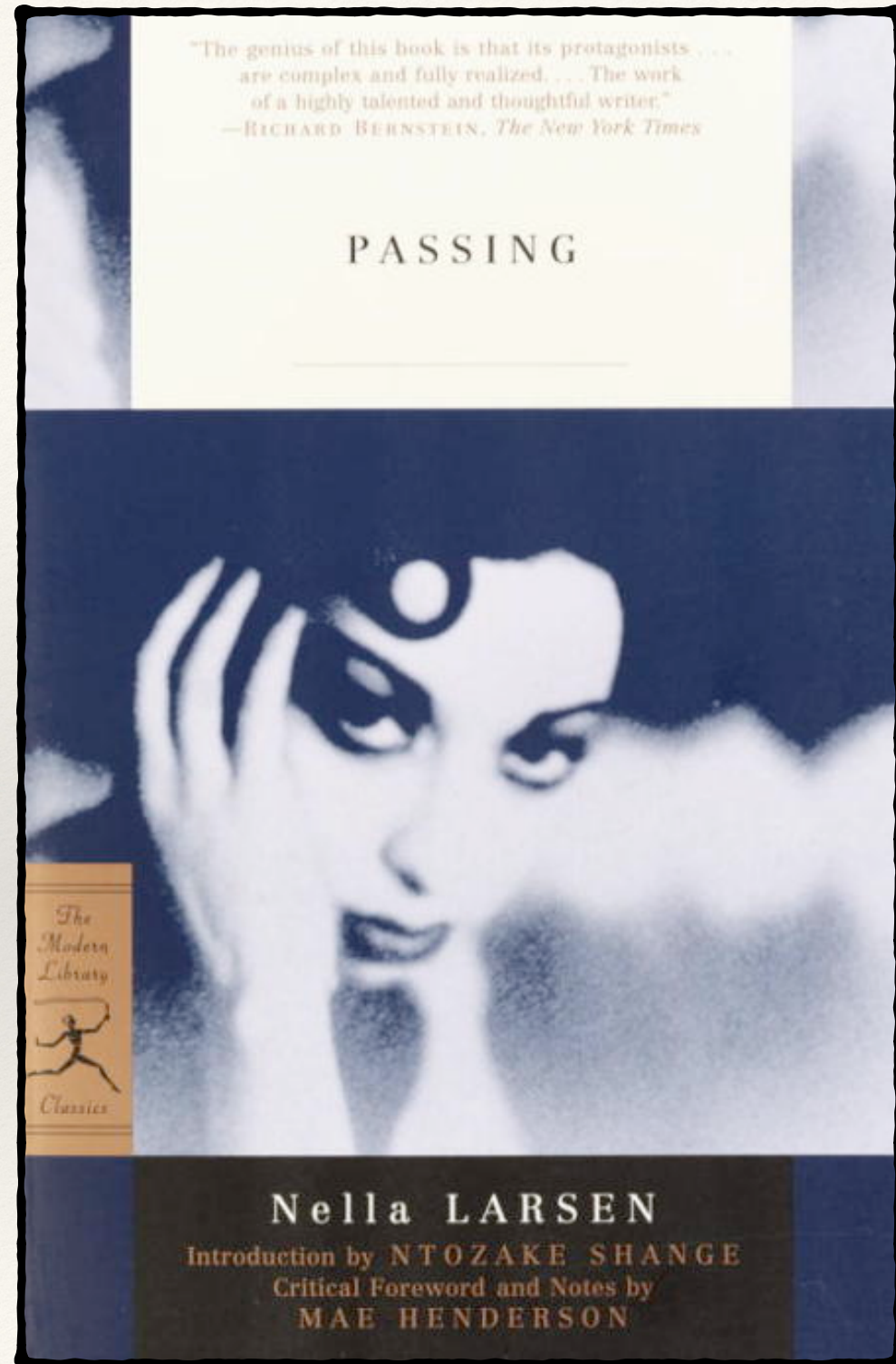
Felise drawled: "Aha! Been 'passing,' have you? Well, I've queered that."





# *Passing* as Melodrama

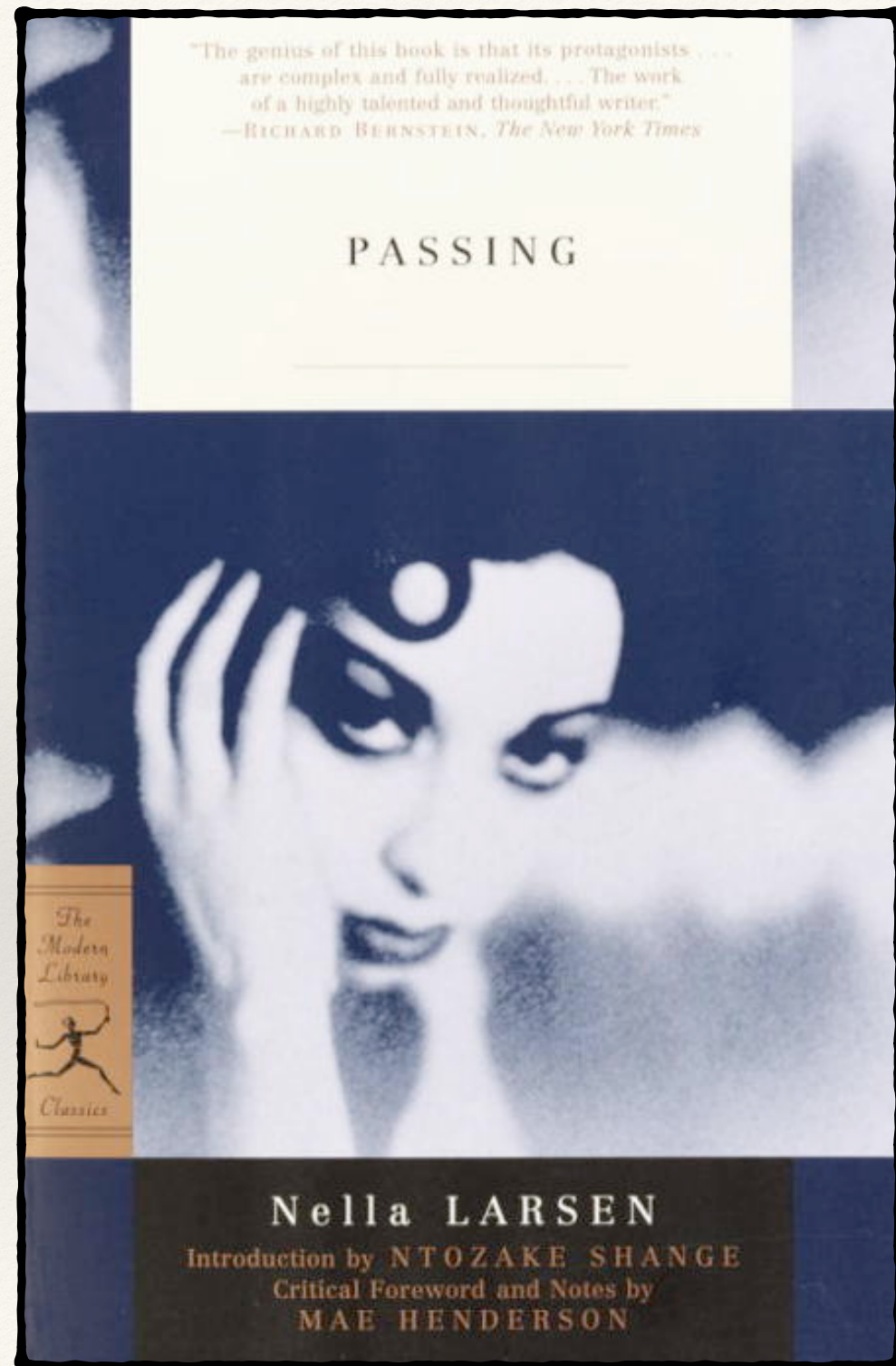
- ❖ Melodrama is often critiqued for being overly emotional, simplistic, but it has a very precise, tragic structure
- ❖ Melodrama is always *too late*; the “passer” is out of place, but is also out of time (the time to tell the truth is long past)
- ❖ Passing as acting (II.1), as an inherently dramatic activity
- ❖ Only melodramatic because its tragic failure is “inevitable”





## *Passing as Melodrama*

The letter which she just put out of her hand was, to her taste, a bit too lavish in its wordiness, a shade too unreserved in the manner of its expression. It roused again that old suspicion that Clare was acting, not consciously, perhaps—that is, not too consciously—but, none the less, acting. (II.1)





# Performativity

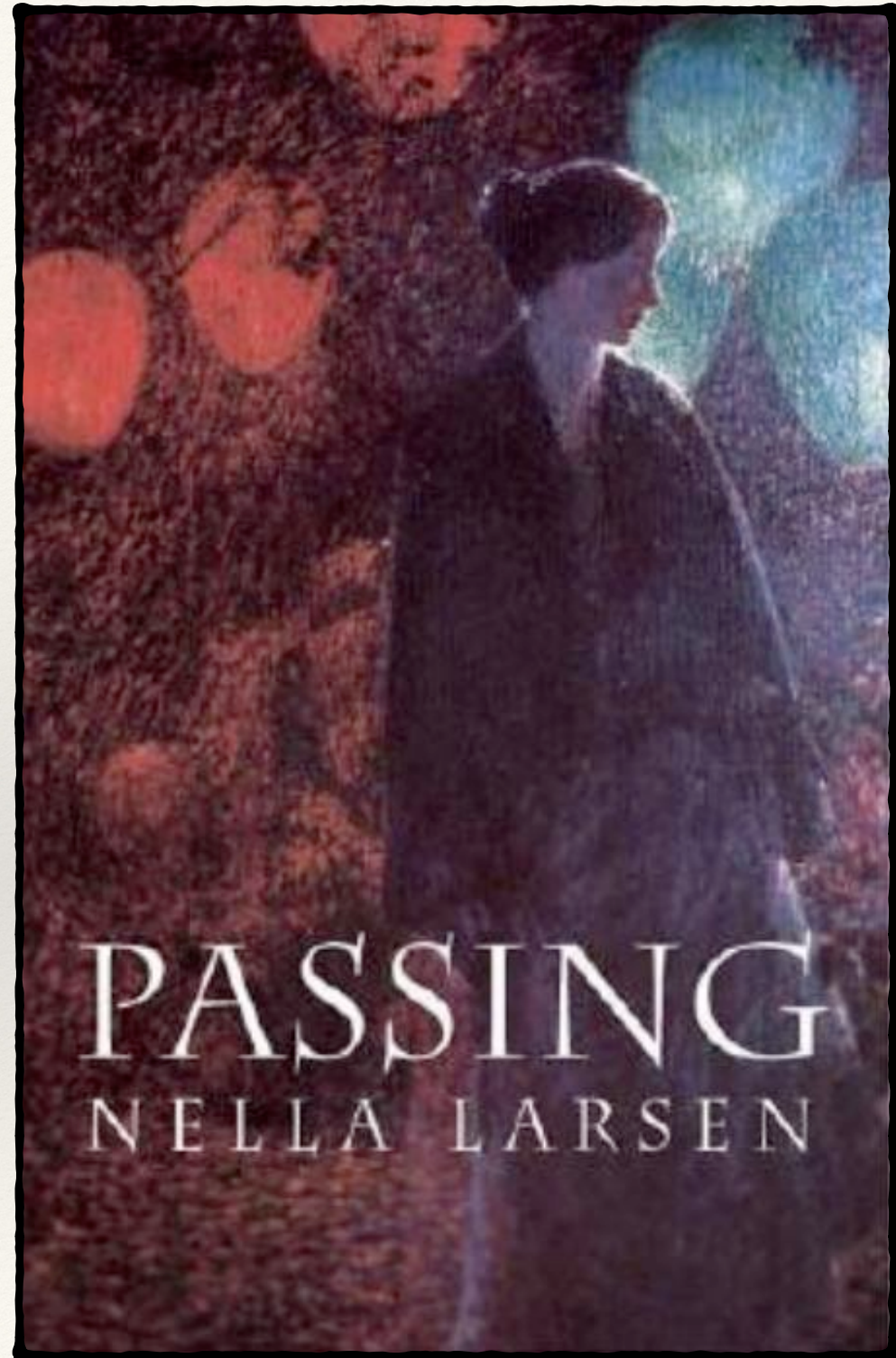
- ❖ The post-“Judith Butler” generation: sex may be biological, but gender is performative
- ❖ Larsen suggests race is performative, too; potentially, also sexuality (as well as gender)
- ❖ Hence, Larsen’s current fame: a little bit post-modern, and not “just” modernist





# Modernism

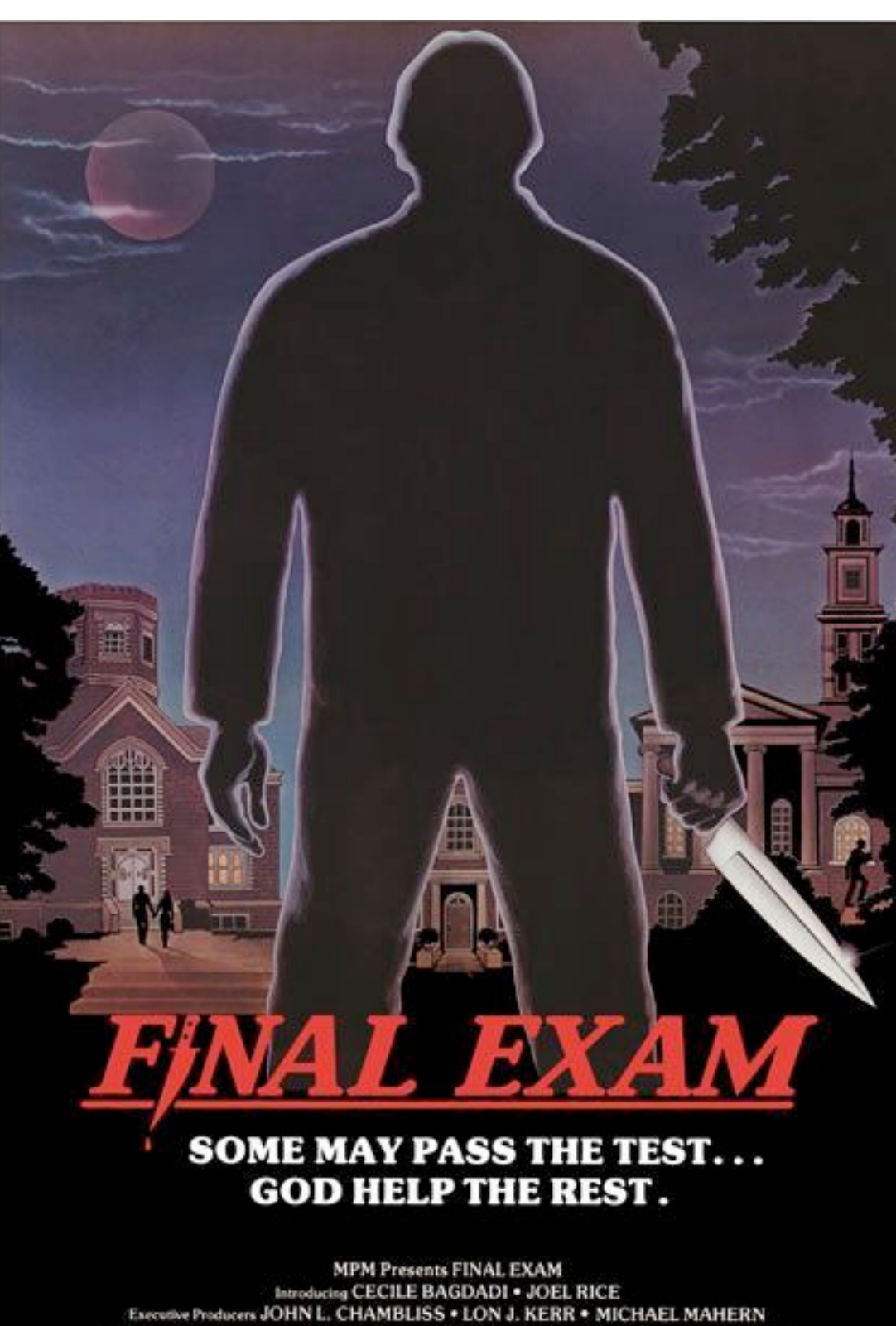
- ❖ Thinking from the margins; marginality and passing are intimately connected
- ❖ Alienation from self and other; Clare (fair) creates (I)Rene
- ❖ Focus on consciousness, perspective
- ❖ Formal technique: temporal gaps, stream of consciousness (tea party in III.1), elisions, reticence





In the room beyond, a clock chimed. A single sound. Fifteen minutes past five o'clock. That was all! And yet in the short space of half an hour all of life had changed, lost its color, its vividness, its whole meaning. No, she reflected, it wasn't that that had happened. Life about her, apparently, went on exactly as before. "Oh, Mrs. Runyon... So nice to see you... Two?... Really?... How exciting!... Yes, I think Tuesday's all right..." Yes, life went on precisely as before. It was only she that had changed. Knowing, stumbling on this thing, had changed her. It was as if in a house long dim, a match had been struck, showing ghastly shapes where had been only blurred shadows. Chatter, chatter, chatter. Someone asked her a question. She glanced up with what she felt was a rigid smile. Hideous. A great weariness came over her. Even the small exertion of pouring golden tea into thin old cups seemed almost too much for her. She went on pouring.





# FINAL EXAM

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- Monday, May 6
- 7-10 PM
- Right in this room!
- 3 sections
  - Short answers to big questions
  - Short answers to small(er) questions
  - Identifications (sounds hard, but they are not)
- All material will be drawn from the readings (of course) and the PowerPoints that are on the course website



*Section I:* Answer with 4-5 sentences (refer to several important ideas, authors and texts). Answer all 4 questions (6 pts. each; 24 pts. total).

1. What vision of society does the “Enlightenment Project” promote?

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*Section II:* Answer with 4-5 sentences. Answer all 10 questions (5 pts. each; 50 pts. total).

1. Briefly describe some of Whitman's principal poetic themes and techniques.

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*Section III:* Identifications. Give author and title, if any. What features are typical of the author's style? Comment briefly on importance of passage. Answer 5 out of the 8 possible questions (5 pts. each; 25 pts. total).

1. I lost a world the other day.  
Has anybody found?  
You'll know it by the row of stars  
Around its forehead bound.

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*Final question:* A completely trivial question drawn from the lectures, possibly not from the PowerPoints (1 pt. each; 1 pt. total).

1. What tie did Prof. Rushing wear on the day of the second Frankenstein lecture, the one about Frankenstein movies?

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