



FILM: **PASSING**

FDG RATING: 4.0 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Rebecca Hall: *director*  
Ruth Negga: *actress, Clare*  
Tessa Thompson: *actress, Irene*

DATE: December 19, 2021

## DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **PASSING**

From the time of slavery, some light-skinned African-Americans escaped racism by passing as white. Rebecca Hall, in her feature directorial debut film, *Passing*, tells the story of two light skinned African American women, childhood best friends, who run into each other in 1920s New York City, after not seeing each other for many years.

Irene, married to a successful African American doctor, has a nice life in Harlem and only occasionally, uses her light skin tone to pass as white, for example, to buy some toys for her son which are available in the white neighborhood stores. We see her carrying her purchases, her face barely visible, duck into a fashionable hotel to escape the sweltering heat. With her hat brim pulled far down, she orders a glass of water in the tea room. And then recognizes her childhood friend, Clare, with shimmery blond, stylish coiffed hair, sitting alone at another table. The two reconnect, setting in motion a series of exposés and risky encounters as the lives of the two women entwine. Each is curious and enthralled by how the other lives and sees what is missing in their own life, envying that aspect in the other's life while at the same time being repelled by it. Clare's husband, John, is wealthy and respected, and she can go anywhere she likes as his wife. He doesn't know her secret and in a later scene makes several racist comments. Being with Irene, Clare recognizes there is a vitality to the African American culture that she has abandoned and immersing herself in it makes her desperate to regain that loss.

We noted that several of the characters had aspects to their lives that conflicted with their natural identity such as Irene's close friend, white author, Hugh Wentworth, who was a regular in Irene's social circle. Irene explains his attraction, "I think what they feel is—well, a kind of emotional excitement. You know, the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you; something so different that it's really at the opposite end of the pole from all your accustomed notions of beauty." At home, it was surprising to see Irene belittle her black maid, treating her in a condescending manner while Clare befriended her as an equal.

We praised the lush cinematography. Filmed in black and white allowed a gray softness to the scenes, blurring the edges, underscoring the point that nothing in life is black and white, appearances are not what they seem, there are layered ambiances graying the obvious. One discussion participant described the beautiful filming as "silvery". The camera often focuses on Irene's face in the same close-up as Clare, almost as if each is a mirror of the other.

For those who had also read the novel by Nella Larsen, the film followed the story closely but offers much more emotion in terms of body language and facial expressions. The ending is purposely unsettling, ambiguous, which stimulated many opinions about what may have happened.

With outstanding cinematography, exceptional performances, wonderful costumes and sets, *Passing* garnered a much greater than passing score, earning an unequivocal 4.0 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)

*Footnote: Rebecca Hall began adapting Larsen's novel after learning that her own Black grandfather had passed as a white man.*



See you at the movies!

Adriane Dedic, [adedic@pacbell.net](mailto:adedic@pacbell.net)

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