



Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral: A Library of America eBook Classic

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Written at the height of the Harlem Renaissance in 1928, Plum Bun tells the story of Angela Murray, a young black girl from Philadelphia who discovers she can 'pass' for white.

Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral: A Library of America eBook Classic Details

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Classic Jessie Redmon Fauset**

From Reader Review Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral: A Library of America eBook Classic for online ebook

Jenny Yates says

I loved this novel. It's a classic that I'd been wanting to read for ages. But it wasn't exactly easy to find, and they didn't have it in my local library.

Written in the 20s, it's a clear picture of life for a woman in NYC, on both sides of the color line. The main character, Angela Murray, grows up in Philadelphia as a very light-skinned African American, and she learns about passing from her equally light-skinned mother. For her mother, it's a little game that involves tea and shopping, not a serious path. But Angela feels the limitations of her racial heritage more acutely, and when she gets older, she resolves to doff her black identity completely. She goes to New York City, and not long afterwards, her darker-skinner sister Virginia follows her there.

The novel's subtitle is "a novel without a moral" and this is one of the things I loved most about it. The author doesn't pass judgment on any of her character's choices, but rather very subtly shows the effects, both psychological and social.

There are a lot of interesting characters here, all carefully and vividly drawn. Even the racists in the novel are depicted in all their complexity, as whole people. Racism is shown as a kind of toxic social fungus which infects and affects people to a greater or lesser extent. The people in the novel use different strategies to avoid or contain it, and these are explored in detail. When is it worthwhile to fight, and when do you just slough it off? For Angela, occupying that edge between black and white, there are constant subtle reminders. Meanwhile, for the white people, awareness and responses to racism comprise moral crossroads.

A couple of times, the question of whether white blood is itself toxic is raised, but the author makes no judgments. She lets her characters ask the questions and try to live the answers, as best they can.

New York City in the 20s is depicted with great skill and vividness, which figures, since Jessie Redmon Fauset was an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance. All the descriptions in this book are very visual, and this also makes sense, since Angela, the main character, is an artist. It's also a wonderfully feminist book, since Angela is thrust into a social marketplace where women are bought and sold – not literally, but in essence. She has to learn to value herself and the work she does. In this way, the book reminds me of novels by Edith Wharton which explore a woman's longing for freedom within rigid social hierarchies.

And it's also a page-turner, especially the second half. I enjoy a good romance, as long as it's well-written, intelligent, and fair to women. This is a good novel in many other ways, but it's also a riveting romance.

After I finished it, I spent some time wondering where the title came from, but a Wikipedia page explained it to me.

Andrew Fairweather says

'Now be practical, [Virginia]; after all, I am both white and Negro and look white. Why shouldn't I declare for the one that brings me the greatest happiness, prosperity, and respect?'

The primary concern of Jessie Redmon Fauset's 'Plum Bun' rests on this very question.

This novel has an irresistible charm—its character's are affable and its story lovable. In this 'novel without a moral' we follow Angela Murray as she comes of age in a systematically racist America as she lives on both sides of the color line. Angela is what is known as 'passing for white'—when she realizes this, Angela believes that the only way to escape the tired old conversations on race and the limitations which majority white society places on the advancement of blacks, is to up-sticks and head to New York City, to reinvent herself (as so many New Yorkers do) as a white girl named 'Angele Mory'. Angela believes that this is only right, for she is owed an opportunity for a life of affluence and the finer things, what in her eyes amount to happiness. She soon finds, however, that happiness is much a more complicated thing... Angela is not a 'bad' person, just immature, and I think Fauset is very good at making sure the reader doesn't come to this conclusion.

There's something a whiff ironic about Angela's search for what she deems happiness in that Angela comes from a very happy family. Her parents (a black father and 'passing' mother) are truly in love and have done everything imaginable for their children's comfort and safety in order to spare them from the immense hardship they themselves had to overcome in their lifetime. Yet, Angela knows that her racial background denies her pleasantries and is rightly frustrated by this. This very fact is made apparent in heartbreaking scenes where Angela's father must pose as her mother's chauffeur in order to receive her from the hospital, or when in a moment of weakness, Angela and her mother pretend not to recognize their very own husband and father in the street while on a shopping spree in the city while together passing for white—it is on these very shopping sprees where Angela cultivates a very reductive, materialist vision of what happiness is. For Angela it can only be a life of luxury, without the worries and cares of place, race, and roots. She wishes to live a life of unfettered agency.

Virginia, Angela's sister, is bound by her darker skin to identify as black, and so comes to different conclusions as to what makes a happy life since she would never be let into the establishments where Angela and her mother shop in the first place. She quickly becomes acquainted with, and builds off of her limitations and lives a far richer life in New York as a result. While Angela's life is defined by money, empty social niceties, and denial of one's past (all elements to Angela's day-to-day existence embodied by her fraught relationship with Robert), Virginia is able to live a vibrant life of the mind in Harlem which runs in concert with her past. This contrast between the lives of Angela and Virginia reaches a twin climax first at the dinner party with Margaret, and second, at the Van Meier lecture in Harlem.

Angela's 'people' are of a white artistic persuasion. Their whiteness is paramount to understanding their point of view, for it is the point of view of one's point of view being taken as granted... that is, as heard by the majority. It is the difference between one who speaks with the authority of one who is used to being heard, and one who must articulate their self, or perish. They are a 'political' group, professedly concerned with the rights of humankind. And yet, even Angela senses their limitations of these seemingly limitless agents...

'And again it seemed to her that they represented an almost alarmingly unnecessary class. If any great social cataclysm were to happen they would surely be first to be swept out of the running. Only real people could survive.'

This thought reaches maturity at the Van Meier lecture, where the arresting black orator calls upon the race to draw pride and strength on their own terms, a call which would surely transcend the status symbols and social privileges of a white world which Angela holds so dear.

'It is neither courage, no, nor hate
That lets us do the things we do;
It's pride that bids the heart be great.'

This calling is beyond mere 'discursivity'—it is a fierce calling to those whose very lives are at stake, a calling by which Margaret and Ladislav's dinner party politics pales pathetically in comparison.

After two years of denial, lies, and failed friendships and relationships in New York, Angela's life lacks true social cohesion. She finds herself no better than when she arrived, just another lonely soul wandering crowded 14th street. It's in the depths of this loneliness that Angela learns to strive for the merits of a friendship based in love, belonging, and a pureness of heart.

And oh, geez, what a love story!!! OK, so the story has what you might call a typical happy ending... so what? Sometimes life is a happy, happy thing... it'll melt your heart, guaranteed...

Michelle Boyer says

I've been on the verge about whether or not this book should get a 3 or a 4 --so I've decided it is a 3.5 and I'll be lenient and give it a 4-star rating here on GoodReads.

Let me explain--

The novel is about a young woman named Angela, who, during the Harlem Renaissance, decides that living her life has become all too complicated because of race. Therefore, she decides that she is going to try "passing" and moves to New York. As one might predict, she still faces trouble and turmoil in New York as she navigates the problems of being a woman, a white woman, a black woman, etc. Basically... there are no easy answers.

This novel may deserve 4-stars for being one of the first novels to be written on the subject in the 1920s-- especially considering it is written by an African-American female author. I think this is one of the reasons we have returned to this novel, because of its historic significance (and the significance of the author). But that aside, the story itself is not "better" than some of the books that come later dealing with the same subject of "passing."

In terms of presenting an overall story, I would probably rate this somewhere around a 3. Sure, the characters are somewhat interesting, and the subject matter is interesting, but the writing style is not unique. There are moments where I wanted to say "well duh" after reading passages that were meant to be super profound. One such example: "She knew that men had a better time of it than women, coloured men than coloured women, white men than white [w]omen" (p88). I'm going to let the typo "momen" slide, but the publisher should have noticed this. I am, however, going to say this is 3-star rating in terms of writing because this moment of "epiphany" from Angela is nothing that should be an epiphany (even in the 1920s when it was written).

Another moment of confusion is when Angela meets Paulette and begins spending time with her. She seems to look up to Paulette, but only because "she has never seen a woman more completely at ease, more assuredly mistress of herself and of her fate" (p105). Why, might you ask, does she feel this way? The best answer is because Paulette has a male lover that spends time at her house (which we know because, gasp, Angela sees his toothbrush) and because Paulette smokes (not just smokes, but is alluring while she does it). Huh?

And of course, Angela has been caught "passing" before as a child. But for some reason, she is convinced this will not happen to her in New York. For real? Fauset tells us that she's been caught before... but Angela doesn't think it could possibly ever happen again? Seems illogical.

As a story, a solid 3. But because of some of the historical context, I'd be willing to give it a 3.5 and therefore round it to a 4.

Beverlee says

Plum Bun was my challenge book of the year. I started reading it 2 years ago and it has been stop & start up until the last week or so. The writing isn't bad, the storyline is intriguing, though I didn't appreciate it until the last third of the book.

Plum Bun is about passing, but there's more to it. Angela grew up with a mother that could pass and this was done occasionally. I don't think it was because their life was particularly hard, but maybe more because at the turn of the 20th century white people controlled everything. Angela moves to New York and passes as a white art student. Her goal may have been security and comfort, but what price is too high?

The story's ending is a neat and near perfect with Angela finding exactly what she searched for. I think that's where the subtitle fits, "novel without a moral" because in the end Angela didn't lose anything by passing as white. It was a lesson in which she ultimately learned self acceptance- "colored" not white and to cherish family and friends.

Seward Park Branch Library, NYPL says

'Now be practical, [Virginia]; after all, I am both white and Negro and look white. Why shouldn't I declare for the one that brings me the greatest happiness, prosperity, and respect?'

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—AF

Monica says

Overly erudite. Corny ending. Nothing much really happens in the book. In short, I enjoyed it!! An anthropological treasure. Its like a time capsule with this young, black, female author struggling for attention and respect both as a woman and as a negro. I am not describing the plot of the book, I'm stating my perception of how the author came across to me in the telling of the story. The story itself was not that complex. A coming of age story of a young woman in the 1920s who attempted to pass and found out she'd rather be who she was. Her journey was the story. Simply fascinating.

Almost 3.5 stars

Paige says

[almost “too happy” for serious literature by today’s standards (hide spoiler)]

Alex says

What if *Sister Carrie* were black? ish? Harlem Renaissance author Jessie Redmon Fauset reminds me of no one more than Theodore Dreiser. Both are concerned with single women trying to make it on their own terms, and neither is particularly skilled at writing. Dreiser is better - more powerful in the end, less susceptible to Victorian plot twists, and less moralistic - but this is good.

Weird to say moralistic, given that *Plum Bun* advertises its lack of moral in the title, but the title is a lie: there are morals galore here, about pride in ancestry and the importance of family and proper behavior and what have you, and they're not subtle.

She began to see the conventions, the rules that govern life, in a new light; she realized suddenly that for all their granite-like coldness and precision they also represented fundamental facts; a sort of concentrated compendium of the art of living and therefore as much to be observed and respected as warm, vital impulses.

Maybe I should be comparing her to Jane Austen.

Passing, which is where a light-skinned black person decides to define herself as white, was of vivid interest to the Harlem Renaissance writers. It shows up in Nella Larsen's terrific *Passing*, the best treatment of it; it's also covered satirically in George Schuyler's *Black No More*, and awkwardly in Jean Toomer's actual life. We don't talk about it so much anymore. Both black and white people find it...what, gauche? I don't know. The last time I heard about passing was when Rachel Dolezal tried a reverse pass. (That's the woman who was head of the NAACP until her Caucasian parents released a statement like, hey, btw, let's make Thanksgiving awkward.) Given its frequent discussion a century ago, I would assume that many black people made this decision at some point previous, and now it's in the past, their families have been white for generations. Suck it racists, I guess?

We're still stuck on the idea that a drop of black blood makes one black, which is sortof weird and ugly. What if a person of mixed race, like Barack Obama, just declared that he was white? Why shouldn't he? The very definition of passing sucks.

Anyway, that's what *Plum Bun* is about. Fauset, who had siblings who could pass, is against it. Her protagonist, Angela Murray, (view spoiler) This is all handled adequately well.

Plum Bun is at its best, though, describing loneliness. Here too there may be autobiographical elements: like Angela, Fauset moved alone to Harlem, and the poignancy of her description of loneliness in New York City feels very real. I loved these parts of the book.

Loneliness! Loneliness such as that offered by the great, noisy city could never be imagined. To realize it one would have to experience it.

They're not enough to make me love the whole thing, which totters into Victorian melodrama at a certain point and then proceeds to drown in it. Angela's sister Virginia (view spoiler)

E.B. White opens Here is New York with what could be the epigram to this book:

On any person who desires such queer prizes, New York will bestow the gift of loneliness and the gift of privacy.

Angela uses the privacy to reinvent herself, but she ends up realizing that you can't have one without the other. The book is about that choice: both or neither.

SmartBitches says

Full review at Smart Bitches, Trashy Books

Plum Bun is a classic novel from the Harlem Renaissance. This book is a pretty optimistic story that features the lives of mostly middle-class African Americans. Its subtitle is "A Novel Without a Moral," and the book is realistic without being preachy or tragic – in fact, the ending is quite a "happy sigh" moment.

Plum Bun is about an African American woman, Angela, who is able to "pass" for white. As a child, she visits white establishments with her equally light-skinned mother, while her darker sister and father have their own adventures. After Angela's parents die, Angela decides to try passing for white in New York City full-time. She creates a new identity for herself and studies art. However, she longs to get married someday. Her most promising suitor seems to be Roger, who is rich, but who also is planning to marry into wealth himself (Roger is also racist, well beyond the norms of the day). She also likes Anthony, who is from Brazil. Anthony is brooding, mysterious, and inconveniently poor.

Romance fans will be quick to figure out early who Angela is going to end up with. The real decision is between Anthony, who is depressed, poor, dedicated to art, and incredibly ethical; and Roger, whose sense of entitlement is such that he shocks Angela by proposing she become his mistress, and who finally persuades Angela to be his lover in a scene which can easily be interpreted as date rape. (Therefore: trigger warning.)

Angela grows up during the course of the novel and takes a more mature view of life, but neither her ethnicity nor her gender doom her to a life of unrelenting sadness. Some of her friends are disloyal, but many are not, and even Anthony gets a chance to cheer up at the end as a set of extremely complicated relationships finally sort themselves out. Both characters learn to appreciate who they are, sometimes in defiance of what they're told they should be, or how they should act. *Plum Bun* is more of a coming-of-age story than a romance, but there's plenty of romance to please romance readers and, yes, it does have a happy romantic ending. I found the book to be both enlightening and delightful.

- Carrie S.

Ari says

IQ "I don't mind a man's not marrying me; but I can't forgive him if he thinks I'm not good enough to marry him. [...]It's wrong for men to have both money and power; they're bound to make some woman suffer"

Paulette, 128

Obviously this novel was going to discuss race and the emotional as well logistical complexities of a Black person passing for white but I was also pleased that it touched on male privilege and sexism. It also has very independent female characters who have *gasp* casual sex and a few nods at homosexuality which was not something I expected for a novel written in 1929. I love how fearless this novel was for its time. There is outright disapproval of Angela passing but her sister Jinny tries to look at it from both sides which keeps the novel from sounding like it's trying to impart a lesson; "And each of us will have go her chosen way. After all each of us is seeking to get all she can out of life! and if you can get more out of it by being white, as you undoubtedly can, why, why shouldn't you? Only it seems to me there are certain things in living that are more fundamental even than color,-but I don't know. I'm all mixed up", she continues "After all in a negative way, merely by saying nothing, you're a disclaiming your black blood in a country where it is an inconvenience,-oh! there's not a doubt about that. You may be proud of it, you may be perfectly satisfied with it-I am-but it certainly can shut you out of things. So why shouldn't you disclaim a living manifestation of that blood?" (171). The perfect mixture of disapproval with sisterly love and attempt at understanding.

The novel also manages to get across its social causes in a subtle manner, for example, presenting a look at the Black middle class which was still extremely rare. Furthermore the author has clearly thought out every aspect of the novel. It is divided into five sections, each starting with a line from the poem that the title derives from. A bildungsroman that deftly employs the marriage plot and also uses passing to discuss power dynamics. I quite enjoyed watching Angela flounder around a bit and eventually grow. I wish schools would require this be read side-by-side with *Passing*, these two novels are far too often over looked and I think they give a great glimpse into Black lives in the early 20th century/the writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

Latanya (CraftyScribbles) says

Worth a read. I enjoyed Nella Larson's telling of the same story better in *Passing* and *Quicksand*.

4 out of 5

Deidre Valentine says

1929. The Harlem Renaissance: the high-swinging days of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston. These names produced some of the most recognizable and justifiable literature in the 20th century. Stories of jazz, sexuality and freedom bloomed from the minds of these poets and novelists.

In a time when ideas pollinized the cities' streets, very few names could be spotted on the radar and could be etched into time. Writers like Jessie Redmon Fauset published their works and passed on as if they were the racially passing characters in which they wrote. The protagonist in *Plum Bun*, Angela Murray, realizes that she can pass for white. Throughout the novel, this proves itself as an advantage and a disadvantage. Fauset creates a character who in some capacity is both static and dynamic. She characterizes Angela as a conflicted, naïve woman who will never understand what it is to be true to oneself.

Jennifer Collins says

Written at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, this is one of those novels that isn't nearly as widely read as it should be. Fauset's novel is so readable as to often seem casual, but the heart of the story is a detailing of psychology related to racism, sexism, and the question/process of "passing". By focusing on a young African American girl who wants nothing more than to be a free woman and artist, Fauset tracks her young protagonist through Philadelphia and then New York with a constant eye toward the politics of her life. Because the focus of the novel is on the personal psychology of characters, as opposed to larger politics affecting society, the book and protagonist might come across as deceptively simple, or even selfish. Instead, the novel works to provide a picture of simple, and even realistic, survival.

In the end, Fauset's subtitle, "a novel without a moral", is both important and careful. As prolific and involved as Fauset was during the Harlem Renaissance, there's no question that this work is never without thought, but it is also incredibly engaging and readable, maybe so much so that its very readability has allowed it to be overlooked when we look back at the serious literature of its time. Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral is, though, a pointed critique of anyone who would attempt to call "passing" a simple matter of morality, pride, or confidence--it is a serious work of fiction, worth reading and considering, that sheds real light onto race and gender politics of the early twentieth century.

Simply, this may be a book you haven't heard of...but it shouldn't be.

Absolutely recommended.

Domonique says

Just ok

It took me a while to get into this book, it was slow going for a while. Forgetting about the countless punctuation and grammatical errors, of which there were a lot, it wasn't all that interesting. I had to make myself keep reading in the hopes that it would get better and it did pick up about half through, but still didn't really grab me. The idea was good, but not the execution.

Leslie says

Read for my Harlem Renaissance class. The marriage plot gets a little blah toward the end, but everything else about this book is so interesting - plot focused on a woman who is passing in NYC in the 1920s/30s, and the complications this creates for her romantic and familial relationships, also while trying to make it as a young artist. Fascinating!
