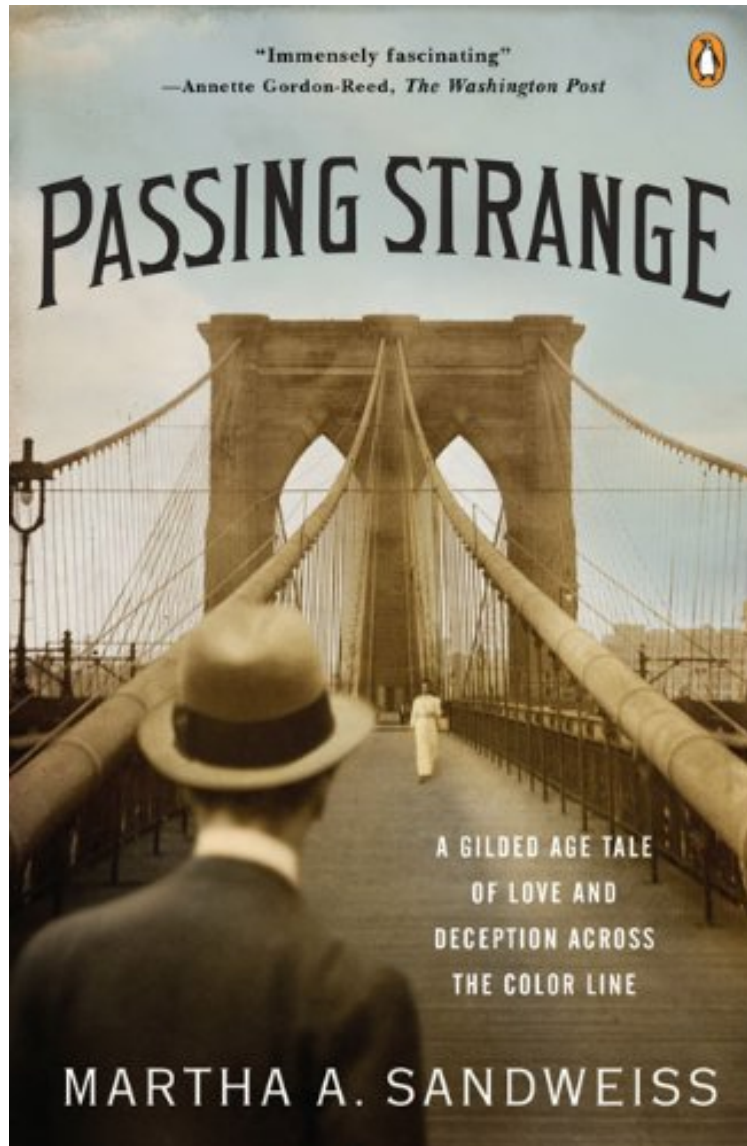


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Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line

Martha A. Sandweiss

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#679903 in Books Martha A Sandweiss 2010-01-26 2010-01-26 Original language: English PDF # 1 8.39 x .85 x 5.49l, .72 #File Name: 014311686X400 pages Passing Strange A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line | File size: 34.Mb

Martha A. Sandweiss : Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Curious Tale of Race and Love In The Gilded AgeBy R PRIUSThe facts upon which this book is based are fairly simple. A caucasian man named Clarence King is descended from a wealthy family of importers from Newport RI. In his adulthood, he becomes quite well-known as an explorer and surveyor of the American West and associates with the upper echelon of high society, business, and government. He leads an exciting life and is a 19th century celebrity. However, during the last 15 years of his life he leads another life of anonymity as a black man named James Todd. Todd is married to a black woman named Ada Todd and has fathered five children. Sounds strange? Absolutely!Essentially this story details King's life of deception, half-truths, and denial and looks at an ever changing climate where race is defined and redefined with each census. It is also a story of a family trying to lay claim to their birthright and presumed fortune.I liked this book very much with one exception. The author concedes that there are many aspects to this story that are unknown or cannot be fully answered as James Todd, his family life and marriage were as blurred as the public life of Clarence King was known. For me, the gaps in knowledge about James and Ada Todd and the level of candor in their relationship is frustrating. So be forewarned, not everything covered in this book is easily explained or logical at times. This is a fascinating yet somewhat incomplete story which doesn't have easy or completely logical answers.3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Dream UnfulfilledBy EdubbieyThrough hagiographical works of admirers of Clarence King, much has been written about the white diminutive man who was the country's first director of the Geological Survey, who mapped the West after the Civil War, who dined with presidents, who exposed a diamond hoax in 1872, and who had even penned a short story--"The Helmet of Mambrino." But not much has been written about the hoax or sorts King played on the black woman he married just as the country was about to enter the mauve decade, until author Martha Sandweiss brings to life the roiling mind of King in her marvelous book--"Passing Strange."Written in equal parts historical information and a storytelling narrative, the author expertly deconstructs King's dream of a "United States of the United Races." She weaves a plausible narrative of King being attracted to "dusky" women well before he married his wife, Ada, who knew him as James Todd. Before he met Ada, King's affinity for swarthy women apparently led him to cast aside his white persona, one that allowed him to be friends with such Brahmin luminaries as Henry Adams and John Hay, to go "slumming" in the black neighborhoods of New York.The author allows the reader to witness the poseur King's internal struggle to love Ada, but to protect his white family and white friends from his black family. One quickly wanders whether King's dream of a race-blind society is all talk. He never revealed his true name to his wife until on his death bed.For me, the story rises to a crescendo when the reader begins to see how King's widow fights to bring to life the fact that she was married to the notable King, a man who had a voluminous mind. With Ada's insuperable fight that ultimately lands her in court 30 years after King's death where she seeks money for a trust fund King promised her, she gains a measure of recognition that she was indeed married to King. But one wonders whether that recognition would ever have be good enough for King. What would he think of the fact that his dream of a raceless society never caught on with his children and grandchildren?To borrow a phrase from the book, the author captured the zeitgeist of King's deception in the flask of her translucent storytelling.The storytelling was good, but so too was the author's historical scholarship. She took an aspect of life for the King family, and weaved a plausible scenario with an historical event. For instance, the author recounts a time King may have worried about his family's safety while he was checking out some mines in the upper Columbia River region of the Pacific Northwest in mid-June because a landlord-tenant dispute near the King home had led to a fatal shooting in late May.Some critiques focus on the fact that the author cannot plug the holes in many unanswered questions. I disagree with that because you can only work the information that is available. Of course the story would be a great novel, but I am glad it wasn't because I learned the truth based on all of the information the author possessed.The book could have been tighter in places. There were a few times the author provided too much tangential information. For instance, while nice to know I suppose, but did the reader really need to know about the backgrounds of two of Ada's lawyers--Everett Waring and J. Douglas Whetmore? But the author is a historian!After reading the book, I am left with wondering whether there was anything King could have done to tell his story beyond his grave. Since he never fully immersed himself in his utopian idea of a raceless society, perhaps he could have committed his true feelings and intentions to writing, with instructions to those who administered his estate to reveal his writings, say 20, 30, 50, or even 100 years (like Mark Twain) after his death.All in all a good book, and I recommend it.5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. A lesson in history, a biography, a page turning love story...By yogameisterThis story gripped my interest on many points. First I live in the Sierra Nevada, and the tales of King and King's tall tales I have always found fascinating. I really didn't know anything about his "double life".Once I began reading this book I could understand how King could pull something like this off. He was elusive and engaging at the same time. His family history and their points of view also help to explain his curiosity with the black world, one that he found exotic and natural.One reviewer was put off because much of the information was secondhand and conjecture. That is an interesting point of view, but I found just the opposite, I found it interesting and provocative. As the author tells us, much of Ada's story, as with those of most black families, cannot be based on recorded or documented history. Most did not read or write and during the time of slavery they did not even have family names, birth and marriage certificates were also none existent. Therefore most of their history is hearsay, handed down as stories. Martha Sandweiss, in my mind, did a great job of proclaiming fact

from educated guess. The fact that assumptions were declared made the story more fascinating. We will never know exactly how Ada came to New York; we will not know the details of Clarence and Ada's meeting and their courtship. The author was careful, referring to history and the state of the black community at the time to draw possible scenarios. She took care not to state them as fact. If you enjoy American history or the history of the West then you will find this book enthralling. Because I enjoy these things this book captured me from the first page. I know much of what was happening at the time, I knew many of the characters and the places from earlier readings. One of my favorite books is *Ramona*, a book that King read and romanticized. There was much I did not know about the South, the slave condition and the post emancipation period. I found the chapter, *Becoming Ada*, very interesting and the fact that so little is known about her is thought provoking. Wow, what a book! Read it if you are taken by American history, a lover of the Sierra Nevada and its characters. If we demand only facts to support the characters and events in this book it would not have been written and that would be a shame.

Read Martha A. Sandweiss's posts on the Penguin Blog *The secret double life of the man who mapped the American West, and the woman he loved Clarence King was a late nineteenth-century celebrity, a brilliant scientist and explorer once described by Secretary of State John Hay as "the best and brightest of his generation."* But King hid a secret from his Gilded Age cohorts and prominent family in Newport: for thirteen years he lived a double life—the first as the prominent white geologist and writer Clarence King, and a second as the black Pullman porter and steelworker named James Todd. The fair, blue-eyed son of a wealthy China trader passed across the color line, revealing his secret to his black common-law wife, Ada Copeland, only on his deathbed. In *Passing Strange*, noted historian Martha A. Sandweiss tells the dramatic, distinctively American tale of a family built along the fault lines of celebrity, class, and race— a story that spans the long century from Civil War to civil rights.

From Booklist *During America's Gilded Age, Clarence King was a famous geologist, friend of wealthy, famous, and powerful men. He was a larger-than-life character whose intellect and wanderlust pushed him to survey far-flung regions of the western U.S. and South America and develop an abiding appreciation of non-Western culture and people. What his family and wealthy friends did not know was that for 17 years, King lived secretly as James Todd, a black Pullman porter with a black wife and mixed-race children residing in Brooklyn. Devoted to his mother and half-siblings, restless and constantly in need of money, King relied on the largesse of his wealthy friends to help him support both families, never revealing his secret until he was near death. Sandweiss relies on letters, newspaper accounts, and interviews to chronicle the extraordinary story of an influential blue-eyed white man who passed for black at a time when passing generally went the other way. An engaging portrait of a man who defied social conventions but could not face up to the potential ruin of an interracial marriage.* --Vanessa Bush RQTEST
About the Author *Martha A. Sandweiss is Professor of History at Princeton University. She began her career as a museum curator and taught for twenty years at Amherst College. She is the author of numerous works on western American history and the history of photography, including *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West*, winner of the Organization of American Historians' Ray Allen Billington Award, and *Laura Gilpin: An Enduring Grace*, and is the co-editor of the *Oxford History of the American West*.*