

## [Q&A]

PW TALKS WITH MARTHA SANDWEISS

# Passing Strange

In *Passing Strange* (Reviews, Dec. 1), Sandweiss uncovers the double life of Clarence King, the renowned geologist who mapped the American West—and crossed color lines, passing as a black Pullman porter, James Todd, to marry Ada Copeland, a black nursemaid.

**How did you come across this story?**

I read Thurman Wilkins's spectacular biography of Clarence King in graduate school. It haunted me. Reading Philip Roth's wonderful *The Human Stain* got me thinking again, as did the Clinton scandal: Clinton messed up for 30 minutes and the story was spread around the world. King sustained a secret life for 13 years. So I sat down one day to see if there was anything I could do with the story. In five minutes I found the census document of King reporting to be black.

**King's life reads like a *Who's Who* of the time: Henry Adams, Henry James, John Hayes—**

James Weldon Johnson! Who would have thought? And Frederick Douglass. It's like six degrees of Clarence King. In the 19th century, he would have been on the cover of [the equivalent of] *People* magazine, but when the story came out in the 1930s, he had dropped out of public consciousness.

**It's difficult for modern readers to understand how King could pass as black. What have we forgotten about how racial distinctions used to be in America?**

We're still dealing with the legacy of the one drop of black blood rule. Think about our new president.

We call him black because 50% of his ancestry comes from an African man. We

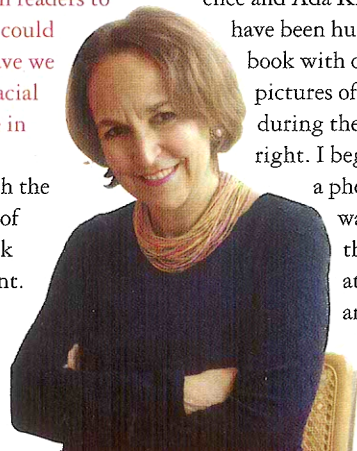
don't imagine him existing in an intermediary category. The fact that we're so quick to call him black speaks to the lasting legacy of the rules that enabled Clarence King's passing. It doesn't depend on what you look like. It's so ironic that these racial laws sprang up during Reconstruction in order to fix racial identity—to say that if you have one black great-grandparent, you're riding in the Jim Crow cars—but they made race more fluid. They let a man like Clarence King, who had no African ancestry, claim that he did.

**Racial classification must have seemed so arbitrary to Ada King. Her daughters later passed as white, yes?**

It's remarkable how white their daughters were, or the daughter that I have a picture of. In the photographs [in the book], you can see how she could marry as a white woman. Normally, I like to have pictures integrated into the text, but in this case, since there's no photograph of Clarence and Ada King together, it would have been hundreds of pages in the book with only Clarence and then pictures of Ada and her family during the trial. That didn't feel right. I begged the publisher for

a photo insert, because I wanted readers to see them together, to look at him and look at her and wonder: how did they pull this off?

—Parul Sehgal



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thur fellow Marshall's (*The Fisher King*) geographic, intellectual and emotional triangulation among the peoples and locales that shaped her—Barbados and Grenada; the Bajan community of Brooklyn; and Africa. Marshall begins with a 1965 State Department-sponsored tour of Europe in the company of her idol, Langston Hughes, when she was a young author and civil rights activist. The book continues as a meditation on "Bodies of Water" (the theme of the original lecture series) as diverse as the James River, the principal port of entry for African slaves in the 18th century, and the Caribbean. Among other personal stories that give her book artistic flair are Marshall's early encounter with the redoubtable editor Hiram Haydn; her disturbing experience with another editor, who was giddy over her upcoming tour of a Virginia plantation ("Our association ended shortly thereafter," Marshall writes drily); and her father's odd devotion to Father Divine. When the USIS again taps Marshall, this time for a mission to Nigeria, the reception she and other U.S. representatives elicit from some of their hosts—welcome combined with shame over their ancestors' complicity in the slave trade—is revelatory. 6 illus. (Mar.)

### ★ Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution

Richard Beeman. Random, \$28 (496p)  
ISBN 978-1-4000-6570-7

A day-by-day account of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 in Philadelphia can't yield up much drama or fireworks, or even much sparkling talk, at least as recorded by a few participants, especially James Madison. But in this masterful account, Beeman (*Patrick Henry*), a noted historian of the late 18th century, does his best to dramatize the writing of the American Constitution. As the convention's hot summer weeks rolled on, tensions built, agreements were reached and compromises (especially, alas, about slavery) were made. Beeman gives each decision, each vote, the weight it deserves and, in brief sketches, brings the delegates alive. The result may not be an exciting story, but, after all, it concerns the writing of the world's longest-lived written national constitution. It's also a story freighted with world-historical significance—and one as well told here as can be



See the review at [www.publishersweekly.com/passingstrange](http://www.publishersweekly.com/passingstrange)