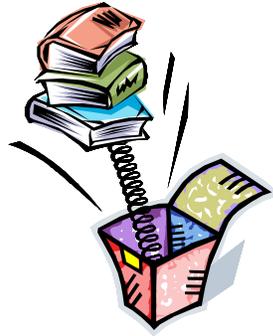


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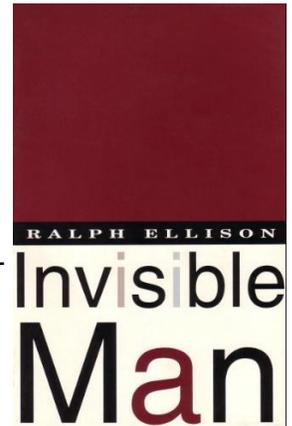
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INVISIBLE MAN

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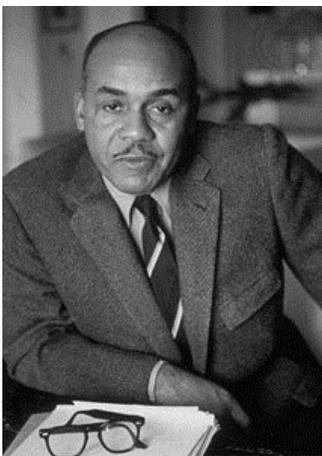
About the Book

Invisible Man is a milestone in American literature, a book that has continued to engage readers since its appearance in 1952. A first novel by an unknown writer, it remained on the bestseller list for sixteen weeks, won the National Book Award for fiction, and established Ralph Ellison as one of the key writers of the century. The nameless narrator of the novel describes growing up in a black community in the South, attending a Negro college from which he is expelled, moving to New York and becoming the chief spokesman of the Harlem branch of "the Brotherhood", and retreating amid violence and confusion to the basement lair of the Invisible Man he imagines himself to be. The book is a passionate and witty tour de force of style, strongly influenced by T.S. Eliot's **The Waste Land**, Joyce, and Dostoevsky.



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About the Author



Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man* has a prominent place in the American literary canon. Indeed, some critics have argued that Ellison wrote the great American novel. When *Invisible Man* first appeared, it was hailed as a masterful depiction of black life in America, and Ellison was received as the first black writer to join the distinguished company of William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway. At the same time, a naturalistic strain was noted in his fiction, which allied him with such writers as Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright. Ellison enjoyed a unique position among black writers. In the 1960's, he was attacked by certain Black Nationalists and pan-Africanists for not being black enough, for assimilating his fiction into the conventions of white, Western European literature, but he stood his ground, absorbing influences from everywhere and adamantly refusing to shape his ideas of literature to a political program. Ellison was always his own man, breaking with his mentor Wright when Ellison wanted to go beyond the naturalism of Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Naturalism emphasized the way individuals were shaped by society. There was a deterministic quality in the doctrine which suggested that human beings were the products of their environment. Ellison opted for a fiction that was more idiosyncratic and playful, and he developed a view of individuals who were capable of transforming society through their

perceptions and manipulations of language.

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Invisible Man is about a man's freedom to be himself. The novel's black narrator is not even named — a telling point, for it allows his voice, his way of telling things, and not his identity, to predominate. The narrator has retreated from society after a series of defeats — failures in his education, in politics, and in the friendships he has formed. A naturalistically conceived character might have been crushed by these disasters, but the narrator rescues his battered self by retreating to a cellar in New York City, where he has managed to tap into the power of the light company. In every way, the narrator is a subversive. He is underground, a marginal figure in society, whose narrative of his life is also a means of regrouping, of finding a way to emerge from the "hole" he has made out of his career. Ellison's depiction of society is sometimes surreal, sometimes realistically detailed. He re-creates the oppressive atmosphere of the South, where the narrator has been humiliated by whites and punished by blacks. In New York City, the narrator gets caught up in the rivalries of religious and political cults, each claiming to have the key to human salvation. Although he does not quite say so, it is implicit in the narrator's account of things that the only true liberation is the liberation of the mind. No political program, religious movement, or organization can deliver human beings from tyranny.

In spite of the painful nature of his experience, the "invisible man" — invisible because whites have never really acknowledged, never actually seen, blacks as full-fledged human beings — reveals considerable humor about his predicament. He has been naïve, even stupid, in not learning more quickly about the murderous elements in his society. His self-critical stance sets him apart from the smug, authoritarian dissenters and establishment figures in the novel. *Invisible Man* is an urbane work that draws upon European models. Fyodor Dostoevski's *Zapiski iz podpolya* (1864; *Notes from the Underground*, 1918), in particular, seems to have influenced Ellison's existential view of human nature; that is, the invisible man's character is the result of his response to existence, and it is his responsibility to say what he has become rather than blaming society for his stunted development.

By the end of the novel, the narrator hints that he is almost ready to leave his hole. Implicit in his narrative has been his feeling that his story is every human being's story, in the sense that each individual must somehow come to terms with society yet preserve his or her own integrity. The narrator's integrity has been violated repeatedly — by whites and blacks, by medical experiments, and by all kinds of institutions and individuals. Yet through his ability to imagine the scenes of his degradation, he has managed to overcome his humiliation, for he has identified his plight as everyone's, or as he puts it (characteristically in the form of a question): "Who knows but that on the lower frequencies I speak for you?"

For forty years, Ellison worked on a second novel. Parts of it appeared in various periodicals, but the book remained incomplete at his death in 1994. Only minor edits and revisions were necessary, however, and it finally appeared in 1999. *Juneteenth* is about a black minister named Alonzo Hickman who takes in and raises a young boy as black, even though the child looks white. The boy, whom he calls Bliss, soon runs away to New England and later becomes a race-baiting senator using the name Adam Sunraider. After he is shot on the Senate floor, Sunraider sends for Hickman, and their past is revealed through their ensuing conversation. The title of the novel refers to June 19, 1865, the day that Union forces announced the emancipation of slaves in Texas, where Juneteenth is an official holiday.

Flying Home, and Other Stories is a posthumous collection of stories edited by Ellison's literary executor, John F. Callahan, which brings together in one volume all the principal short fiction that Ellison wrote (except for pieces published as excerpts of his novels). Callahan arranged the stories according to the age of the main characters, thereby highlighting the stories' thematic unity regarding the growth of ideologies in young people.

Nevertheless, Ellison's influence on American literature is almost exclusively the result of *Invisible Man*, as well as his brilliant collection of essays *Shadow and Act*, in which he explores the subjects of race, the artist, and society.

Rollyson, Carl, et al. "Ralph Ellison." *Cyclopedia Of World Authors, Fourth Revised Edition* (2003): 1. *Biography Reference Center*. Web. 2 Aug. 2014.

Further Reading

If you liked *The Invisible Man*, you might like:

Black Boy by Richard Wright

The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White

Mother by James McBride

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou

The Return of Simple by Langston Hughes

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

Discussion Questions

1. What makes Ellison's narrator invisible? What is the relationship between his invisibility and other people's blindness--both involuntary and willful? Is the protagonist's invisibility due solely to his skin color? Is it only the novel's white characters who refuse to see him?
2. One drawback of invisibility is that "you ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world" [p. 4]. How does the narrator try to prove that he exists? Does this sentence provide a clue to the behavior of other characters in the book?
3. What are the narrator's dreams and goals? How are these variously fulfilled or thwarted in the course of the book?
4. Is the reader meant to identify with the narrator? To sympathize with him? How do you think Ellison himself sees his protagonist?
5. What is the significance of the grandfather's deathbed speech [p.16]? Whom or what has he betrayed? What other characters in this book resort to the same strategy of smiling betrayal?
6. Throughout the novel the narrator gives speeches, or tries to give them, to audiences both black and white, at venues that range from a whites-only "smoker" to the funeral of a black street vendor murdered by the police. What role does oratory--and, more broadly, the spoken word--play in **Invisible Man**?
7. The "battle royal" sequence portrays black men fighting each other for the entertainment of whites. Does Ellison ever portray similar combats between blacks and whites? To what end?
8. Throughout the book the narrator encounters a number of white benefactors, including a millionaire college trustee, an amiable playboy, and the professional agitator Brother Jack. What does the outcome of these relationships suggest about the possibility of friendship or cooperation between the races?
9. What black men does the protagonist choose as mentors or role models? Do they prove to be any more trustworthy than his white "benefactors"? What about those figures whose authority and advice the narrator rejects--for example, the vet in *The Golden Day* and the separatist Ras the Exhorter? What characters in **Invisible Man**, if any, represent sources of moral authority and stability?
10. What cultural tendencies or phenomena does Ellison hold up for satire in this novel? For example, what were the real-life models for the Founder, the Brotherhood, and Ras the Exhorter? How does the author convey the failures and shortcomings of these people and movements?
11. Why might Tod Clifton have left the Brotherhood to peddle demeaning dancing Sambo dolls? What does the narrator mean when he says: "It was as though he [Clifton] had chosen...to fall outside of history"? How would you describe Ellison's vision of history and the role that African-Americans play within it?
12. **Invisible Man** may be said to exemplify the paranoid style of American literature. How does Ellison establish an atmosphere of paranoia in his novel, as though the reader, along with the narrator, "had waded out into a shallow pool only to have the bottom drop out and the water close over my head" [p.432]? Why is this style particularly appropriate to Ellison's subject matter?
13. Where in **Invisible Man** does Ellison--who was trained as a musician--use language to musical effect? (For example, compare the description of the college campus on pages 34-7 to Trueblood's confession on 51-68, to the chapel scene on 110-135, and Tod Clifton's funeral on 450-461.) What different sorts of language does Ellison employ in these and other passages? How does the "music" of these sections--their rhythm, assonance, and alliteration--heighten their meaning or play against it?
14. More than forty years after it was first published, **Invisible Man** is still one of the most widely read and widely taught books in the African-American literary canon. Why do you think this is so? How true is this novel to the lives of black Americans in the 1990s?
15. In spite of its vast success (or perhaps because of it), Ellison's novel--and the author himself--were fiercely criticized in some circles for being insufficiently "Afrocentric." Do you think this is true? Do you think Ellison made artistic compromises in order to make **Invisible Man** accessible to white readers?