

Ralph Ellison

Ralph Waldo Ellison was an American novelist, literary critic, scholar and writer. Ellison is best known for his novel *Invisible Man*, which won the National Book Award in 1953.

Named after Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ellison was born in Oklahoma City to Lewis Alfred Ellison and Ida Millsap. Ellison's father was a small-business owner and a construction foreman who died — when Ralph was three years old.

In 1933, Ellison entered the Tuskegee Institute on a scholarship to study music. While there, he spent increasing amounts of time in the library, reading up on modernist classics.

After his third year, Ellison moved to New York City to study sculpture and photography. He met author Richard Wright. Wright encouraged Ellison to pursue a career in writing fiction. His first published story was entitled *Hymie's Bull*, inspired by his hobbing on a train.

Wright was then openly associated with the Communist Party and Ellison was publishing and editing for communist publications. Both Wright and Ellison lost their faith in the Communist Party during World War II, feeling the party had betrayed African Americans and replaced Marxist class politics with social reformism. Ellison began writing *Invisible Man*, a novel that was, in part, his response to the party's betrayal.

World War II was nearing its end when Ellison, reluctant to serve in the segregated army, chose merchant marine service over the draft. From 1947 to 1951, he earned some money writing book reviews but spent most of his time working on *Invisible Man*.

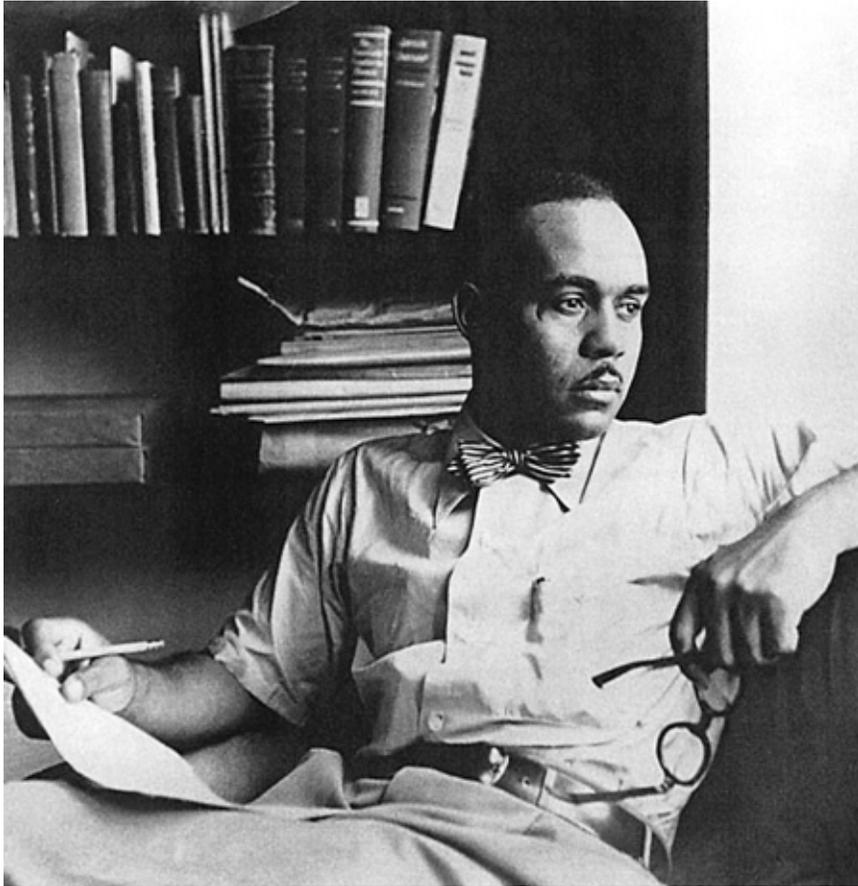
Published in 1952, *Invisible Man* explores the theme of man's search for his identity and place in society, from the perspective of an unnamed black man in the New York City of the 1930s. Ellison's characters are dispassionate, educated, articulate and self-aware. Ellison explores contrasts between Northern and Southern varieties of racism and their alienating effect. The narrator is, figuratively, "invisible" in that "people refuse to see" him, and he also experiences a kind of dissociation. The novel, won the 1953 U.S. National Book Award for Fiction.

The award was his ticket into the American literary establishment. In



1955, Ellison went abroad to Europe to travel and lecture before settling for a time in Rome, Italy. In 1958, Ellison returned to the United States to take a position teaching American and Russian literature at Bard College and to begin a second novel, *Juneteenth*.

In 1964, Ellison published *Shadow and Act*, a collection of essays, and began to teach at Rutgers University and Yale University, while continuing to work on his novel. The following year, a survey



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of 200 prominent literary figures proclaimed *Invisible Man* the most important novel since World War II.

In 1969, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom; in 1970, he was made a Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by France and became a faculty member at New York University as the Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities, serving until 1980.

In 1975, Ellison was elected to The American Academy of Arts and Letters and his hometown of Oklahoma City honored him with the dedication of the Ralph Waldo Ellison Library. Ellison was also an accomplished sculptor, musician, photographer and college professor.

He taught at Bard College, Rutgers University, the University of Chicago, and New York University. He was a charter member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

Ralph Ellison died on April 16, 1994, of pancreatic cancer, and was buried at Trinity Church Cemetery in New York City.