

Ralph Ellison's Comments—1953 Fiction Award

Read comments made by Ralph Ellison when he received the 1953 Fiction Award.

Understand what he is saying. You may need to look up some of his terms. ←

RALPH ELLISON, WINNER OF THE 1953 FICTION AWARD FOR *INVISIBLE MAN*

If I were asked in all seriousness just what I considered to be the chief significance of *Invisible Man* as a fiction, I would reply: Its experimental attitude and its attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy which typified the best of our nineteenth-century fiction.

When I examined the rather rigid concepts of reality which informed a number of the works which impressed me and to which I owed a great deal, I was forced to conclude that for me and for so many hundreds of thousands of Americans, reality was simply far more mysterious and uncertain, and at the same time more exciting, and still, despite its raw violence and capriciousness, more promising.

To see America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism which has led after so many triumphs to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction. I was to dream of a prose which was flexible, and swift as American change is swift, confronting the inequalities and brutalities of our society forthrightly, but yet thrusting forth its images of hope, human fraternity, and individual self-realization. A prose which would make use of the richness of our speech, the idiomatic expression, and the rhetorical flourishes from past periods which are still alive among us. Despite my personal failures there must be possible a fiction which, leaving sociology and case histories to the scientists, can arrive at the truth about the human condition, here and now, with all the bright magic of the fairy tale.

Ralph Ellison's Introduction to the novel *Invisible Man*

Read the introduction to the novel *Invisible Man*. It is in your text, at the front, before the novel, before the prologue, yes, those pages with the Roman numeral page numbers. Read it.

Biographical Information on Ralph Ellison

From Annenberg Learner, *American Passages a Literary Survey*

(<http://www.learner.org/amerpass/unit14/authors-4.html>)

Read the biographical passage and answer the following: What insight into the novel *Invisible Man*, if any, can you derive from this short biography of Ellison?

Ralph Ellison grew up in Oklahoma City and attended college at the Tuskegee Institute, where he was a music major who admired both the classics of the European tradition and Kansas City jazz. After graduation he moved to New York City, where he met Richard Wright, who encouraged him to pursue his writing career. *Invisible Man* (1952), the result of seven years of writing, won the National Book Award and brought Ellison into the national spotlight. Critics disagreed about whether the book made a statement about African Americans, but Ellison felt both sides had missed the point. He had never aimed to be a spokesperson and asked to be judged simply as a writer. After the enormous success of *Invisible Man*, Ellison began teaching, and from 1970 until his retirement he was the Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at New York University. His essays are collected in *Shadow and Act* (1964).

In the 1930s the communist party attracted much community attention as a force in the civil rights movement, and many African American intellectuals gravitated to it. Ellison found his way into the party because it seemed at the time to be the strongest and most promising force for change in African American life, a major presence in inner-city neighborhoods, with skilled organizers and an agenda that offered hope in the midst of a worldwide depression. Like Richard Wright and James Baldwin, however, Ellison broke with communism when he came to understand that the party, under the control of the Stalinist Soviet Union, was exploiting black Americans rather than genuinely championing their causes. This disappointment with the communist party is a central theme in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, contributing to the novel's pervading sense of alienation and dashed hopes. That mood is also palpable in his short story "Cadillac Flambé," in which a black man acts out of anger not only against the complacent racist remarks of a national politician, but also against his own susceptibility to consumerism, the dream that something purchased, something material, can bring fulfillment and peace.

By the early 1960s, *Invisible Man* was being praised at American universities as the greatest novel by an African American; later in that decade, however, as campus radicalism shook up literary and scholastic life in the United States, the book and its author were faulted for showing too much respect for traditions both literary and social. Ellison's wry humor and his public demeanor were liabilities at a time when artists tended to take themselves and racial politics very seriously. When the politics of the 1960s subsided, Ellison's reputation recovered.