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# Invisible Man: A Novel

RALPH ELLISON

# Invisible Man

READ BY JOE MORTON

UNABRIDGED



## Synopsis

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a monumental novel, one that can well be called an epic of 20th-century African-American life. It is a strange story, in which many extraordinary things happen, some of them shocking and brutal, some of them pitiful and touching - yet always with elements of comedy and irony and burlesque that appear in unexpected places. After a brief prologue, the story begins with a terrifying experience from the hero's high-school days; it then moves quickly to the campus of a "Southern Negro college" and then to New York's Harlem, where most of the action takes place. The many people that the hero meets in the course of his wanderings are remarkably various, complex and significant. With them he becomes involved in an amazing series of adventures, in which he is sometimes befriended but more often deceived and betrayed - as much by himself and his own illusions as by the duplicity and the blindness of others. *Invisible Man* is not only a great triumph of storytelling and characterization; it is a profound and uncompromising interpretation of the anomalous position of blacks in American society.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ellison, Baldwin and Wright formed the triumvirate of great African American male novelists of the past 200 years. Of the three, Ellison may well prove to be the most timeless. While *Native Son*, *Black Boy* and *Go Tell it on a Mountain* are powerful works, they don't quite measure up to *Invisible Man*, in terms of sheer literary genius. While Ellison wears his influences on his sleeve (Dostoevsky, symbolist poets, existentialist writers, etc.[he even borrows his title from HG Wells]), his writing

never suffers or sinks beneath the weight of literary associations. His was a unique voice and vision. Like Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, Ellison's narrator has essentially beat a retreat from the world. He holes up in a subterranean room, where he reflects on the the injustices society has dealt him. Dostoevsky's narrator purposely bumps into people on the Nevsky Prospect in order to certify that he is visible and just as important as the next man. Ellison's *Invisible Man* beats and almost kills a white man he confronts on an empty street, also in order to rationalize his own existence. Both the underground man and the invisible man are filled with self loathing. Yet, in Ellison's work, the narrator does achieve a sort of spiritual progress and affirmative self-knowledge. He goes from being a pathetically exploited non-being that must accede to the whims and wishes of the white oppressor (the often anthologized battle royal scene at the beginning of the book), to a point near the conclusion of the book in which he can state he is free to pursue "infinite possibilities." Irving Howe, in an overall favorable review of the novel, took Ellison to task on several fronts.

When I was 12 years old, my father brought home a trunk full of used books from a thrift store. In it was every book imaginable by the leading lights of the African-American literary pantheon. Baldwin, Hughes, Hurston, Wright, Fanon, Brown and of course the weightiest of the tomes at 600-plus pages, Ellison's *Invisible Man*. I read through all the slimmer volumes and never got around to Ellison until I was in college. Even after hearing all the hype about it for years on end, I was still floored by the book. It was the kind of book you backtrack while reading, retracing chapters you just read to see if the initial impact of the words was really that forceful. I empathized with the book and it's protagonist because having just gone through my early adolescence and teens I sensed his feeling of longing...and need for belonging. Nearing the end of the book, I slowed my pace, afraid of what I would find. After finishing it for many days (weeks, months...) afterward the book haunted my quiet times. It haunted me whenever I thought about it for years afterward. Thus, having just bought the "new" Ellison, "*Juneteenth*" I also bought the new commemorative "*Invisible Man*" and decided to read it again first. It was more powerful than before. It's tale of a search for identity in a land where your identity is denied rings even truer in this time of assimilation/balkanization. We live in a time where color-blindness (one form of invisibility) is the alleged goal while denial of recognition and privelege (the more prevalent form of invisibility) is still the unfortunate norm. Beyond being a book of the 50's and the civil rights era, it's even more important as a book for the move to a new millennium...

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