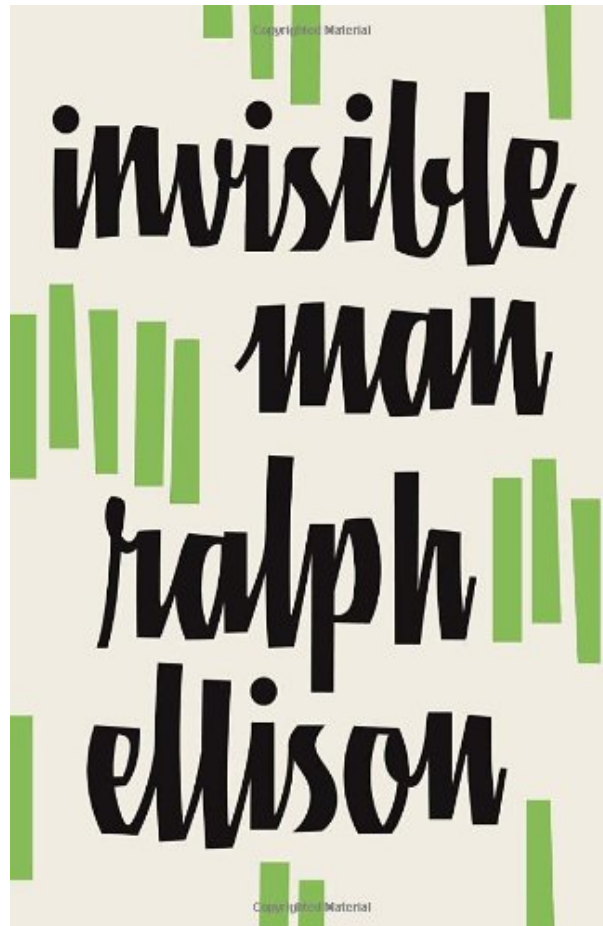
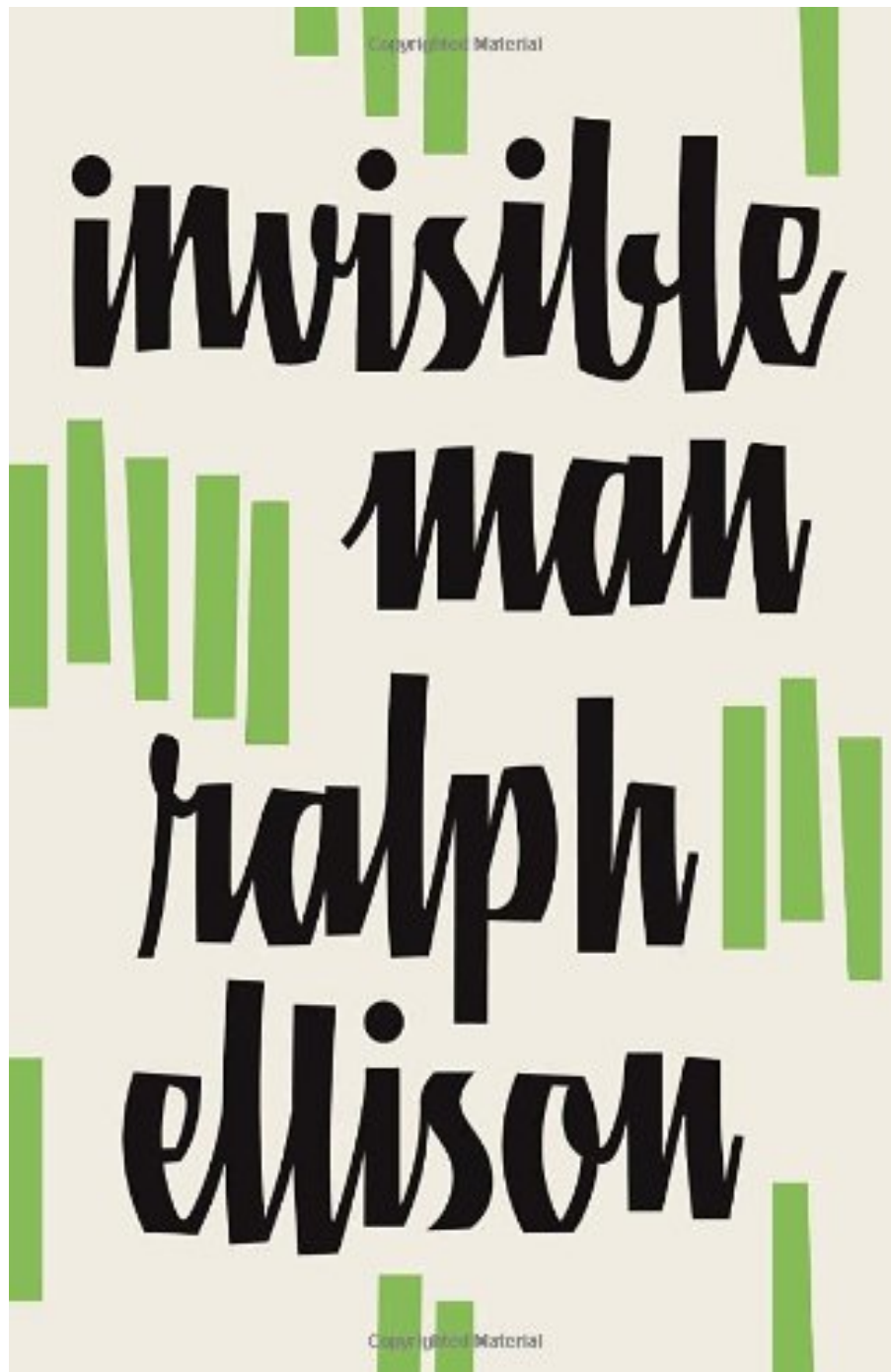


# INVISIBLE MAN BY RALPH ELLISON



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### Amazon.com Review

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What ensues is a search for what truth actually is, which proves to be supremely elusive. The narrator becomes a spokesman for a mixed-race band of social activists called "The Brotherhood" and believes he is fighting for equality. Once again, he realizes he's been duped into believing what he thought was the truth, when in fact it is only another variation. Of the Brothers, he eventually discerns: "They were blind, bat blind, moving only by the echoed sounds of their voices. And because they were blind they would destroy themselves.... Here I thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men."

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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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A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius

By Bruce Kendall

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. He complained that the section wherein the narrator falls in with "The Brotherhood" portrays the communist party in an unrealistic vein. He was also troubled by Ellison's narrative design: "Because the book is written in the first person singular, Ellison cannot establish ironic distance between his hero and himself, or between the matured "I" telling the story and the "I" who is its victim. And because the experience is so apocalyptic and magnified, it absorbs and then dissolves the hero; every minor character comes through brilliantly, but the seeing "I" is seldom seen." Though I generally have a high opinion of Irving Howe's criticism, I think he's arriving at a conclusion here which entirely deflates his own remarks. Yes, the "I" in Invisible Man is harder to see than the other characters, but that is part of the author's construct. It's the very point he makes over and over throughout the novel. How better to portray an "invisible man?"

If you've never read this important work, try reading the first 40 pages that are on display here at .... It includes the famous battle royal sequence, which is one of the best hook chapters in all of literature. It should be enough to induce you to read the rest of the novel. You are in for an unforgettable read.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Trying Hard to See You

By Gregory N. Hullender

Ellison's African-American hero (appropriately, we never learn his name) wanders through life suffering from people who expect him to be someone he's not. Every time he tries to assert himself, people punish him for failing to conform to their expectations, and since no two people seem to expect the same thing from him - and since he meets so many different people - he suffers a lot. He calls himself the invisible man, then, because no one sees him for himself. The novel tells how he comes to this realization and how he concludes that forcing people to conform is wrong and that diversity is a strength. Surprisingly for a black novel set in the 1950s, only about half of his troubles come from racism, and he seems to have little or no internalized racism. Also, although the novel can be read just on the surface, it has a rich allegorical subtext that rewards careful examination. (E.g. the Liberty Paint Company secretly adds a few drops of black graduate to each bucket of their award-winning white paint.) Finally, the book is almost completely free of modern notions of political correctness, so it should be readable and enjoyable for everyone.

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