

## About This Volume

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Robert C. Evans

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is and almost always has been considered one of the most important works of twentieth-century fiction. Although this book was the only complete novel Ellison published during his lifetime, its impact was immediate and has proven to be enduring. The book, which first appeared in 1952, won the 1953 National Book Award, besting works by various better-known competitors, including Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. In the decades since its first publication, it has been widely read, widely taught, and widely admired. The purpose of the present volume is to offer a diverse array of new perspectives on *Invisible Man* as well as many helpful facts and a good deal of new information.

Like all the volumes in the Critical Insights series, this one is divided into three main parts. The first is a collection of four Critical Contexts essays, intended to treat the novel (1) from a historical vantage point, (2) in terms of its critical reception, (3) using a specific critical lens, and (4) by comparing and contrasting it with another important work. The Critical Contexts essays are followed by eleven Critical Readings, which are designed to offer a kaleidoscope of different ways of approaching Ellison's book. The book concludes with a Resources section consisting mainly of a chronology and both primary and secondary bibliographies.

The book begins with a flagship essay by Patrice Rankine, a distinguished scholar who has been studying Ellison's works for many decades. In fact, his essay takes the form of a self-interview, in which he asks and answers a series of questions about when, where, how, and especially why he came to find the book so intriguing. Rankine explores the motifs and approaches that made *Invisible Man* "a novel that America could not ignore, and should not, even into the 21st century." He argues that "approaches rooted in literary allusion and borrowings, alongside Ellison's interest in jazz and blues, color

the novel in unique, unexpected ways. The same characteristics that raised *Invisible Man* to ‘classic’ heights,” he contends, “are the ones that critics fault. *Invisible Man* deserves our attention because many of the social ills to which it points are still with us.”

Rankine’s essay is followed by a brief biography of Ellison by Kelley Jeans, which lays out the main facts of the author’s life, especially in the period before and during the first publication of *Invisible Man*.

### Critical Contexts

In the first of the Critical Contexts essays, Phill Johnson looks at Ellison’s novel from an intriguing historical perspective. He recounts, more thoroughly than has ever been done before, the various attempts that have been made to challenge and even to ban the book, especially from high school classrooms. His findings reveal that it has usually been the sexual rather than the racial aspects of the book that have provoked the most controversy. “Ironically,” he writes, “when the book *has* been objected to on racial grounds, the main complaint seems to have involved its use of “the ‘n’ word” and other, similarly insensitive language.” Paradoxically, then, *Invisible Man* “—which is generally perceived as an indictment of racism—has occasionally been seen as racist itself because it honestly presents the ways racists actually speak.” Johnson notes that attempts “to ban *Invisible Man* can be traced over many decades, including into very recent times.” Most of those attempts ultimately failed and, like most attempts at censorship, actually stimulated interest in the book.

Robert C. Evans, offering one of two chapters on the critical reception of the novel, first looks at early reactions, from the 1950s and ’60s. Evans, noting that the book’s narrator is also its main character, reports that this unidentified persona has been called, “by various critics, ‘the narrator,’ ‘the protagonist,’ or simply ‘Invisible.’” Evans observes that the narrator has been “central to much critical commentary” but that “many other aspects of the novel have also been discussed.” His goal, in this first essay, “is to survey representative critical reactions to the book in the first two decades of its existence—from 1952 until 1969—by relying

on essays reprinted in various critical anthologies.” He focuses on these, he says, because they “were usually selected for their relevance, excellence, and typicality. They were, in a sense, given seals of approval by the books’ editors, all experts on Ellison.”

In the Critical Lens essay, Nicolas Tredell examines issues of “sensation and making sense” in *Invisible Man*. Tredell sees the book as a “novel that sharply evokes bodily sensation and sensory experience—especially through the eye and ear—and that vividly dramatizes its protagonist’s attempts to make sense of the often disorientating situations that engulf him and the sometimes puzzling people he meets—including, at times, himself.” Tredell “explores the ways in which the novel works to convey sensations, sensory experience and sense-making through its scenes, its structure, and the narrative voice of its nameless first-person narrator and protagonist,” a voice “which interweaves a copious variety of discursive modes, including formal and impromptu public orations, demotic speech, folktale, myth, the thriller, the bildungsroman, Modernist fiction and poetry, and the existentialist and absurdist novel.”

In the last of the Critical Contexts essays, Steven D. Ealy highlights “biblical riffs in and on *Invisible Man*.” In listening for echoes of the Bible in Ellison’s writing, Ealy notes that he is “not suggesting that Ellison is attempting to explicate the meaning of scripture or using biblical references to proselytize his readers. Rather, Ellison seeks to deepen and broaden his work with these often subtle, but at times explicit and direct, biblical quotations and allusions.”

### **Critical Readings**

The first of the Critical Readings essays is actually the transcript of a public lecture delivered by Arnold Rampersad, the biographer of Ellison and various other notable figures and a winner of one of the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship genius grants. Rampersad provides an engaging overview of Ellison’s life and also comments on the occasionally negative reactions his book received from a minority of reviewers. Discussing some of the revelations the book contains, Rampersad says, “Many people would prefer to have such

unpleasantness left out of a biography. In my defense, I say that my book consciously illustrates the price of great art.” He continues, “I say to the squeamish reader: ‘You think you love great art, and no doubt you do. But great art almost always, perhaps always, exacts a great price. It exacts a great price from the spouse of the artist, who is usually a wife. It often exacts a price from the children, in terms of parental neglect and abuse.’” He adds, of course that “It doesn’t have to be that way always, but it is almost typically that way, or so it seems. And finally, it usually exacts a cruel price on the artist himself or herself. . . . Producing great art doesn’t come cheaply. If you want a biography that pretends otherwise, this is not the one for you.”

Rampersad’s lecture is followed by several essays that begin to put *Invisible Man* in various kinds of frames of reference. Another essay by Robert Evans traces critical reception of the book from the 1970s to the middle of the twenty-first century. An essay by Antonio Byrd then surveys Ellison’s own comments on the criteria and traits of good creative writing. Evans then returns with an essay focusing on Ellison’s own early comments, from interviews, about his famous novel. This essay includes material from two substantive but little-known interviews (one in Italian) in which Ellison speaks very interestingly about his most important book. The intent of the Evans and Byrd essays is to bring together, for readers’ convenience, much information relevant to a better understanding of *Invisible Man*, including information about how Ellison himself interpreted the book.

The next few essays offer substantive new readings of the book itself. Nicolas Tredell, for instance, argues that *Invisible Man* “is packed with incidents that provoke anger in its nameless protagonist—and the sympathetic reader.” Anger, Tredell notes, “is an awkward, ambiguous emotion” that can impair “clear vision, sound judgement and appropriate action; on the other hand, it may appear to restore true sight to the eyes and bring wholeness to the psyche.” It “may be destructive or creative, sometimes both at once—and it is difficult to imagine emancipatory action, or energized art, without the fuel of properly directed anger.” Tredell’s essay

analyses “the complex negotiations with anger in *Invisible Man*, both in the evoked experiences of its unnamed first-person narrator and protagonist, and in the novel itself as an artistic performance that offers a rich repertoire of ways of representing and exploring anger and recognizing its causes without collapsing into polemic, propaganda, or an enervating equilibrium.”

In the next essay, the noted Ellison scholar Lucas E. Morel reports that “when asked the advice he would give to a young writer, Ellison answered that, especially for a black American writer, it would require wrestling with ‘the integration of American society on the level of the imagination.’” Ellison added, “It is one way in which he is able to possess his world, and in his writings, help shape the values of large segments of a society which otherwise would not admit his existence, much less his right to participate or to judge.” According to Morel, Ellison believed that this “civic aspect of the black American author’s task was unavoidable if he were to write a more truthful, meaning a more comprehensive, account of what it has meant to be black in America.”

In a related essay that follows his first one, Morel contends that in Ralph Ellison “one finds both a patriot and critic of America. His writings reflect a nuanced appreciation of his country that teaches us what to love about the United States, what not to love, and how to bear with the difference as one worked to promote change.” Ellison, says Morel, “understood his work to follow a long-standing tradition of black American activism that pressured the nation to align its practice more closely to its profession.” Morel notes that in “a 1970 *Time* magazine essay titled ‘What America Would Be Like Without Blacks,’ Ellison declared ‘it is the black American who puts pressure upon the nation to live up to its ideals. . . . It is he who insists that we purify the American language by demanding that there be a closer correlation between the meaning of words and reality, between ideal and conduct, between our assertions and our actions.’” Morel’s own essay explores the implications of such beliefs.

In a piece titled “*Invisible Man* and the Mysteries of Reconstruction,” Grant Shreve argues that “Ellison saw Reconstruction as a moment of true democratic flourishing, an all-too-fleeting vision

of the kind of racially integrated republic Abraham Lincoln had begun to envision before he was assassinated in 1865.” It was, Shreve writes, “an instant of productive chaos, and its passing meant that the question of race would continue to haunt the United States, existing, as Ellison once wrote, as a ‘quiescent organism in the blood’ that would occasionally revive itself as ‘the eruption of boils and cancers’ in society.” For Ellison, according to Shreve, “the end of Reconstruction, which allowed the South to impose unimaginably oppressive laws on African American populations, represented a catastrophic failure of moral courage. It marked . . . a political retreat from the possibility of interracial democracy.”

In the first of two essays dealing with the ways Ellison’s life and works have been adapted for stage and screen, and especially about critical responses to those adaptations, Bryan Warren surveys reviews of Oren Jacoby’s highly successful dramatic version of the play. Warren notes that “every single word in the three-hour play comes from the novel itself,” and that although “Ellison rightly worried that a dramatized version of *Invisible Man* could never do justice to the novel, critical reaction to the play has been almost uniformly positive.”

In his second essay, Warren notes that “by the year 2002 Ellison, mainly thanks to *Invisible Man*, had become the subject of a documentary film commissioned as part of the award-winning ‘American Masters’ series hosted by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).” Warren reports that this “film—written, produced, and directed by Avon Kirkland—earned mostly positive reviews. It was important, in part, not only because it was (and remains) the only full-length film about Ellison’s life and works but also because it contained the first substantial dramatized excerpts from *Invisible Man*.” Warren surveys critical responses to the film and then closes his piece by calling attention to a number of other valuable resources available on film and/or video that may be helpful to students and teachers of Ellison as well as to anyone interested in his life and writings.

Finally, the main body of the book closes with an essay by Michael Germana, whose recent book from Oxford University

Press has helped cement his reputation as one of the leading Ellison scholars of our time. Germana's essay focuses on Ellison's response to Reconstruction, an era following the Civil War when African Americans briefly possessed a certain degree of freedom and even political power. "For twenty-first century readers," Germana maintains, "the coexistence of America's past and present in [Ellison's] novel produces cognitive dissonance—a feeling of disjointedness that relies upon the absence of racial progress we were *supposed* to have made in the intervening decades." Germana continues, stating that the fact that "the protagonist continually stumbles over an oppressive past he believes he has transcended only to discover the inherent paradoxes of the present-past only enhances this experience." According to Germana, as "Invisible gets 'boomeranged' by the return of the past in the present, so too is the reader forced to confront the still-unfinished work of Reconstruction in contemporary America."

The volume closes with a variety of diverse resources, including an appendix of recently discovered early materials about *Invisible Man*, including previously unpublished reviews and other kinds of commentary. This is followed by a chronology of Ellison's life, lists of works by and about Ellison, information about the editor and contributors, and a comprehensive index.

## Ralph Ellison on the Craft of Good Writing\_\_\_\_\_

Antonio Byrd

Probably the best interpreter of any writer's intentions is usually the writer himself. Critics may be best positioned to assess what a writer has actually accomplished, but the author is usually best positioned to say what was *intended*. This fact makes Ralph Ellison's various comments about the nature and purposes of good writing especially relevant to any reading of his masterpiece, *Invisible Man*. Fortunately, many of Ellison's comments about writing have been collected in a volume issued as part of the *Conversations with . . .* series, published by the University of Mississippi Press. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh edited the volume devoted to Ellison, and that book's splendid index makes it possible to trace many of Ellison's personal observations on the nature and practice of creative writing, especially the kind of creative writing done by African American authors.

### Ellison's Views about Writing

In a 1967 interview, Ellison was asked whether black writers, like Jewish writers, might someday come to be seen simply as writers per se. He responded by saying that "neither Negro American expression nor religion has been primarily literary. We are by no means," he continued, "as is said of Jews, 'people of the Book'—not that I see this as a matter for regret. For we have a wider freedom of selection" (111).

African Americans, Ellison asserted,

took much from the ancient Hebrews and we do share, through Christianity, the values embodied in the literature of much of the world. But our expression has been oral as against "literary." And when it comes to the question of identifying those writers who have shaped American literature—the framers of the Declaration, the Constitution, and Lincoln excepted—we tend to project racial categories into the areas of artistic technique, form, insight; areas

where race has no proper place. We seem to forget that one can identify with what a writer has written, with its form, its manner, techniques, while *rejecting* the writer's beliefs, his prejudices, philosophy, values. (111-12)

Ellison next (in this comment at least) distinguished the form of literature from its content. One could value the first, he said, while ignoring or even rejecting the latter. This was a view commonly accepted by many writers from the 1940s through (and sometimes even beyond) the 1960s. Called *formalism*, this position emphasized a writer's artistic talent rather than his or her ideas about external issues. One could be a writer with repulsive views but real literary gifts, or one could be a talentless writer whose views were perfectly mainstream. Or, ideally, one could be a gifted writer who really spoke to profound human concerns. The latter is the kind of writer Ellison aspired to be.

Later in the same interview, Ellison cautioned against the idea that black writers could do their best work in any particular location. He especially cautioned against the idea that good writing could only be done in a place (such as Harlem) where African Americans made up the bulk of the population. According to Ellison, one “frees oneself, as a writer, by actually going in and trying to get the shape of experience *from the writer's perspective*. I see no other way. But this,” he went on, unfortunately

requires a writer's type of memory—which is strongly emotional and associative—and a certain amount of technique. You must pay the Negro community the respect of trying to see it through the enriching perspectives provided by great literature—using your own intelligence to make up for the differences in economy, in class background, in education, in conscious culture, in manners and in attitude toward values. Human beings are basically the same and differ mainly in lifestyle. Here revelation is called for, not argument. (118)

Later in this same discussion, Ellison expanded on his point about writing in any particular place. He emphasized that regardless of a

writer's location, an author should consider "what you seek to depict, and most important of all is perspective. And the main perspective through which a writer looks at experience is that provided by literature" (120). Although he admitted that some African American writers felt that they had to travel to other countries to escape racial segregation, he said that he himself had moved to New York not to live more comfortably than in the South. Instead, Ellison said he had sought "a wider world of opportunity. And, most of all, the excitement and impersonality of a great city. I wanted room in which to discover who I was" (121). Once again, then, Ellison stressed the need for a commitment to art rather than to any particular location or ideology. Only a talented writer, he thought, could provide the kind of "revelation" he saw as crucial to great literature.

Ellison was asked if he advocated that writers focus on African Americans' "hope and aspirations" rather than on the historical realities they faced. He responded by saying that although he understood that "negative things" have happened in African American history, he felt

compelled to reject all condescending, narrowly paternalistic interpretations of Negro American life and personality from whatever quarters they come, whether White or Negro. Such interpretation would take the negative details of our existence and make them the whole of our life and personality. But literature teaches us that mankind has always defined itself *against* the negatives thrown at it by both society and the universe. It is human will, human hope, and human effort which make the difference. (120)

He strongly suggested that while disasters have in fact befallen African Americans since Europeans brought them to North America as slaves, it is also the writer's duty to depict earnest attempts to combat such cruelty and reclaim humanity.

At the end of this interview, Ellison offered advice to young people considering writing as a profession. He insisted that aspiring writers avoid "talking about writing" but instead focus on practicing their literary craft "as a young physician who is required to regard his period of training" (134). They might even need to live in

poverty as they pursue a career in writing. Part of that training should involve reading high-quality books, “especially those in the literary form in which [a writer] desires to become creative.” This was important, he said, because “books contain the culture of the chosen form and because one learns from them the achievements of other writers.” Considering the kind of education he believed aspiring writers should have, Ellison nonetheless cautioned them not to follow the example of Hemingway and Faulkner in eschewing formal education. Although those authors did not finish college, Ellison said, they were “gifted” writers already. But most writers, he felt, must have *some* education, especially an education that teaches them not only about their local community but also about their community’s customs, values, and beliefs. In addition, he argued that the writer should have a well-rounded knowledge in different disciplines, such as “in the sciences, in religion, in government, and in the other arts” (134). In sum, Ellison said, an author “should have a working model of [his] society and of the national characteristics present within his mind.” He continued that the

problem of enriching that model and keeping it up-to-date is one of the greatest challenges to the Negro writer, who is, by definition, cut off from firsthand contact with large areas of society—especially from those centers where power is translated into ideas and into manners and into values. Nevertheless, this can be an advantage, because in this country no writer should take anything for granted, but must use his imagination to question and penetrate the façade of things. Indeed, the integration of American society on the level of the imagination is one of his basic tasks. (134-35)

### **Further Thoughts on Good Writing**

Later, in a 1972 interview, Ellison described important characteristics of a writer’s mind. He saw the writer as “obsessed with extracting [from the world around him] characters, nuances, and rhetoric,” so that “as he re-combines them in terms of literary forms, he conveys what he considers most important in life . . . The life of the imagination leads him to combine those images he has extracted from reality” (217). Ellison called reading a key to further cultivating

## About the Editor

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**Robert C. Evans** is I. B. Young Professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery, where he has taught since 1982. In 1984 he received his PhD from Princeton University, where he held Weaver and Whiting fellowships as well as a university fellowship. In later years his research was supported by fellowships from the Newberry Library (twice), the American Council of Learned Societies, the Folger Shakespeare Library (twice), the Mellon Foundation, the Huntington Library, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Society, and the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

In 1982 he was awarded the G. E. Bentley Prize and in 1989 was selected Professor of the Year for Alabama by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. At AUM he has received the Faculty Excellence Award and has been named Distinguished Research Professor, Distinguished Teaching Professor, and University Alumni Professor. Most recently he was named Professor of the Year by the South Atlantic Association of Departments of English.

He is a contributing editor to the John Donne *Variorum Edition* and is the author or editor of more than fifty books (on such topics as Ben Jonson, Martha Moulsworth, Kate Chopin, John Donne, Frank O'Connor, Brian Friel, Ambrose Bierce, Amy Tan, early modern women writers, pluralist literary theory, literary criticism, twentieth-century American writers, American novelists, Shakespeare, and seventeenth-century English literature). He is also the author of roughly four hundred published or forthcoming essays or notes (in print and online) on a variety of topics, especially dealing with Renaissance literature, critical theory, women writers, short fiction, and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.