

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • LITERARY

Invisible Man

Ralph Ellison and the Weight of Being Unseen

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Contribution Track • ERA V–VI • Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Who He Is

Ralph Waldo Ellison — named for the Concord essayist — was born March 1, 1913, in Oklahoma City, to Lewis and Ida Ellison. His father died from a work injury when Ralph was about three, leaving Ida to raise him and his younger brother alone through domestic work. He began playing trumpet at eight and enrolled at Tuskegee Institute in 1933 to study music composition under composer William L. Dawson, discovering modernist literature there — T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* above all — through English teacher Morteza Drexel Sprague. He left Tuskegee in 1936 without finishing his degree, intending a summer trip to New York, and never went back.

New York

In New York, Langston Hughes befriended and mentored him, introducing him into Black literary circles, and Richard Wright encouraged him toward fiction. He worked for the Federal Writers' Project and served in the Merchant Marine during World War II as an alternative to segregated military service. His second wife, Fanny McConnell, whom he married in 1946, provided crucial support throughout the composition of his novel and for decades after his death.

Invisible Man

Published by Random House in 1952, *Invisible Man* follows a nameless narrator from a Southern Black college through expulsion, migration to New York, and a rise and fall within a fictional political organization called the Brotherhood, ending in retreat to the basement lair he imagines himself confined to. It won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1953, making Ellison the first Black author to receive it.

"I am an invisible man... I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids — and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." — Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

The Second Novel

Ellison spent roughly four decades working on a follow-up novel, accumulating more than two thousand pages of drafts and notes he never assembled into a finished book in his lifetime. His essay collections *Shadow and Act* (1964, dedicated to his Tuskegee mentor Sprague) and *Going to the Territory* (1986) secured his standing as a critic as well as a novelist. He died April 16, 1994, in Manhattan, of pancreatic cancer. His literary executor, John F. Callahan, condensed the surviving manuscript into *Juneteenth* (1999), later publishing the complete materials as *Three Days Before the Shooting...* (2010).

NC Local Lens

No biographical connection between Ralph Ellison and North Carolina was found in this research pass, and none is claimed here — he was born and raised in Oklahoma and Alabama and lived his adult life in New York. The one North Carolina episode on record involves the novel rather than the man: in September 2013 the Randolph County school board banned *Invisible Man* from an eleventh-grade reading list after a parent complaint, reversing itself ten days later after public pressure. That is a

footnote on the book's reception in North Carolina, not a local-lens connection for Ellison himself, and this entry does not present it as one.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Birth year: Ellison himself gave 1914 for most of his life; census records and a corrected family note point to 1913, now the scholarly consensus this entry follows.

Death date: April 16, 1994 is standard, though his widow Fanny's own inscription in a first-edition Juneteenth reads April 15 — a one-day discrepancy worth flagging, not resolving.

The 1967 house-fire manuscript loss: widely repeated in secondary sources but not corroborated in the institutional sources checked here — verify against a full biography before stating as fact.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Ralph Ellison," Read.gov, Library of Congress, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.read.gov/fiction/ellison.html>.
2. "Ralph Ellison," National Book Foundation, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nationalbook.org/people/ralph-ellison/>.
3. "Invisible Man," National Book Foundation, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nationalbook.org/books/invisible-man/>.
4. "Ellison, Ralph Waldo," Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture, Oklahoma Historical Society, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=EL009>.
5. "Posthumously Published – Juneteenth," Bibliomania (blog), Library of Congress, June 21, 2023, <https://blogs.loc.gov/bibliomania/2023/06/21/posthumously-published-juneteenth/>.
6. "Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man Restored in North Carolina," National Coalition Against Censorship, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://ncac.org/incident/ralph-ellisons-invisible-man-restored-in-north-carolina>.

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.