The Cambridge Companion To Ralph Ellison

Ralph Ellison’s classic 1952 novel *Invisible Man* is one of the most important and controversial novels in the American canon and remains widely read and studied. This Companion provides the most up-to-date introduction to this influential and significant novelist and critic and to his masterpiece. It features newly commissioned essays, a chronology and a guide to further reading. The essays reveal new dimensions of Ellison’s art radiating out from *Invisible Man* into new domains – technology, political theory, law, photography, music, religion – and recover the compelling urgency and relevance of Ellison’s political and artistic vision. Since Ellison’s death his published oeuvre has been expanded by several major volumes – his collected essays, the fragment of a novel, *Juneteenth* (1999), letters and short stories – examined here in the context of his life and work. Students and scholars of Ellison and of American and African-American literature will find this an invaluable and accessible guide.
THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
RALPH ELLISON

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CHRONOLOGY

1913 Ralph Ellison born on March 1 in Oklahoma City to Lewis Ellison, a dealer in ice and coal, and Ida Millsap Ellison (b. 1884), a literate daughter of Georgia sharecroppers.

1916 July 19 Lewis Ellison dies at age 39 from a perforated ulcer after an accident hauling ice. Ida now the sole support of her two sons, Ralph and Herbert, the latter born the month before her husband’s death. She is employed as a domestic and hotel worker. Active in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

1919 Ellison family moves into AME church parsonage and Ida works as a sexton. The church library becomes a favorite place for Ralph. He begins first grade at Frederick Douglass Elementary School, a segregated school in Oklahoma City.

1920–24 After leaving the parsonage, the Ellison family lives in a series of rented rooms and houses, with Ida struggling to make ends meet. July 8, 1924, she marries James Ammons, a literate common laborer. He dies a year later.

1927–30 As a member of the Douglass school band, Ellison becomes a trumpet player during the height of the Jazz Age; Oklahoma is a mecca of southwestern blues, jazz, and swing and the home of the Blue Devils band led by “Hot Lips” Page. Immersed in the music scene, Ellison also pursues his love of literature and writing. Ida Ellison marries John Bell.

1932 Graduates from Douglass High School where he achieves first chair as trumpeter in the school band.

1933 Wins a scholarship to the Music School of Tuskegee Institute, Alabama. Arrives at college with two head wounds after hoboing on freight trains to Alabama and being beaten by railway detectives.
1935
Switches allegiance from the Music School to the English Department. Tuskegee freshman Albert Murray, who becomes lifelong friend and influence, admires him from afar. Discovers Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and begins to write poetry and study the major modernists intensively.

1936
Leaves Tuskegee for summer, planning to return to gain degree; heads to New York, arrives in Harlem on July 4. Meets Alain Locke and Langston Hughes on his second day in New York. Studies sculpture with Richmond Barthe, works as a receptionist and file clerk for the psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan. Friendship with Hughes introduces him to left-wing political and literary circles. Decides to remain in New York.

1937
Meets Richard Wright, who has moved to New York to head the Harlem bureau of the Daily Worker of the Communist Party. Wright, who also edits New Challenge with Dorothy West, invites Ellison’s first book review, and will be the decisive figure in radicalizing Ellison’s political and literary views. Ellison attends the Second League of American Writer’s Congress, sponsored by the Party, and hears Kenneth Burke’s controversial lecture on “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s Battle”; Burke will become a crucial intellectual influence. Mother dies October 16 in Dayton, Ohio. Spends the winter in Ohio, supporting himself hunting and selling quail and harvesting pears and walnuts.

1938–41
Returns to New York in April. With Wright’s help he is hired by New York City Federal Writers Project of the WPA to compile information on the history of blacks in New York and keeps the job until 1942. Marries Rose Poindexter, an actress and dancer, in 1938. Begins working as a reviewer for The New Masses, a major journal of US Communist left. Declines to become a member of the Party, remains a fellow traveler. May, 1940 attends the Third National Negro Congress, a proletarian movement that he calls “the first real basis for faith in our revolutionary potentialities,” and his enthusiastic report becomes his first front-page piece in New Masses. Publishes short stories in New York literary magazines. Wright’s Native Son published in 1940, sells 200,000 copies within three weeks. Ellison hails it in a review as the “first philosophical novel by an American Negro.” Estranged from his wife by 1941.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Works with Angelo Herndon as managing editor of <em>Negro Quarterly</em>, a journal of left-liberal independent critical thought. Lasts four issues. Increasingly at odds with <em>New Masses</em> and its Stalinist position. Wright withdraws his membership in the Party.</td>
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<td>1944–45</td>
<td>Publishes “King of the Bingo Game” in <em>Tomorrow</em>; he regards it as his first mature piece of fiction. Meets Fanny McConnell, who works for the Urban League and had formerly been in theatre in Chicago. Returns from the war zone in Europe in April, 1945. Publishes “Richard Wright's Blues,” his first major essay, in <em>Antioch Review</em>, which places Wright's new bestseller, his autobiography, <em>Black Boy</em>, in the context of a blues aesthetic. Divorced from Rose Poindexter. Awarded a fellowship from the Rosenwald Foundation to write a novel about a black pilot in a German POW camp. Soon evolves into <em>Invisible Man</em>.</td>
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<td>1946–52</td>
<td>Marries Fanny McConnell, who becomes his indispensable partner in life and art. She supports him for the seven years he works on <em>Invisible Man</em>. Ellison gains additional income from freelance photography and installing high fidelity sound equipment.</td>
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<td>1953</td>
<td><em>Invisible Man</em> awarded National Book Award on January 27. Earlier that day meets William Faulkner for the first time.</td>
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<td>1956–58</td>
<td>Awarded the Prix de Rome, funding a year's residency as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome. Fellowship renewed for a second year.</td>
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<td>1958–61</td>
<td>Teaches American and Russian novel courses at Bard College. “And Hickman Arrives” published in <em>Noble Savage</em> (1960), an excerpt from his novel-in-progress that would remain unfinished at his death. Seven other excerpts would be published in various literary magazines over the next seventeen years.</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<td>1967</td>
<td>Loses much of the manuscript of his long-awaited second novel in a fire that destroys his summer home in the Berkshires.</td>
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<td>1969</td>
<td>Awarded Medal of Freedom, America’s highest civilian honor, by President Johnson at awards ceremony in the White House.</td>
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<td>1970</td>
<td>Awarded the Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et Lettres by his longtime intellectual hero André Malraux, the French minister of cultural affairs.</td>
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<td>1970–79</td>
<td>Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities, New York University.</td>
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<td>1978</td>
<td><em>Invisible Man</em> ranked as the most important American novel published since World War II in a <em>Wilson Quarterly</em> poll of American literature professors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>National Medal of Arts.</td>
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<td>1986</td>
<td><em>Going to the Territory</em>, second collection of prose written or published from 1963 to 1986. The opening essay, “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” is one of Ellison’s masterpieces.</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>April 16, dies in Harlem where he lived for more than forty years on Riverside Drive.</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison</em>.</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>“Flying Home” and Other Stories.</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td><em>Juneteenth</em>, a fragment of his unfinished novel assembled by his literary executor John Callahan.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td><em>Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray</em>.</td>
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