

BOOKS & THE ARTS.

'Invisible Man' At Thirty

50 & counting

ALICE K. TURNER

There's nothing literary folk like better than taking odds on what, in the flood of books that rolls forth each year, will float for longer than, say, a decade. The yearly prizes give way to reassurances and reassessments, with anxious glances at what is being taught and at what young people have actually heard of, let alone read. Thus, in 1965, a *Book Week* poll of "200 prominent authors, critics and editors" chose Ralph Ellison's first novel, *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, as "the most distinguished single work published in the last 20 years."

Now, on the novel's thirtieth anniversary, Random House is reissuing it, affirming the editors' faith in its distinction (despite its singularity, for Ellison never gratified his publishers with another) and its continuing buoyancy.* They're surely right to do so, for the book survives wonderfully well; a new poll that limited the prize candidates to American novels might easily shore up *Invisible Man*'s claim as the most distinguished postwar work yet published.

Certainly, it has been extraordinarily influential. That memorable introduction, a gravely cynical classic of alienation, conducted in the glare of 1,369 light bulbs to the sweet smell of marijuana smoke and the plaintive growl of Louis Armstrong asking,

What did I do
To be so black
And blue?

must have been the envy and inspiration of the entire Beat Generation, not to mention Norman Mailer in his "White Negro" phase. Ellison's use of knock-about farce with an edge of rue to dramatize deadly serious affairs predated the Black Humorists of the 1960s and the essays into surrealism which followed. And, of course, there can't be a black writer who hasn't studied his work.

Ellison has always ducked the mantle of dean of black (he would say Negro) writers, claiming, quite correctly, to be

squarely in the American mainstream. If *Invisible Man*'s roots reach back to Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, to Dickens and to a number of "young man from the provinces" novels popular in France, they owe even more to American writers like Melville (who provides an epigraph) and Twain. Maybe that's why the book seems so fresh: it was the start of something new, but it also skipped back to the solid foundations of the nineteenth century.

If the ultimate appeal of a novel is to young people, as many have claimed, *Invisible Man* is well grounded here too. Its theme is the education of a young person. Its setting is, mainly, an eerie, glittering Harlem, as magical and seductive as any El Dorado, and its villains are the changing faces of the Establishment: black and white grown-ups, educators, rich businessmen, manipulative do-gooders, demanding women, insistent rabble-rousers, powerful criminals. The prose is strong but easily accessible, the pace antic, the characters identifiable (as befits a picaresque novel) and the predicaments precarious and hilarious. What more could a young person ask for than to get both idealism and alienation in the same bag?

What's more, the novel has a strange precognitive quality, as though it were a glass through which the decades that

followed its publication were seen darkly. Although the Brotherhood that the hero joins is presumably a takeoff on various leftist groups of the 1930s and 1940s, it stands in uncannily well for the Movement of the 1960s. Ras the Exhorter sounds a lot like Rap Brown or even Malcolm X. The ineffable Rinehart—"Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rine the Reverend"—brings to mind the sinister Harlem superhero Nicky Barnes. The riots, looting and arson, the "woman question," the black-white comedy, the refuge in music and drugs, all seem to belong to a time *after* the book was published—and it's hardly sufficient to proclaim that the black subculture often previews subsequent mass movements.

All in all, it wouldn't take much to turn this thirty-year-old novel into a thoroughly contemporary Richard Pryor movie—just a little dirty talk. Perhaps the sole proof that the book dates from 1952 is the fact that it contains only one "forbidden" four-letter word. And yet despite this, it turns out that *Invisible Man* is on the list of books banned by some schools. How curious this is: the book deals with sex discreetly (far more discreetly than *Tom Jones*, say); its language is pure; it is a book that knows no color boundary, so that black and white students can enjoy it equally. Its only fault would seem to be comic subversiveness, healthy fare for young people up against their own Establishments. □

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