

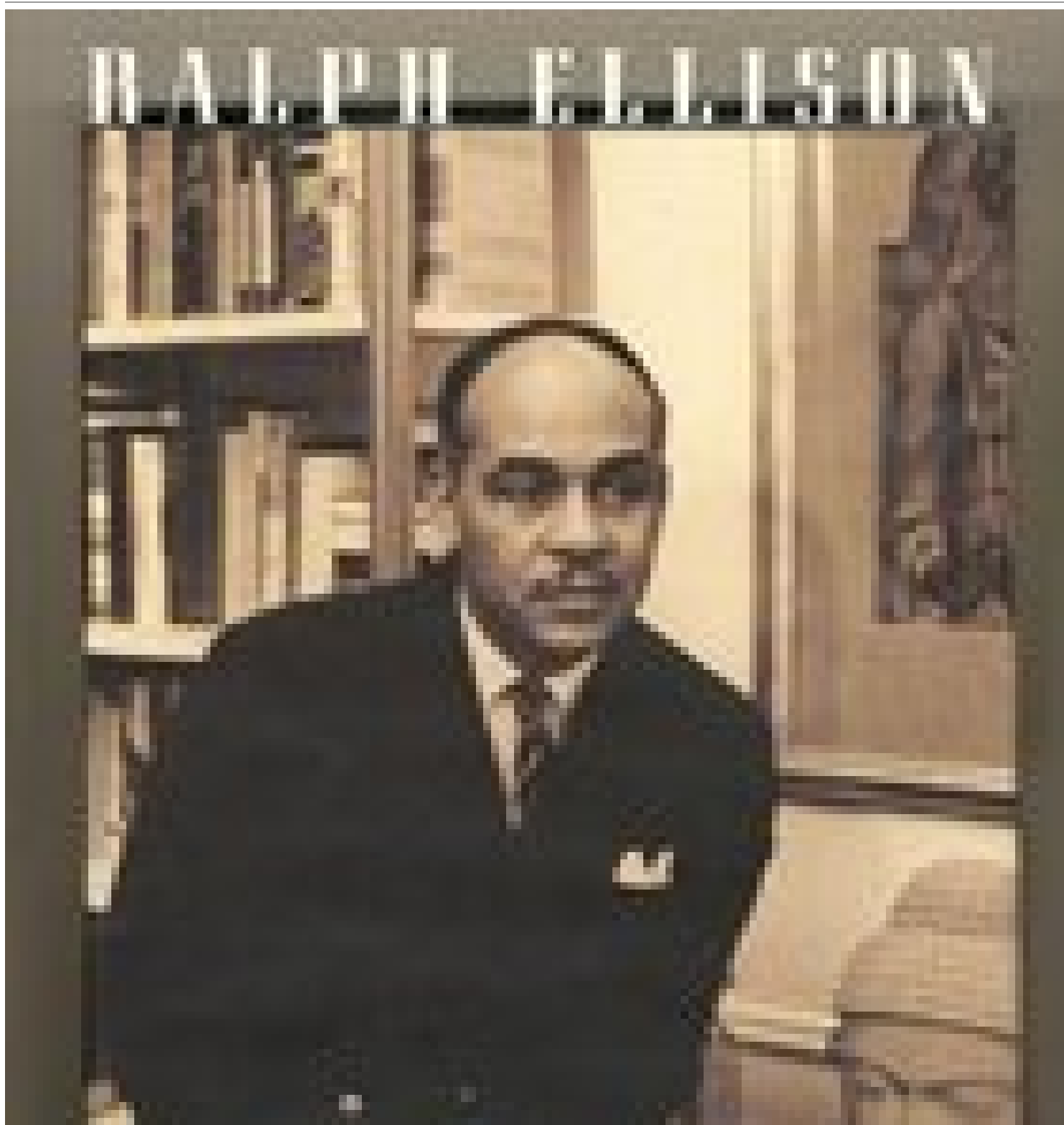
VISIBLE GENIUS

BY [LAUREN KIRSCHNER](#)

JULY 12, 2007 12:00 AM



RALPH ELLISON: A BIOGRAPHY by Arnold Rampersad (Knopf), 672 pages, \$44 cloth. Rating: **NNNN**





He was famous for a first novel so brilliant he couldn't follow it up.

So begins the tale of Ralph Ellison, whose 1952 odyssey of racial alienation in America, *Invisible Man*, beat out Hemingway for the National Book Award and became an instant literary classic in the ranks of *Moby Dick*.

Not bad for a poor boy from Oklahoma.

Arnold Rampersad's sprawling biography moves from Ellison's surrealistically sad start (his father, an ice delivery man, was crushed to death by a piece of his own ice) to his gilded seat at the tables of New York's choicest literati. It tracks his arduous development as artist and intellectual at a time when Jim Crow was keeping blacks in menial jobs.

Rampersad overwrites the myth of Ellison as a one-hit wonder to reveal a diligent, irascible and self-directed man who clawed his way to greatness despite adversaries who tried to cut him down. It's a good lesson for any writer intimate with the SASE.

And, of course, there was Ellison's genius. That helped.

So what kept him from producing a follow-up to *Invisible Man*? Rampersad alludes to writer's block but does not go into much detail about Ellison's 30-year attempt to write his second novel, *Juneteenth*, which was published posthumously.

Whether his novel-writing well dried up because of success and money or he'd said all he wanted to say is one of those questions locked away with the muses.

His other works collections of tremendous essays, stories and jazz writing have garnered less attention than *Invisible Man*. Let's hope Rampersad's excellent and very readable biography widens Ellison's appeal.

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