

an excerpt of

RALPH ELLISON: A BIOGRAPHY. By Arnold Rampersad. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. 688 pp. \$35.00.

Reviewed by Myles Weber

“Although I’m damned disgusted with myself because of my failure to finish,” Ralph Ellison once wrote a friend, “I know nevertheless that it’s better to publish one fairly decent book than five pieces of junk.” During his lifetime Ellison published just one novel, *Invisible Man*—a nearly “immortal” work, according to Arnold Rampersad, National Book Award finalist this year for a new biography that situates the novelist’s glittering triumph of 1952 between failed attempts to complete two other books: an early proletarian novel titled “Slick,” which may yet appear posthumously, and a multivolume mess known as “the Hickman project,” which preoccupied Ellison over the last four decades of his life.

Oddly, Ellison’s professional frustration did not result from writer’s block. Rather, the author actually suffered from logorrhea. Instead of honing a tightly plotted novel, Ellison spent forty years post-*Invisible Man* indulging in literary riffing and improvisation while working on the Hickman project. The result was a sprawling manuscript of several thousand pages, the middle third of which was published in 1999, five years after the author’s death, under the title *Juneteenth*.

To the public, however, Ellison was simply a blocked writer whose success led him, in Rampersad’s words, “to a tangled mess of fears and doubts about his ability to finish a second novel at least as fine as *Invisible Man*.” The author’s subsequent literary career was characterized by silence despite his publishing two significant essay collections: *Shadow and Act* (1964) and its distant echo *Going to the Territory* (1986). His failure to produce a second novel made him the butt of surreptitious jokes and cruel remarks, and as Rampersad observes, “the snickering and giggling behind his back often left him prickly and tart, if not downright hostile.” The biographer’s chosen task, then, is to disentangle the mess of fears and doubts that tormented the author and stalled his career.