

Looking for Ellision

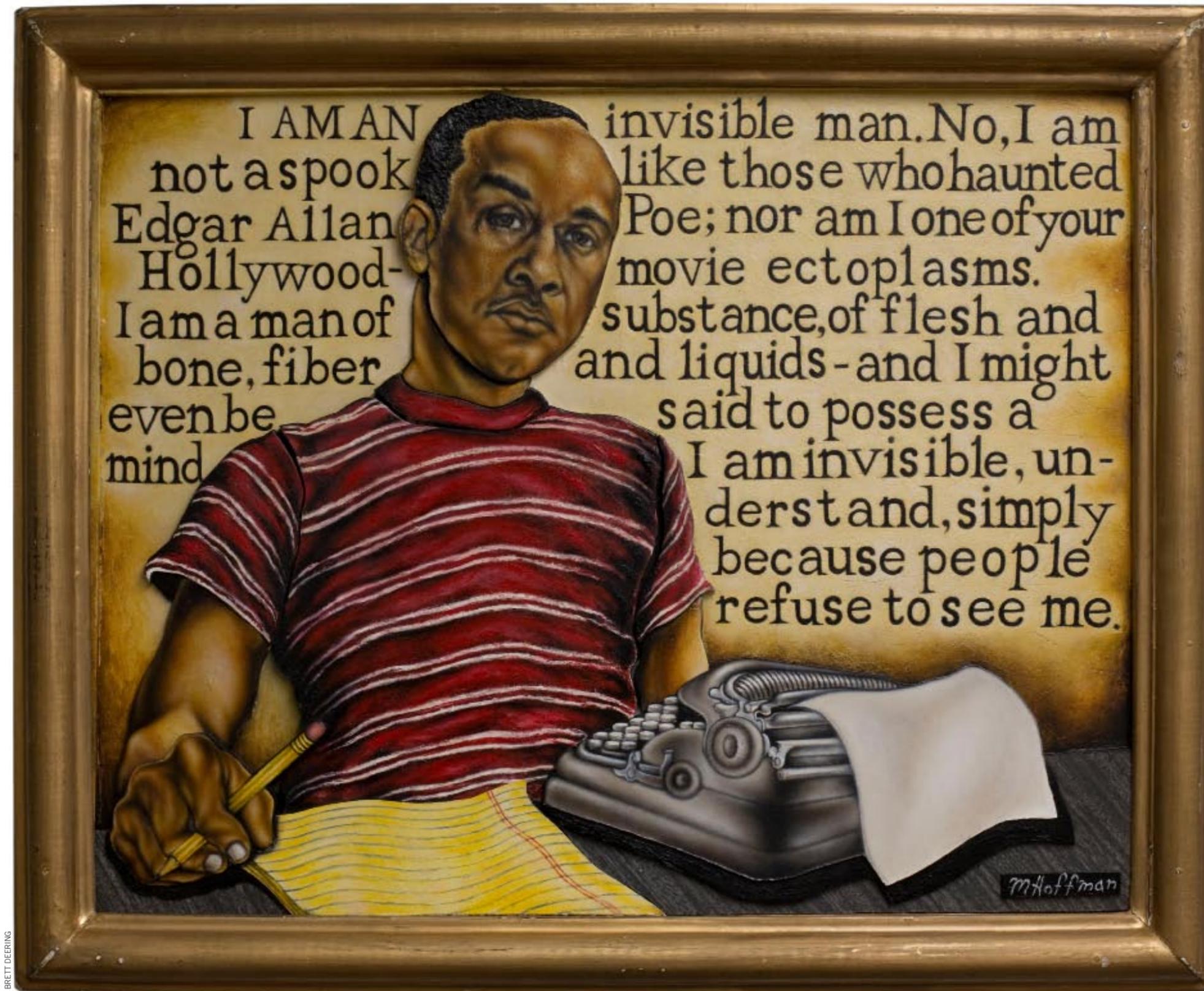
Oklahoma writers share what **JEANETTA CALHOUN MISH** calls a “territory of the mind.” In this commemoration, she pays homage to a homegrown literary giant whose greatness is evident in his stories and essays and his masterwork, *Invisible Man*.

DON'T REMEMBER READING anything by Ralph Ellison when I was a Wewoka High School student in the mid-1970s. We read one Shakespeare play a year—*Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*. In my junior English class, I remember reading Steinbeck's *Of Mice & Men* and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. But no Ellison—neither *Invisible Man*, first published in 1952, nor any of his short stories available in print at the time. I also don't remember anyone in my hometown pointing out that one of America's most famous and accomplished novelists was an Oklahoman.

In June 1975, when I was between eighth grade and my freshman year of high school, Ellison returned to Oklahoma City for the dedication of the Metropolitan Library System's branch named after him, but I don't remember seeing any notices in the local paper or hearing about it on the television news, though it certainly had to have been reported. By the time I was a young adult, I have the definite feeling I had heard of a book called *Invisible Man*, but I don't know for sure how I discovered that Ellison was a fellow Okie. I do know when—I was in my late twenties, a period when I regularly spent time in the company of writers, many of them Oklahoma writers living elsewhere. During that period, I read *Invisible Man* for the first time.

The story line of *Invisible Man* challenged me and angered me and left a mark on my psyche that has never disappeared. Scenes still rise up, unbidden, in my mind's eye. The

LET IT BE PAINTED
Oklahoma City artist Mike Hoffman borrowed a famous passage from *Invisible Man* as the backdrop for *Ralph Ellison, Literary Lion*, a 2013 acrylic and mixed-media piece that hangs TK.



BRETT DEERING

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novel inspired me to see myself clearly, to hunt out and expunge any residual racism I was carrying. I was equally astonished by the book's language; to this day, when I reread it, I am awestruck by Ellison's erudite, yet familiar, style. Take this sentence, for instance: "It was as though the uttered word had given meaning to the night, almost as though it had created it, brought it into being in the instant his breath vibrated small against the loud, riotous air."

I clearly remember thinking that if this Oklahoman could learn to write so magnificently, maybe I could learn to be a better writer myself. Not one who could reach Ellison's heights, but a passable writer, one my family and friends, my fellow Oklahomans, could be proud of.

This year, when I returned to *Invisible Man*, I found the language as moving and the story as powerful as when I first read it in the late 1980s. I am sure I understood more of the unnamed main character's trials during the three or four times I've read the novel in the last fifteen years—I've seen more of the world and have come to understand more about human nature than I did in my twenties.

I had read only a few of Ellison's short stories until recently, when, in celebration of the 2013-14 Ralph Ellison Centennial, I made it a point to tackle all of his writings in print. While Ellison's greatest literary achievement is undoubtedly *Invisible Man*, it was while reading his short stories, collected essays, and letters to his friend, the writer and fellow Tuskegee Institute alumnus Albert Murray, that I met Ralph Ellison, Oklahoma writer.

IT FIRST DAWNED on me that I could find Ralph Ellison, Oklahoman, in his writings when I began reading *Flying Home and Other Stories*, which contains pieces written between 1937 and 1954. "Boy on a Train" and the selections known

as Buster and Riley stories are particularly evocative of Oklahoma.

The latter follow two little-boy protagonists around the neighborhood and into the woods, inviting the reader to experience the world from a child's perspective. Ellison based these stories on his own childhood in Oklahoma City's Deep Deuce neighborhood, where he was born and raised. They are awash in Oklahoma atmosphere and landscape. Reading them, I can feel summer's sweltering heat and see the snake doctors humming by in the late afternoon sky.

"Boy on a Train" is based on a train trip Ellison, his mother Ida, and his younger brother, Herbert, took from Oklahoma City to McAlester; his mother had been promised a job there. Familiar landmarks and landscapes appear throughout the story. In one scene, after his mother teaches him the name for the tall, cylindrical structures he sees from the train window, James, the young narrator, muses, "Silo, silo. Almost as tall as the Colcord Building in Oklahoma City that Daddy helped to build."

In "Boy on a Train," Ellison not only evokes the sensory experience of Oklahoma but also, through the mother character's voice, describes the almost-promised-land status the state held among African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century: "We traveled far, looking for a better world, where things wouldn't be so hard like they were down South."

Reading that hope today is painful, as it must have been for Ellison to write. Jim Crow came to Oklahoma, and the social structures of a frontier state gave way to the Tulsa Race Riot and the race laws and practices of the early twentieth century that saw Ellison, his mother, and his younger brother thrown out of the public zoo at Wheeler Park.

Despite the hardships of living as a person of color in early twentieth-century Oklahoma, throughout his life, Ellison

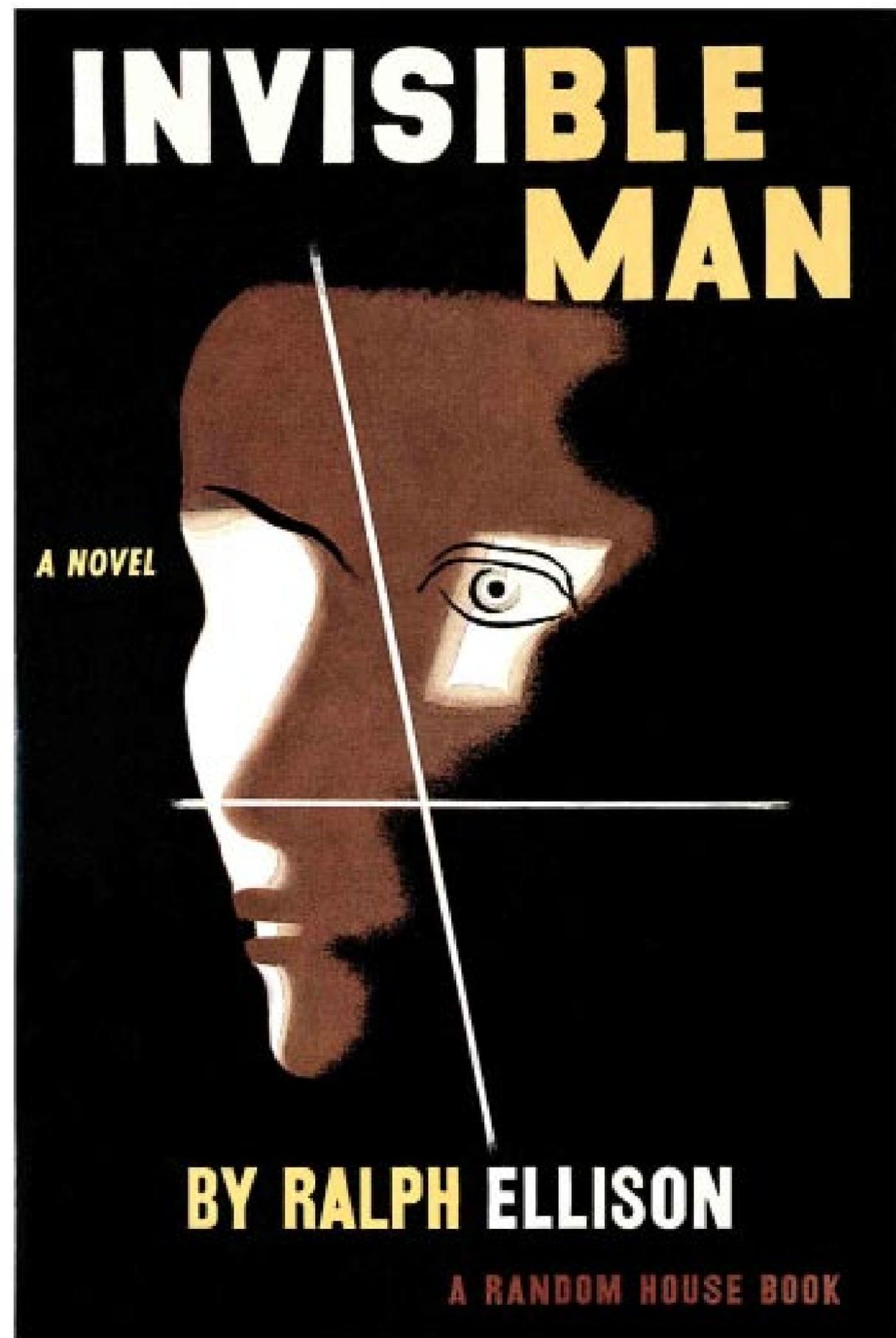
referred, often fondly, to memories of Oklahoma, to its flora, fauna, and inhabitants, and to the African American culture and music that flourished in his neighborhood. The taproots of many of Ellison's essays are sunk deep in Oklahoma red dirt and Deep Deuce culture.

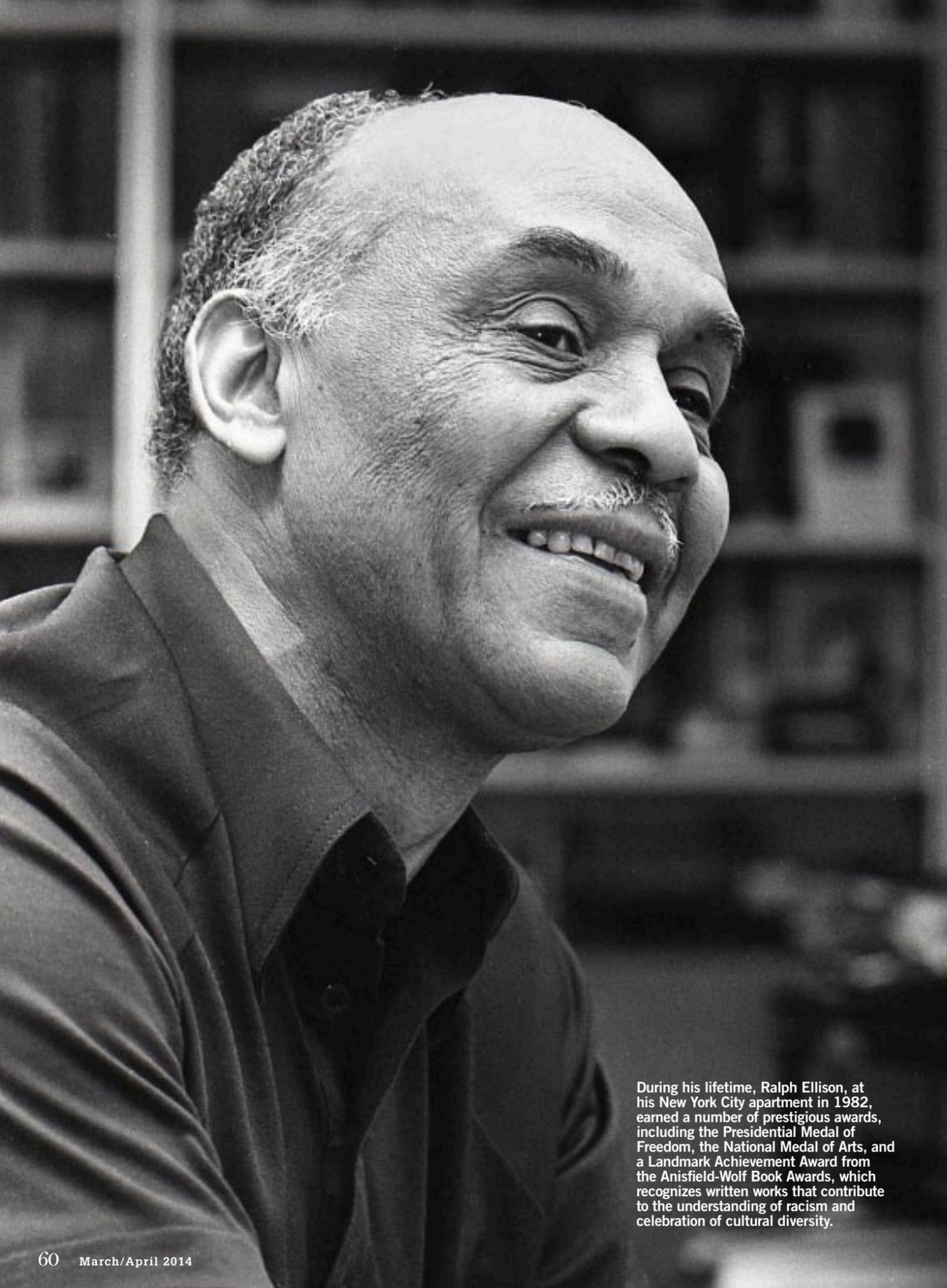
DURING HIS LIFETIME, Ellison's essays on literature, race, democracy, American culture, and music—classical, jazz, blues, even flamenco—were published in influential magazines such as *Saturday Review*, *Partisan Review*, *The New Republic*, *Esquire*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*. Some of Ellison's essays were previously collected in *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*; his *Collected Essays* was published in 1995. *Going to the Territory*—the title borrowed from a Bessie Smith song—refers to Oklahoma, which Ellison considered a "territory of hope" where African Americans might find a safe and fair place to work, worship, and raise their children. Reading *Collected Essays*, it's clear Ellison never gave up on Oklahoma and its promise, seeing it as containing a seed of possibility from which to grow an American multiracial, multicultural democracy.

Among the treasures of the *Collected Essays*, three pieces stand out as essential Oklahoma reading—the interview "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure" and the essays "Going to the Territory" and "Hidden Name and Complex Fate: A Writer's Experience in the United States." In "Hidden Name," Ellison sifts through his memory to identify the moments in his life when the word—literature, writing—called to him, beginning with his father

First published in 1952, *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award and brought Ralph Ellison's words to generations of readers. In a 1998 Modern Library reader survey, Ellison's magnum opus ranked number 19 on its list of the best English-language novels of the 20th century.

RANDOM HOUSE





During his lifetime, Ralph Ellison, at his New York City apartment in 1982, earned a number of prestigious awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the National Medal of Arts, and a Landmark Achievement Award from the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards, which recognizes written works that contribute to the understanding of racism and celebration of cultural diversity.

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naming him Ralph Waldo Ellison after the famed nineteenth-century American philosopher, essayist, and poet.

“Hidden Name” also contains a passage that makes me homesick: “Long before I thought of writing, I was claimed by weather. . . By spring floods and blizzards, catalpa worms and jack rabbits, honeysuckle and snapdragons (which smelled like old cigar butts), by sunflowers and hollyhocks. . . By parades, public dances and jam sessions, Easter sunrise ceremonies and large funerals.”

Catalpa worms! Honeysuckle jam sessions! Ellison’s language strikes the tuning fork of my own Oklahoma memories—the reverberations last for hours.

“Going to the Territory” combines an intellectual history of Deep Deuce’s rich culture—and a remembrance of Ellison’s early mentors—with a discussion of vernacular literature. All Oklahoma writers who make use of our distinctive ways of expression owe Ellison a debt of gratitude for defending us from those who would denigrate vernacular writing solely for what he calls “seeking the homeness of home.” (“There is no necessary contradiction between our vernacular style and the pursuit of excellence,” he writes.)

He goes on to assert that embracing who we are is a democratic process, a “way of establishing and discovering our national identity.” Similarly, in “That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure,” Ellison discusses the fluid race relations of early Oklahoma and how they contributed to his development as an artist and intellectual: “My father had many white friends who came to the house when I was quite small, so that any feelings of distrust I was to develop toward whites later on were modified by those with whom I had warm relations. Oklahoma offered many opportunities for such friendships.”

Ellison often was criticized for his belief that a multi-ethnic American democracy, while still in the process of being created,

was not only possible but desirable and achievable. He formed that belief growing up in Deep Deuce.

ELLISON’S OKLAHOMA UPBRINGING was essential to his understanding of his profession as a writer and of broader American themes and issues such as democracy and race relations. It is much the same for me: For better or worse, I see the world through my rural Oklahoma upbringing. Like Ellison, living in the Territories allowed me stereotype-defying friendships and a rich vernacular language and culture influenced by Scots-Irish, African American, and Native American traditions. It also gave me a hunger to know a larger world, glimpsed mostly through books discovered at school and in the library, and through public television—another Ellison-influenced project. As an adult, I’ve taught programs and workshops sponsored by the Oklahoma Humanities Council and the Oklahoma Arts Council—both of which Ellison helped bring into being as a founding board member of the National Council on the Arts.

Ellison came home for extended periods several times, including a 1970 visit to lecture at the University of Oklahoma and another in 1986 to be honored by then-governor David Boren, who declared November 16 Ralph Ellison Day. Two of Ellison’s letters to Albert Murray, collected in *Trading Twelves*, were written during a 1953 trip to Oklahoma. Ellison was delighted to be home and wrote a rare poem, “Deep Second,” on the topic.

In his letter, Ellison’s descriptive language about his hometown reaches the poetic: “Boy but the barbecue is still fine and the air is still clean and you can drive along in a car and tell what who is having for dinner; and it’s still a dancing town, and a good jazz town, and a drinking town; and the dancing still has grace. And it’s still a town where

the eyes have space in which to travel, and those freights still making up in the yard sound as good to me as ever they did when I lay on a pallet in the moon-drenched kitchen door and listened and dreamed of the time when I would leave and see the world.”

It is fitting that an extended period of time has been set aside to honor Ralph Ellison in his home state. One of the most important American writers of the last century never stopped looking toward Oklahoma, thinking about Oklahoma. He was known to quote Heraclitus’ axiom, “Geography is fate.” In the dedication to the original edition of *Going to the Territories*, Ellison wrote, “The territory is an ideal place—ever to be sought, ever to be missed, but always there.”

As Oklahomans, we still are seeking that territory of hope, still learning to live together, work together, worship together, raise our children together, build a better Oklahoma. I, too, am seeking that ideal territory—a territory of the mind, of the heart, of the word—where I hope to meet regularly with Mr. Ellison, so I can continue to learn from him how to be an Oklahoma writer. ■

A portrait of Ralph Ellison by Fort Gibson native Tracey Harris is scheduled to be unveiled at the Oklahoma State Capitol on March 6 at 10 a.m. March 6 through 9, Oklahoma City University is hosting the annual Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) Conference. Coinciding with the conference, the Ralph Ellison Centennial Public Symposium is March 8 at 1 p.m. at the Skirvin Hilton Hotel. Conference registration is \$50 to \$120; the symposium is free. The final event of the Ralph Ellison Centennial is the annual Thatcher Hoffman Smith Poetry Series featuring Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Tracy K. Smith. 8 p.m. at the Meinders School of Business at Oklahoma City University. ralphellisoncentennial.com.