

## Shadow and Act Award Speech

*Delivered at the Ralph Ellison Foundation's "A Night with Ralph Ellison" gala at the Oklahoma History Center in Oklahoma City on Feb. 29, 2020.*

### Video intro



### Remarks

Thank you, Michael. Leslie and I have traveled and been welcomed to many cities over the years, but we agree that there is a quality of graciousness — more than the “niceness” often attributed to Oklahomans — deriving from good people, and in the case of this crowd, inspired and inspiring people focused on such an inclusive organization.

That first clip about Ralph refers to a show called “Jazz in the Key of Ellison.” The jazz genius Wynton Marsalis and other gifted musicians; Joe Morton, the great actor and voice of *Invisible Man* on Audible; along with Ellison scholars like Bob O’Meally worked together to create an evening of Ralph’s words and jazz, and it even went on the road last year. With so many close readers of Ralph’s prose in the room, try to imagine Ralph’s mellifluous writing with a walking bass line and Wynton’s magical horn underneath. I’d love to bring it here to Oklahoma City.

Given the exciting social and local community mission of the Ellison Foundation, I will also note that many of the Audible interns and scholars from Newark depicted on screen came from North Star Academy. North Star is considered one of the best schools in the world and is part of the Uncommon Schools network of 54 public charter schools serving minority students in the Northeast. Uncommon teachers have developed curricular innovations focused on how to teach underserved young people and help them surmount challenged backgrounds. Forty percent of students in Newark are in beat-the-odds schools, which basically means that they are schools

that are better than the middle class norms in the state. Uncommon was founded by a Chicago-born writer and entrepreneur like me. Audible and Uncommon Schools have grown up side by side. And now we are facing the next step for addressing urban inequality in Newark: to create a way to draw this talent back to Newark to accelerate the city's comeback.

I am so impressed by the social-service mission Michael and the Ellison Foundation team brings to Oklahoma City alongside its dedication to Ralph's legacy. The creative writing workshops, the flying home curriculum, and the use of Ralph's essays in the light bulb room program focused on public dialog on tough subjects all seem to me to be innovations the Ralph Ellison I had the privilege to know would have loved.

If my remarks tonight are personal and particular to my life-changing experience with Ralph, I hope my admiration for what you are all doing here comes through loud and clear.

As someone who has travelled the world and 49 of 50 states as a journalist, I am embarrassed to say that this is my first trip to Oklahoma City. I have Arkansas roots, so I know the Eastern Oklahoma regions close to Fort Smith and Tulsa — and I do realize that the Arkansas background could make the "carpetbagger gets the Shadow and Act Award" story easier to tell.

But I certainly heard about the city from Ralph. I remember how his storytelling voice would change when he was talking Oklahoma. I recall references to the vibrancy of the Deep Second neighborhood, which I sensed was not unlike like Harlem during the Renaissance years or Ralph's coming-of-age years in New York. It was always clear that Ralph considered himself part of an Oklahoma diaspora and part of a history that goes back to 19<sup>th</sup> century treaties and "true" Native Americans and Americans of color who helped defined this important part of the Republic.



Back in Newark, New Jersey, all 122 Audible conference rooms are named for Newark-born luminaries like Philip Roth, Allen Ginsberg, Shaquille O’Neal, Gloria Gaynor and the Newark-native musical virtuosos Wayne Shorter, Sarah Vaughan, James Moody, Woody Shaw, and Willie “The Lion” Smith. And there are others like Dr. E. Alma Flagg, who in 1964 became the city’s first African-American principal of an integrated school.

The room nearest to me is the only one named for someone who is not directly connected to Newark.

The copy on the plaque reads:

*Ralph Ellison’s understanding of the power of the oral tradition and his ability to hear the music in well-wrought arrangements of spoken words informed the vision and mission of Audible from the beginning ... According to Ellison, the way the early American vernacular embraced storytelling around campfires, the braggadocio of our salesmanship, and the sound of our lamenting in the fields became the distinctive voice that defined the American novel. Ralph loved the melodies in language and he told stories in a voice that sounded like a coal car coming out of a mine. He loved enormous cigars, jazz, and ideas. In many ways Audible exists to honor his legacy.*

As the film clip noted, Ralph Ellison was my teacher. My experience of him up close when I was young is a testament to the profound, even defining impact a teacher can have on the course of a life.

In 1971, when I first met Ralph at New York University, I had just read two books that changed me. The first was Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, which I read in a single afternoon-to-dawn sitting. The second was *Invisible Man*, an astonishingly artful and complex work of literature written by a man I had heard was actually teaching a course at NYU the next semester. A writer who’d beat out Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* to win the National Book Award in 1953 let me join his class of 15 or so students to study the character of the American vernacular.

I moved back to Chicago when my father died suddenly in January of 1973, and I thought I would stay at the University of Chicago to finish my studies, but Ralph said he would take me on as a tutee and meet with me for several hours every Wednesday afternoon until I graduated.

I moved back to New York, and from there one of the greatest of all American writers taught me how to listen, and from there how to read.

Much of the work was about how American culture was wrought in such a singular way. I learned from Ralph that Americans worked to create an identity from a synthesis of divergent cultures. I read about how and why we built American buildings and invented American techniques and technologies. The readings and Ralph’s stories and questions helped me recognize how and why we produced singularly American musical art forms — jazz and the blues.

I learned from Ralph that our American experience was derived from the process of a nation constantly making and remaking itself, and that we live in a nation that needed to create its own myths and art and even its own sounds, because we had to. We spent a lot of time considering writing about the special origins of American humor and how “American literacy replaced aristocracy.”

Another Audible conference room honors the Newark native Stephen Crane. Just last week I noted to politicians and a famed rapper visiting us in Newark that Stephen Crane wrote like an American though he lived his short life inside the lifespan of Henry James, who wrote like a Brit, because Crane listened to the glorious pastiche of American talking I learned to appreciate during those days with Ralph.

We read Faulkner, Twain, Macbeth, the anthropologist of American humor Constance Rourke, and also Lord Ragland on the concept of the hero. In the same semester I would try to understand complex treatises on language by I. A. Richards and Kenneth Burke.

Ralph explained that Americans needed a mythic Hercules when we were making a culture and this is why we would study and reconsider the influence of Paul Bunyan, Davy Crockett, and John Henry on the American way of expression.

And from there Ralph would take on his Oklahoma voice, and those funny and often beyond-salty stories told in the voice of Oklahomans from his past would begin.

Sometimes he would become an uncle or family friend and sometimes he channeled his mother, Ida, who would use humor and the power of words to help the young Ellison family transcend a ramshackle room without heat and a bed full of bedbugs.

I once told Ralph that my dream *would be* to be a writer, but I didn’t know anyone growing up in Chicago who made a living as a writer and I didn’t even know if I had the chops to do it. Ralph told me that he had the same doubts when he was young but encouraged me to believe that a writer — and I can see and hear him telling me this nearly 50 years ago so vividly — that a writer is simply one who writes.

I did go on to write almost every day for 20 years. And I even made a living as a writer, and where I was most successful I wrote with my ears, because of the way Ralph helped me understand the power and even the music in language. I worked without a net as a freelance writer and then I wrote books. Though I wrote nonfiction, my focus was on a narrative mode of novelistic truth-telling that was anchored in trying to find out what it meant to be willing to die for a cause in a war, or what it meant to come home from World War II and transfer a sense of battlefield loyalty and purpose to a big corporation and define an entire life from there.



I wrote a book about Nike during the Michael Jordan era and the core thesis was that Nike had managed to create near-mythic superheroes of gifted athletes — the symbolic underpinning of the book once again harking back to those heady afternoons with Ralph.

Ralph supported me during my early years as a professional writer, even trying to help me get a MacArthur “Genius” Grant though I had yet to write a book.

I regret not seeing Ralph more often as my life as a writer called for so much time and focus, but in 1989 my wife Leslie and I ran into Ralph and Fanny at the National Book Awards, and Fanny said that she and Ralph didn’t have children but that in many ways Ralph looked at me as family. I was blown away.

In 1992, two years before Ralph died, I actually found myself sharing a platform with Ralph at the Chicago Printers Row book fair. At the event, Ralph referred to me not as a former student but as a literary colleague, and with that he validated in a moment the grinding, ego-crushing, almost impossible work of writing well every day that defined my working life then.

During my days as his student, I also understood from the author of a book that I first read as a work of rage against deep historical racism — a book I read at a time when the injustices that arose from the interplay of race and democracy were darkening public discourse and action, a time like now — that Americans needed to construct our own archetypes and myths for a nation creating itself without kings, and so a new order was created based on the color of people’s skin.

On those afternoons one on one in New York, I heard Ralph’s ambivalence about the cultural richness of the black church, given the broader perception of that institution’s acquiescence to oppression. We read Winthrop Jordan’s *White over Black* about the complexities of Americans and race from the 16<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Ralph was often under attack from the left during those teacher and student years, and when I read that James Baldwin once observed that Ralph was “as angry as anybody can be and still live,” I understood what he meant.

There is so much complexity in the gulf between justice and injustice, between the best and worst of people. If nothing else I learned from Ralph a tolerance for complexity. I learned that many of the best and biggest ideas and their outcomes — books and, in my case, the idea for a company — come from going deep into those complexities. His friend Kenneth Burke described, in a really challenging book we read, the concept of “perspective by incongruity.” I use this often as a way to bridge shadow and act.

Ralph’s often-quoted lines in an essay about the blues capture his own, always lyrical way of exploring complexity. Beginning with the very Ralph linguistic curve ball of calling a type of music an impulse: “The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.”

I spent two careers trying to draw new ideas out of complex status quos; trying to write in pursuit of what things really mean versus what they are. And then creating a company to make a business of our vernacular, and a company that, at its best, pursues what a company can mean in ways that can transcend what it does.

As the film clip noted, Audible and its cultural and technological inventions exploded a cultural status quo in the spirit of what I learned from Ralph. Ralph wrote an essay noting that Ben Franklin, Noah Webster and the cultural gatekeepers did not want the “linguistic vernacular” of the way we talked to disrupt (he actually used “disrupt” in the way technology innovators use it) the text-based culture we inherited from England.

I was criticized when I left the writing life to try to start a company, because I was turning my back on text itself to pursue the intellectually inferior concept of the spoken word. And now, as I speak, millions of people including much of the global intelligentsia are listening to well-composed and artfully performed words from Audible.

Ralph died in 1994. He didn’t get to see my crazy idea, formulated that year, become Audible, but I sense he would have understood.

I also never got to ask him if his interest in teaching me had to do in some part with the sudden loss of my father when I was 19. The pain of Ralph’s own fatherless childhood, and the pain of losing his beloved mother 22 years later when Ralph was only 25, was always palpable during our sessions.

I always sensed a level of compassion, that because he saw the intense pain caused by the loss of my own brilliant and loving father, it caused him to focus on me.

But I'll never know about that.

What I do know is that teachers are often people who come briefly into a developing life, and sometimes they change that life in defining ways.

I also know that gifted teachers are too often underappreciated for their lasting impact.

In the case of Ralph Ellison, I have tried hard to express my gratitude for what I learned as I could. And as I think often about my father, I hope I have lived a life in a way that my gifted and complicated teacher would have approved of.

