

# 'Invisible Man' may reappear in North Carolina county's schools

*After residents ridicule a ban on Ralph Ellison's modern classic on racism, the Randolph County, N.C., school board will meet to reconsider its decision.*

September 24, 2013|By David Zucchini

ASHEBORO, N.C. — If a county could blush, Randolph County just might.

The school board in this largely rural county, to the embarrassment of many residents, voted last week to ban Ralph Ellison's iconic novel of African American angst, "Invisible Man."

In a 5-2 vote, the board barred the book from all school libraries in the county after the mother of an 11th-grader complained that the novel was "too much for teenagers."

But confronted by an angry backlash and concerns that the ban had shamed the county, the board backed down and scheduled a special meeting Wednesday in order to reconsider the book's status.

That only seemed to stoke the ire of residents outraged that the board had brought negative attention to the county, about 85 miles northeast of Charlotte. The ban made national news, and the local newspaper was inundated with 168 reader comments, virtually all ridiculing the board's decision.

"Retrograde and dim-witted, the Randolph County Board of Education has now offered itself as the laughingstock of the United States," one reader wrote to the Courier-Tribune.

Another reader wrote of the board: "Can you imagine showing yourself off to be this lowbred and stupid in public?"

A third reader wrote: "I think we should be embarrassed."

Ray Criscoe, the paper's editor, says he hasn't published a letter in favor of the ban because he hasn't "received anything that remotely resembles an endorsement." He said he could not recall another issue that prompted as much reader response.

The board's timing was impeccable. This week is the American Library Assn.'s annual Banned Books Week, which celebrates the freedom to read. The association and the Kids' Right to Read Project sent letters to the board condemning the ban and asking that it be lifted.

The book, published in 1952 and ranked number 19 on Modern Library's list of the 100 greatest novels of the 20th century, explores the effects of racism on both its perpetrators and its victims. The unnamed narrator notes, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."

At the main county library here, where 23 people were on a waiting list to check out "Invisible Man," the ban was a prime topic.

"Embarrassed? Of course I am," Pat Dillard, a hospice volunteer in Asheboro, said as she made her weekly library visit. "I'm embarrassed not just for our county, but for our entire state. We're going backwards."

Shakema Steele, 15, an Asheboro 10th-grader visiting the library, said of the ban: "That's just not right. That book is timeless. How can they ban it based on one person's complaint?"

School board Chairman Tommy McDonald, in a Sept. 16 meeting, pronounced the book "a hard read" before voting to ban it. Board member Gary Mason said of the novel, "I didn't find any literary value."

Juniors at Randleman High School were asked to choose "Invisible Man" or one of two other books — "Black Like Me" by John Howard Griffin and "Passing" by Nella Larsen — for assigned summer reading. Kimiyutta Parson, the mother of a junior, sent the board a 12-page letter outlining her objections to "Invisible Man."

"This novel is not so innocent; instead, this book is filthier, too much for teenagers," she wrote.

The book includes passages describing incest and rape. But several Courier-Tribune readers pointed out that the Bible contains vivid references to murder, rape, adultery and incest.

Incensed by the ban, Evan Smith Rakoff, a Randolph County native and associate Web editor for Poets & Writers magazine, and journalist Laura Miller persuaded the book's publisher to offer free copies to county high school students. Vintage Books, a division of Random House, is providing 100 copies of the book through the Books-A-Million store in Asheboro.

"Banning any book, but especially a great American novel like 'Invisible Man,' just doesn't fit the values of the Randolph County I know," Rakoff said from New York, where he now lives. "The people of North Carolina want their children to have open, expansive minds."

Russell Perreault, a Vintage spokesman, said, "We can only hope the attempt to ban the book will bring even more readers to Ralph Ellison's magnificent novel."

The Books-A-Million outlet here quickly sold its 10 copies of "Invisible Man" after the ban, and has a long waiting list for the book, said Cory Saxe, a store employee.

The Randolph County Public Library has ordered four more copies, along with two e-book copies and an audio version, said Ross A. Holt, the library director. Holt said no one had complained about "Invisible Man" in his 30 years at the library.

"It's a modern classic," Holt said. "It has been part of most high school and college curricula for very many years, and a highly respected mainstay in the collections of our nation's public libraries."

Ian Fletcher, 30, a library computer specialist, said he was disturbed, though not surprised, by the board's actions. "They might as well ban the dictionary," he said.

Four board members contacted by The Times for comment did not respond. The Courier-Tribune reported that none of the board's seven members responded to the newspaper's requests for comment. It quoted the board's lawyer as saying she had advised members to remain silent on the issue.

The Courier-Tribune reported that board members were provided copies of the book before the Sept. 16 meeting, but it was not clear whether all members had actually read it.

"I doubt the entire board read the book before they decided to ban it," one reader wrote the newspaper. "No worries. No surer way to elevate a book to the Must Read list of teen readers than to ban it."

[david.zucchino@latimes.com](mailto:david.zucchino@latimes.com)

**Directions:** After reading the article, answer the following questions:

1. Identify the date and setting of this article (date and place).

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2. Why was *Invisible Man* banned from the school?

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3. Did the banning of *Invisible Man* draw attention to the rural town? If so, how?

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4. What does “Banned Books Week” celebrate?

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5. “The book includes passages describing incest and rape.”

With this knowledge, do you think the book should be banned? Why or why not?

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6. “I doubt the entire board read the book before they decided to ban it,” one reader wrote the newspaper.” Based on this quote, it can be assumed that people make decisions before knowing all the facts. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

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7. Do you believe that books should be banned? Does banning books go against the first amendment?

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