

# Being Invisible Short Guide

## Being Invisible by Thomas Berger

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# Characters

Wagner, Berger's protagonist, resembles other Berger heroes who begin as naive seekers and undergo a series of initiations to find enlightenment. Wagner is less obtuse than Russell Wren, the foolishly innocent private detective of *Who Is Teddy Villanova?* (1977) but he lacks the sophistication of the Reinhart who appears in Reinhart's *Women* (1981; see separate entry).

Aside from Wagner, all the other characters, although well drawn, play secondary roles. Oddly enough, Wagner's ineffectual qualities seem to make him attractive to those who know him best—his friend Roy Pascal and his estranged wife Carla. These characters are portrayed as likable people, particularly because of their kindness to Wagner, although his innocence frequently annoys them. Such characterizations reveal a mellow side in Berger's comedy.

The other characters, except for Catherine—the romantic heroine who enters near the novel's end—display an abundance of comic traits. Especially memorable for their selfishness and callousness are Zirko, the arrogant sculptor, and the pair (Polly Todvik and the building superintendent, Glen) who use Wagner's apartment during his absence for their free-lance prostitution business.



## Social Concerns

Being Invisible displays Thomas Berger's vision of a world dominated by rudeness and vulgarity. The protagonist, Fred Wagner, is a gentlemanly fellow out of step with the times, whose kindness, naive idealism, and traditional values have made him a convenient victim for his more ruthless contemporaries. Longing to become a novelist, he toils at a secondrate job, writing advertising for a mail order catalog company. His aggressive colleague Jackie Grinzing has, despite lesser talents, climbed above him to become his supervisor. Even Wagner's charming wife, Carla, who still feels some affection for him, has recently left to start her own art gallery.

It seems that Carla may be seduced by Siv Zirko, an arrogant sculptor, whose success is due more to overwhelming self-assertion than to talent. Zirko's sculptures, which boldly celebrate his sexuality, are admired in a world that ignores Wagner's greatest achievement—his development of the talent of invisibility. Such ironies comment on the public's inability to discern quality in art and literature.

Finally, as is usual in Berger's later fiction, his hero encounters women who sometimes exploit him, but who are also in need of comfort and reassurance. Two of Wagner's lovers, Sandra and Mary Alice, have been dependent on less than admirable men. Married to Miles, a wandering con artist, Sandra turns to Wagner for consolation when she believes Miles has died. And Mary Alice, hampered by an overly protective father, rebels temporarily to give Wagner solace when he is fired. Berger's later fiction is a world peopled by wounded and vulnerable women, who remain unfulfilled by their encounters with a coarse society.

## Techniques

The novel is presented primarily in the conventional mode of realism, and more specifically, the urban or metropolitan realism which is Berger's forte. But Berger adds an element of the fantastic—Wagner's ability to make himself invisible. Wagner's handling of this extraordinary gift is adroit; he develops the ability to make all of himself disappear at will, which eliminates some of the problems associated with stories of invisible people through the mechanism of drugs or magic rings. Like J. R. R. Tolkien in *The Hobbit* (1937; see separate entry), Berger avoids the difficulties of clothes and nudity by making anything that touches Wagner also become invisible. Limiting the fantastic to Wagner's invisibility and the point of view to Wagner's perceptions are important technical choices.

This focus allows Berger to study invisibility as a psychological condition.

# Themes

There are two kinds of invisibility in *Being Invisible*. One is involuntary: Wagner becomes invisible in society as he loses his job and women use and discard him.

Although talented, Wagner is essentially an unheroic figure who tries to survive each day. His very goodness may be what dooms him: Unwilling to be spiteful and unwilling to bully, he is abused; society simply will not reward a good man for being good. Examples surround him of no-talent fools and bullies who live better lives than he does. In Wagner's complex urban world, the people who stand out and advance up the social hierarchy are those who are loud enough to call attention to themselves; it is as if urban society has no respect for talent or unselfishness, using and then discarding talented, good people.

The second kind of invisibility seems to contradict the first. It is voluntary.

Wagner has the literal ability to disappear; he can choose to fade from view in any situation, making his invisibility a refuge from some of the pain of his life. When invisible, he can be an observer without being an actor in life. This has two implications for Wagner: One is that he can choose to do as he wishes, but he elects not to act to his advantage, suggesting that he has a weak personality. The second implication is that his miserable life may be his own fault; perhaps he has encouraged his own social invisibility. F. Scott Fitzgerald declares, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." This seems to be what Berger has achieved: Society is responsible for Wagner's invisibility and Wagner is responsible for his own invisibility, and the novel still functions. This seeming contradiction gives the novel its tension, creating subtle friction throughout.



## Key Questions

Many novels dealing with invisibility provide an elaborate scientific or pseudoscientific explanation for a character's invisibility. Others use some kind of supernatural rationale. Instead of either choice, Berger simply describes Fred Wagner's invisibility as the result of a gift or talent which he develops. It might be useful, however, to compare and contrast Berger's novel with science fiction novels such as H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* and fantasy novels such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*.

The novel also illustrates how different people appear to us when they believe themselves to be acting freely outside of our observation. Berger's novel provides ample evidence of the way people behave when they do not believe they are being watched.

1. What has been the nature of Fred Wagner's life before he develops his talent for making himself invisible?
  2. Describe the relationship between Wagner and his wife before their separation, based on the hints and indications provided by the story. What seems to have caused their separation? Why does Carla give Fred a television set as a farewell present? Is her note to him explaining the gift entirely honest?
  3. Discuss Wagner's job of writing catalogue copy. In what way does this job exhibit his literary talents? Why is this job an ironic vocation, given his dreams of a literary career? How are his relationships with his coworkers revealed to be somewhat ironic?
  4. How strongly does Wagner believe that he and Carla can be reconciled? Why is such a belief illusory? When does Wagner relinquish the dream?
  5. What is Wagner's relationship with his sister? Why does Wagner tell her a number of lies about himself in their telephone conversation?
  6. During the course of the novel, Wagner, although still harboring a sentimental attachment to Carla, either seduces Sandra and Mary Alice, or allows himself to be seduced by them. Why does neither woman seem to want a permanent attachment to Wagner? Has Sandra been aware, or suspected, that her husband is probably hiding from creditors, rather than dead? Why does the appearance of Mary Alice's father with a shotgun seem to restore Mary Alice's self-esteem? Why does Mary Alice break off the affair so quickly?
  7. What is suggested about modernist art by Berger's caricature of the artist through his characterization of Siv Zirko?
- Is Berger's caricature unnecessarily cruel or does it seem warranted? What is Zirko's driving force? Why, near the end of the novel, does Zirko refuse to accept the reality that some unseen force threw him out of the window of his studio? How does he plan to make the event work to his advantage?



8. Throughout the novel, the characters find rational or common sense explanations for events whenever Wagner intervenes invisibly. Why do they consistently refuse to acknowledge that something extraordinary has happened to them, or near them?

9. As Wagner becomes familiar with the uses of his talent, he learns some of its possibilities and limitations. Describe some of the ways Wagner uses and misuses his talent.

10. Why does Wagner want to commit a "false suicide" at the end of the novel?

Is his idea a good one, or a sign of psychological defeat? What symbolic point is suggested by his abandoning his plan to prevent a rape from occurring?

11. What is different about the final woman in Wagner's life, Catherine? Why does Berger say that she has "beautiful eyes"? What makes it possible for Catherine to accept the existence of Fred's talent? Why does Catherine feel safer with Fred than with her alleged fiancé, Alan? At the end of the novel, has Wagner found a new inspiration for living?





## Literary Precedents

Berger cites two novels as conscious influences on this novel—H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* (1897; see separate entry) and Ralph Ellison's epic novel of black consciousness *Invisible Man* (1952; see separate entry). Wells depicted invisibility as a daring scientific experiment and used most of his narrative to describe the puzzling events as viewed from the perspectives of normal villagers, police officers, and scientific researchers. Ellison's novel does not employ outright fantasy at all, but uses invisibility as a metaphor for the social situation of the black American before the era of civil rights protests. For Ellison, invisibility is a social and psychological condition. Berger, too, is interested in the symbolic implications of invisibility.

Being Invisible may also owe something to the fiction of James Thurber. Thurber's fiction is populated by shy but creative male protagonists such as Walter Mitty, who spends a day daydreaming of glorious adventures while enduring the abuse of an unsympathetic wife and the residents of a complex urban environment ("The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," 1939; see separate entry). Like Wagner, Thurber's protagonists often have special talents or are privy to fantastic knowledge and, even so, are disrespected by the women in their lives and by society in general.

## Related Titles

At first glance, *Being Invisible* mainly resembles Berger's later novels because of its competitive and morally indifferent urban setting. But the novel also recalls earlier Berger novels that skirt the boundaries of fantasy. The closest kinship to any prior work in the Berger canon is its likeness to *Arthur Rex* (1978) in the use of fantasy. As in the retelling of the Arthurian saga, Berger presents the marvelous as matter-of-fact, without resorting to pseudoscientific explanations.

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