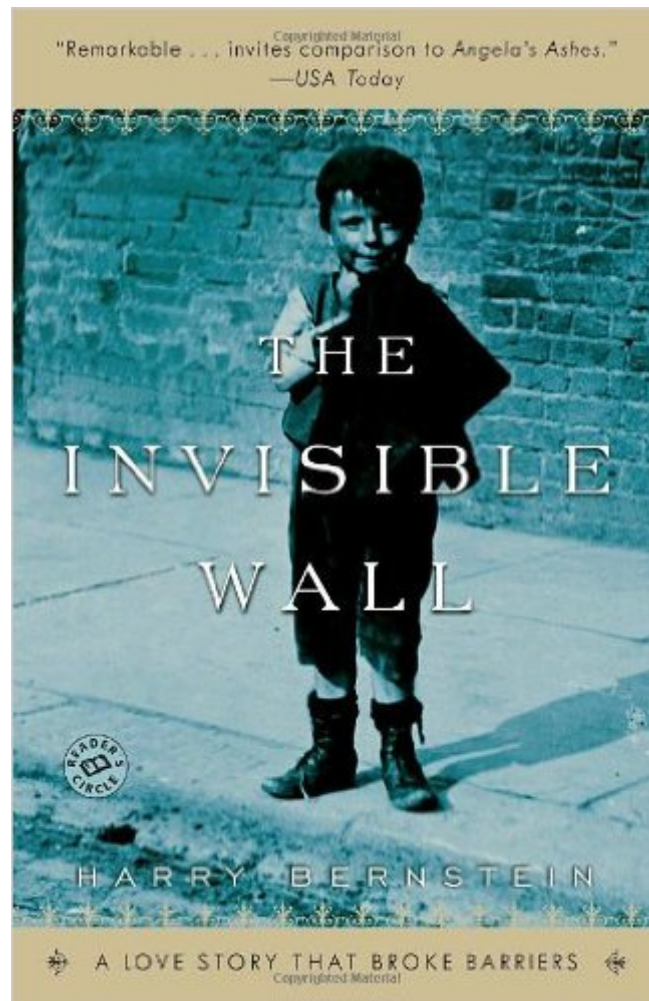


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The Invisible Wall: A Love Story That Broke Barriers



Synopsis

There are places that I have never forgotten. A little cobbled street in a smoky mill town in the North of England has haunted me for the greater part of my life. It was inevitable that I should write about it and the people who lived on both sides of its "Invisible Wall." The narrow street where Harry Bernstein grew up, in a small English mill town, was seemingly unremarkable. It was identical to countless other streets in countless other working-class neighborhoods of the early 1900s, except for the "invisible wall" that ran down its center, dividing Jewish families on one side from Christian families on the other. Only a few feet of cobblestones separated Jews from Gentiles, but socially, it they were miles apart. On the eve of World War I, Harry's family struggles to make ends meet. His father earns little money at the Jewish tailoring shop and brings home even less, preferring to spend his wages drinking and gambling. Harry's mother, devoted to her children and fiercely resilient, survives on her dreams: new shoes that might secure Harry's admission to a fancy school; that her daughter might marry the local rabbi; that the entire family might one day be whisked off to the paradise of America. Then Harry's older sister, Lily, does the unthinkable: She falls in love with Arthur, a Christian boy from across the street. When Harry unwittingly discovers their secret affair, he must choose between the morals he's been taught all his life, his loyalty to his selfless mother, and what he knows to be true in his own heart. A wonderfully charming memoir written when the author was ninety-three, *The Invisible Wall* vibrantly brings to life an all-but-forgotten time and place. It is a moving tale of working-class life, and of the boundaries that can be overcome by love. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

I was touched by *The Invisible Wall* in a profound way. Harry Bernstein waited to tell the story of his childhood until he was 96 years old. I am not sure if that fact is what had me riveted or the way the story of his upbringing in northern England unfolds. As a young boy, Bernstein had to endure a childhood of antisemitism where he was considered a Christ killer because he was Jewish and an alcoholic father. Even his family had their own prejudices and Harry seemed to be caught in the middle. Add a controversial (for their time) love story in the midst of all this and you have a best seller. Bernstein's mother is credited for keeping the family together with her strength and determination. I read this out of curiosity but finished it because it was wonderful and too hard to put down. The remarkable spirit that pours from the pages of *The Invisible Wall* will capture your heart.

When I first heard about this book in the news I was already hooked. Harry Bernstein, in his 90's and lonely after the death of his wife of 60+ years, writes his memories of growing up in a Lancashire mill town in England in the early 1900's. He describes the "invisible wall" that ran down the middle of his street, keeping the Jews on his side and the Christians on the other mostly separate. The only thing they really had in common was poverty and a distrust of each other. It's an amazing memoir as he remembers some of the incidents that happened on his street, such as going to school for the first time, his sister Lily winning a scholarship to the grammar school, and the young men who went to fight in WWI. He tells of the sacrifices his mother made for the children, and how mean and uncaring his father was. The one thing that sort of brought the two sides together was when his sister fell in love with a Christian boy, although it caused a lot of trouble and heartache. Overall, a very difficult book to put down from the very first sentence. The writing is beautiful and descriptive, and gives a sense of the hardships the working poor faced. But it's not all sadness, and there are some bright moments, although it reads very much like a Dickens novel in many respects. The bigotry of both sides of the street is detailed and told without bitterness. And Bernstein makes his family and neighbors come alive - you feel real sympathy for his mother and sister and their hopes and dreams, and even some for his alcoholic father. It's difficult to describe the emotions in the book, and yet I couldn't wait to keep reading it. Perhaps the best book I've read in a long time and I fully recommend it.

Written by Harry Bernstein at the age of 93, "*The Invisible Wall*" is a memoir about a young boy's experiences and observations growing up in a mill town near Manchester, England before and after World War I. Although the story is set in a very small locale, the inter-personal relationships the

author (perceptively and lovingly) describes are applicable to all Humankind. The book is a wondrous mix of both sadness and hope, sorrow and love. In ways similar to "Angela's Ashes," the affirmation of life, despite tragedy and hardship, runs free throughout its pages. Mr. Bernstein's story is a microcosm of Human Nature: Our never-ending need for love and companionship, and to endure even when things are most bleak; our mistrust of others whose backgrounds and beliefs are different from our own; how early experiences influence our character and personality throughout our entire lives; our ability, in some instances, to grow beyond narrow confines; the tragedies brought about by conflicts and wars; and the reality that some people are born with kind and generous hearts, while others are not. Whether one is a Christian, Jew, Muslim or whatever, "The Invisible Wall" is a book of great sensitivity and relevance, one that will not be quickly forgotten. Mr. Bernstein, now working on a second book, is an inspiration to us all. Ralph Block Westlake Village, CA

Harry Bernstein could be the poster child for all those aspiring authors who thought they might one day write a book. The man was 96 years old when he finally got the job done, but what a masterful job it is. Bernstein grew up in poverty near Manchester England. Born in 1910, he lived with his parents and siblings on one side of a road in a mill neighborhood. Jews lived on his side of the road and Christians lived on the other side. There were, of course, tensions and problems and some violence, but overall, people survived with a wary eye on each other and sometimes with genuine good deeds toward their neighbors. True, schoolboys on each side beat each other up and insults were frequently hurled, but not all residents on either side wanted it that way and there were the decent people on each side of the street who only wanted to live in peace. To say that Bernstein's family was poor is entirely too tame a description for their woes. The mother loved her children and provided for them as best she could. The father however, was an alcoholic brute who abused all who crossed his path whether they be children, wife, neighbors or co-workers. The wonder is that someone did not kill the man and end the family's woes. The fact that Harry even lived to adulthood is in itself a miracle. The obvious comparison here would be to Angela's Ashes, but this, in spite of all, is a more upbeat and optimistic story. Bernstein pulls the reader along with his realistic dialogue and descriptions and even when he relates an awful happening the reader's feeling is that things have to get better at some point. Miraculously, they do when an unknown benefactor sends steamship tickets to America. This is a book to read and treasure, but not one to start into at bedtime as it is impossible to put down once begun.

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