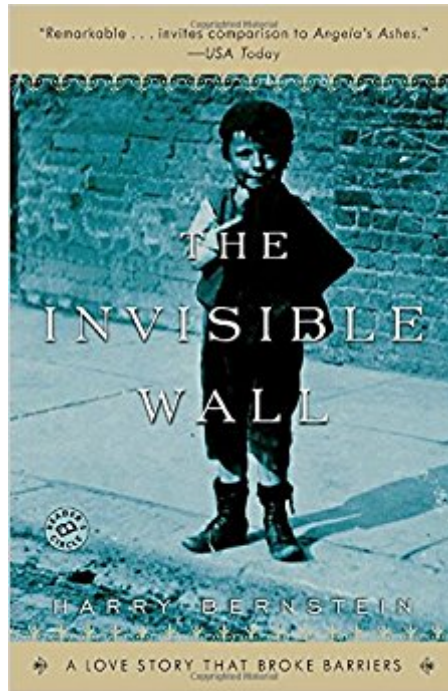




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# The Invisible Wall: A Love Story That Broke Barriers



## 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Bernstein writes, "There are few rules or unwritten laws that are not broken when circumstances demand, and few distances that are too great to be traveled," about the figurative divide ("geographically... only a few yards, socially... miles and miles") keeping Jews and Christians apart in the poor Lancashire mill town in England where he was raised. In his affecting debut memoir, the nonagenarian gives voice to a childhood version of himself who witnesses his older sister's love for a Christian boy break down the invisible wall that kept Jewish families from Christians across the street. With little self-conscious authorial intervention, young Harry serves as a wide-eyed guide to a world since dismantled—where "snot rags" are handkerchiefs, children enter the workforce at 12 and religion bifurcates everything, including industry. True to a child's experience, it is the details of domestic life that illuminate the tale—the tenderness of a mother's sacrifice, the nearly Dickensian angst of a drunken father, the violence of schoolyard anti-Semitism, the "strange odors" of "forbidden foods" in neighbor's homes. Yet when major world events touch the poverty-stricken block (the Russian revolution claims the rabbi's son, neighbors leave for WWI), the individual coming-of-age is intensified without being trivialized, and the conversational account takes on the heft of a historical novel with stirring success. (Apr.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

Adult/High School—When Bernstein, who is in his 90s, was a boy, his older sister, Lily, was in love with Arthur. This would not have been a problem except that Arthur was Christian and Lily was Jewish, and in their pre-Great War mill town in northern England, an invisible wall ran down their street, separating them. Neighbors rarely crossed those few cobblestoned feet. In winter, the Jews built a snow slide on their side and the Christians built one on theirs. There was not much other frivolity in those hard times. Home was not a happy place for Harry, his mother, and his five brothers and sisters when his mean, alcoholic father was there. When 12-year-old Lily won a scholarship to grammar school, her father dragged her by the hair to work with him. Harry's mother started a shop in her front room to make ends meet, selling slightly damaged fruit and providing a place for socializing and gossip. She always hoped for better, having Harry write letters to their relatives in America, beseeching them on a regular basis to send passage for her family, and then, finally, only for Lily when the lovers were discovered. Barriers were finally broken as Lily refused to

give up either Arthur or her mother. Readers will be taken with this memoir, reminiscent of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (Scribner, 1996). It will grab them from the start, drawing them into an intimate relationship with Harry, Lily, their mother, and the various neighbors who lived on their street. -- Ellen Bell, Amador Valley High School, Pleasanton, CA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. -- This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

What a wonderful story/memoir. Set in Northern England just after the turn of the 20th century, Harry Bernstein recounts his childhood with amazing clarity. The "Invisible wall" relates to a religious divide running right down the street of his childhood. Christians on one side, Jews on the other. Never the twain shall meet. At that time in history, England had opened its arms to the European Jews escaping persecution. Though the Government accepted those fleeing, it seems the populace didn't. So rose the invisible walls. Such is the divisive nature of religion. Harry recounts the divides that separated people that lived within feet of each other. He tells of the torment he and his siblings faced daily from the Christian kids. The opportunities for Christians were not there for the Jews and so on and so on... The two sides come together briefly from time to time. Tragedy united the two sides as families lost sons in WW I. Sometimes the wall came down and humanity won but, inevitably, the wall went back up. Harry's older sister did the unthinkable and married a lad from the other side of the street. The wall got higher but eventually came back down. Harry then leaves England for America and the book ends. A short Epilogue has Harry and his wife returning to the street some 40 yrs later and this puts a fitting end to a very engaging memoir. Summary: Highly engaging and thought provoking memoir about Northern England at the turn of the 20th century. Nothing too clever, nothing too fancy just straightforward, enjoyable reading. Highly recommended.

Not truly literary writing, but an amazing feat of memory for a 93-year-old author and good insights into human nature and the corrupting effects of religious observance (though author wouldn't put it that way). Certainly succeeds in immersing the reader in the setting.

This is a biography of Harry's life growing up in England at the time of World War I. As refugees from Russia, his street in industrial England had an invisible line down the middle, one side was Catholic and the other side Jewish. His life is lived from the Jewish side. The book is a magnificent view into this extremely complex society. Not always easy to hear or understand, but provides many view points. It is well written. The book ends and there are some extras at the end where he goes

back to the street that are interesting.

This book was very interesting as I relived Harry Bernstein's life along with his recollection of his story. I could feel the utter poverty they endured in the small mill-town in England and the moments of joy that they grabbed onto when they were able to do so. I thought the dialog was remarkable - as though it was yesterday or last week not the decades that passed by. The town's people were held captive by their cultures, risking great problems if they cast old rules aside and followed their hearts. I enjoyed this writing immensely and also read the continuation of this story called *The Dream*. This author was remarkable writing these beautiful memoirs in his 90's.

Harry Bernstein brings alive these characters from his childhood...his writing makes them flesh and blood. One can feel...while reading...their emotions...their joys and sorrows and at times their utter confusion as to why the world is the way it is. Captured are the feelings of fear & distrust between the Christians and the Jews of that time...the feelings of despair at the impoverished state in which people found themselves living. Also...brought to life and to the readers understanding...the simple fact that people are people...we are all so much more the same than we are different. This is a story of hardships faced, hopes dashed, and hard work rewarded by suffering...and yet...the human spirit triumphs collectively with the rising of each individual soul who finds the strength to rise up and meet another day! Brilliant & beautiful writing!

*The Invisible Wall*, begins when Harry Bernstein was four years old. Harry was raised in the English mill town of Stockport. His father worked in a tailor shop, while his mother struggled to feed, clothe, and educate their children. Much of his father's meager salary went for his drinking and gambling, and the family was poorer than most. The family were observant Jews, whose life revolved around the Sabbath and Holy Days. The street the family lived on was populated with similar families. The Jews lived on one side of the street, and the Christians lived on the other. Down the middle of the street runs the "invisible wall" of the title. Except for attending the same schools and frequenting each others' shops, the Christians and Jews had little to do with one another. When one Jewish girl fell in love with an unsuitable Christian boy, her family shipped her off to a relative in Australia. While there was some animosity between the two sides of the street, the families mostly co-existed in an uneasy peace. Life changes, however, during the Great War. The families rely on each other for news of the war and of their sons. All mourn when a son is killed or wounded. When the soldiers return from the War, the budding relationship between Harry's sister Lily and the Christian neighbor

Arthur Forshaw blossoms. Harry becomes Lily's co-conspirator in her trysts with Arthur. There are many poignant scenes in *The Invisible Wall*. This memoir reminded me of *Angela's Ashes*. The ignorance and poverty of both families was strikingly similar, but *The Invisible Wall* was much more focused on the relationships between the Christians and Jews than the fact of the poverty. This book tells a very sad, but true story. As in *Angela's Ashes*, the redemption comes from the author's successful life in America, a stark contrast to its meager beginning

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