

The Master Writer of the City

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Man in Profile: Joseph Mitchell of The New Yorker

by Thomas Kunkel

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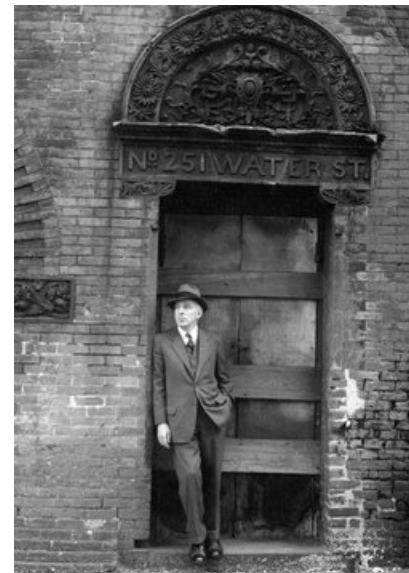
In 1942 *The New Yorker* published Joseph Mitchell's profile of a homeless man in Greenwich Village named Joe Gould, whose claim to notice—the thing that separated him from other sad misfits—was “a formless, rather mysterious book” he was known to be writing called “An Oral History of Our Time,” begun twenty-six years earlier and already, at nine million words, “eleven times as long as the Bible.” Twenty-two years later, in 1964, the magazine published another piece by Mitchell called “Joe Gould's Secret” that ran in two parts, and that drew a rather less sympathetic and a good deal more interesting portrait of Gould.

Mitchell revealed what he had kept back in the profile—that Gould was a tiresome bore and cadger who attached himself to Mitchell like a leech, and finally forced upon him the realization that the “Oral History” did not exist. After confronting Gould with this knowledge, the famously kindhearted Mitchell regretted having done so:

I have always deeply disliked seeing anyone shown up or found out or caught in a lie or caught red-handed doing anything, and now, with time to think things over, I began to feel ashamed of myself for the way I had lost my temper and pounced on Gould.

Mitchell went on to make a generous imaginative leap. “He very likely went around believing in some hazy, self-deceiving, self-protecting way that the Oral History did exist.... It might not exactly be down on paper, but he had it all in his head, and any day now he was going to start getting it down.”

“It was easy for me to see how this could be,” Mitchell continued in a remarkable turn, “for it reminded me of a novel that I had once intended to write.” The novel, conceived “under the spell of Joyce's *Ulysses*,... was to be ‘about’ New York City” and to chronicle a day and a night in the life of a young reporter from the South who was no longer a believing Baptist but is “still inclined to see things in religious terms” and whose early exposure to fundamentalist evangelists has



Therese Mitchell/Estate of Joseph Mitchell
Joseph Mitchell in Lower Manhattan, near the old Fulton Fish Market; photograph by his wife, Therese Mitchell

left him with a lasting liking for the cryptic and the ambiguous and the incantatory and the disconnected and the extravagant and the oracular and the apocalyptic.... I had thought about this novel for over a year. Whenever I had nothing else to do, I would automatically start writing it in my mind.... But the truth is, I never actually wrote a word of it.

In fact, however, Mitchell did write—if not a novel exactly—a book about New York City that fully achieved his young self’s large literary ambition. The book is *The Bottom of the Harbor*, published in 1959, a collection of six pieces that are nothing if not cryptic and ambiguous and incantatory and disconnected and extravagant and oracular and apocalyptic. The book was reprinted in the thick anthology of Mitchell’s writings, *Up in the Old Hotel*, published in 1992, but it deserves to stand alone. The other books reprinted in the anthology—*McSorley’s Wonderful Saloon*, *Old Mr. Flood*, and *Joe Gould’s Secret*—are wonderful, but they are to *The Bottom of the Harbor* what *Tom Sawyer* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* are to *Huckleberry Finn*.

The opening piece, “Up in the Old Hotel” (from which the later anthology took its name), tells a minimal, almost nonexistent story. Mitchell goes for breakfast to Sloppy Louie’s, a seafood restaurant in a decrepit old building on South Street in the Fulton Fish Market, and converses with its owner, Louis Morino, “a contemplative and generous and worldly-wise man in his middle sixties,” a widower and father of two daughters, who emigrated to New York from a fishing village in Italy in 1905 at the age of seventeen, and worked as a waiter in restaurants in Manhattan and Brooklyn until 1930 when he bought his own restaurant.

Almost imperceptibly, Mitchell turns over the narration of the story to Louie, as he calls Morino, sliding into the long monologue that was once a commonplace of *New Yorker* nonfiction, and is a signature of Mitchell’s mature work. Occasionally Mitchell breaks in to speak in his own voice, which is slightly different from Louie’s, but in the same register, giving the effect of arias sung by alternating soloists in an oratorio.

Louie dilates on a change that has taken place in the clientele of his restaurant, which used to consist solely of fishmongers and fish buyers. Now, people from the financial district, the insurance district, and the coffee-roasting district are coming in at lunchtime, and on some days the lunch crowd is so great that latecomers have to wait for tables. “This gets on his nerves,” Mitchell says of the too-successful restaurateur, who has reluctantly decided to put tables on the second floor to accommodate the overflow. His reluctance comes from the fact that his building, like the other South Street buildings that stand on filled-in river swamp, has no cellar, and he has to use the second floor to store supplies and equipment and as a changing room for his waiters. “I don’t know what I’ll do without it, only I got to make room someday,” Louie says. “That ought to be easy,” Mitchell says. “You’ve got four empty floors up above.”

But it isn’t easy. To get to the empty floors, whose windows are boarded up, it is necessary to enter a monstrous, uninspected elevator that has to be pulled up by hand, like a dumbwaiter. This is the pivot on which the story’s slender plot turns. During all the twenty-two years he has rented the building, Louie has never dared to enter the elevator. Each

time he has peered into it he has felt a primal dread:

I just don't want to get in that cage by myself. I got a feeling about it, and that's the fact of the matter. It makes me uneasy—all closed in, and all that furry dust. It makes me think of a coffin, the inside of a coffin. Either that or a cave, the mouth of a cave. If I could get somebody to go along with me, somebody to talk to, just so I wouldn't be all alone in there, I'd go.

“Louie suddenly leaned forward. ‘What about you?’ he asked. ‘Maybe I could persuade you.’”

Mitchell agrees, but before the trip takes place, Louie launches into another aria in which he explains why he has remained in a building he was never keen on and always intended to move from. “It really doesn't make much sense. It's all mixed up with the name of a street in Brooklyn.” The street was Schermerhorn Street near a restaurant Louie waited tables at, Joe's on Nevins Street, one of the great Brooklyn chophouses, where political bosses ate alongside rich old women of good family of whom Louie says: “They all had some peculiarity, and they all had one foot in the grave, and they all had big appetites.” One of these trencher-women was a widow named Mrs. Frelinghuysen: “She was very old and tiny and delicate, and she ate like a horse.... Everybody liked her, the way she hung on to life.” She liked Louie in turn, and if his tables were filled would defer her meal until he was free to wait on her. While she ate, he observed her closely:

She'd always start off with one dozen oysters in winter or one dozen clams in summer, and she'd gobble them down and go on from there. She could get more out of a lobster than anybody I ever saw. You'd think she'd got everything she possibly could, and then she'd pull the little legs off that most people don't even bother with, and suck the juice out of them.

During his afternoon break, Louie's recitative continues, he would go over to Schermerhorn Street, a quiet back street, and sit on a bench under a tree and eat fruit he had bought at a nearby fancy-fruit store. One afternoon, it occurs to him to wonder, “Who the hell was Schermerhorn?” So that night at the restaurant he asks Mrs. Frelinghuysen and she tells him that the Schermerhorns are one of the oldest and best Dutch families in New York, and that she had known many of the descendants of the original seventeenth-century settler Jacob Schermerhorn, among them a girl who had died young and whose grave in Trinity Church cemetery in Washington Heights she had visited and “put some jonquils on.”

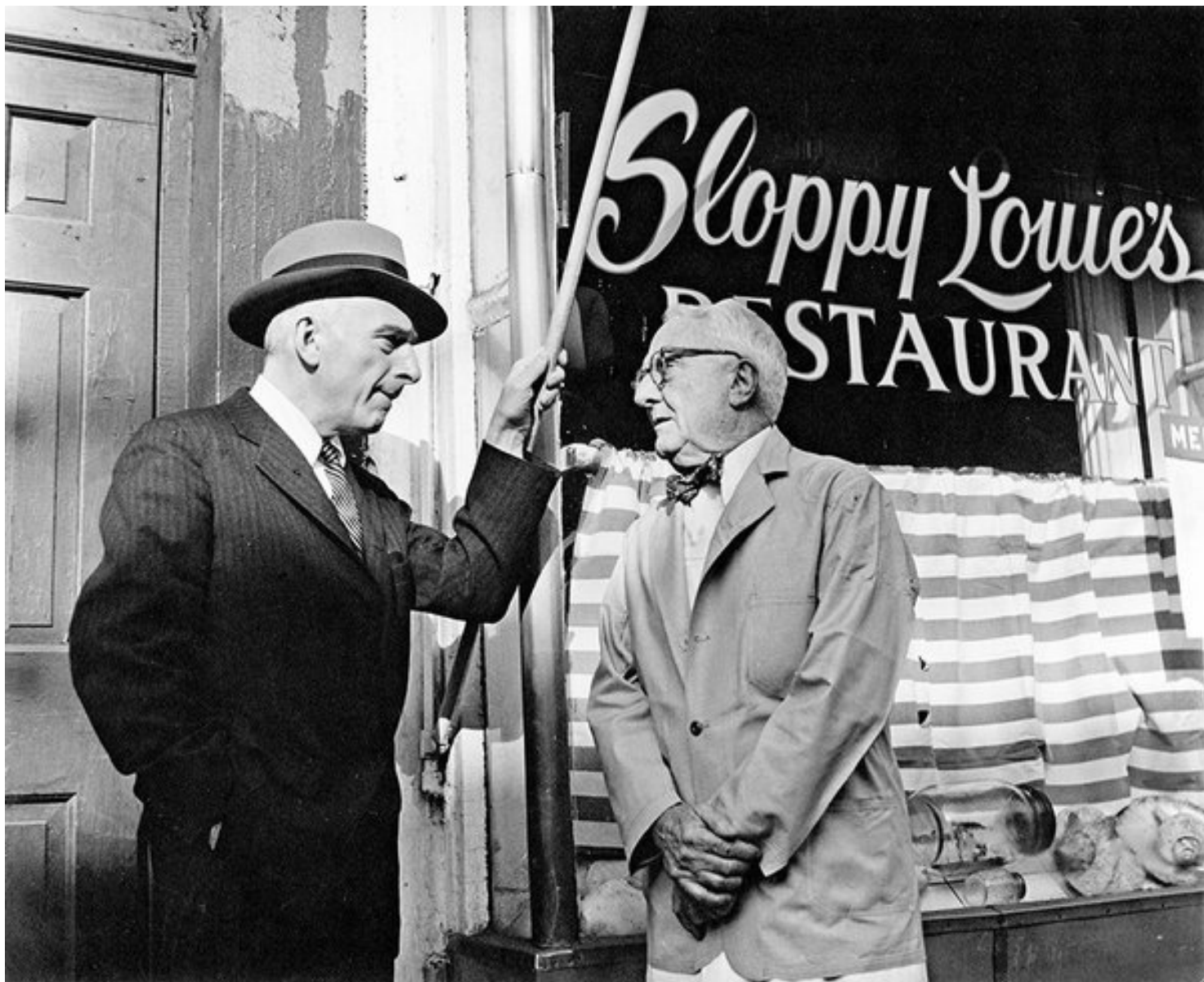
Where the hell is this going? As in all of Mitchell's pieces everything is always going somewhere, though not necessarily so you'd notice. Mitchell is one of the great masters of the device of the plot twist disguised as a digression that seems pointless but that heightens the effect of unforced realism. Louie tells Mitchell of an incident that occurred a few years after he left Joe's. Mrs. Frelinghuysen had died and Louie had married and bought his restaurant and rented the building it was in. One afternoon a long black limousine pulled up in front of the building and a uniformed chauffeur came into the restaurant and said, “Mrs. Schermerhorn wanted to speak to me, and I looked at him and said, ‘What do you mean—Mrs. Schermerhorn?’ And he said, ‘Mrs. Schermerhorn that owns this building.’” Louie is stunned to hear this. He had assumed the real estate company he paid his rent to was the owner. But no, the beautiful woman who gets out of the limousine, the recently widowed Mrs. Arthur F. Schermerhorn, owns the building. Louie asks her if she knows anything about its history, but she doesn't—she is just inspecting the properties she has inherited from her husband. She drives off and he never sees her again.

I went back inside and stood there and thought it over, and the effect it had on me, the simple fact my building was an old Schermerhorn building, it may sound foolish, but it pleased me very much. The feeling I had, it connected me with the past. It connected me with Old New York.

Louie pursues city records and after many years and many dead ends learns that his building and the identical one next door had been put up in the 1870s by a descendant of Jacob Schermerhorn and combined to form a hotel called the

Fulton Ferry Hotel after the ferry to Brooklyn that stood in front of it. From the mid- to late 1800s the hotel flourished. The ferry passengers crowded its saloon, and out-of-town passengers from the steamships docked in the East River along South Street filled its rooms as they waited for passage.

But then one of those disasters occurred by which the life of the city is punctuated and defined, the disaster of change. The Brooklyn Bridge went up, followed by the Manhattan and Williamsburg bridges, which ended the ferry traffic that gave the saloon its trade; then “the worst blow of all,” the passenger lines left South Street for docks on the Hudson and the hotel declined into “one of those waterfront hotels that rummies hole up in, and old men on pensions, and old nuts, and sailors on the beach.” What remained finally were two buildings with boarded-up top floors, one of them occupied by Sloppy Louie’s and the other by a saloon no longer in business. Louie concludes his monologue: “Those are the bare bones of the matter. If I could get upstairs just once in that damned old elevator and scratch around in those hotel registers up there and whatever to hell else is stored up there, it might be possible I’d find out a whole lot more.”



Therese Mitchell/Estate of Joseph Mitchell

Joseph Mitchell outside Sloppy Louie's restaurant with Louis Morino, the subject of Mitchell's 1952 New Yorker profile 'Up in the Old Hotel'

As Mitchell and Louie, wearing helmets and carrying flashlights, pull the rope and heave the ancient elevator up to the

third floor, the story's lyrical music gives way to harsh new sounds. Louie is no longer the contemplative and generous and worldly-wise man of the monologues. He has become angry and almost hysterically agitated. In the pitch-dark, dust-laden room the elevator opens onto that had been the hotel's reading room and is now stacked with hotel furniture, Louie yanks (Mitchell's word) drawers out of a rolltop desk. "God damn it! I thought I'd find those hotel registers in here. There's nothing in here, only rusty paper clips." A mirror-topped bureau yields only a stray hairpin and comb and medicine bottle. Louie opens the medicine bottle and smells the colorless liquid in it and says disgustedly, "It's gone dead.... It doesn't smell like anything at all."

The men move on to the hotel bedrooms at the rear of the floor, all empty except for one with an iron bedstead and a placard tacked to the wall saying "The Wages of Sin is Death; but the Gift of God is Eternal Life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Louie has had enough and heads back toward the elevator. Mitchell wants to go up to the other floors but Louie says no. "There's nothing up there." In the elevator, Louie

was leaning against the side of the cage, and his shoulders were slumped and his eyes were tired. "I didn't learn much I didn't know before," he said.

"You learned that the wages of sin is death," I said, trying to say something cheerful.

Louie is not amused. The third floor and the place where there is nothing to look at or read or smell, toward which we are all headed, have evidently become fused in his imagination. He is desperate to get back down to the restaurant. "Come on, pull the rope faster! Pull it faster! Let's get out of this." Mitchell has circled back to his opening sentence: "Every now and then, seeking to rid my mind of thoughts of death and doom, I get up early and go down to Fulton Fish Market." The stands heaped with forty to sixty varieties of gleaming fish, "the smoky riverbank dawn, the racket the fishmongers make, the seaweedy smell, and the sight of this plentifulness" give Mitchell a feeling of well-being, even of elation. But they hardly rid him of his existential anguish.

Mitchell often said that his favorite book was *Ulysses*, but it is another book—Ecclesiastes—that hovers over the pages of *The Bottom of the Harbor*. Like the preacher/narrator of Ecclesiastes, Mitchell is all over the place. He is at once an absurdist and a moralist and a hedonist. All is vanity, there is nothing new under the sun, eat, drink, and be merry. The rhetorical slyness of verse 9:10—"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest"—is almost uncannily consonant with the legerdemain Mitchell himself performs in *The Bottom of the Harbor*, as he celebrates, and describes in the most minute and interesting detail, the excellence of the work done by his subjects—a series of men connected in one way or another to the New York waterfront—while helplessly murmuring about the probable pointlessness of it all.

"The Rivermen," the final and arguably strongest piece in the volume, is its most explicit memento mori. It is set in Edgewater, New Jersey, a small town on the Hudson across from the Upper West Side of Manhattan, first settled in the seventeenth century by Dutch and Huguenot farmers. By the time of Mitchell's visit in 1950, most of the farms are gone, replaced by factories, which are themselves declining. A ferry between Edgewater and Manhattan had just been discontinued; like the Fulton Ferry it fell victim to its natural enemy the bridge, in this case the George Washington.

As he was with Louis Morino, Mitchell is a little in love with Harry Lyons, a retired fireman who fishes for shad in the polluted waters of the Hudson during the season of their upriver journey to spawn. "He has an old Roman face," Mitchell writes. "It is strong-jawed and prominent-nosed and bushy-eyebrowed and friendly and reasonable and sagacious and elusively piratical." As if this wasn't enough, when Mitchell runs into Lyons on his way to (what else?) a funeral in his Sunday best, "I was surprised at how distinguished he looked; he looked worldly and cultivated and illustrious."

An ignorant visitor to Lyons's barge becomes the audience for an exquisitely detailed lecture on the art of shad fishing

in the Hudson. And once again Mitchell doesn't do the telling himself, but allows his central character to hold forth in a monologue that goes on for many pages. But this time it isn't the main but a secondary character who delivers Mitchell's message of death and doom. He is Joseph Hewitt, a man in his seventies, a former bookkeeper at the Fulton Fish Market, who has made money from real estate since his retirement, and shouldn't be complaining, but can't tear himself away from the handwriting on the wall:

“Things have worked out very well for you, Joe,” I once heard another retired man remark to him one day... “and you ought to look at things a little more cheerful than you do.” “I'm not so sure I have anything to be cheerful about,” Mr. Hewitt replied. “I'm not so sure you have, either. I'm not so sure anybody has.”

At the beginning of “Mr. Hunter's Grave,” the best known of the pieces in *The Bottom of the Harbor*, Mitchell strolls through a cemetery on Staten Island and examines his feelings. “Invariably, for some reason I don't know and don't want to know, after I have spent an hour or so in one of these cemeteries, looking at gravestone designs and reading inscriptions and identifying wild flowers and scaring rabbits out of the weeds and reflecting on the end that awaits me and awaits us all, my spirits lift, I become quite cheerful....”

Mitchell isn't the only one to find a visit to a graveyard a cheering rather than depressing experience. These places produce a kind of homeopathic effect on the visitor. They make him feel better by giving him a whiff—real or imagined—of the worst. The interconnectedness of what we have to feel cheerful about and what we don't is Mitchell's great subject. The image of old Mrs. Frelinghuysen sucking the juice out of lobster legs can hardly be surpassed as an emblem of the defiant life force.

In “The Rivermen” Mitchell offers the quieter but no less powerful image of old men who have gathered on the banks of the river to see Harry Lyons bring in his catch and to accept from him the eucharistic gift of a roe shad that they wrap in newspapers and carry home in neatly folded paper bags. In the passage in “Joe Gould's Secret” about his own unwritten book, Mitchell quotes an old black street preacher that his young hero meets in Harlem:

Like the Baptist preachers the young reporter had listened to and struggled to understand in his childhood, the old man sees meaning behind meanings, or thinks he does, and tries his best to tell what things “stand for.” “Pomegranates are about the size and shape of large oranges or small grapefruits, only their skins are red,” he says.... “They're filled...with juice as red as blood. When they get ripe, they're so swollen with those juicy red seeds that they gap open and some of the seeds spill out. And now I'll tell you what pomegranates stand for. They stand for the resurrection.... All seeds stand for resurrection and all eggs stand for resurrection. The Easter egg stands for resurrection. So do the eggs in the English sparrow's nest up under the eaves in the “L” station. So does the egg you have for breakfast. So does the caviar the rich people eat. So does shad roe.

Images that “stand for something” recur throughout Mitchell's writing and reinforce the sense that we are reading a single metaphoric work about the city. That the author was a southerner only heightens its authority. As Robert Frank's European sensibility permitted him to see things as he traveled around America that had been invisible to the rest of us, so Mitchell's outsidership gave him his own X-ray vision.

Thomas Kunkel's biography adds some telling details to what Mitchell's readers already know about his childhood as the eldest son of a prosperous cotton and tobacco grower in North Carolina.* Perhaps the most striking of these is Mitchell's trouble with arithmetic—he couldn't add, subtract, or multiply to save his soul—to which handicap we may owe the fact that he became a writer rather than a farmer. As Mitchell recalled late in life:

You know you have to be extremely good at arithmetic. You have to be able to figure, as my father said, to deal with cotton futures, and to buy cotton. You're in competition with a group of men who will cut your throat at any moment, if they can see the value of a bale of cotton closer than you. I couldn't do it, so I had to leave.

Mitchell studied at the University of North Carolina without graduating and came to New York in 1929, at the age of twenty-one. Kunkel traces the young exile's rapid rise from copy boy on the *New York World* to reporter on the *Herald Tribune* and feature writer on *The World Telegram*. In 1933 St. Clair McKelway, the managing editor of the eight-year-old *New Yorker*, noticed Mitchell's newspaper work and invited him to write for the magazine; in 1938 the editor, Harold Ross, hired him. In 1931 Mitchell married a lovely woman of Scandinavian background named Therese Jacobson, a fellow reporter, who left journalism to become a fine though largely unknown portrait and street photographer. She and Mitchell lived in a small apartment in Greenwich Village and raised two daughters, Nora and Elizabeth. Kunkel's biography is sympathetic and admiring and discreet. If any of the erotic secrets that frequently turn up in the nets of biographers turned up in Kunkel's, he does not reveal them. He has other fish to gut.

From reporting notes, journals, and correspondence, and from three interviews Mitchell gave late in life to a professor of journalism named Norman Sims, Kunkel extracts a picture of Mitchell's journalistic practice that he doesn't know quite what to do with. On the one hand, he doesn't regard it as a pretty picture; he uses terms like "license," "latitude," "dubious technique," "tactics," and "bent journalistic rules" to describe it. On the other, he reveres Mitchell's writing, and doesn't want to say anything critical of it even while he is saying it. So a kind of weird embarrassed atmosphere hangs over the passages in which Kunkel reveals Mitchell's radical departures from factuality.

It is already known that the central character of the book *Old Mr. Flood*, a ninety-three-year-old man named Hugh G. Flood, who intended to live to the age of 115 by eating only fish and shellfish, did not exist, but was a "composite," i.e., an invention. Mitchell was forced to characterize him as such after readers of the *New Yorker* pieces from which the book was derived tried to find the man. "Mr. Flood is not one man," Mitchell wrote in an author's note to the book, and went on, "Combined in him are aspects of several old men who work or hang out in Fulton Fish Market, or who did in the past." In the *Up in the Old Hotel* collection he simply reclassified the work as fiction.

Now Kunkel reveals that another Mitchell character—a gypsy king named Cockeye Johnny Nikanov, the subject of a *New Yorker* profile published in 1942—was also an invention. How Kunkel found this out is rather funny. He came upon a letter that Mitchell wrote in 1961 to *The New Yorker's* lawyer, Milton Greenstein, asking Greenstein for legal advice on how to stop a writer named Sidney Sheldon from producing a musical about gypsy life based on Mitchell's profile of Nikanov and a subsequent piece about the scams of gypsy women. Mitchell was himself working on a musical adaptation of his gypsy pieces—it eventually became the show *Bajour*, named after one of the gypsy women's cruelest scams, that came to Broadway in 1964 and ran for around six months—and was worried about Sheldon's competing script.

"Cockeye Johnny Nikanov does not exist in real life, and never did," Mitchell told Greenstein. Therefore "no matter how true to life Cockeye Johnny happens to be, he is a fictional character, and I invented him, and he is not in 'the public domain,' he is mine." Mitchell's Gilbertian logic evidently prevailed—Sheldon gave up his musical. But the secret of Johnny Nikanov's wobbly ontological status—though Greenstein kept quiet about it—had passed out of Mitchell's possession. It now belonged to tattling posterity, the biographer's best friend.

What Kunkel found in Mitchell's reporting notes for his famous piece "Mr. Hunter's Grave" made him even more nervous. It now appears that that great work of nonfiction is also in some part a work of fiction. The piece opens with an encounter in the St. Luke's cemetery on Staten Island between Mitchell and a minister named Raymond E. Brock, who tells him about a remarkable black man named Mr. Hunter, and sets in motion the events that bring Mitchell to Hunter's house a week later. But the notes show that the encounter in the cemetery never took place. In actuality, it was a man sitting on his front porch named James McCoy (who never appears in the piece) who told Mitchell about Mr. Hunter years before Mitchell met him; and when Mitchell did meet Hunter it was in a church and not at his house.

This and other instances in the reporting notes about Mitchell's tamperings with actuality cause Kunkel to ask: "Should the reputation of 'Mr. Hunter's Grave' suffer for the license Mitchell employed in telling it?" He adds primly: "As with

any aspect of art, that is up to the appraiser.”

The obvious answer to Kunkel’s question—the one that most journalists, editors, and professors of journalism would give—is yes, of course, the reputation of “Mr. Hunter’s Grave” should suffer now that we know that Mitchell cheated. He has betrayed the reader’s trust that what he is reading is what actually happened. He has mixed up nonfiction with fiction. He has made an unwholesome, almost toxic brew out of the two genres. It is too bad he is dead and can’t be pilloried. Or perhaps it is all right that he is dead, because he is suffering the torments of hell for his sins against the spirit of fact. And so on.

As a former journalist and professor of journalism (he is now president of St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin), Kunkel might be expected to share these dire views; but as Mitchell’s biographer, he can’t bring himself to express them. He clearly disapproves of Mitchell’s “tactics,” but he venerates Mitchell and hates to show him up as Mitchell hated showing up Joe Gould. His own tactic is to invoke the pieties of journalism. “Of course, today’s *New Yorker*, or any mainstream publication, would never knowingly permit such liberties with quotation; they would take a dimmer-yet view of composites being billed as ‘non-fiction.’” And: “The dubious technique would not really disappear from the print media’s bag of tricks until the general elevation of journalistic standards several decades later.”

Kunkel magnanimously excuses Mitchell and other of the early *New Yorker* writers for their subprime practices because they didn’t know any better. Of course, Mitchell and his *New Yorker* colleagues such as A.J. Liebling knew very well what they were doing. On October 14, 1988, Mitchell told Norman Sims:

My desire is to get the reader, well, first of all to read it. That story [“The Bottom of the Harbor”] was hard to write because I had to wonder how long can I keep developing it before the reader’s going to get tired of this. Here and there, as I think a fiction writer would, I put things that I know—even the remark the tugboat men make, that you could bottle this water and sell it for poison—that are going to keep the reader going. I can lure him or her into the story I want to tell. I can’t tell the story I want to tell until I’ve got you into the pasture and down where the sheep are. Where the shepherd is. He’s going to tell the story, but I’ve got to get you past the ditch and through these bushes.

Every writer of nonfiction who has struggled with the ditch and the bushes knows what Mitchell is talking about, but few of us have gone as far as Mitchell in bending actuality to our artistic will. This is not because we are more virtuous than Mitchell. It is because we are less gifted than Mitchell. The idea that reporters are constantly resisting the temptation to invent is a laughable one. Reporters don’t invent because they don’t know how to. This is why they are journalists rather than novelists or short-story writers. They depend on the kindness of the strangers they actually meet for the characters in their stories. There are no fictional characters lurking in their imaginations. They couldn’t create a character like Mr. Flood or Cockeye Johnny if you held a gun to their heads. Mitchell’s travels across the line that separates fiction and nonfiction are his singular feat. His impatience with the annoying, boring bits of actuality, his slashings through the underbrush of unreadable facticity, give his pieces their electric force, are why they’re so much more exciting to read than the work of other nonfiction writers of ambition.

In the title piece of *The Bottom of the Harbor*, a short work of great subtlety about the ability of fish and shellfish to survive in polluted water, Mitchell mentions a small area of the New York waterfront where, in contrast to the general foulness, “clean, sparkling, steel-blue water” can be found. This image of purity in the midst of contamination could serve as an emblem of Mitchell’s journalistic exceptionalism. He has filtered out the impurities other journalists helplessly accept as the defining condition of their genre. Mitchell’s genre is some kind of hybrid, as yet to be named.

Kunkel pauses to shake his head about “a strain of perfectionism” in Mitchell, “an obsession for his writing to be just so.” “Mitchell would patiently cast and recast sentences, sometimes dozens of times, changing just a word or two with each iteration until an entire paragraph came together and seemed right,” Kunkel wonderingly writes, and adds, “All this

fussing was exceedingly time-consuming, even for a magazine writer.” Kunkel’s naiveté about writing is evident, but his picture of Mitchell at work only confirms and amplifies our sense of his artistry.

Much has been made of the fact that after “Joe Gould’s Secret” Mitchell published nothing in *The New Yorker*, though he came to the office regularly, and colleagues passing his door could hear him typing. I was a colleague and friend, and I always assumed that the reason he wasn’t publishing was because he wasn’t satisfied with what he was writing: he had been producing work of increasing beauty and profundity, and now the standard he had set for himself was too high. Mitchell spoke of James Joyce, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Ivan Turgenev, D.H. Lawrence, and T.S. Eliot as writers he read and reread. This was the company he was in behind his closed door. We should respect his inhibiting reverence for literary transcendence and be grateful for the work that got past his censor.

* See the posthumous “Days in the Branch,” *The New Yorker*, December 1, 2014, part of an unfinished memoir. [↗](#)