

# **City Mouse or Country Mouse?—Joseph Mitchell’s Interpretation of the City**

**by Norman Sims**

Paper presented to the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies  
2009 Convention at Northwestern University  
© Copyright Norman Sims 2009

This paper briefly compares the sensibilities of two *New Yorker* writers: Joseph Mitchell, a native of North Carolina whose family owned land and was engaged in the tobacco business, and A. J. Liebling, who was a native of New York City.

Liebling can be seen as the “city mouse.” In his classic works on the city, Liebling highlighted groups of people—con men, cigar store Indians, boxers and their entourages. Liebling saw people as created and determined by their surroundings. Liebling was at home in the city and he celebrated the traditional benefits of city life, such as the great food of Paris.

Mitchell and Liebling were close friends, but there are differences in their work, or at least different tendencies. Mitchell’s works focused on individuals, rather than groups, and he rarely attributed a person’s character or actions to outside forces. While there’s a temptation to treat Mitchell as a “country mouse” whose perspectives were shaped in his rural background, this paper uses interview material to argue that Mitchell was as much a citizen of the city as Liebling. Unlike Liebling, Mitchell always felt he was an outsider in the city, and he tended to portray people whose marginality helped to define them, such as Joe Gould.

Literature can be seen as the expression of identity. In fiction, we read for a window on the author’s mind, not for the facts of the world. In journalism, as David Abrahamson has said, the author is presumed not to exist. But we can read literary journalism for the author’s identity, or the author’s expression of it.

Mitchell wrote simultaneously about the world and about himself.

Some selected examples from Mitchell and Liebling can be pointers to those expressive moments concerning identity.

In “The Cave Dwellers,” (1938) Mitchell wrote about a couple who had been living in a Central Park cave for a year in 1933. His newspaper story about them generated money and a job for the couple, but after a while they disappeared again. Their benefactor thought they liked the cave better than living in a house.

Mitchell commented on several “country mouse” types of places. He liked to get up at 5:30 in the morning and visit the Fulton Fish Market, which might have reminded him of the tobacco auctions where his father worked. The fish trading, he said, helped to rid his mind of thoughts of death and doom and left a feeling of well-being and elation.

In one of my favorite passages in “The Rivermen,” Mitchell meets a woman tending the wild roses in the Edgewater Cemetery. She told Mitchell she knew why the roses grew so well there: “They’ve got good strong roots that go right down into the graves.”

Mitchell devoted most of these pieces to the issues of death and getting along among others. Equality ruled in the Edgewater Cemetery, where the suicides from the New York bridges would wash up and be buried, something often prohibited elsewhere.

Mitchell made frequent trips to cemeteries, which reminded him of visits with his aunts in North Carolina to cemeteries, and of the Easter egg hunts held there. Eggs were always symbols of resurrection for Mitchell. He was a modernist, but one who tried hard to be accessible to ordinary readers.

Several of Liebling’s types, such as boxers and politicians, were engaged in difficult, but possibly scientific, endeavors. Liebling said if there was a science to boxing, then someone was bound to win out. His book on the subject was *The Sweet Science*. Southern politicians, unexpectedly, were also guided by a secret science of human behavior.

Liebling grew up in the city. Then, as today, people-watching in the city often began with typecasting. We recognize the suits, the wealthy suburban women, and the street types. It's often hard to see them as individuals.

I first met Mitchell in 1988, when Mark Singer arranged an appointment for me with Mitchell at *The New Yorker*. At that time, Mitchell was 80-years-old and had been denying requests for interviews for about 30 years. We went for lunch to Sloppy Louie's in the Fulton Fish Market, and on another visit to the Century Club around the corner from *The New Yorker* offices. We met several times and talked for many hours. I later asked him why he decided to talk to me, and he said something about no one lives forever.

After we had many conversations and I had published work on Mitchell, he called me one day. He was going in the hospital the next day for some minor surgery, and he wanted to ask me a favor. He said a scholar was writing something about him that explained his work as being highly influenced by his upbringing in North Carolina, and it connected all his work to his country up-bringing. Mitchell thought that approach was hopelessly incorrect and asked me to write something instead. I didn't want to do it—I was busy on other projects—but I told Mitchell I would do what I could. As Jim Rogers knows, this is a long story that I won't bore you with. The next day Mitchell went into the hospital, and unfortunately he died there at age 87. I then realized I had made the equivalent of a deathbed promise to Mitchell, so I wrote a biographical piece with Jim Rogers' help.

But I never really considered until now why Mitchell was so adamant about NOT connecting his work to his North Carolina background.

There's much to recommend that approach. The background differences between Mitchell and Liebling point this way. Using the famous children's story, we could treat Mitchell as the "country mouse" and Liebling as the "city mouse."

But I'm going to argue that it's an unfortunate comparison, and I think I now understand why Mitchell rejected it.

Mitchell's characterizations may have contributed to the reputation. His characters lived in interesting times—times of depression and war—yet they generally paid no attention to that. The political-social order stood as an outside force, invading and wrecking the things they held sacred. Much more important were the seemingly traditional concerns that are more associated with villages than with cities—wildflowers, the local cemetery, quiet places to meet and talk, traditions, and a concern with the passing and nurturing of generations.

When Prohibition came, for example, Old Bill in “McSorley's Wonderful Saloon” just went right on selling his ale. He didn't have a peephole in the door. He just kept going the way he always had. It was as if the outside world didn't exist. And only rarely in Mitchell's collected works can you find a reference to the Depression. He took people on their own terms, not as representations of outside forces.

Mitchell wrote about bucolic or natural settings in the city—views of the Hudson River; cemeteries; Edgewater, New Jersey; and Staten Island. In “Mr. Hunter's Grave,” Mitchell's first line was, “When things get too much for me, I put a wildflower book and a couple of sandwiches in my pockets and go down to the South Shore of Staten Island and wander around awhile in one of the old cemeteries down there....The South Shore is the most rural part of the island, and all of these cemeteries are bordered on at least two sides by woods.”

Despite their differing perspectives, Liebling and Mitchell were best friends. They often walked to work together, and they discussed their writing. Mitchell told me it was not to imitate each other, but merely to discuss writing.

Mitchell's themes include human dignity, which can be seen in almost every one of his pieces, but especially in the book on McSorley's, in “Mr. Hunter's Grave,” and in his works on Joe Gould. It was the same “common humanity” that he said he found in *Finnegan's Wake*.

Another theme is the depth of the human unconscious. He wrote in an age when Freud was all the rage, and symbolism dominated literature. And he also wrote about human

illusions—our belief in living to 110 as Old Mr. Flood planned, or in writing an Oral History of the World.

A third theme is that of holding at arm's length a persistent and ugly outside world. He'd find the quiet places in the city: cemeteries, lonely docks, fishing boats, old-fashioned saloons. With the city humming as a backdrop, there was peace in those places. As he told me, "Whatever quality is in my newspaper or magazine writing has come from the desire to put in a background, which is constantly changing, people who are constantly changing, but an *attitude* toward life and death that doesn't change." The shad fishermen in Edgewater, for example, are within sight of the city, which would surely overwhelm them and the shad before long, yet they could sit on an old oyster barge and contemplate the meaning of life.

Such themes contribute to the "country mouse" image, but I think that nostalgic interpretation misses the literary quality of Mitchell's journalism.

This is complicated and contradictory. When I talked with him in the late 1990s, he kept telling me stories about his childhood in North Carolina, which seemed to reinforce the "country mouse" idea.

Mitchell said that on Sunday afternoons, his family used to go for rides out in the country. "Since it was a bleak country, only the swamps," he said, "we'd find the cemeteries. My people have been down there for a good long time, so we had relatives in every cemetery in the county. We were always getting out and going in the cemeteries. For some reason we used to have Easter egg hunts in the Baptist cemetery at home. My God, there were eggs hidden by the Sunday school teacher and the kids would go running around. I still have the recollection of hunting for eggs around the graves. You'd find them underneath weeds and vegetation that had died. Colored eggs, robin's egg blue. How wonderful it was to find them in the graveyard, right where my grandmothers and grandfathers were buried."

Back in the city, we have to remember that Mitchell lived since his 20s in Greenwich Village in New York City, the American center of the *avant garde*, of modernism, and of innovation. Freudian interpretations and symbolism were the

rage in literary criticism. Mitchell was not a hick, and he included among his friends some of the hippest people of the time, such as the photographer Diane Arbus.

Mitchell said, “To me ordinary lives, people who are ‘boring,’ are as filled with symbolism, ritual and myth as anybody else’s life.” As in the quote, the things Mitchell pursued were symbolism, ritual and myth, not rural nostalgia.

He was always talking about eggs, and wrote that whenever they appeared they were symbols of resurrection. Joe Gould ate eggs. There was shad roe in his story about the Rivermen in Edgewater, New Jersey. He went Easter egg hunting in the cemeteries of North Carolina.

Mitchell was a symbolist. And he was a gloomy guy, fascinated with death and with how people faced it and thought about it.

In the passages about the novel he never wrote—this comes near the climax of *Joe Gould’s Secret*—Mitchell mentions a Baptist preacher who would be a character in the unwritten book. This preacher tries his best to tell what things “stand for.”

The preacher explains that pomegranates in the Bible stand for 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.” There are constant references to oysters that can “rejuvenate an old man as it can make a 22-year-old truck horse scamper after a mare down an icy street.” [Hyman, *Critic’s Credentials*, 1978.]

Shad roe? That’s part of “The Rivermen” about Edgewater, New Jersey. Joe Gould eats eggs. The two could come together in cemeteries. He said the Trinity Cemetery on lower Broadway at the head of Wall Street is on the migratory flyway of birds. Birdwatchers would hang out in the cemetery. And that led him to talk of the pigeons in the elevated stations that built nests up in the eaves, and whose eggs were always falling out of the nest.

But Mitchell, in that same passage in *Joe Gould's Secret* about his unwritten novel, describes himself as the young reporter, and concludes:

As the young reporter listens, it dawns on him that it is not the South that he longs for but the past, the South's past and his own past, neither of which, in the way that he has been driven by homesickness to think of them, ever really existed, and that it is time for him to move out of the time gone by and into the here and now—it is time for him to grow up. When the sermon is over, he goes back downtown feeling that the old man has set him free, and that he is now a citizen of the city and a citizen of the world.

That's what instructed me on Mitchell's attitude toward his "country mouse" past. He was a citizen of the city and of the world. He had grown up in the city and become part of it.

And, of course, Mitchell had a streak of graveyard humor in him. He looked at death as something we all carry around with us. He loved the Posada drawings from Mexico, the Day of the Dead drawings, such as all the reporters sitting at their desks as skeletons. They are concerned with serious things, "but there's an element of humor in them," Mitchell said. In New York, he said, there's a saying: "So what are you going to do?" Fatalism. He said the jokes about death in Shakespeare are the same as today. Mitchell said he was never bored by interviews or by other people. His graveyard humor made him more eager to enjoy what was going on. "To someone in the fish market," Mitchell told me, "they'd say, 'What the hell do you mean bored? Who's got the chance or the freedom to be bored? You've gotta keep moving.' That idea of keeping moving and the abundance of the market or of the shad fishing. A shadow has been cast over that more than I realized."

In North Carolina, when they were out driving around on a Sunday, they would pick up one of his aunts. The aunt and his mother would walk through a cemetery talking about all the old people who were buried there, and they would comment on

what a good person or what a bad person they had been. “At the rural churches, there were always picnic tables out there. It was festive. We went to picnics, family reunions. I guess in my mind a cemetery is pleasant.”

Mitchell said, “It’s a funny thing about a cemetery, how cheerful it’ll make you. Maybe it’s only me.”