

# Joseph Mitchell and *The New Yorker* Nonfiction Writers

by Norman Sims

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At *The New Yorker*, when you get off the elevator you step into an off-white, narrow little prison of a waiting room. The receptionist phones the inner sanctum of the editorial offices, and your host meets you at the door.

My host was Joseph Mitchell, who has been with *The New Yorker* since 1938. Although he was eighty-one-years-old and rumored to be a ghostly presence in the corridors of the magazine, he carried the grace of a much younger man. Mitchell's last magazine article appeared in 1964. He has regularly gone to his office since then, feeding the speculation that this very private man has been writing some magnificent addition to the books he published between 1938 and 1965.<sup>1</sup> Curiosity has been fed by Mitchell's own last work, *Joe Gould's Secret*, and by the appearance of a character similar to him in Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*. Not surprisingly, given his longevity at the institution, his office is the first one down the hallway. The furnishings—metal desk, cabinets, flooring that dates from the age of linoleum—are standard at *The New Yorker*. That narrow office was a place I never expected to reach. For years, Mitchell has turned down requests for interviews. Finding out what he has been doing the last twenty-five years was the least of my objectives. There are deeper mysteries in his writing.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Mitchell's books include *My Ears Are Bent* (New York: Sheridan House, 1938), a collection of his newspaper work; *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943); *Old Mr. Flood* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1948); *The Bottom of the Harbor* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960); with Edmund Wilson, *Apologies to the Iroquois With A Study of the Mohawks in High Steel* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1960), which contains Mitchell's classic ethnographic study of the Indian ironworkers; and *Joe Gould's Secret* (New York: Viking Press, 1965). Many of these works were reprinted in *Up in the Old Hotel* (1992).

Mitchell and several of his colleagues at *The New Yorker* were responsible for keeping literary journalism alive during the middle years of the twentieth century before the New Journalism burst on the American scene. Mitchell's nonfiction, and to some extent that of A. J. Liebling, adopted a creative approach and probed further into the borderlands of fiction and nonfiction than did many of the highly publicized experiments of the New Journalism.

In the years just before World War II, *The New Yorker* magazine began nurturing literary journalists. Harold Ross founded *The New Yorker* in 1925 as a magazine dedicated to humor, criticism, short fiction, and reportage. Its early success owed little to literary journalism, and a great deal to a talented staff. Katharine Angell edited the fiction department while E. B. White, later her husband, in his "Notes and Comment" essays developed a voice that would be called "*The New Yorker* style." James Thurber contributed short pieces and humorous drawings that cemented both his reputation and the magazine's.

The genius who created *The New Yorker* was not necessarily a genius for organization. Ross fumbled repeatedly while looking for a managing editor. In 1933, he finally hired an editor who could make sense of his editorial system, and who would make a difference in the future of literary journalism. William Shawn arrived as a "Talk of the Town" writer and by 1939 was managing editor. After Ross's death in 1951, Shawn succeeded him as editor and served for thirty-five years.

Shawn's rise to power came at an opportune time. The *New Yorker* editorial corps had weakened as three of its foundation stones departed. Thurber's eyesight was failing and he steadily withdrew. Katharine and E. B. White moved to Maine in 1938, temporarily depriving the magazine of their guidance and contributions. The vacuum was gradually filled by new writers who made enduring contributions to literary journalism: John Jersey, John McNulty, Geoffrey Hellman, Joel Sayre, Alva Johnston, St. Clair McKelway, Philip Hamburger, John Lardner, Brendan Gill, Berton Roueché, John Bainbridge, and Lillian Ross. Referring to himself, Joe Mitchell, Jack Alexander, Richard O. Boyer, and Meyer Berger, A. J. Liebling once wrote, "I still think *The New Yorker's* reporting before we got on it was pretty shoddy."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond Sokolov, *Wayward Reporter: The Life of A. J. Liebling* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 104-5.

Before they came to the magazine, most of the new writers had been newspaper feature reporters. Feature writing could be creative, especially under the editorship of someone like Stanley Walker, city editor of the New York *Herald Tribune*, but was severely limited in the time spent reporting and the scope of presentation. Moving to *The New Yorker* gave writers more time to work, more space (in print, if not in their cubbyhole offices), superb editing, greater autonomy, and—at least in the cases of Mitchell and Liebling—opportunities to pursue literary goals. The institutional conditions were ripe for literary journalism. Until the late 1950s, magazine writing had not fully exploited storytelling; one student of the era found little use of scenes, dramatization, or first-person narrative outside of *The New Yorker*.<sup>3</sup> No American magazine had offered the consistent freedom and encouragement found at *The New Yorker*. The payoff came rapidly from writers such as Mitchell, Liebling, Hersey, Boyer, and Lillian Ross.

Mitchell is a bright-eyed, energetic man who puzzles over things and takes pains to get them right. He dresses as he writes, in a stylish, comfortable, yet precise manner. He lacks a striking physical feature and never intrudes abruptly on a conversation. Talking with him is easy. His courtesy may be his most distinctive trait, along with an incredible memory. He grew up in the cotton and tobacco region near Fairmont, North Carolina, where his ancestors had lived since before the Revolutionary War. After four years at the University of North Carolina, he became a reporter for the New York *Herald Tribune*. He worked at the *Herald Tribune* and *World-Telegram* until 1938, except, as he said, “for a period in 1931 when I got sick of the whole business and went to sea.”<sup>4</sup> Thereafter, he wrote profiles for *The New Yorker* of waterfront workers, people on the Bowery, Mohawk Indians who work on high structural steel, and characters from the Fulton Fish Market in the southeast corner of Manhattan near the Brooklyn Bridge. The literary critic Stanley Edgar Hyman put Mitchell in the tradition of William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, and James Joyce. Hyman said Mitchell “is a reporter only in the sense that

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Bush, “The Use of Fiction Elements in Nonfiction: Proving the Existence of a New Genre,” Master’s degree thesis, Vermont College of Norwich University, 1989, Ch. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, *My Ears Are Bent*, p. 11.

Defoe is a reporter.”<sup>5</sup> Like Defoe in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Mitchell wrote articles that are mixtures of fiction and nonfiction. “Mr. Flood,” a ninety-three-year-old retired house-wrecking contractor who lived in a waterfront hotel and pursued his remaining ambition of eating fish every day (and practically nothing else) and thereby living to be 115, was a composite character. “Combined in him are aspects of several old men who work or hang out in Fulton Fish Market, or who did in the past,” Mitchell explained. “I wanted these stories to be truthful rather than factual, but they are solidly based on facts.”<sup>6</sup>

Two of Mitchell’s books illustrate the advances in literary journalism at *The New Yorker* from the late 1930s to the 1960s. In *The Bottom of the Harbor*, Mitchell reprinted magazine pieces written between 1944 and 1959, including “Up in the Old Hotel,” his symbolic cultural portrait of the Fulton Fish Market. This piece illustrates Malcolm Cowley’s remark that “Mitchell...likes to start with an unimportant hero, but he collects all the facts about him, arranges them to give the desired effects, and usually ends by describing the customs of a whole community.”<sup>7</sup> *The Bottom of the Harbor* also contained “The Rivermen” and “Mr. Hunter’s Grave,” examples of Mitchell at his best in searching out the psychological core of a person or the symbolic meaning of a topic. Mitchell’s last book, *Joe Gould’s Secret*, published in 1965 at the dawn of the New Journalism, represents self-expression in nonfiction that stands somewhere between the realist and modernist styles found among New Journalists.

From the time Mitchell began writing about the Fulton Fish Market, he had a vision of a book that might report on the complexities of the characters he found there. He thought of writing about the fish market in the same way Melville wrote about whaling in *Moby Dick*. “I had an idea for a big book on the fish market,” Mitchell said.<sup>8</sup> “I had those reefer trucks coming in from the East Coast, the West Coast, and the Gulf Coast and converging at South Street and Fulton Street early in

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<sup>5</sup> Stanley Edgar Hyman, “The Art of Joseph Mitchell,” in *The Critic’s Credentials* (New York: Atheneum, 1978), p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, *Old Mr. Flood*, p. vii.

<sup>7</sup> Malcolm Cowley, “The Grammar of Facts” in *The New Republic* (July 26, 1943), p. 113; also reprinted in *The Flower and the Leaf* (New York: Viking Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Mitchell’s remarks were made during several interviews with the author in 1988-1989.

the morning. I worked on it for years, and I couldn't find a focus or a way of telling it. I was lost out there among the bins of fish, screaming 'Rescue me!' Louie rescued me."

Louie Morino owned a seafood restaurant at 92 South Street, which still exists today in the South Street Seaport development around the Fulton Fish Market. The restaurant, Sloppy Louie's, occupied the first floor of a six-story building that was once a hotel. Mitchell began his story, "Up in the Old Hotel," with a description of the early-morning scene in the fish market, forty to sixty kinds of fish arriving from all over. Louie was introduced as the son of a northern Italian fisherman, Giuseppe Morino. His family fished from the village of Recco, near Genoa, from Roman times. His father specialized in octopus, enjoying exclusive rights to fish an underwater cave "full of octopuses; it was choked with them." In a few hours of bobbing meat scraps near the dark entrance of the cave, he could catch enough to "glut the market in Recco." Louie left Recco in 1905 at the age of seventeen. In America, he worked in restaurants and, by then in his mid-sixties, bought the run-down restaurant in the fish market. Louie's story became a vehicle for Mitchell's cultural portrait. He lingered over the customers who frequented Sloppy Louie's, their businesses, their attitudes, their habits, and their characteristic jokes.

Louie used the second floor of the building for storage, but the floors beyond were a mystery to him. The stairs only reached the second floor. An old elevator on a rope-pull then led upward. Louie did not want to risk a ride in the creaky old cage. "It makes me uneasy," Louie said, "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." After Louie explained the history of the building, from its days as the Fulton Ferry Hotel before the Brooklyn Bridge was built nearby, Mitchell said, "Look, Louie, I'll go up in the elevator with you."

The reader is amply prepared for some sort of symbolic climax. The building had been owned by the Schermerhorns, an important Dutch family of Old New York, and the hotel was near busy oceanic and coastwise steamship piers. Louie thought they might find "beds and bureaus, pitchers and bowls, chamber pots, mirrors, brass spittoons, odds and ends, old hotel registers that the rats chew on to get paper to line their nests with, God knows what all."

Louie brought out construction helmets and flashlights, and he and Mitchell climbed into the elevator. “Oh, God in Heaven,” Louie cried, “the dust in here! It’s like somebody emptied a vacuum-cleaner bag in here.” Louis pulled them up to the third floor, and they stepped out into what was once the reading room of the Fulton Ferry Hotel. After the build-up, the discoveries were a disappointment. They found a bit of old hotel junk under a deep layer of dust: bedsprings, a tin water-cooler, a cracked glass bell, rusted sugar bowls, and a wire basket filled with empty whiskey bottles. A drawer in a bureau held “a few hairpins, and some buttons, and a comb with several teeth missing, and a needle with a bit of black thread in its eye, and a scattering of worn playing cards.” The other drawers were empty. In the next bureau, Louie found a medicine bottle with “two inches of colorless liquid and half an inch of black sediment.” He opened it and smelled. “It’s gone dead. It doesn’t smell like anything at all,” Louie said. Then the restaurant owner grew morose and insisted they return to the ground floor. On the way down he said, “I didn’t learn much I didn’t know before.”

“This climax is a tremendous let-down, and it is meant to be,” Noel Perrin wrote in a retrospective article on Mitchell. “They have broken through to the past, and all they find is trivial debris. For once the past had seemed retrievable—but when you reach out to seize it, you find nothing but dust and decay.”<sup>9</sup> Stanley Edgar Hyman took a more symbolist view of the several stories in *The Bottom of the Harbor*, a view encouraged by the literary perspectives of Kenneth Burke. Hyman wrote:

Mitchell’s other major theme, most boldly imaged in *The Bottom of the Harbor*, is the depths of the unconscious. Dusty hotel rooms shut up for decades and now reluctantly explored are infantile experience; the wrecks on the bottom of the harbor, teeming with marine life, are festering failures and guilts; the rats that come boldly out of their holes in the dark before dawn are Id wishes; Mr. Poole’s dream of the draining of New York harbor by earthquake is a paradigm of

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<sup>9</sup> Noel Perrin, “Paragon of Reporters: Joseph Mitchell,” in *The Sewanee Review*, 91(2):182 (Spring 1983).

psychoanalysis; Mr. Hunter's grave is at once tomb and womb and marriage bed.<sup>10</sup>

Such interpretations are uncommon in nonfiction, a literary realm where symbolism is often considered nonexistent or accidental. In one interview, Mitchell explained the symbolic significance of the story as he saw it. "Louie was always talking about his father, who was a fisherman. He had some underwater caves down there where octopuses lived. The first title I had on that story was 'The Cave.' I realized later on that upstairs in this old hotel was Louie going into the past, into the cave of the past. An octopus is a dream creature itself. It comes out of a nightmare sort of world. Later on, Stanley Hyman wrote a piece about this and I said, 'My God, Stanley's right.' These were the nightmare figures upstairs of Louie's and maybe of mine. I didn't go out consciously looking for this, but maybe in some unconscious way I knew what I was doing."

The symbolism of the past, and Mitchell's peculiar interest in graveyard humor, played a part in two other articles, "The Rivermen" and "Mr. Hunter's Grave." Mitchell said Harold Ross, the founder of *The New Yorker*, came into his office one time to discuss the characters in Mitchell's articles. "You know," Ross said, "you're a pretty gloomy guy." A moment later, Ross amplified this remark. "Of course," he continued, "I'm no Goddamned little ray of sunshine myself." The concept of graveyard humor is "the only view I have of the world," Mitchell told me. "By that time I was writing about disappointed old men and old women. When they started talking about how nothing had turned out the way they thought it would, I said to myself, 'I can respond to that.'"

Mitchell reached into a drawer of his desk and took out a book of engravings by the Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada. On the cover was an engraving of a laughing skeleton playing a guitar. "This strange man Posada has had a great influence on me—on the way I look at the world," Mitchell said. "I first heard of him in 1933, during the worst days of the Depression, when I was a reporter on the *World-Telegram*. I had gone up to the Barbizon Plaza Hotel to interview Frida Kahlo, who was the wife of Diego Rivera and a great painter herself, a sort of demonic surrealist—I believe time might tell that she is a greater painter than Rivera. That was when Rivera

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<sup>10</sup> Hyman, *The Critic's Credentials*, p. 83.

was doing those Rockefeller Center murals. Thumb-tacked all over the walls of the hotel suite were some very odd engravings printed on the cheapest kind of newsprint. ‘José Guadalupe Posada,’ Kahlo said, almost reverentially. ‘Mexican. 1852-1913.’ Then, through an interpreter, she told me that she had tacked them up herself so she could glance at them now and then and keep her sanity while living in New York City. Some were broadsides. ‘They show sensational happenings that took place in Mexico City in streets and in markets and in churches and in bedrooms,’ Kahlo said, ‘and they were sold on the streets by peddlers for pennies.’ One broadside showed a streetcar that had struck a hearse and had knocked the coffin onto the tracks. A distinguished-looking man lay in the ruins of the coffin, flat on his back, his hands folded. One showed a priest who had hung himself in a cathedral. One showed a man on his deathbed at the moment when his soul was separating from his body. But the majority of the engravings were of animated skeletons mimicking living human beings engaged in many kinds of human activities, mimicking them and mocking them: a skeleton man on bended knee singing a love song to a skeleton woman, a skeleton man stepping into a confession box, skeletons at a wedding, skeletons at a funeral, skeletons making speeches, skeleton gentlemen in top hats, skeleton ladies in fashionable bonnets. But the most astonishing thing is that all these pictures were humorous, even the most morbid of them, even the busted coffin on the streetcar tracks. That is, they had a strong undercurrent of humor. It was the kind of humor that the old Dutch masters caught in those prints that show a miser locked in his room counting his money and Death is standing just outside the door. It was Old Testament humor, if I make any sense: the humor of Ecclesiastes—vanity, vanity, all is vanity. Gogolian humor. Brueghelian humor. I am thinking of that painting by Brueghel showing the halt leading the blind, which, as I see it, is graveyard humor. Anyway, ever since that afternoon in Frida Kahlo’s hotel suite, I have been looking for books showing Posada engravings. I never pass a bookstore in a Spanish neighborhood of the city without going in and seeing if they have a Posada book, and I have found quite a few of them. My respect for him grows all the time. To me, he is the great master of what I think of as graveyard humor.”

“The Rivermen” focused on the town of Edgewater, New Jersey, on the Hudson River across from the upper West Side of



Manhattan within sight of the George Washington Bridge. Generation after generation of shad fishermen and rivermen has lived in Edgewater. As was his habit, Mitchell frequented the Edgewater Cemetery. From North Carolina, he brought an interest in wildflowers, which could be found most easily in overgrown cemeteries around New York City. At Edgewater, he wrote:

Old men and old women come in the spring, with hoes and rakes, and clean off their family plots and plant old-fashioned flowers on them. Hollyhocks are widespread. Asparagus has been planted here and there, for its feathery, ferny sprays. One woman plants sunflowers. Coarse, knotty, densely tangled rosebushes grow on several plots, hiding graves and gravestones. The roses that they produce are small and fragile and extraordinarily fragrant, and have waxy red hips almost as big as crab apples. Once, walking through the cemetery, I stopped and talked with an old woman who was down on her knees in her family plot, setting out some bulbs at the foot of a grave, and she remarked on the age of the rosebushes. "I believe some of the ones in here now were in here when I was a young woman, and I am past eighty," she said. "My mother—this is her grave—used to say there were rosebushes just like these all over this section when she was a girl.... And she said *her* mother—that's her grave over there—told her she had heard from *her* mother that all of them were descended from one bush that some poor uprooted woman who came to this country back in the Dutch times potted up and brought along with her...She thought they were a nuisance. All the same, for some reason of her own, she admired them, and enjoyed looking at them. 'I know why they do so well in here,' she'd say. 'They've got good strong roots that go right down into the graves.'"<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mitchell, *Bottom of the Harbor*, p. 189-90.

The image of ancient roses with their roots in the graves perfectly represents Mitchell's approach to reporting. It connects him to the symbolic manner of James Joyce—his favorite author—and to his own past. "On Sunday afternoons, when I was a child," he recalled, "my father and mother and my brothers and sisters would go for a ride in the country, and more often than not we would wind up visiting some old family cemetery out in a field in a grove of cedars where people who were kin to us were buried, and my parents would describe who this one was and who that one was and exactly how they were related to us, and somehow I always enjoyed this. And at least once every summer, my family and my two aunts on my mother's side and their families would meet on a Sunday afternoon at an old Scottish Presbyterian church out in the country, old Iona Church that my mother's family long ago had helped build. We would all bring some big watermelons from our own gardens—big long green Rattlesnakes and big round Cuban Queens—and we would sit the melons on tables in a picnic grove in back of the church and slice them into rashers and eat them, and then we would stand around and talk, and then, late in the afternoon, as it was getting dark, we would go for a walk up and down the rows in the cemetery that belongs to the church and my mother and my aunts would comment on the people buried there, just about all of whom were related to them. 'This man buried here was *so mean*,' one of them would say, 'I don't know how his family stood him.' And a few steps farther along, she would say, 'And this one here was *so good*, I don't know how his family stood him.' Every time I read the Anna Livia Plurabelle section in *Finnegans Wake*, I can hear the voices of my aunts as they walk among the graves in Iona cemetery and the sun is going down.

"And there's another thing I remember about cemeteries when I was a child. In those days, the Baptists in Fairmont used to have a big Easter-egg hunt in the old cemetery across the road from the First Baptist Church. My father's people were Baptists and some of my ancestors, including my paternal grandfather, were buried in the cemetery, and I always went to the Easter-egg hunt. The Sunday-school teachers would hide colored eggs all over the cemetery, in among the graves. Then, later in the day, the children would line up, and, at a signal, start running all over the place, hunting for the eggs. I can still remember finding a beautiful robin's-egg-blue egg under a pile of dead leaves on my grandfather's grave."

The community of rivermen in Edgewater had survived for generations by working on tugboats and excursion boats on the river, by fishing for shad during the annual run, and before that by cutting paving blocks for New York City from a local quarry. “In the years when there was no shad fishing going on, you could walk along there and you would have no idea—unless you knew what the barges represented—that this thing went on. There was a kind of secret background, but there are traces all along if you happen to know it,” Mitchell said. He was trying to preserve that past in his story, perhaps as a seed of resurrection, an egg in a cemetery.

Mitchell found similar traditions in the Fulton Fish Market, where the companies would retain the names such as “Chesebro Brothers, Robbins and Graham” long after the Chesebro brothers and Robbins and Graham were all dead and gone. “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 who display an *attitude* toward life and death that doesn’t change,” Mitchell said. The woman tending roses in Edgewater had the enduring attitude that attracted Mitchell.

In “Mr. Hunter’s Grave,” Mitchell profiled an elderly black bricklayer, a resident of a traditionally black community along Bloomingdale Road on Staten Island. The story begins, innocently enough, as a quest for wildflowers in a Staten Island cemetery. Mitchell was directed to Mr. Hunter, who knew the location of the cemetery, but before long he was listening to the story of a man’s life and drawing out of it the culture of the entire community.

“My whole idea of reporting—particularly reporting on conversation—is to talk to a man or a woman long enough under different circumstances, like old Mr. Hunter down on Staten Island, until, in effect, they reveal their inner selves,” he said. “During the time that I knew him, Mr. Hunter’s son died—his son was an alcoholic—and I genuinely sympathized with him, and he gradually saw that I was seriously and deeply interested in the life of his community. He himself was trying to understand what his mother went through bringing up her family. I was always trying to reach his inner life. I can’t really write about anybody until they speak what I consider ‘the revealing remark,’ or the revealing anecdote or the thing that touched them. I’ve often deliberately tried to find those things. You’re trying to report, at the beginning without knowing it, the

unconscious as well as the consciousness of a man or woman. Once I had what I considered the revealing remark, I could use that to encourage them to talk more about that aspect of their lives. They were able to talk, like Mr. Hunter could talk about his first wife's death, about his son's death, about his stepfather who he hated and who I guess hated him. That way I could go far deeper into the man's life than I could any other way."

This approach led Mitchell toward the use of symbolic backgrounds and a technique he attributes to T. S. Eliot. "One thing you have to do, if you're going to write this sort of thing, is realize that people have buried their pain and have transformed experience enough to allow them to endure it and bear it. If you stay with them long enough, you let them reveal the past to themselves, thereby revealing it to you. Then they will dare to bring out the truth of something even if it makes them look bad."

Mitchell's technique departed from the standard nonfiction of the day. While most magazine articles presented an almost flat character defined by the facts of age, occupation and achievements, Mitchell's writing took the reader into a character's inner life. With Mr. Hunter, the revealing moment came as he told Mitchell about a time when he saw his mother's reflection in the window of a store. As she passed by in the street, Mr. Hunter saw her face and how sad it was. The reflection made the familiar strange, and Mr. Hunter could thereby interpret it. Mitchell said he wanted to create those backgrounds in his nonfiction writing, producing an experience that we are capable of understanding more clearly than we can in everyday life. Writing about moments that reveal an inner life demands an approach different from the frontal assault of standard journalism. "T. S. Eliot called it the 'objective correlative,'" Mitchell said. "It's where you write about one thing and you're actually writing about another. Or where you make one thing represent another." He cited, as an example, a passage in D. H. Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia* in which a man is roasting a young goat at a large, open fireplace. The scene presents a primitively spitted goat being roasted by an Italian peasant, greasy from the work he is doing, against the flickering shadows cast by the open flames and the bluish glow of burning fat. "Suddenly you begin to realize," Mitchell said, "that Lawrence is showing you how it was in the caves. He doesn't anywhere imply that, but you can't miss it.

“In other words, first you write the background for something to happen, and then it happens against this background. It has to be in the round. You have to have the person against the background. That gives a story meaning and significance, rather than plot.”

*Joe Gould's Secret* was a two-part profile for *The New Yorker*, with the parts separated by twenty-two years. Mitchell met Joe Gould in Greenwich Village in 1938. Gould was a bohemian, a short, gaunt, garrulous man with a disheveled beard and a wild look. He was the son of a New England doctor and a graduate of Harvard, class of 1911. His ancestors had been in the New World since 1635. On the Bowery, Gould wore castoff clothes and he cadged drinks by demonstrating how he conversed with sea gulls.

Gould was always scribbling in nickel composition books, writing the Oral History of Our Time, which had grown over the years to fill hundreds of notebooks with millions of words. Gould's project, which had been reported by writers on several publications, was the focus of the first profile. The Oral History contained ordinary conversations, biographies of bums, sailor's tales, hospital experiences, harangues from speakers in Union Square and Columbus Circle, dirty stories, graffiti found in washrooms, gossip, accounts of Greenwich Village parties, and arguments about topics of the day such as free love, birth control, psychoanalysis, Christian Science, alcoholism, and art. Gould's inspiration came from William Butler Yeats, who once commented, “The history of a nation is not in parliaments and battlefields, but in what the people say to each other on fair days and high days, and in how they farm, and quarrel, and go on pilgrimage.” Gould explained to Mitchell:

All at once, the idea for the Oral History occurred to me: I would spend the rest of my life going about the city listening to people—eavesdropping, if necessary—and writing down whatever I heard them say that sounded revealing to me, no matter how boring or idiotic or vulgar or obscene it might sound to others. I could see the whole thing in my mind—long-winded conversations and short and snappy conversations, brilliant conversations and foolish conversations, curses, catch phrases, coarse remarks, snatches of quarrels, the mutterings of

drunks and crazy people, the entreaties of beggars and bums, the propositions of prostitutes, the spiels of pitchmen and peddlers, the sermons of street preachers, shouts in the night, wild rumors, cries from the heart.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of the Oral History attracted Mitchell. His own profiles had focused on ordinary people, especially on the Bowery and in the fish market—people who lived life fully but in ordinary ways. Describing five of the articles in *The Bottom of the Harbor*, Noel Perrin said, “each tells its story so much in the words of its characters that it feels like a kind of apotheosis of oral history.”<sup>13</sup>

One problem flawed the first profile, “Professor Sea Gull,” which Mitchell published in 1942: he never got a chance to read the Oral History, which had been reported as filling so many notebooks that they could be stacked higher than Gould himself. Gould said his notebooks were stored in friends’ basements and attics, and the opportunity never arrived for Mitchell to read them.

In the 1964 profile, Mitchell reported his efforts to find the Oral History and read some portion of it. His search led to a few notebooks filled with repetitive and obsessive memories of Gould’s father, who had once made a psychologically damaging remark about his son’s chances in life. After considerable searching, Mitchell discovered Joe Gould’s secret: the Oral History did not exist. Gould’s convincing patter had seemed unassailable to several reporters, including Mitchell. After announcing his conclusion to Gould, Mitchell immediately regretted it.

I returned to my office and sat down and propped my elbows on my desk and put my head in my hands. 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.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Mitchell, *Joe Gould’s Secret*, p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> Noel Perrin, “A Kind of Writing For Which No Name Exists,” in *A Reader’s Delight* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1988), p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell, *Joe Gould’s Secret*, p. 139.

Charitably, Mitchell decided the Oral History existed in Gould's head and might one day be written down on paper.

It was easy for me to see how this could be, for it reminded me of a novel that I had once intended to write. I was twenty-four years old at the time and had just come under the spell of Joyce's "Ulysses." My novel was to be "about" New York City. It was also to be about a day and a night in the life of a young reporter in New York City.... But the truth is, I never actually wrote a word of it ... When I thought of the cataracts of books, the Niagaras of books, the rushing rivers of books, the oceans of books, the tons and truckloads and trainloads of books that were pouring off the presses of the world at that moment, only a very few of which would be worth picking up and looking at, let alone reading, I began to feel that it was admirable that he *hadn't* written it.<sup>15</sup>

Later on, Mitchell wrote, he received a letter from a friend of Gould's. "I have always felt that the city's unconscious may be trying to speak to us through Joe Gould," the letter said. "And that the people who have gone underground in the city may be trying to speak to us through him. And that the city's living dead may be trying to speak to us through him. People who never belonged anyplace from the beginning. People sitting in those terrible dark barrooms."<sup>16</sup>

Stanley Edgar Hyman's essay, "The Art of Joseph Mitchell," presented this rather pregnant interpretation of the book:

In literary terms, *Joe Gould's Secret* is a Jamesian story of life's necessary illusion (the secret is that the nine-million-word Oral History of Our Time that Gould had spent his lifetime producing did not exist). The book is written, however, not in intricate Jamesian prose, but in the bubbling, overflowing manner of James Joyce . . .

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<sup>15</sup> Mitchell, *Joe Gould's Secret*, p. 140-45.

<sup>16</sup> Mitchell, *Joe Gould's Secret*, p. 153.

In deeper terms, Gould is a masking (and finally an unmasking) for Mitchell himself. In *Joe Gould's Secret* Mitchell seems freer than ever before to talk about himself, his resolutions and intentions, his methods of reporting and writing, even his life ... By the end of the book, when he discovers Gould's secret, Mitchell becomes, not Gould's bearer or Gould's victim, but Gould himself, and the unwritten Oral History merges with Mitchell's own unwritten novel, a New York *Ulysses* (which Blooms magnificently even in four-page synopsis). Then we realize that Gould has been Mitchell all along, a misfit in a community of traditional occupations, statuses, and roles, come to New York to express his special identity; finally we realize that the body of Mitchell's work is precisely that Oral History of Our Time that Gould himself could not write.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps I took Hyman's thesis—that Gould is actually Mitchell—too literally, but it brought together several streams that had been running through my mind and merged them into a river I could not ignore. For a while, I imagined that Gould never existed, and I could see clues in the text.

In the first place, Mitchell had dealt with fictional characters before, although they were certainly based on fact. His Old Mr. Flood, the ninety-three-year-old resident of a hotel in the fish market, was a composite of several characters in the market who would not cooperate with Mitchell on a profile. Harold Ross suggested Mitchell write a composite as a profile, and a three-part series followed. Mitchell told me that one part of Old Mr. Flood was Joe Mitchell, the part of the character who only ate seafood. "All the things I said in there about eating fish, that's what I believe," Mitchell said. He called it a "seafoodetarian diet."

In addition, Gould says a lot of things about the Oral History that sounded like the Joe Mitchell I had been interviewing. "Some talk has an obvious meaning and nothing more, [Gould] said, and some, often unbeknownst to the talker, has at least one other meaning and sometimes several other meanings lurking around inside its obvious meaning."<sup>18</sup> Gould

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<sup>17</sup> Hyman, *The Critic's Credentials*, p. 84-85.

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell, *Joe Gould's Secret*, p. 37.



says, “In autobiography and biography, as in history, I have discovered, there are occasions when the facts do not tell the truth.”<sup>19</sup> Gould looks for the revealing remark in conversations, which was a hallmark of Mitchell’s reporting technique. Mitchell would sit for many hours listening to someone like Mr. Hunter on Staten Island, waiting for the comments that cast light on a lifetime. “He was the sad old man you see in Balzac or Thomas Hardy,” Mitchell said of Mr. Hunter, “the sad old figure in the corner someplace who wants to tell you what he learned going through life, but he never got the chance. To tell you the truth, after a while I got an idea that if I had any skill, it grew out of this fact that I’m not easily bored. I can listen indefinitely to anybody.” It was also characteristic that Mitchell’s real-life subjects were based on literary models.

Joe Gould’s father, the doctor, had driven him away from home with his expectations. Joe Mitchell’s father contributed to his move to New York City, although less harshly. Mitchell’s father wanted him to become a cotton trader. Mitchell discovered while standing next to his father on the cotton-trading platform that he is almost a dyslectic in arithmetic. He knew he could never handle cut-throat cotton trading, so when he learned to write in college he took the opportunity to leave. “I always felt like an exile,” he told me. So had Joe Gould.

Some passages in *Joe Gould’s Secret* read like suggestive clues in a mystery. For example, one night a bohemian in Goody’s bar said to Joe Gould, “You don’t seem to be yourself.” And Gould answered, “I’m *not* myself. I’ve never been myself.”<sup>20</sup>

Last, the parallels are too close. What has Mitchell been doing the last twenty-five years, writing an Oral History? He has been in his office working on a book project that he says will collect all his work in one place. It will contain all of his *New Yorker* articles, many of which were never reprinted, and some new work, such as a profile of Joe Cantalupo, who once hauled trash out of the fish market. This might prove to be his best writing, but no one has seen it. Joe Mitchell’s secret might parallel Joe Gould’s. Has he been not-writing nonfiction pieces, or perhaps his novel, or his own Oral History that would portray New York as Joyce portrayed Dublin? Has he been going through the motions while actually creating a mask? This

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<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, *Joe Gould’s Secret*, p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> Mitchell, *Joe Gould’s Secret*, p. 169.

possibility has occurred to virtually everyone who has commented on the Gould book.

It seemed a bit much to imagine that Joe Gould was really Joe Mitchell. But then, it was hard to imagine that the Oral History did not exist. I never looked for Gould's birth certificate nor evidence of his father's medical practice. I did confirm that Gould was graduated from Harvard in 1911 and his father from Harvard Medical School in 1888. Then I realized that such evidence did not answer any questions. I believe Joe Gould really did exist, but Joe Mitchell occupies a good portion of Gould's character, just as he does Mr. Flood's. Whatever the nature of Gould's personality, the symbolism of this book is pure Mitchell. Gould had created his own identity, a mask that was as much an anchor for him as anyone's more genuine activities. Mitchell always sought the true story behind those masks, the window on the personality opened by the revealing remark. He found the truth in Joe Gould's story, but part of Joe Mitchell's life got entangled with it and created a mystery.

The symbolism matters to the extent that it deepens our knowledge of Mitchell's work and of modern literary journalism. There are mysteries in Joe Mitchell's prose that I could have asked him to explain, although I knew he would have talked his way around such questions as craftily as a politician. The mystery, after all, gives the prose an embedded edge that I would hate to dull by explaining it away. Was Mitchell really Joe Gould? Was Old Mr. Flood an incomplete novel presented as a *New Yorker* nonfiction profile? Were his shad fishermen and Fulton Fish Market types a silent conspiracy by a very clever man to create an innovative mixture of fiction and nonfiction, or were they merely results of interviews with ordinary people? The clues in the texts could lead to answers on both sides. He may have been Joe Gould. I did not want to eliminate the delicious mystery because it was along that edge of uncertainty that Mitchell's work soared toward greatness.

I did eventually ask him if his interests had mingled with Joe Gould's to create this work. "Oh, Lord, yes," Mitchell said. "We were in the same boat. We both came from small towns and didn't fit in, and both had an idea. He had the same feeling about people on the park bench talking. I was talking about myself here. He was talking about himself and I was talking about myself."

“With all the people in New York City,” I asked, “why does Joe Gould become an interesting person to you?”

“Because he is me,” Mitchell said. “God forgive me for my version of Flaubert’s remark about Madame Bovary. I think all of us are divided up into lots of different aspects, you might say. To mix them up, you almost have to say, ‘I am so-and-so,’ just as I tried to do with Gould and all the different aspects of the people who had seen him.”

Mitchell later elaborated. “Everything in the Gould book is documented, all those things in the *Dial* and all the records of his family. But I could have used this documentation in a different way, The creative aspect of it is the particularity of the facts that you choose, and the particularity of the conversations that you choose, and the fact that you stayed with the man long enough to get a panoply of conversations from which you can choose the ones that you decide are the most significant. The Gould I described, I think, is the absolutely true Gould. But another person could have written the story about Joe Gould far differently.”

This sort of discovery seemed more important to me than finding out what he has been doing for the last twenty-five years. After saying he did not enjoy perpetuating mysteries, Mitchell finally explained. Whether or not he answered the question is another matter. His mother died in 1963. She left him two farms near Fairmont, his hometown, in Robeson County, North Carolina. He rented one and began managing the other in a partnership arrangement that required him to go to Robeson County often. “It so happened that farming was changing radically down there at that time,” he said. “Many farmers were changing from the traditional crops—cotton and tobacco—to such crops as soybeans and winter wheat, and I became pretty much involved in that.” Then, in 1976, his father died, at the age of ninety-five. “My father had been a farmer, a cotton buyer, a tobacco warehouseman, and a speculator in cotton futures,” Mitchell said. “He had accumulated approximately 3,500 acres of land in tracts scattered all over the lower part of the county. He left this land to his six children—me, my two brothers, and my three sisters. Half of it was farmland and half of it was covered with timber, mostly tall, beautiful Southern shortleaf pines. State foresters who examined the timber told us that it was fully mature and was vulnerable to forest fires and pine beetles and that we should sell it, which we did. And as soon as the timber was cut, we

started a reforestation program that is still going on. We are reforesting the cut-over land tract by tract, and I have become very interested in this. In fact, I guess I should say that I have become obsessively interested in it. In some periods of the year, I spend more time down in Robeson County working in the woods and staying in the old family house on Church Street in Fairmont than I do in New York City.

“Another thing that has interrupted my work is the South Street Seaport Museum. I was mixed up in the Seaport from the beginning—I was one of the charter members—and for eight years or so, from 1972 until 1980, I was a member of the restoration committee, which was the busiest of the Seaport committees, and that took up a great deal of my time. And then, in 1982, Mayor Koch appointed me to the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission and I spent five years as a commissioner. But despite all these interruptions, down South and up here, I have continued working on a book, and one of these days, if I am not terminally interrupted, I hope to finish it.”<sup>21</sup>

For many years, Mitchell avoided being interviewed because he had once turned down a friend, a newspaperman, who asked for an interview—he did not want to talk about inherited land and such—and he has tried to be consistent since then. In addition, he said, “As a journalist, I have the old feeling that the reporter should stay out of it.” In the meantime, rumor and speculation have grown up around Mitchell, as it has around J. D. Salinger. Mitchell was not hiding and had no metaphysical objections to being interviewed; he simply felt until recently that he did not want to talk.

In *Joe Gould's Secret* and *Old Mr. Flood*, it seemed to me, Mitchell discovered an avenue for self-expression not often found in journalism. How does a writer inject himself into the narrative without upsetting readers who are accustomed to impersonal newspaper prose? Facing the same question, some writers, such as James Agee, threw themselves and their psyches into the foreground. On the other hand, Liebling portrayed himself as a secondary character along the margins of the storyline, especially in his early work. Writers could become a dominant part of the narrative, or stand apart from it and erase their personalities and motivations. Both choices were

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<sup>21</sup> Note: In 1992, Mitchell published *Up in the Old Hotel*, a compilation of his previous work. The book did not contain new work.

uncomfortable for creative nonfiction writers. Mitchell found another solution by merging himself with the characters of Mr. Flood and Joe Gould, and then writing about them in third person.

In 1952, Joe Liebling, writing about Colonel John R. Stingo (“The Honest Rainmaker”), “discovered a way to infuse himself into another man’s nature in such a manner that he created an ostensibly real portrait that was in one sense fictional, in another, a retouched composite of two flesh-and-blood men,” as Raymond Sokolov wrote.<sup>22</sup> Mitchell had already pioneered that ground. “I think Liebling’s Col. Stingo is my Mr. Flood, to tell you the truth,” Mitchell said.

Another attempt to merge with a central character can be seen in *Joe Gould’s Secret*, but the work threatens to overwhelm the reader with mysteries about the legitimate links between fiction and nonfiction. Few nonfiction writers at that time had experimented so aggressively along the borders as did Liebling and Mitchell. Some that come to mind are Agee in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Ernest Hemingway’s nonfiction reports on Spain and Africa, George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, and *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and John Dos Passos’s *Orient Express*. Mitchell is present in his work, as much as Norman Mailer or Joan Didion are in theirs, but modernist writers such as Didion and Mailer are self-consciously playing a role that the reader must interpret. Mitchell’s presence remains hidden, perhaps even unconscious to him, and his motives and purposes remain set behind a veil of symbolism, his personality merged into that of another character. In several respects, this was territory not explored by the New Journalists; few others have moved to this borderland.

“You hope the reader won’t be aware,” Mitchell said. “If I read something and I think, ‘Oh, God, here comes the myth,’ I’m tired of it already. But if it’s inherent and inescapable, then the reader will go along. You want to take the reader to the last sentence. I don’t want to take him there just by *fact*. I want to take the reader there by going through an experience that I had that was revealing. There’s something I like about that word ‘reveal.’”

One way of looking at Joe Mitchell’s work, I decided, was as a web of reporting, cultural anthropology, symbolism,

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<sup>22</sup> Sokolov, *Wayward Reporter*, p. 252.

and memoir. Old Mr. Flood and Joe Gould were made of a fabric that had once clothed Joe Mitchell. At the same time, his writing opened the door to the Fulton Fish Market, the Bowery, and Greenwich Village for readers who had no knowledge of those places, just as a good cultural anthropologist can bring a Balinese village to life. One of his strongest personal interests was literature, especially James Joyce and the Russian literary greats. Whatever else was going on in Mitchell's reporting, there was always the possibility of an elaborately drawn symbolic meaning.

Of the several other *New Yorker* writers who were creating innovative literary journalism after the war—including most certainly John Hersey and Lillian Ross—perhaps the most important was A. J. Liebling. In 1935, Liebling moved to *The New Yorker*, completing a twelve-year newspaper career that began at age eighteen and ended as a feature writer at the *New York World-Telegram*, where he and Joe Mitchell became close friends. Shawn handled his copy and his training at *The New Yorker* from the beginning. From 1936 until he left for Europe in September 1939, Liebling wrote profiles of lowlife street characters, popular entertainers, con men, and boxers. Liebling claimed he received the assignment to Europe on the eve of World War II because he spoke French, but he was already a proven writer—just the kind of person who would find a different approach to a spectacular story. While other reporters gobbled up combat stories in Europe, Liebling sought out the French civilians who had survived occupation by two armies, and the stories of ordinary soldiers. After the war he retraced his route from a Normandy beachhead, where he had come ashore under fire, through the farmhouses and restaurants he had visited on the road to Paris. Liebling's sophisticated yet earthy first-person account stood a head above contemporary journalism.<sup>23</sup> He was later best known as *The New Yorker's* press critic, and as the author of *Chicago: The Second City* and *The Earl of Louisiana*.

Liebling recognized in Mitchell a compatriot who had been drawing from the same models for his prose. They had both read George Borrow's nineteenth-century books on the Spanish gypsies, François Villon, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Ben Hecht's *Erik Dorn*. Liebling had read Baudelaire and

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<sup>23</sup> *Normandy Revisited*, copyright 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958 by A. J. Liebling, can be found in *Liebling Abroad* (Playboy Press, 1981).

Rimbaud in the original. Both liked Stephen Crane, but Liebling preferred *Red Badge of Courage*, while Mitchell, who grew up in the South but could not stand Civil War stories and history, favored *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. They discussed writing by arguing about Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, rather than by reviewing each other's journalism. "I didn't think of influencing Joe, or of Joe influencing me," Mitchell said. "We were too individualistic. We talked a lot about books but not much about our own writing. That was a private thing. We preferred to talk about how Stendhal did it." Both had read Rabelais, and Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches*. The list of models goes on: Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*; Fielding's *Jonathan Wild*; *The Arabian Nights*; Kafka's short story "The Burrow"; Thomas Mann's "Disorder and Early Sorrow"; Robert Graves's *White Goddess*; the books of Mark Twain and James Joyce; John Skelton's poems. Liebling drew heavily on William Cobbett, Pierce Egan's boxing stories, Hazlitt, and Dostoevsky. These models are more literary than one might expect for nonfiction writers, but then, Mitchell and Liebling had extraordinary goals for their nonfiction. As Sokolov noted about Liebling's era and our own, "We cannot help noticing that we live in a time of confused genres, where energies focus at the no man's land between fact and fiction."<sup>24</sup>

The financial success of *The New Yorker* encouraged Mitchell, Liebling, and others who wanted to write literate reports about ordinary people, street eccentrics, and the cultures of the world of boxing or the Fulton Fish Market. Never generous with its writers, the magazine still found ways to support innovative journalism. Mark Singer, a contemporary *New Yorker* writer, has described the methods of compensation at the magazine as "Byzantine."<sup>25</sup> Originally, Harold Ross paid more for a celebrity "highlife" profile than for a "lowlife" piece. Mitchell said Ross added a new category to reward the newspaper feature writers in the postwar years. This was the "highlife lowlife" profile. "For example," Mitchell said, "in my Mazie profile [about a theater ticket-taker on the edge of the Bowery], Ross said, 'I'll tell you what we'll do. You've got Fannie Hurst in there. She's highlife. That makes it a "highlife lowlife.'" And then he put another classification in, that if it was a 'humorous highlife' it got a certain amount, but if it was

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<sup>24</sup> Sokolov, *Wayward Reporter*, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Personal interview, Sept. 24, 1982.

a ‘humorous highlife lowlife,’ that was as high as you could get.”

Liebling wrote first-person narratives, developing a masterful style rarely matched. John McNulty and Joe Mitchell created fictional or composite characters such as Mr. Flood, and brought them to life in the service of nonfiction. Of course, this was in an age before the controversies over the New Journalism, where composite characters such as Gail Sheehy’s “Redpants” were roundly condemned not so much on theoretical grounds but more as a way of thumping the whole enterprise of New Journalism. Mitchell received little or no criticism for his literary experiments, and no excuses were needed. “Old Mr. Flood” worked and injured nobody. Even John Hersey used a composite character in “Joe Is Home Now,” one of his World War II stories, although he would later criticize Tom Wolfe for similar “fiction-aping” practices.<sup>26</sup> Lillian Ross’s career reached full stride just before the New Journalism took the stage. She wanted to stay out of her reports, yet she artfully created such a distinctive voice in her work that later New Journalists such as Sara Davidson would acknowledge her as a model they emulated.

In 1973, Tom Wolfe published an essay, “The New Journalism,” in which he described how some reporters had paid homage to “The Novel.” Even today, his article remains an oracle for scholars of the New Journalism. Back in the early 1960s, Wolfe said, the envious reporter with literary ambitions wanted to quit the newspaper game, write a novel of his own, and retire to a fishing shack in Arkansas. The literary scene accommodated journalists’ dreams, he said, but only if they were dreams about fiction. “There was no such thing as a *literary* journalist working for popular magazines or newspapers. If a journalist aspired to literary status—then he had better have the sense and the courage to quit the popular press and try to get into the big league.” In that atmosphere, Wolfe said a few journalists came up with “a curious new notion ... in the nature of a discovery.” This was the idea that “it just might be possible to write journalism that would ... read

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<sup>26</sup> John Hersey, “The Legend on the License,” in *The Yale Review* 70:1-25 (Autumn 1980). “Joe Is Home Now” can be found in Hersey’s *Here to Stay* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 109-33.



like a novel.”<sup>27</sup> Thus began the New Journalism—according to Tom Wolfe.

Wolfe’s first-person account of his life as a feature writer in New York and the rise of New Journalism in the early 1960s carried such an air of authenticity that few have questioned it. But he was wrong when he said there was “no such thing as a *literary* journalist.” He largely ignored the history of literary journalism at *The New Yorker*, the institution primarily responsible for the development of the form for thirty years.

In an appendix, Wolfe grudgingly mentioned John Hersey, Truman Capote, Lillian Ross, and A. J. Liebling as “Not Half-Bad Candidates” for historical forerunners to the New Journalism, grouping them with “various writers for *True*.” Wolfe’s literary background, including a doctorate from Yale in American Studies and his tenure on the New York newspapers, suggests he should have heard about the work of Joe Mitchell, John McNulty, Meyer Berger, Alva Johnston, St. Clair McKelway, and the other *New Yorker* nonfiction writers. Why, then, did Tom Wolfe resist giving credit to *The New Yorker* writers when he drew his historical profile of the New Journalism? And why did the *New Yorker* writers, who are not shy, fail to defend their role in establishing the New Journalism?

For one thing, there was the “Tiny Mummies!” episode. This sordid little controversy created such distaste for Wolfe that *New Yorker* writers avoided any association with the New Journalism, even when they deserved membership.

On April 11 and April 18, 1965, Wolfe published a two-part article in *New York* magazine, then the Sunday supplement of the *Herald Tribune*. The first of these, titled “Tiny Mummies! The True Story of The Ruler of 43d Street’s Land of The Walking Dead!” attacked *The New Yorker*’s editor, William Shawn, as the “embalmer” of a dead institution.

Wolfe’s articles raised the hackles of the literary community. Usually a reticent man, Shawn called the articles “false and libelous” and “wholly without precedent in respectable American journalism.” Murray Kempton, Nat Hentoff, Walter Lippmann, and Joseph Alsop also expressed their displeasure. Several *New Yorker* writers rose in indignation to defend their editor. Renata Adler and Gerald Jonas of *The New Yorker* said Wolfe’s articles were “reportorial

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<sup>27</sup> Tom Wolfe, “The New Journalism,” in *The New Journalism with an Anthology*, Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson, eds. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 89.

incompetence masquerading as a new art form” and documented several glaring factual inaccuracies.<sup>28</sup>

On the surface, Wolfe’s articles are not so bad as the attacks would have us believe. He profusely complimented Lillian Ross, something he could not bring himself to do when he wrote “The New Journalism.” Even if intended as parody, some of it reads like the work of a critic—targeting the magazine’s habit of publishing long, convoluted sentences, for example. Wolfe called such constructions “the whichy thicket.” He criticized writers who imitated Lillian Ross’s style, not important for its own sake, but a foregrounding of the armies of Tom Wolfe-imitators who would invade journalism in the late 1960s. Toward the end, Wolfe wrote a treatise on the readers of *The New Yorker*: “since the war, the suburbs of America’s large cities have been filling up with educated women with large homes and solid hubbies and the taste to...buy *expensive things*.”<sup>29</sup> Wolfe said this trend explained a certain bourgeois sentimentality in *New Yorker* fiction: “After all a girl is not really sitting out here in Larchmont waiting for Stanley Kowalski to come by in his ribbed undershirt and rip the Peck and Peck cashmere off her mary poppins.”<sup>30</sup>

The antifemale attitude aside, it was formula mid-1960s Tom Wolfe prose, very similar to his attacks on modern art and architecture—but those attacks had not been written yet. Readers could only assume the “Tiny Mummies!” articles were part of his journalistic repertoire, not a piece of cultural criticism voiced from a personal point-of-view.

The crew at *The New Yorker* was livid. Wolfe had reported—even citing Cook County Court records—that William Shawn had been on a list of intended victims prepared by the young killers Leopold and Loeb, and as a result became “retiring.” Cook County records do not support this story; Adler and Jonas say it was simply not true. At first, Wolfe defended the pieces. He said in a radio interview that the Leopold and Loeb story was “common dinner-table conversation” although he could not find anything conclusive to confirm it.<sup>31</sup> Later, Wolfe’s story changed. In his 1973 essay, Wolfe said the pieces

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<sup>28</sup> *Columbia Journalism Review* (Winter 1966), pp. 32-34.

<sup>29</sup> Tom Wolfe, “Lost in the Whichy Thicket: *The New Yorker-II*,” *New York Magazine of the Herald Tribune* (April 18, 1965), p. 24.

<sup>30</sup> Wolfe, “Lost in the Whichy Thicket,” p. 24.

<sup>31</sup> Leonard C. Lewin, “Is Fact Necessary?” in *Columbia Journalism Review* (Winter 1966), pp. 29-34.

were “lighthearted...A very droll *sportif* performance, you understand.”<sup>32</sup> This revision of history made little sense, but Wolfe did correctly point out that his critique of *The New Yorker* was *not* New Journalism: “it used neither the reporting techniques nor the literary techniques; underneath a bit of red-flock *Police Gazette* rhetoric, it was a traditional critique, a needle, an attack, an ‘essay’ of the old school.”<sup>33</sup> More accurately, it was a piece of *New Yorker* bashing, such as might be found today in *Spy*. Wolfe has never reprinted the articles in his collections.<sup>34</sup>

At the time, Wolfe’s articles generated bitterness that has remained on both sides, and it stimulated several defensive strikes on the New Journalism.<sup>35</sup> Years later, John Hersey and others had still not forgiven him. With the exception of Truman Capote, *New Yorker* writers, after the “Tiny Mummies!” episode, did not want their names associated with Wolfe and the New Journalism, which they considered a plague.<sup>36</sup> The episode caused lasting injury. It separated the New Journalism from *The New Yorker* writers. Wolfe and his friends became spokesmen for a form that *The New Yorker* heavyweights would not acknowledge even though they had nurtured it through the postwar years. Without positive criticism and collegial debate, the New Journalism stumbled off in its own direction.

Surprisingly, given all the controversy that “Tiny Mummies!” generated, historians have generally followed Wolfe’s interpretation of the birth of New Journalism. The style of writing deserved a name (even if it was not the *first* New Journalism) and Wolfe promoted it. It also deserved a history,

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<sup>32</sup> Wolfe, “The New Journalism,” p. 24. Although he was not talking about exactly the same thing, compare his comment in a *Rolling Stone* (Nov.-Dec., 1987, issue 512) interview: “In my mind, I was never satirizing anybody. My intention, my hope, was always to get inside of these people, inside their central nervous systems, and present their experience in print from the inside” (p. 218).

<sup>33</sup> Wolfe, “The New Journalism,” p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> Note: This is no longer true. A recent anthology of Wolfe’s work re-published the pieces.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, the articles in Part Four of Ron Weber’s *The Reporter as Artist: A Look at The New Journalism Controversy* (New York: Hastings House, 1974), and John Hersey’s “The Legend on the License,” from 1980.

<sup>36</sup> See especially Hersey, “The Legend on the License,” pp. 5-7. Discussing Wolfe’s “Tiny Mummies!” articles, Hersey said, “in them one finds in gross form the fundamental defect that has persisted ever since in Wolfe’s writing, and that is to be found in the work of many of the ‘new journalists,’ and also indeed in that of many ‘nonfiction novelists’ — namely, the notion that mere facts don’t matter.” This was published in 1980, and is *not* a fair assessment of Wolfe or the New Journalism.

which in Wolfe's account was a relatively clean slate—indeed, how can you call something *New Journalism* if its forerunners include several major twentieth century writers and its roots reach to Defoe? Wolfe could not bring himself to acknowledge *The New Yorker's* genuine contributions.

The magazine created by Ross and Shawn provided the institutional conditions that nourished literary journalism from the late 1930s: time, space, freedom, and financial backing. *The New Yorker* attracted some of the best writers, and gave them an opportunity to create nonfiction literature. This was in a context that differed from the rise of New Journalism. The controversies and generational conflicts of the 1960s did not give *New Yorker* writers an excuse to fling their innovations as a challenge onto their editors' desks. Wolfe may have found writing New Journalism for the magazines to be a mark of status that separated him from newspaper reporters, but Mitchell, Liebling, Ross, and Hersey had more friendly cooperation with newspaper workers. For example, Mitchell said that after his long profile of Mr. Flood appeared, several people went looking for the old fellow in the fish market. When he could not be found, the newspapers said nothing, even though several editors knew Mr. Flood was a composite.

Mitchell and his fellow writers can trace their heritage back through Turgenev, Borrow, and Defoe. Many of them rose through the newspaper feature ranks, as did Wolfe, to become the star nonfiction writers of their time.

Liebling, Ross, Hersey, and especially Mitchell pioneered the styles that a few years later made New Journalism such a notorious and enjoyable literary form. In Mitchell's work on Mr. Flood and Joe Gould, and in his symbolic cultural portraits of lower Manhattan and the surrounding fishing communities, he quietly succeeded in merging fiction and nonfiction, the symbolic and the literal, biography and reportage, the real and the imagined landscapes of the city, in a way that continues to influence and inspire nonfiction writers today.

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