Janet Malcolm | Notebook

Janet Malcolm - Wikipedia



“Her specialty is the discrepancy between self-image and reality, but she doesn’t watch only to pounce.” From review in Post & Courier (032419) by Catherine Holmes of CofC.

032619 | Started Nobody’s Looking At You
First story from 2013, The New Yorker, about Eileen Fisher, who gives the book of essays its title.



Yuja Wang is the pianist featured on the cover of the book.

032719: I reread “Three Sisters,” about The Argosy bookshop, today. Originally – along with this photo – in TNY in 2014.



Naomi Hample, Judith Lowry, Adina Cohen, and their parents, Ruth Shevin and Louis Cohen, at the Argosy bookshop in the early nineteen-eighties.

“The antiquarian book business is a funny business. The people it caters to are not exactly non-readers, but they do not buy books just to read them, or even, in some cases, to read them at all. They are interested primarily in things surrounding books: their bindings, covers, paper, typefaces, age, condition, whether they are first editions, if they are signed by the author and if he or she is famous rather than the obscure schlub it is the destiny of most writers to remain or become.” (60)

“The work of the bookshop is indeed agreeable work. You could even say that it isn’t real work. It has none of the monotony and difficulty and anxiety of work. The cartons of books are like boxes of chocolates. Each book is treated to be savored. That the treats are the end product of what most writers consider an arduous if not downright torturous activity perhaps only adds to their deliciousness.” (70)

"The demolition of the squat building next door and the construction of its thirty-story replacement will soon begin. When that is completed, the Argosy will stand alone on the block of massive structures, like a wildflower that has found a bit of soil in a crack in the pavement. Godspeed, wonderful bookshop, on your journey into the uncertain future." (82)

#coincidence

My father's stack of books in the March 25, 2019, issue. Also, my conversation today with John Paul.

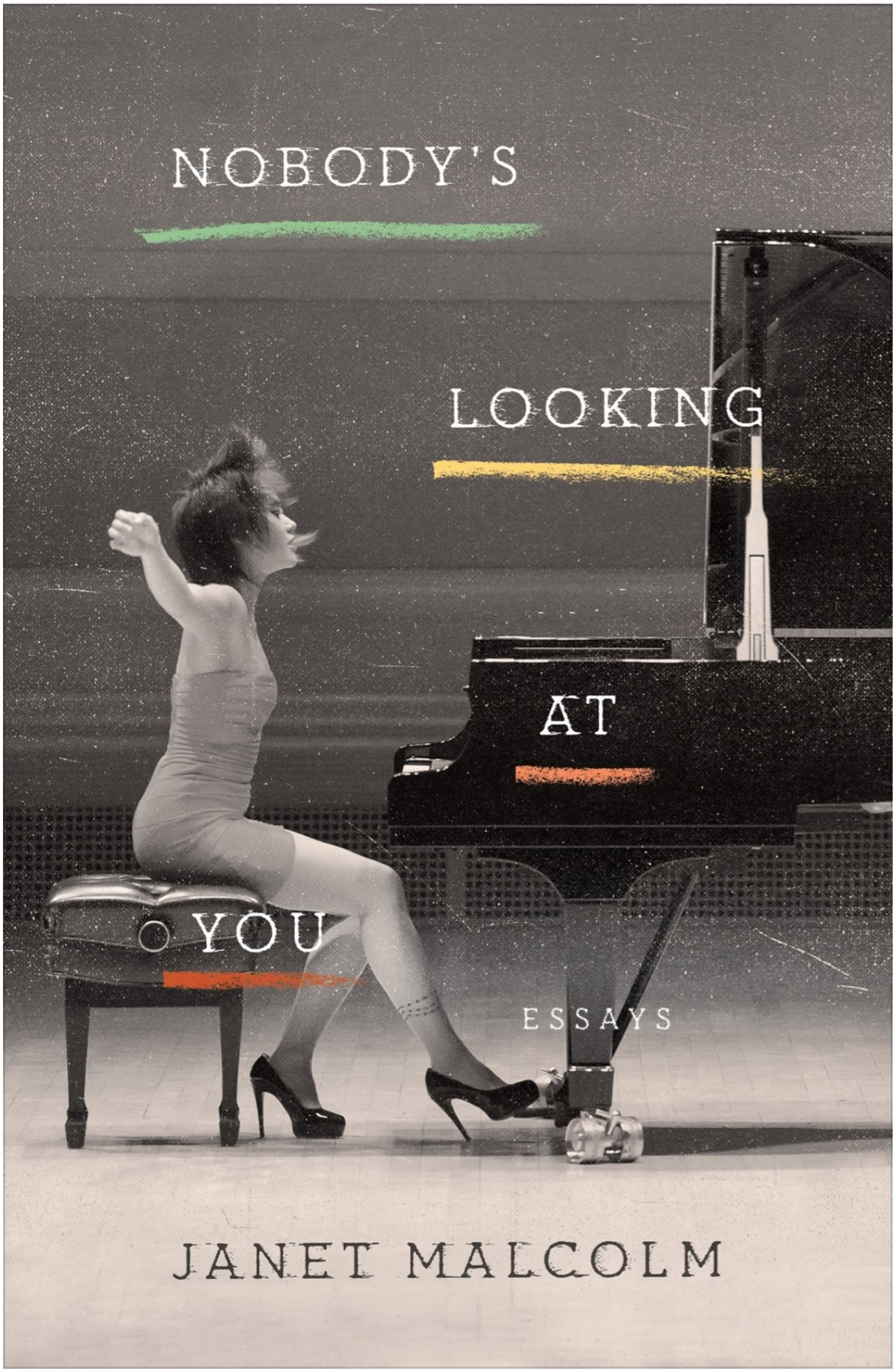
George Jellinek from The Vocal Scene.



March 8, 2019

Review of Nobody's Looking at You, NYT

> Her work was hybrid before hybrid was a thing: It balances her skills as a reporter (avid, nosy attention) with those of a scholar (writing about anything, it's clear she's read everything), a literary critic (tuned to how language, written or spoken, foregrounds its maker's gifts and faults) and, above all, a storyteller. She is uncommonly concerned with finding a form that delivers the force of the story she is telling.



At the start of her landmark book, "The Journalist and the Murderer" – her consideration

> of the relationship between subjects and authors occasioned by Joe McGinness's nonfiction book about Jeffrey MacDonald, a doctor who killed his pregnant wife and two little daughters — Malcolm wrote: "Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse."

> Malcolm's presence in these pieces, you might at this point feel like reminding me, could be understood as nothing more than the habit of mind pioneered by the so-called New Journalists: Gay Talese , Norman Mailer , Joan Didion , Tom Wolfe , Hunter S. Thompson . And yet I am here to disagree. Taking no particular issue with the work of her colleagues, I wish nonetheless to say that Malcolm, line to line, is a more revealing writer, one whose presence in her pieces isn't meant to advertise the self so much as complicate the subject. And also, line to line, she is a better writer.

From NYT By the Book, Feb 17, 2019

"I have been doing a lot of rereading in recent years. Why have a large library and not use it? Why keep books, if you are not going to read them more than once? For the decor? The answer isn't entirely no. A book-lined room looks nice. I like walking into my living room and seeing the walls of books with faded spines that have accreted over many decades."

013019: Reprint of "Three Journeys: Anton Chekhov on the road," by Janet Malcolm in the October 29, 2001, issue.

Six glimpses of the past. Long piece on photography and family memory in Oct 29 2018 TNY.

> Do we ever write about our parents without perpetrating a fraud? Doesn't the lock on the bedroom door permanently protect them from our curiosity, keep us forever in the corridor of doubt?

> The mystery of madness hangs over the world like a cry at night. The children of psychiatrists are no less crassly derisive about crazy people than the rest of the sane world. We would make dumb jokes about the nuts Daddy treated and about loony bins and laughing academies. My father good-naturedly accepted our cruel, stupid talk. He was always sympathetic to fun.

> [About her father] He was a wonderful father. I know he dearly loved me and my sister. But he loved his own life more and seemed to have hated leaving it more than most men and

women do.

‘ Forty-One False Starts,’ by Janet Malcolm

By ADAM KIRSCH

Published: May 23, 2013

The most revealing moment in Janet Malcolm’s new collection of essays and profiles, “Forty-One False Starts,” comes toward the end of “A Girl of the Zeitgeist,” her 1986 piece about Ingrid Sischy, who was then the editor of Artforum. The reader can hardly help noticing that while Sischy is the titular girl, she is not much in evidence in the piece itself, which is largely a portrait gallery of various art-world blowhards and monomaniacs . Malcolm admits that she hoped Sischy would be “some sort of strikingly modern type, some astonishing new female sensibility loosed in the world . ” What she found instead is that Sischy was, to put it simply, a good person: “a pleasant, intelligent, unassuming, responsible, ethical young woman . ” Naturally, Malcolm concludes, “I . . . turned away in disappointment . ”



FORTY-ONE FALSE STARTS

Essays on Artists and Writers

By Janet Malcolm

298 pp . Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $27

NYT review from 2013

It’s no wonder, then, that Malcolm is devoted to photography, which she returns to several times in this book (she is also the author of “Diana and Nikon,” a book on the subject) . Nowhere is there so acute a tension between what is and what is seen; and in no other art is the shaping, calculating intelligence of the artist so elusive . Writing about the

pioneering Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, Malcolm resists attempts to canonize Cameron's fantastic, amateurish pictures of people dressed as characters from Arthurian legend. To take them seriously as works of art is to miss the point, which is precisely the tension between what Cameron thought she was creating and what her camera actually captured.

"These photographs," she writes, "bear unmistakable traces of the condition under which they were taken, and . . . these conditions were often comical." That's why Malcolm loves the way that Cameron's Madonna and Child composition "Goodness" is subverted by "the expression of the child who is representing the infant Jesus, and who obviously hates every minute of her modeling assignment." For it finally doesn't matter if you hate being photographed, or written about; the portrait or profile will survive. The scandal of the artist's power is the engine that drives Malcolm's writing, and that makes even these short pieces unmistakably the work of a master.

Dreams and Anna Karenina, by Janet Malcolm



Tatyana Drubich in Sergei Solovyov's adaptation of *Anna Karenina*, 2009

We do not think of Tolstoy as a comic writer, but his genius permits him to write farce when it suits him. There is a wickedly funny scene in *Anna Karenina* that directly precedes the painful scenes leading to Anna's suicide. It takes place in the drawing room of the Countess Lydia Ivanovna, who, almost alone among the novel's characters, has no good, or even pretty good, qualities. She embodies the kind of hysterical and coldhearted religious piety that Tolstoy was especially allergic to. "As a very young and rhapsodical girl," he

writes, she

> had been married to a wealthy man of high rank, a very good-natured, jovial, and extremely dissipated rake. Two months after marriage her husband abandoned her, and her impassioned protestations of affection he met with a sarcasm and even hostility that people knowing the count's good heart, and seeing no defects in the ecstatic Lydia, were at a loss to explain. Though they were not divorced, they lived apart, and whenever the husband met the wife, he invariably behaved to her with the same venomous irony, the cause of which was incomprehensible.

Tolstoy, with his own venomous irony, makes the cause entirely comprehensible to the reader of *Anna Karenina*, as he shows Lydia Ivanovna fasten herself on Karenin after Anna leaves his house to go abroad with Vronsky, and preside over his degeneration into his worst self. She is an ugly and malevolent creature who coats her spite in a thick ooze of platitudes about Christian love and forgiveness. When Anna was on the verge of death after giving birth to Vronsky's daughter, Karenin experienced an electrifying spiritual transformation: his feelings of hatred and vengefulness toward Anna and Vronsky abruptly changed into feelings of love and forgiveness, and under the spell of this new "blissful spiritual condition" he offered Anna a divorce and the custody of her son—neither of which she chose to accept. Now, a year later, she wants the divorce, but Karenin is no longer of a mind to give it to her. The blissful spiritual condition has faded away like a rainbow, and Karenin, in thrall to the malignant Lydia Ivanovna, has reassumed his old, supinely rigid, and unfeeling self.

Anna's brother, Stepan Arkadyevich (Stiva) Oblonsky, has gone to Karenin to intercede for Anna, and Karenin has said he would think the matter over and give his answer in two days' time, but when the two days pass, instead of an answer, Oblonsky receives an evening invitation to the house of Lydia Ivanovna, where he finds her and Karenin and a French clairvoyant named Landau, who is to be somehow instrumental in Karenin's decision. The comic scene that follows is filtered through Oblonsky's consciousness.

By now we know Oblonsky very well. Tolstoy has portrayed him as a person whom it is necessary to condemn—he is another dissipated rake—but impossible to dislike. He radiates affability; when he comes into a room people immediately cheer up. And when he appears on the page, the reader feels a similar delight. In the novel's moral hierarchy, Lydia Ivanovna and Karenin occupy the lowest rung; they sin against the human spirit, while Stiva only sins against his wife and children and creditors. Through his geniality, Oblonsky has been able to maintain a job in government for which he is in no way qualified, but now, because he needs more money, he is trying to get himself appointed to a higher-

paying position in the civil service. Lydia Ivanovna has influence among the appointers, and Oblonsky figures he might as well use the occasion to charm her into helping him. Thus, while listening to Lydia Ivanovna and Karenin's odious religious palaver, he cravenly—but, he hopes, not too cravenly—hides his atheism:

> "Ah, if you knew the happiness we know, feeling His presence ever in our hearts!" said Countess Lydia Ivanovna with a rapturous smile.

> "But a man may feel himself unworthy sometimes to rise to that height," said Stepan Arkadyevich, conscious of hypocrisy in admitting this religious height, but at the same time unable to bring himself to acknowledge his freethinking views before a person who, by a single word to Pomorsky, might procure him the coveted appointment.

During all this Landau, "a short, thinnish man, very pale and handsome, with feminine hips, knock-kneed, with fine brilliant eyes and long hair" and a "moist, lifeless" handshake, is sitting apart at a window. Karenin and Lydia Ivanovna look at each other and make cryptic remarks about him. A footman keeps coming into the room with letters for Lydia Ivanovna, to which she rapidly scribbles answers or gives brief spoken answers ("Tomorrow at the Grand Duchess's, say"), before resuming her pieties, to which Karenin adds pieties of his own. Stiva feels increasingly baffled. Lydia Ivanovna suddenly asks him, " *Vous comprenez l'anglais?* " and when he says yes, she goes to her bookcase and takes down a tract called *Safe and Happy*, from which she proposes to read aloud. Stiva feels safe and happy at the chance to collect himself and not have to worry about putting a foot wrong. Lydia Ivanovna prefaces her reading with a story about a woman named Marie Sanina who lost her only child, but found God, and now thanks Him for the death of her child—"such is the happiness faith brings!" As he listens to Lydia Ivanovna read *Safe and Happy*,

> aware of the beautiful, artless—or perhaps artful, he could not decide which—eyes of Landau fixed upon him, Stepan Arkadyevich [begins] to be conscious of a peculiar heaviness in his head.

> The most incongruous ideas were running through his mind. "Marie Sanina is glad her child's dead…How good a smoke would be now!… To be saved, one need only believe, and the monks don't know how the thing's to be done, but Countess Lydia Ivanovna does know…And why is my head so heavy? Is it the cognac, or all this being so strange? Anyway, I think I've done nothing objectionable so far. But, even so, it won't do to ask her now. They say they make one say one's prayers. I only hope they won't make me! That'll be too absurd. And what nonsense she's reading! But she has a good accent…."

Stiva fights the drowsiness that is overcoming him, but begins to helplessly succumb to it. On the point of snoring, he rouses himself, but too late. "He's asleep," he hears the countess saying. He has been caught out. The countess will never help him with the appointment. But no, the countess isn't talking about him. She is talking about the clairvoyant. He is lying back in his chair with his eyes closed and his hand twitching. He is in the trance Lydia Ivanovna and Karenin have been waiting for him to fall into. She instructs Karenin to give Landau his hand and he obeys, trying to move carefully, but stumbling on a table. Stiva watches the scene, not sure he isn't dreaming it. "It was all real," he concludes.

With his eyes closed, the clairvoyant speaks: " *Que la personne qui est arrivée la dernière, celle qui demande, qu'elle sorte! Qu'elle sorte!* " Let the person who was the last to come in, the one who asks questions, let him get out! Let him get out! Stiva, "forgetting the favor he had meant to ask of Lydia Ivanovna, and forgetting his sister's affairs, caring for nothing, but filled with the sole desire to get away as soon as possible, [goes]out on tiptoe and [runs] out into the street as though from a plague-stricken house." It takes him a long time to regain his equanimity. The next day he receives from Karenin a final refusal of the divorce and understands "that this decision was based on what the Frenchman had said in his real or pretended trance the evening before."

It was all real. There has been a great deal written about the preternatural realism of *Anna Karenina*, and about the novel's special status as a kind of criticism-proof text because of the reader's feeling that what he is reading is being effortlessly reported rather than laboriously made up. "We are not to take *Anna Karénine* as a work of art; we are to take it as a piece of life," Matthew Arnold wrote in 1887. "The author has not invented and combined it, he has seen it; it has all happened before his inward eye, and it was in this wise that it happened." In 1946 Philip Rahv elaborated on Arnold's idea:

> In the bracing Tolstoyan air, the critic, however addicted to analysis, cannot help doubting his own task, sensing that there is something presumptuous and even unnatural, which requires an almost artificial deliberateness of intention, in the attempt to dissect an art so wonderfully integrated…. Such is the astonishing immediacy with which he possesses his characters that he can dispense with manipulative techniques, as he dispenses with the belletristic devices of exaggeration, distortion, and dissimulation…. The conception of writing as of something calculated and constructed—…upon which literary culture has become more and more dependent—is entirely foreign to Tolstoy.

Tolstoy—one of literature's greatest masters of manipulative techniques—would smile at this. The book's "astonishing immediacy" is nothing if not an object of the exaggeration,

distortion, and dissimulation through which each scene is rendered. Rahv calls these devices belletristic but long before anyone wrote belles lettres everyone who dreamed was practiced in their use. If the dream is father to imaginative literature, Tolstoy may be the novelist who most closely hews to its deep structures. As we read *Anna Karenina* we are under the same illusion of authorlessness we are under as we follow the stories that come to us at night and seem to derive from some ancient hidden reality rather than from our own, so to speak, pens. Tolstoy's understanding of the sly techniques of dream-creation is at the heart of his novelist's enterprise. Like the films shown in the movie houses of our sleeping minds, Tolstoy's waking scenes draw on a vast repertory of collective emotional memory for their urgency.

Take the famous ballroom scene at the beginning of the novel in which Anna and Vronsky fall in love as if forced to do so by a love potion in a room filled with tulle and lace and music and scent. The scene has inscribed itself on our memories as one of the most vividly romantic scenes in literature. Who can forget the sight of Anna in her simple black gown that shows off her beauty rather than its own and sets her apart from all the other women in the room? As Tolstoy describes her—practically caressing her as he does so—we fall in love with her ourselves. How could Vronsky resist her?

But wait. It isn't Tolstoy who describes Anna—it is through the eyes of Kitty Scherbetskaya that we see her. The scene is written not as a romance but as a nightmare. Kitty, who loves Vronsky, has come to the ball in the happy expectation that he will propose to her. As in our worst nightmares, when a horrified realization of disaster comes upon us and will not let go of us, Kitty's delight turns to horror as she watches Anna and Vronsky displaying the signs of people falling in love, and grasps the full extent of Vronsky's indifference to her. Kitty will hate Anna for the rest of her life, but Tolstoy—to render his effect of Anna's powerful sexual magnetism—captures the moment when Kitty is herself attracted to Anna. Tolstoy places or rather displaces the weight of Kitty's crushing mortification onto the mazurka that she assumed she would dance with Vronsky and for which she now finds herself without a partner. In writing the scene as an archetypal nightmare of jealousy—in refracting Anna and Vronsky's passion through the prism of Kitty's anguish—Tolstoy performs one of the hidden tours de force by which his novel is animated.



Clarence Sinclair Bull/Everett Collection Greta Garbo as Anna Karenina in the adaptation directed by Clarence Brown, 1935 The horse race offers another example of Tolstoy's use of the archetypal nightmare as a literary structure. This time his model is the dream of lateness. In this dream, no matter what we do, no matter how desperately we struggle, we cannot get to the airport, or the play, or the final examination in time. Something holds us back and we struggle against it to no purpose. On the morning of the race Vronsky makes a visit to the mare he is going to ride (and kill). The English trainer asks him where he is planning to go after he leaves the stable, and when Vronsky tells him he is going see a man named Bryansky, the Englishman—evidently not believing him, knowing, as others seem to know, that he is going to visit Anna—says, "The vital thing's to keep quiet before a race…don't get disturbed or upset about anything." Vronsky drives out to Anna's summer house and becomes predictably disturbed and upset when she tells him she is pregnant. He leaves for Bryansky's house to give him some money—he wasn't lying to the trainer, just not telling the whole truth—and the nightmare proper of lateness begins. Only on the way to Bryansky does he look at his watch and see that it is much later than he thought and that he never should have started out. Should he turn back? No, he decides to keep going. He believes he will just make the race. At this point, Tolstoy veers away from the classic dream of lateness in which the dreamer never arrives at his destination and allows Vronsky to make the race. But Vronsky is clearly not in the right state of mind. An unpleasant encounter with his brother, who wants him to end the affair with Anna, is another assault on the necessary condition of quiet. When disaster strikes, when Vronky makes the wrong

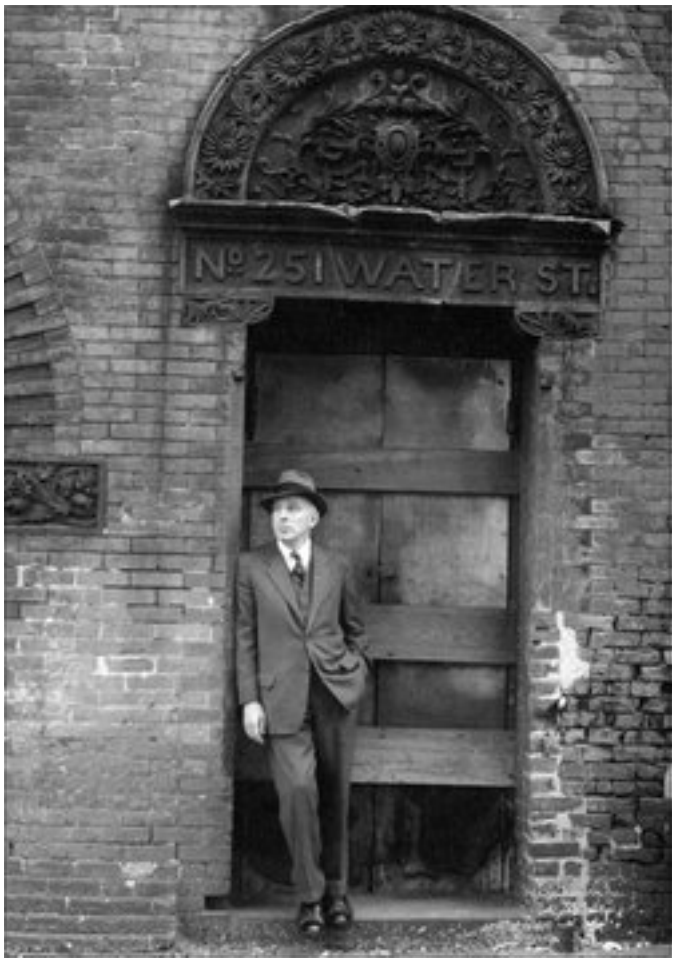
move that breaks the mare's back, it registers, as these things do when we dream them, as a terrifying inevitability. All dreams are not nightmares, of course. As we sometimes awaken from a dream in tears, so a number of Tolstoy's scenes draw on the sentimentality—a sort of basic bathos—that is lodged in the hearts of all but the most high-minded among us. One such scene takes place the day after the ball, when her sister Dolly comes to the humiliated Kitty's room in her parents' house and finds her sitting and staring at a piece of rug. Kitty rejects Dolly's attempts to make her feel better, is cold and unpleasant to her, and finally silences her by spitefully flinging Stiva's philandering in her face. "I have some pride, and never, never would I do as you're doing—go back to a man who's deceived you, who has cared for another woman. I can't understand it. You may, but I can't!" Tolstoy continues: And saying these words, she glanced at her sister, and seeing that Dolly sat silent, her head mournfully bowed, Kitty, instead of running out of the room, as she had meant to do, sat down near the door and hid her face in her handkerchief. The silence lasted for a minute or two. Dolly was thinking of herself. That humiliation of which she was always conscious came back to her with a peculiar bitterness when her sister reminded her of it. She had not expected such cruelty from her sister, and she was angry with her. But suddenly she heard the rustle of a skirt, and with it the sound of heart-rending, smothered sobbing, and felt arms about her neck. Kitty was on her knees before her. "Dolinka, I am so, so wretched!" she whispered penitently. And the sweet face covered with tears hid itself in Darya Aleksandrovna's skirt. The novel is filled with such passages (another is the scene in which Dolly comes upon her daughter Tanya and her son Grisha eating cake and crying over Tanya's kindheartedness in secretly sharing it with him after he had been forbidden dessert as a punishment) that do not advance its plot—almost seem to retard its forward motion—but heighten the sense of piercing reality Arnold and Rahv could find no words to account for. The novel is also filled with accounts of actual dreams experienced by characters that entirely lack the vividness of the scenes of waking life. They seem, in their various ways, flat, formulaic, even boring. When Anna dreams of sleeping with both Karenin and Vronsky, we get the point—and feel that Tolstoy is not being very subtle. On the morning after Dolly confronts Stiva with the evidence of his affair with a former governess, he awakens in the study to which he has been banished from this uninterestingly incomprehensible dream: Alabin was giving a dinner at Darmstadt; no, not Darmstadt, but something American. Yes, but then, Darmstadt was in America. Yes, Alabin was giving a dinner on glass tables, and the tables sang Il mio tesoro—not Il mio tesoro, though, but something better, and there were some sort of little decanters on the table, and they were women, too. "Yes, it was nice, very nice." Stiva recalls. "There was a great deal more that was delightful, only there's no putting it into words, or even expressing it in one's thoughts once awake." Tolstoy was obviously well acquainted with the guard who stops us at the border of sleep and awakening and confiscates the brilliant, dangerous spoils of our nighttime creations. The capacity to recreate these fictions in the unprotected

light of day may be what we mean by literary genius. As the full realization of the mess he has made of his domestic life comes over Stiva, he reflects that "to forget himself in sleep was impossible now, at least till nighttime; he could not go back now to the music sung by the decanter women; so he must forget himself in the dream of daily life." In January 1878, a professor of botany named S.A. Rachinsky wrote to Tolstoy about what he felt to be "a basic deficiency in the construction" of Anna Karenina, namely that "the book lacks architectonics." To which Tolstoy replied, Your opinion about Anna Karenina seems wrong to me. On the contrary, I take pride in the architectonics. The vaults are thrown up in such a way that one cannot notice where the link is. That is what I tried to do more than anything else. The unity in the structure is created not by action and not by relationships between the characters, but by an inner continuity. One of these continuities—perhaps the most significant—is Tolstoy's keen, almost prying, interest in the sexuality of his characters and the hierarchy he has set in place that runs parallel to, though distinct from, his moral hierarchy. At the top he has set his sexually robust characters—Anna, Vronsky, Oblonsky, Levin, Kitty, and Dolly—and to the bottom he has consigned figures like the creepy Landau and Varenka, a sexless young woman Kitty meets at the spa to which she has been sent to cure her broken heart, and whose limp handshake is echoed a hundred pages later by Landau's flaccid grip. Levin's bloodless-intellectual half-brother Sergey Ivanovich Koznishev, a kind of double of the bloodless-intellectual Karenin (as Lydia Ivanovna is a double of another dreadful pious woman named Madame Stahl—the novel is filled with doubles and doublenesses), is another member of the league of the sexually underpowered, though his portrait is a mere sketch in comparison to the full-blown case study of impotence that Tolstoy has fashioned out of his complicated cuckold. He allows us to study Karenin both from the point of view of his sexually unfulfilled wife and, most interestingly, from his own sense of how he doesn't measure up to other men. At a court event, the flatfooted and wide-hipped Karenin keeps looking at the attractive, powerfully built court functionaries around him and asks himself whether they felt differently, did their loving and marrying differently, these Vronskys and Oblonskys…these fat-calved chamberlains…those juicy, vigorous, self-confident men who always and everywhere drew his inquisitive attention in spite of himself. Anna is the special case of poetical sexual awakening turning into terrifying erotomania that reflects Tolstoy's own famous craziness about sex, which in some sense is what the novel is "about." The transformation of the wonderful Anna we first meet at the railway station—"the suppressed eagerness which played over her face…as though her nature was so brimming over with something that against her will it showed itself now in the flash of her eyes, and now in her smile"—into the psychotic who throws herself in front of a train is chronicled over the book's length, and doesn't add up. Standard readings of the novel attribute Anna's descent into madness to the loss of her son and to her ostracism by society. But in fact, as Tolstoy unambiguously tells us, the situation is of her own making. She did not lose her son—she abandoned him

when she left for Italy with Vronsky after her recovery from the puerperal fever that propelled Karenin into his "blissful spirituality." Under its influence, he was willing to give up his son and give Anna a divorce that would permit her to marry Vronsky and rejoin respectable society as, even in those days, divorced women were able to do. But as the novel goes on and Anna's life unravels, it is as if this opportunity had never arisen. We experience the novel, as we experience our dreams, undisturbed by its illogic. We accept Anna's disintegration without questioning it. Only later, when we analyze the work, does its illogic becomes apparent. But by then it is too late to reverse Tolstoy's spell. Man in Profile: Joseph Mitchell of The New Yorker

by Thomas Kunkel

Random House, 384 pp., $30.00



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

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

> 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 someway," 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."

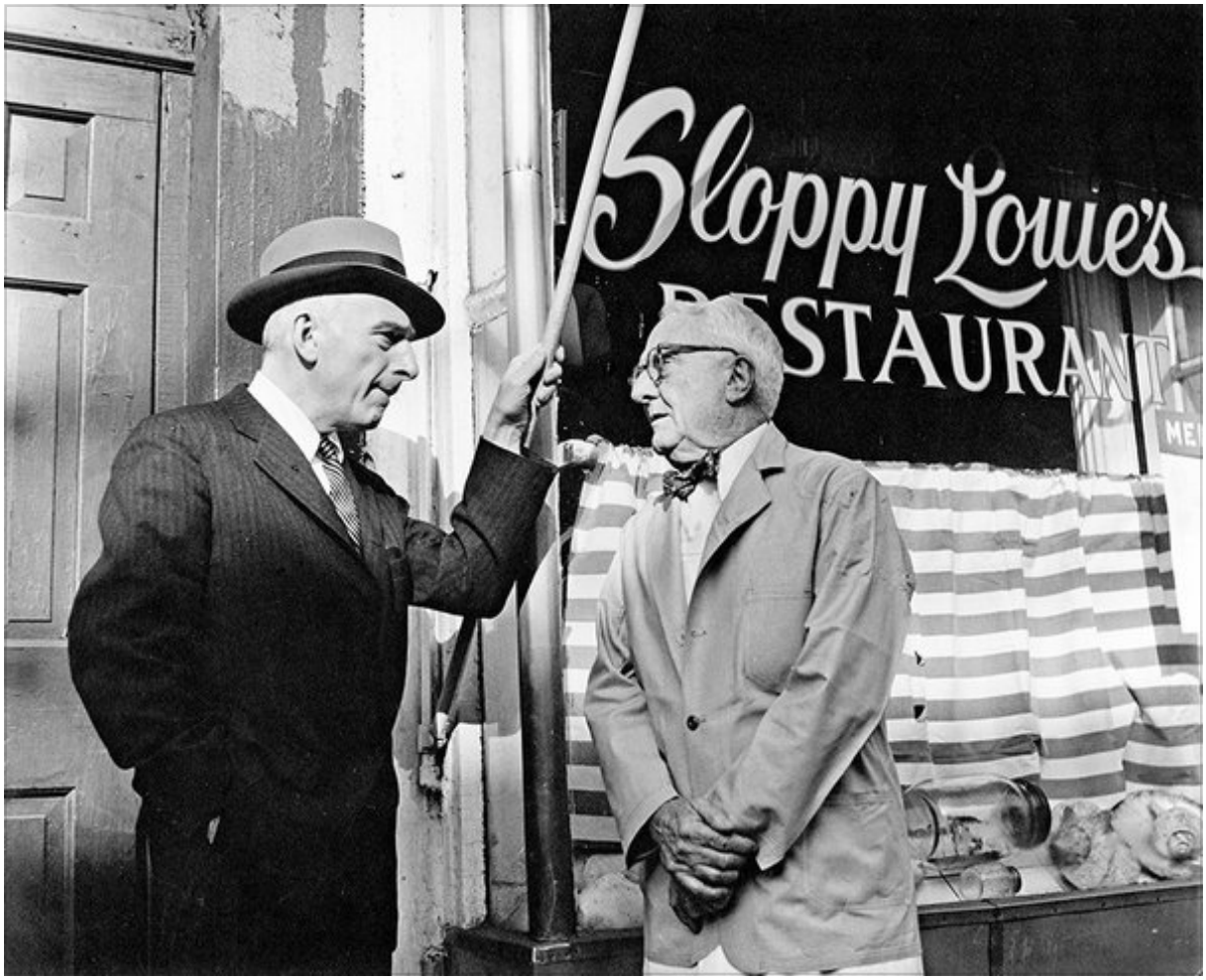
Where the hell is this going? As in all of Mitchell's pieces everything is always going somewhere, though not necessarily so you'd notice. Mitchell is one of the great masters of the device of the plot twist disguised as a digression that seems pointless but that heightens the effect of unforced realism. 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."



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 outsiderness 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.

"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.

1. See the posthumous "Days in the Branch," *The New Yorker*, December 1, 2014, part of an unfinished memoir. ↩
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/26/books/review/forty-one-false-starts-by-janet-malcolm.html?nl=books&emc=edit_bk_20130524&_r=0