

Defusing the Joe Mitchell Bombshell

Man in Profile: Joseph Mitchell of the New Yorker

by Thomas Kunkel. New York: Random House, 2015. Hardcover, 384 pp., \$30

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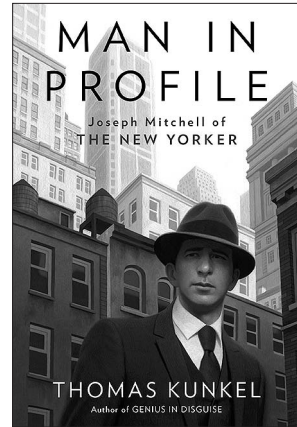
Thomas Kunkel's *Man in Profile: Joseph Mitchell of the New Yorker* would have fundamentally altered the received understanding of one of the founding masters of literary journalism, even it hadn't contained a few bombshells about the genius' literary practice.

But it does: Kunkel leaves no doubt that at least some of Mitchell's practice, in some of his most stunning stories, was less scrupulously factual than we thought. The smoking gun is a 1961 letter from Mitchell to the *New Yorker's* attorney about his profile of a "gypsy king": "Insofar as the principal character is concerned, the gypsy king himself, it is a work of imagination. Cockeye Johnny Nikanov does not exist in real life, and never did" (151). Ouch.

True, there is a measure of presentism in our disappointment—such techniques as composite characters, punching up the language in quotes, and rejiggering time to suit the narrative flow were not the big no-nos then that they are now. Even if we concede that these lapses were guileless, and further, appear to have been done with the approval of his editors, it's still a tough thing to hear. Mitchell's fans and devotees (myself included) are often guilty of hero worship; we all read Kunkel's biography and let out a collective wail of "Say it ain't so, Joe." A lot of us share the sentiment with which Michael Rosenwald titled his review in the *Columbia Journalism Review*: "I wish this guy hadn't written this book."¹

I just can't let that happen, and, long term, I don't think many of Mitchell's admirers will either. For my part, I've made my peace with Mitchell's wonky sense of fact by asking if he really was writing journalism. George Core, in an underappreciated 1989 article on the *New Yorker's* journalists, points out that these writers have always set out to move "the familiar essay toward fiction," and smartly reminds us that Mitchell always specifically "called his essays *stories*—not reports or essays or memoirs or something else—*stories*."² We may need to think that Mitchell was doing journalism; but I'm not sure that the Mitchell of the *New Yorker* years thought that.

And if we can disable the disenchantment switch, there is so much to be grateful for about Kunkel's biography of Mitchell. Like many biographies, and probably for that matter, like many lives, the book follows a sort of triptych structure. Moving left to right, we open with a childhood and young adulthood, about which even Mitch-



ell's most devoted readers knew very little: the North Carolina years and his years as a beat reporter. Kunkel presents the young Mitchell as a virtual writing machine while at the *World-Telegram*, turning out superb features in short order, because, as he notes "in those salad days, Mitchell wrote quickly, and his acute mind allowed him to shape vast amounts of information into coherent narratives prior to sitting down at the typewriter" (72) and that "even for a New York-based general-assignment reporter, the range of his interests and assignments is astonishing" (76). The later slow, and then silent, writer has so much come to dominate our understanding of Mitchell that it is good to have Kunkel remind us he was not always so.

There is much else in Kunkel's retrieval of the early years that entices us. Among other things, we learn that a third of the population in Robeson County, North Carolina, where Mitchell was raised, were Native Americans of the Lumbee tribe. We also learn of Mitchell's sometimes challenging relationship with his father, a family drama about which there are virtually no clues in his published work. This, too, may be yet another tribute to Mitchell's humane sensibility: that although there is never a hint of self-display in his writing—still less any self-indulgence or confessionality—his authorial presence is inescapable through his command of the material.

The most remarkable discovery in this portion is the knowledge that Mitchell had not only read but also interviewed the pioneering anthropologist Franz Boaz, and wrote a series of articles about his research. His reporting on Boaz was, Kunkel writes, "a kind of graduate level seminar in anthropology that caused him to rethink, as a reporter, why people are who they are and do what they do. It would be a career-altering revelation" (93). In this way Kunkel's book might also be read as an invitation to revisit much of Mitchell's writing—his work on gypsies, his study of the fish market, even his early reportage on burlesque dancers—as not only ethnographic in tone, but also by design.

In the center panel of this triptych is the Mitchell we all know: the author of one stunning story after another, an oeuvre of snowballing brilliance. For the most part Kunkel has wisely chosen to allow the published work to speak for the public man, devoting whole chapters to such jewels as "The Mohawks in High Steel" and "Mr. Hunter's Grave." Oddly (and perhaps only a matter of the materials available to Kunkel), "The Rivermen," a lyric 1959 study of the shad fishermen in Edgewater, New Jersey, that is also a bit of an ethnography, does not get the same attention; "The Rivermen" may well be Mitchell's most accomplished and ambitious work.

Far to the right are the years about which we have, until now, also known almost nothing: the span of heroic nonproduction from 1964 to 1996. In those thirty-plus years of nonpublication, Mitchell was a revered figure, but one at risk of being overshadowed by his own silence. People who had not read—or who in the days before 1993, when *Up in the Old Hotel* appeared—simply could not read, his *New Yorker* stories were nonetheless aware of the staff writer with the supposed extraordinary writer's block. Only J.D. Salinger and Ralph Ellison have attained equal celebrity for not writing (and although Kunkel doesn't mention it, perhaps it's notable that Mitchell would have known them both, and was in fact quite close to Ellison).

One of the factors that potentiates Mitchell's long silence and makes it distinct

from other authors who went silent is the fact that he made *not* writing the subject of his last and some would say (I wouldn't) his best book, *Joe Gould's Secret* (1964). But it is good to remember that Mitchell was always fascinated by the possibilities of not writing: in the opening sentence of his first book, *My Ears Are Bent* (1938), he explicitly introduces his misgivings about the profession of writer: "Except for a period in 1931 when I got sick of the whole business and went to sea . . . I have been for the last eight years a reporter on newspapers in New York City." In other words, at the age of twenty-three or twenty-four, Mitchell was uncertain about the merits of journalism. More important, Mitchell introduces, as a possible response to such doubts, the abdication of the writer.

Kunkel's biography makes clear that Mitchell was absolutely not inactive during these years. Still, one of the things that becomes clear reading *Man in Profile* is that there was something tragic about whatever it was that kept him from writing. Not tragic, in the sense of the works of genius that we missed: near the end of the book, Kunkel approvingly quotes Philip Hamburger who, when asked about his friend's output, would reply, "Why didn't he write more? Well, he wrote enough" (325).

I would concur with Hamburger and with Kunkel: we need to appreciate the brilliance that we have, rather than falling into something like Dwight MacDonald's snarky comment on James Agee, that no writer has ever been so fondly remembered for the books he never wrote.

But Mitchell's long silence is also tragic in the classic sense of tragedy, as being the inevitable outcome of an internal flaw. "Even allowing for all the external factors that impeded his writing expectations," Kunkel writes, "it was Mitchell who set things up so that there could be, in essence, only one outcome—failure" (299). Because he was convinced that his next project after *Joe Gould's Secret* had to be a full-blown book, and because his passion for note-taking, interviewing, and accumulating sources could never be satisfied, Kunkel concludes, "Mitchell had stepped into a trap, one largely of his own devices" (300).

It was not just that Mitchell had decided he had to write another full-length book. He could have written many books. But we can infer that he was not going to be satisfied with just a book: he seems to have still believed he needed to write a work of masterful inclusion. In discussing *Joe Gould*, Kunkel makes the connection, as others have, between Gould's nonbook and Mitchell's admission that as a young man he had fantasized about writing a novel as comprehensive as Joyce's *Ulysses*: "But the truth is, I never actually wrote a word of it," Mitchell realizes (*Up in the Old Hotel*, 692). Mitchell should have known by this point that writing a book, any book, is a taxing assignment, but writing a book that, as it were, includes everything, is an impossible one. But he never fully let go of that fantasy. Mitchell's admiration for Joyce, not just *Ulysses* but also *Finnegans Wake*, probably had a baleful influence on him—he remained susceptible to the dream of an encyclopedic work, even when he had firsthand experience of its impossibility in the example of Joe Gould.

A less global way in which this tragic flaw kept Mitchell from writing happened at the sentence level. Kunkel writes, in discussing Mitchell's style, that he prized "permanence, endurance, and beauty, whether those qualities came together in a care-

fully constructed cast-iron building or a Profile.” He adds that Mitchell approached writing in structural terms, for which the basic building blocks were “long, languid sentences that built layer upon layer, achieving a satisfying richness—not dissimilar to many Southern novelists who were his contemporaries” (169).

That is exactly right. The problem is that such sentences demand an utter control of tone, pacing, sound, and detail, and that the longer those long, unspooling sentences go on, the harder it is to sustain such control. Mitchell could, and to an astounding extent did, pull this off—but not without extraordinary effort. One can only imagine the work that went into the opening paragraph of “The Rivermen,” for example, where after three short sentences there are two that run to seventy-two and then ninety-eight words, respectively. They are gorgeous, downright gorgeous—but Mitchell clearly sweated blood to write them.

In the run-up to the release of *Man in Profile*, we were at last privileged to read previously unpublished Mitchell stories in the *New Yorker*. These new pieces show how inexorably Mitchell fell under the spell of the artful periodic sentence. He had taken on a counsel of perfection, believing that everything he wrote had to be a virtuoso performance.

Maybe it would be an exaggeration to say that Kunkel’s book is a virtuoso performance. But it is an indispensable one. I remember making the point during a Mitchell panel at the IALJS gathering at Northwestern University in 2009, that you could read all the serious scholarship on Mitchell in a single afternoon. That will never be true again: Kunkel has opened a window, a wide window, on a remarkable writer. In the future, every research act on the subject of Mitchell will start with *Man in Profile*.

Notes

1. Michael Rosenwald, “I Wish This Guy Hadn’t Written This Book,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, July–August 2015, http://www.cjr.org/first_person/joseph_mitchell_new_yorker.php.

2. George Core, “Stretching the Limits of the Essay,” in *Essays on the Essay*, ed. Alexander Butrym (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 208.