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A Life in the Hazy Borderlands Between Journalism and Literature

Kevin M. Lerner, Marist College
kevin.lerner@marist.edu

Man in Profile: Joseph Mitchell of The New Yorker. Thomas Kunkel. (New York, NY: Random House, 2015). 366 pp. \$30 hardcover.

To many people—journalists and those who study journalism, in particular—Joseph Mitchell represents the archetypal journalist of the middle 50 percent of the 20th century. He was a Southerner who discovered writing, moved to New York, and joined a newspaper, the venerated *Herald-Tribune*, where he worked for the archetypal city editor, Stanley Walker. He wore tweedy suits, took long walks around the city, ate and drank with A. J. Liebling, and hung around the Fulton fish market, Greenwich Village taverns, and Staten Island cemeteries. And he was discovered by Harold Ross of *The New Yorker*. Along the way, he turned out increasingly longer pieces of journalism that increasingly had the feel of something more like literature. He wanted to write, and to write pieces that would be remembered beyond his own time, and he achieved that. But he also created composite characters and reordered timelines. And then he stopped writing completely, despite coming to *The New Yorker* offices most days from 1964 until his death in 1996. Joseph Mitchell is a profoundly problematic hero for journalists, and Thomas Kunkel's recent biography of him, *Man in Profile*, offers a disappointingly prosaic picture of the man, but one which holds lessons about the special power of magazines and about the changing mores and standards of professional journalism.

Kunkel, the president of St. Norbert College and a former dean of the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, previously wrote a biography of Ross, Mitchell's first *New Yorker* editor, so he knows this territory well. Based on interviews as well as the archives of *The New Yorker* and Mitchell's own letters and manuscripts, Kunkel builds a fairly conventional literary biography, taking readers from Mitchell's North Carolina boyhood on his family's farm, through his time at the University of North Carolina, and then into his adulthood. Mitchell's output as a *New Yorker* writer was sparse enough that Kunkel can dig at some depth into the reporting that underlies many of the most recognizable Mitchell stories: "Up in the Old Hotel," "Old Mr. Flood," "Mr. Hunter's Grave," "King of the Gypsies," and "The Old House at Home," the last better remembered by the title of the book it was collected in, *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*. And Kunkel goes into some detail, too, about the circumstances under which Mitchell met his most famous profile subject, Joe Gould, and about their continuing relationship between the first and second stories that Mitchell wrote about the man known as Professor Seagull. *The New Yorker* gave its writers room to marinate in a subject and ruminate on its best method of expression, rather than pressuring them to "produce" on a regular basis. This was particularly true for Mitchell, as Kunkel discovers, since Mitchell was an extremely rare breed of writer at *The New Yorker*, one who drew a steady salary that was not tied to his output, rather than advances on payments for stories.

Hugh G. Flood, the main character in three of Mitchell's stories from the mid-1940s, did not exist. Instead, he was a deliberately created composite character, made up of several real people Mitchell had met in his time hanging around the fish market. But unlike the entirely fictional

“sources” who populate the latter-day *scandales célèbres* of Jayson Blair and Stephen Glass, the Hugh Flood of Mitchell’s stories did not spring fully formed from his head as a way of circumventing that bothersome step of actually reporting a story. If anything, Mitchell knew the world of the fish market too well and had trouble finding the one person on whom he could hang all of the atmosphere and lore of the market. And also unlike Glass and Blair, Mitchell had editors who were fully complicit in the act. According to memos in Mitchell’s archive, it was in fact Harold Ross who suggested the idea, saying that several other “composite profiles” had been published in *The New Yorker*. Kunkel suggests that Mitchell was bashful about this deception, and in his review of the book, Michael Rosenwald even wished that Kunkel hadn’t written it, so that journalists and other admirers of Mitchell could keep a pure image of him in their heads. But of course, journalists are supposed to be skeptical of everything, even the lyrical portraits of old fishmongers and manic, crazed Village *habitués* that they read in the magazine that we all have a tendency to see as unimpeachable.

But seeing Joseph Mitchell as a man with flaws—one for whom the process of writing became so difficult that he had to invent a composite character now and then and eventually so difficult that he stopped publishing altogether—does not have to detract from his legacy. One could make an argument that the greater truth of those stories does not necessarily rely on the accuracy of each individual fact but on the agglomeration of detail, atmosphere, and emotion. The person who made such an argument would not want to teach that to a young journalist, of course, but there is still value in Mitchell’s stories. Despite their real shortcomings as journalism, they live in the hazy borderlands between journalism and literature, in the days just before the borders were definitively drawn and before Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese and Joan Didion began exploring those new lands.

The kind of work that Joseph Mitchell did is rarely seen in the workaday journalism of newspapers and can only take hold with the kind of freedom—perhaps a little bit too much freedom—that a magazine can give a writer.