

Up in the Old Hotel

© Mark Mantho

Joe Gould's Secret, like much of Joseph Mitchell's *Up in the Old Hotel*, reads less like journalism than well-crafted fiction. Mitchell's informal narrative style, penchant for minute detail, and suspiciously precise dialogue combine to conjure a vivid portrait of an indelible New York character. The result is an eminently readable story that may, or may not, be "true."

The structure of *Joe Gould's Secret*, like Mitchell's writing itself, is loose, verbose, and frequently digressive. Mitchell begins by painting a visual and psychological portrait of Gould ("He was a chronic sufferer from the highly contagious kind of conjunctivitis that is known as pinkeye. His voice was distractingly nasal. ... In addition, he was nonsensical and bumptious and inquisitive and gossipy and mocking and sarcastic and scurrilous"). Then Mitchell shifts from third to first person narration to describe his first meeting and subsequent encounters with Gould, his fruitless attempts to track down the legendary Oral History, and, finally, his moral quandary over how to handle the fact of its non-existence. In between, and in no discernable order, Mitchell retraces Gould's unhappy childhood growing up in Norwood, Massachusetts, ability to translate Longfellow into Seagull-ese, and battles with Greenwich Village radicals. The round-about structure of *Joe Gould's Secret* mimics the unpredictable exploits of its protagonist, a device that keeps readers off-balance and engaged.

The tone of *Joe Gould's Secret* is intimate and conversational, as if the author were relating his story over sips of beer to an old friend at a favorite Bowery haunt. Like John Hersey in a very different way, Joseph Mitchell is a crafty writer. There's always a point lurking beneath the amiable, disarmingly off-the-cuff prose. Paragraphs ramble along in meandering fashion, seemingly going nowhere but actually under masterful control:

I spent a good many hours during those years listening to (Gould.) I listened to him when he was sober and I listened to him when he was drunk. I listened to him when he was cast down and meek – when, as he used to say, he felt so low he had to reach up to touch bottom – and I listened to him when he was in moods of incoherent exaltation. I got so I could put two and two together and make at least a little sense out of what he was saying even when he was very drunk or very exalted or in both states at once, and, gradually, without intending to, I learned some things about him that he may not have wanted me to know, or, on the other hand, since his mind was circuitous and he loved wheels within wheels, that he may very well have wanted me to know – I'll never be sure. In any case, I am quite sure I that I know why the manuscript of the Oral History will

never be found. (Mitchell 627)

Mitchell's reportage is crafty as well, but a good deal more problematic from a journalistically purist point of view. He weaves little factoids about old New York or large chunks of information about Gould's adventures so seamlessly into his narrative that readers gladly follow along. Paragraphs are studded with descriptive detail about the precise layout and condition of various New York locales, copious inclusion of street names, and historical background that make Manhattan and its denizens come alive. Yet one of the greatest joys of Mitchell's brand of literary journalism – blocks of quoted material that allow his characters to speak in their own, richly idiomatic voices – is the very aspect of his writing that invites skepticism. Are we to believe Mitchell is so proficient with pen and pad that, as appears to be the case at one point in the story, he can reproduce nearly nineteen pages of Joe Gould's highly idiosyncratic blatherings verbatim, replete with references to "Pirandello and George Moore and Spengler and Schnitzler," as well as Mitchell's moment by moment account of every word that passes between himself, Gould, and a surly waitress? As elsewhere in *Up in the Old Hotel* (particularly in the chapter of the same name, where Mitchell recounts dialogue he couldn't possibly have taken down at the time), the polished nature of the author's lengthy, complex dialogue stretches credulity. One is forced to conclude that Mitchell's approach to "literary journalism" emphasizes the charms of the former at the expense of the latter.

The thematic underpinnings of *Joe Gould's Secret* echo those found repeatedly in Mitchell's work. As in *The Old House at Home* and the story *Up in the Old Hotel*, there's a strong preoccupation with the past and a desire to recapture it, to escape the present and go back to another, seemingly happier time. "By talking to me, (Gould) could bring back his past, he could keep it alive," Mitchell observes. And, as with *Santa Clause Smith* and *The Don't Swear Man*, a proclivity to romanticize oddballs who tilt at windmills is evident; whatever else Mitchell thinks of Joe Gould, he's clearly impressed by Professor Sea Gull's eccentricity and nonconformist attitude toward society. More to the point, Mitchell views Gould the same way he views the old Southern preacher in his never-published novel of New York ("the old man sees meanings behind meanings, or thinks he does, and tries his best to tell what things 'stand for'"), and seeks to derive personal insight from his musings ("the reporter...finds himself drawing oblique conclusions from the old man's statements in order to make them have some bearing on his own spiritual state").

The ultimate "message" of *Joe Gould's Secret* centers around the human tendency to play roles in order to fit in, and the need to keep secrets, both from ourselves and others. Joe Gould "had come to Greenwich Village and had found a mask for himself, and he had put it on and kept it on," notes Mitchell. "The Eccentric Author of a Great, Mysterious, Unpublished Book – that was his mask." Mitchell himself admits to the same at story's end,

failing as he does to come clean about Gould's secret and "continuing to play the role I had stepped into the afternoon I discovered the Oral History did not exist." The notion that people carry secrets, or that they pretend to be something they're not, is hardly original. Nor, for that matter, is Mitchell's apparent propensity to refine the testimony of his subject. For these reasons, one cannot call *Joe Gould's Secret* particularly original or journalistically sound. Yet Mitchell's obvious skills as writer and storyteller nearly outweigh such objections. He digs deep down into the soul of a New York iconoclast, and he does so in exceedingly entertaining fashion. The final story in Joseph Mitchell's book may not be factual, but it has the ring of truth all the same.