# Up in the Old Hotel and Other Stories Study Guide

## Up in the Old Hotel and Other Stories by Joseph Mitchell (writer)

BOOKRAGS

# Contents


Up in the Old Hotel and Other Stories Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Plot Summary....3

Pages 1-55....4

Pages 56 - 105....6

Pages 106 - 209....8

Pages 210 - 324....10

Pages 325 - 370....12

Pages 371-436....14

Pages 437 - 621....16

Pages 622-716....19

Characters....20

Objects/Places....23

Themes....25

Style....27

Quotes....29

Topics for Discussion....31

# Plot Summary

The book opens with a description of a saloon named "McSorley's." The saloon was probably the oldest in operation in the city at the time of the writing and the author, Joseph Mitchell, described the place and the regular customers in detail. From there, Mitchell moved on to tell the story of a woman named Mazie Gordon, who had spent most of her adult life working in a theater she owned as a ticket taker. But most nights after work, Mazie took some soap and change and went to the streets where she distributed both and checked up on anyone who seemed to be in distress. The stories continued with Joe Gould, who claimed to be able to talk to seagulls and was writing an extensive work he titled "An Oral History of Our Time." A longer story about Gould concluded the book with Mitchell noting that he'd come to remember Gould as something less disreputable than he actually had been, probably because of a tendency to remember the dead with fondness.

Many of Mitchell's stories were set along the water fronts. He considered the pollution to the harbors at some length and presented the opinion of one old bayman who said people always claimed the pollution was lessening but that he believed otherwise. One community Gould visited, Sandy Ground, had been founded on the oyster industry. One of the town's oldest citizen, Mr. Henry, said the people's attitudes had changed for the worse when they were forced into other occupations. Another man Mitchell met, Will Barbee, had inherited a turtle farm from his father who saw a niche market and capitalized on it.

Mitchell was a newspaper and magazine reporter during the 1930s and 1940s. He said that he'd struggled during the Great Depression because he was constantly sent out to get stories of human suffering. Mitchell said that many of those people felt he might be able to help them and that he often didn't have the heart or the nerve to tell them otherwise. It was on an assignment like this that he met James and Elizabeth Holliman, who claimed to have been living in a cave in the park for the previous year. It was obvious that Mrs. Holliman thought Mitchell was with the relief agency. While he didn't have the power to help them in that way, his article garnered attention and they were showered with gifts and food and were given a job.

Mitchell worked on the premise that everyone had a story and he sought to find those stories. Toward that end, he spent days with interesting people, followed them on their jobs and learned the details of their lives.

# Pages 1-55

## Pages 1-55 Summary and Analysis

In "The Old House at Home," the author described McSorley's, a saloon located on the first floor of a tenement building at 15 Seventh Street. The saloon was opened by Old John McSorley in 1854 and was originally named "Old House at Home," until the owner had to order a new sign to replace a damaged one. He refused to allow women in the saloon and ordered them out. John handed the operation of the bar over to his son, Bill, who was a quiet man in contrast to his outgoing father. Sometimes Bill would close the bar early, citing overcrowded conditions. The rest of the time he closed when he began to feel sleepy, though he always bought a round of drinks for patrons just before ushering them out.

In 1936, Bill sold out to retired police officer Daniel O'Connell, who had been a frequent patron of the bar. He died in 1939, leaving the bar to his daughter, Dorothy O'Connell Kirwan, who operated the bar with a relative as a manager. Patrons said the relative was too quiet and didn't like him much. Dorothy, citing the fact that women weren't allowed in the bar, didn't intrude personally but finally put her husband in charge. The place is crowded at noon and that most of the patrons are regulars, some coming from long distances in order to spend a few hours there.

In "Mazie," the author described a woman named Mazie P. Gordon who was "a celebrity on the Bowery." Mazie's last name wasn't Gordon, but she chose to use the name of her brother-in-law. She worked as a ticket taker at a movie theater called The Venice. Mazie also acted as the bouncer whenever a patron became unruly or too noisy. Mazie and her sisters, Rosie and Jeanie, owned the theater, though the sisters allowed Mazie to run it as she wanted. She worked every day in the ticket booth and often gave the poor a free ticket if they would go wash up first. The evenings were spent walking the streets where she gave away small amounts of change and soap to anyone in need and where she called for help when someone was injured or in danger of dying from exposure. Mazie approved of the Catholic Church, citing the willingness of nuns to help others.

In "Hit on the Head with a Cow," the described a man named Charles Eugene Cassell, who was "an old Yankee" and operated a a museum he called "Captain Charley's Private Museum for Intelligent People." Captain Charley, as he called himself, lived in Harlem and had a sign that indicated he had "odd and ends" for sale. Old women sometimes dropped in and paid the entry fee in order to look around in search of antiques. He claimed to have all kinds of artifacts and told the story of bringing three Egyptian mummies home on a ship only to find upon his arrival that someone had taken one of them.

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The author cited the atmosphere in McSorley's as being "dark and gloomy," and said this promotes a relaxed atmosphere not evident in most bars. He also described the place in great detail, including the fact that most of the old men huddle as near to the fire as possible in the winter and that some doze off and sleep for hours.

The author explained that when he was a child he would sometimes help his father and another man as they slaughtered cows. Once, a block and tackle system malfunctioned and the author was struck, knocking him silly so that for a time after that he was befuddled. He said that when he came to and asked his father what had happened, his dad said, "You've been hit in the head by a cow." The author said he had that same feeling of befuddlement whenever he spent some time with Captain Charlie, prompting the name of that essay, "Hit on the Head with a Cow."

# Pages 56 - 105

## Pages 56 - 105 Summary and Analysis

In "Professor Sea Gull," the author described Joe Gould, a "notable" in Greenwich Village. Joe's father and grandfather were both doctors and his mother required that he attend college. To satisfy her, he attended Harvard as his father had done, but refused to go on for more formal education. He is different from most people in that he refused to have possessions. He said that he would be owned by a large money-making corporation and that he would refuse if the owner of the Chrysler Building offered him that property. Joe was almost constantly writing a work he called "An Oral History of Our Time." This was a rambling narrative of the interesting people Joe met and was written in longhand in twenty-seven notebooks. Joe had arranged to leave his manuscript to the Harvard Library and the Smithsonian and predicted that someone would eventually discover that Joe was "the most brilliant historian of the century."

Joe worked bars and crowds, seeking anyone who might be willing to buy him a drink. In return, he gave recitations or debated on a topic of the buyer's choosing. The title of this essay came from the fact that Joe claimed the ability to translate poetry into a series of squawks that could be understood by sea gulls.

In "A Spism and a Spasm," the author described the Reverend Mr. James Jefferson Davis Hall. The reverend was an Episcopal preacher who held several positions for the church over the years of service, including as pastor of churches, chaplain for a prison camp and director of a mission. He then left the organized pulpit to become a street preacher. He visited areas regularly, based on his own opinions and requests of his patrons, mostly older women. He did not pass the hat for collections when he preached but depended on his pension and voluntary donations. He believed in a religious growth spurt, citing the fact that he received thousands of phone calls at home of people seeking mini-sermons. Some of these phone calls were the result of his leaving his phone number with people. One cleaning woman began leaving scraps of paper with Joe's number and the message to call for an important message. Upon receiving the call, Joe would preach about the need for salvation. Though some of the calls were pranks or the result of pranks, Joe believed many were real cries for help.

In "Lady Olga," the author described Jane Barnell, who worked most of her life as a bearded lady in various sideshows. Jane had been born as one of several daughters to a family and had a faint fuzz on her face from birth. She developed a full beard by the age of four. While her father loved her dearly, her mother was superstitious and seemed to fear the child. While Jane's father was out of town, her mother either sold her or gave her to a traveling circus family. Jane fell ill and spent some time in a hospital before her father found her and took her to live with her grandparents. Jane stayed there, working on a farm, until a man convinced her that she would be happier as a "freak" in a sideshow. Over the years, Jane married several performers before settling down with Thomas O'Boyle, her husband at the time of the author's interview.

Jane had many stage names during her career, including Lady Olga, but eventually became disenchanted with the circus life and took an apartment. She made her living working at various amusements, taking her turn on the stage in return for payment. She had a full beard that she wore in the style of the times as a young woman but that was grey and bushy as an older woman. Jane said that she'd always thought that her life would be better when she was old, but said that she came to realize that wasn't the case. She lived in a building with other circus and carnival people, citing their acceptance of anything and anyone - a fact that meant she wasn't the object of undue attention just by walking down the hallway.

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Joe Gould talked about the rats that populated the streets at night. He said that they came out in some areas without concern for the people. Joe said that he believed the rats to actually be "aching souls of tenement landlords." This seemed to be a reflection of his attitude that possessions are a bad thing. Joe seemed to feel that the tenement owners were cursed in life because of their ownership of the buildings and that this made the tenement owners cursed in death as well.

Jane was only one of the many unusual characters outlined in these essays, but she was one of the most captivating because of her outlook on life. She found only a limited ability to be happy with her life and often fell into fits of depression that last days or weeks. She wore a scarf sometimes to hide her face - and her beard. While she had shaved for a period of time, she had eventually accepted that the beard was a way of earning a living and had embraced that. However, she continued to dream of a different life. Ironically, she wanted to be a stenographer. It seems likely that this was because she wanted only to live an ordinary life.

# Pages 106 - 209

## Pages 106 - 209 Summary and Analysis

In "Evening with a Gifted Child," the author related his meeting with a nine-year-old girl named Philippa Duke Schuyler, who was a child prodigy in music. She was the daughter of a black father and a white mother, both writers, and lived on Convent Avenue. Philippa traveled, performing in prestigious venues and on the radio. She spent half of each day studying music instead of attending classes but continued to make good grades on tests for those classes. Her parents credited her diet for her extraordinary IQ. They seldom cooked anything and ate almost everything raw, including meat. When Philippa attended a movie, she took along an ear of raw corn or raw peas, eating those instead of peanuts or other treats at the movie. Her mother said that Philippa was constantly "pushing" for information and seeking to understand things.

In "A Sporting Man," Mitchell told the story of a man named Commodore Dutch who made his living by giving an annual ball. Each year, the man - known as Dutch, probably because of his ancestry - rented a hall and had tickets printed for the "Annual Party, Affair, Soiree and Gala Naval Ball of the Original Commodore Dutch Association." He charged admission and usually made around two thousand dollars profit. His "association" consisted of several "members" who would pay up "dues" to Dutch whenever they'd had a good run of luck at the tracks or otherwise come into money. While most knew that it was a scam and that Dutch was really just a bum, they admired his class.

In "The Cave Dwellers," Mitchell said he was working for a newspaper during the Great Depression and his job was to seek out stories of human suffering with the idea that anyone who was desperately down on his luck would feel better by reading stories of someone who was worse off. He heard about a couple who had lived in a cave in the park for about a year, surviving on occasional jobs either of them could pick up for a day. A man took them in and gave them a place to stay and Mitchell interviewed them at that apartment. The woman related the story of their hardships and seemed to believe that Mitchell was from the city's relief agency and could offer them help. Mitchell wrote his story and included the couple's address, in case anyone could offer one of them a job. He soon received several donations for the couple and went to give them the money but found that they had received money, food and liquor as gifts already. Both were drunk and angry with Mitchell for the story he'd written, though they didn't explain why. He returned the money to the people who had sent it to him and later discovered that the couple had left, worked a short time for a man on a farm and then disappeared.

In "King of the Gypsies" and "The Gypsy Women," Mitchell related information about the gypsies, including several of their scams, their pickpocket abilities and their tendency to move if things became heated.

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The story of "The Cave Dwellers" leaves the reader hanging, in that Mitchell doesn't discover what happened to the couple after they left the city. It seems they must have been scam artists, though they probably didn't know that Mitchell was a newspaper reporter when he was first questioning them. He said that he often felt bad for prying into the lives of people who were down on their luck and that when the woman of this story indicated she thought he was from a relief agency, he didn't correct her.

# Pages 210 - 324

## Pages 210 - 324 Summary and Analysis

In "The Deaf-Mutes Club," Mitchell received an invitation to visit with a man named Samuel Frankenheim, historian of a club for deaf people. At the club, Mitchell met a man named Jack Fitzsimmons, who told Mitchell about other clubs for the deaf in the city as well as schools and services. He said that several deaf schools paid the salary of a woman who helped the deaf find jobs and that they were particularly adept at welding, carpentry and machine operation. Fitzsimmons said that the one thing that made deaf people really angry is for someone to say that he is tired of the noise of the city and would like to be deaf.

"Santa Clause Smith" was the story of a "ragged white-bearded old man" named John Smith. He claimed to be from Riga, Latvia, Europe, and he traveled across the country, repeatedly stopping in at various towns along the way. The man asked for a cup of coffee or something to eat and people were often generous, feeding him whatever was available. He, in turn, thanked them by leaving a piece of paper behind, roughly in the size and shape of a check, with some ridiculous amount penciled in. The "check" was made of brown wrapping paper, was usually stained, often had a blank for the recipient's name, and ranged from ninety dollars to six hundred thousand. Mitchell said that the "checks" are always written on Irving National Bank of New York, which was no longer in business at the time. Anyone who sent the paper to the bank, hoping that the checks might have been real, was answered by the bank's successor, the Irving Trust. The bank found no one matching Smith's description among its depositors or even among past employees. The mystery remained unsolved.

In "The Don't-Swear Man," Mitchell met a man named Arthur Samuel Colborne who called himself the "founder and head of the Anti-profanity League." He handed out cards that called for no profanity, free of charge to anyone who would agree to distribute them. When a woman asked him if their efforts were paying off, he didn't answer directly but encouraged her to "redouble" her efforts. Mr. Colborne told Mitchell of a situation a few days earlier in which he'd broken some eggs and "came right out and said it." Mitchell asked what he'd said and Colborne said, "The dickens."

"The Obituary of a Gin Mill" was the story of Dick's Bar and Grill, which was moved by its owner to a new location, and some drunks posing as gangsters in order to convince bartenders to pay for "protection." In "Houdini's Picnic," Mitchell related the stories of several men who sing calypsos. He said the songs revolve around love and honor but cover other topics, such as "the wisdom of marrying a woman uglier than you", or whether a rum hangover is worse than a gin hangover. One of the first of these singers to record his music was Edgar Leon Sinclair, known in Harlem as Houdini. In "The Mohawks in High Steel," Mitchell related the history of a group of Indians, the Mohawks, who tend to leave the reservation in favor of factory work in steel mills. The group had

evolved over the years, with many of the young women marrying whites and breaking all contact with their blood families.

"All You Can Hold for Five Buck" was the story of change as traditional "beefsteak dinner" was moved from the saloons to open forums. Mitchell said that the dinners changed even more when they became part of the politicians seeking votes, which were opened to women after suffrage.

In "A Mess of Clams," Mitchell visited with Captain Archie M. Clock at the South Bay clam beds. Clock explained that the town owned the beds and that men from one town were not allowed to fish on beds owned by another town, though they tended to believe that they would be much more successful if they could. Clock took Mitchell out on his boat for the day, where Mitchell watched as Clock bought clams from all those bringing in clams that day. Clock then returned to the warehouse, where Mitchell watched the sorting process and then on routes to deliver the clams.

In "The Same as Monkey Glands," Mitchell traveled to the Isle of Hope, where he met Will Barbee, who owned a diamond terrapin farm. Mitchell learned that Barbee's father had started the farm on his belief that terrapins could be breed in captivity. The thriving business included breeding of terrapins through the sale when the terrapins were nine years old. Mitchell observed the entire process and later went to talk with several people who sold terrapins in the city, including a restaurant owner and a shop owner. The shop owner said that most live terrapins were purchased by Chinese who could scarcely afford to pay the high price for the terrapins but who believed in the healing powers. Mitchell cited Barbee's idea that eating terrapin meat made a person feel young and energetic, much the same effect as "monkey glands."

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Mitchell talked about his research into the life of John Smith, the man who wrote all the checks all over the country. He said that his first impression of the man was that he was a "benevolent old screwball" who meant no harm. However, he read through the letters of people who had written the bank in the hope that Smith's check would somehow be good and that they would benefit from an old man's kindness and came to another conclusion. Mitchell cited the false hope that Smith created in the minds of these people, many who were desperate themselves but who had chosen to show a little kindness to a derelict old man when most had little for themselves, let alone enough to share. Mitchell said that he came to see something sinister in Smith's actions.

Many of the Mohawks had changed religions, becoming Catholic and adhering to the Catholic doctrine. Mitchell related a conversation in which someone had asked a Mohawk if he would care to join the singing at a traditional Indian ceremony. The Indian said that he couldn't because it was prohibited by the Catholic Church and that he would "burn in hell" for that transgression. The man responded that "hell" was a white man's concept and wasn't something the Indians believed. Mitchell said the Indian didn't respond but simply walked away. This seems to be an example of a person torn by his life and his heritage - a theme that appears in several of Mitchell's stories.

# Pages 325 - 370

## Pages 325 - 370 Summary and Analysis

In "Good-bye Shirley Temple," Mitchell spent many evenings at a spaghetti house known as Madame Visaggi's. One of the "regulars" there was a woman named Peggy, who worked in a butcher shop and was very self-conscious about a birthmark on her face. One day a man and his wife were eating at the restaurant with their five-year-old daughter, who was interested in Peggy's birthmark. Peggy told the girl God had put the mark on her face because she was bad. When the girl asked what she'd done, Peggy said she'd killed her father and had cut out his heart. The little girl continued to be interested but later came back and talked to Peggy again. This time Peggy's words made the girl run away and she was later hysterical when she saw Peggy.

"On the Wagon" was the story of a man named Mike who had gotten a job and was trying to stay sober in order to keep it. He'd been "on the wagon" for six weeks and reminded himself that "Betty" would leave him if he didn't manage to hold on to his current job. He avoided bars, though his co-workers usually were at a bar and grill across the street. He was desperately lonesome. One Sunday he went to a bar, telling himself it was the only place to get a "good meal." After having his steak, he had a beer, then another, then a "rye" as a "chaser."

In "The Kind Old Blonde," the author told the story of a man named Jim who was having dinner with a woman. He was depressed and told her that his doctor had warned him to give up cigars and booze. The woman told the story of a man who'd had similar orders and had followed them only to die a year and a half later. She said that liquor was oil, necessary for the body's operation. Jim accepted her advice and ordered a whiskey.

In "I Couldn't Dope it Out," Mitchell was at a restaurant called My Blue Heaven when a couple arrived. The man was very nasty to the woman, insulting her appearance and complaining about everything. Later, Mitchell saw the same couple feeding pigeons and they were laughing and teasing. He said that he couldn't figure them out. In "The Downfall of Fascism in Black Ankle Country," Mitchell offered up opinions about the Ku Klux Klan and its members.

"I Blame It All on Mama" was the story of a woman named Copenhagen Calhoun who had a tendency to get drunk. Mitchell, who was in the tenth grade when he met her, said she was the first woman he'd ever seen get drunk. Mitchell asked her what it was like to get drunk. She slapped him, but then apologized and said that she wasn't proud of her drinking. She said that her mother had dosed her with liquor and molasses as a child to relieve colic, and said that if she'd known how it would affect her, she'd have slapped the liquor out of her mother's hand.

"Uncle Dockery and the Independent Bull" was the story of Dockery Fitzsimmons, a tobacco farmer who had opinions on several topics, including that an automobile was a

bad thing. He was from Black Ankle Country, and though Mitchell called him "uncle," they were not related. Uncle Dockery found himself without mules and harnessed a bull to a wagon to haul firewood. The bull ran, forcing Dockery to run to keep up. When the bull finally stopped, his wife rushed to his aid. He told her that he would stand still and urged that she unharness the bull first.

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Mitchell didn't reveal what Peggy had said to the little girl the second time they talked and it seemed likely that he didn't know. What's interesting is that he didn't go into any detail about what the woman might have said to her. This may seem like an oversight to the casual reader, but the point of the story was not that Peggy frightened the little girl. The point was that Peggy had to learn to accept herself and to accept the feelings of other people about her. This was demonstrated as Mitchell explained that a bartender named Eddie was in love with Peggy. When someone asked Peggy why she didn't return his feelings, Peggy had laughed it off. But after her encounter with the child, Peggy asked the bartender if he would walk her home. Of course he jumped at the opportunity. This encounter with the child was apparently some sort of wake-up call for Peggy, though it's left to the reader to decide exactly what that was.

# Pages 371-436

## Pages 371-436 Summary and Analysis

"Old Mr. Flood" opened with Mitchell explaining that Mr. Hugh G. Flood was ninety-three, a retired "house-wrecker," and determined that he would live until 1965, at which time he would be 115 years old. Mitchell said that Flood is "irreconcilable" to the fact that he will someday die, and that his fear that heaven and hell were equally undesirable was the reason. He drank a lot and ate little except seafood. He is a very neat man in appearance and believed that seafood is the one thing scientists haven't improved, therefore is the one desirable food. He said that people who work in the fish markets are never sick but that they don't want the general public to know this because the markets would always be crowded. He cited his good health, saying that his one cold had occurred when he got damp feet, lost his hat and slept by an open window after being up all night. He believed that if he could avoid an accident he would live to be 115. Though he could have afforded to live in any of the new, expensive hotels, he chose the Hartford because it was old and comfortable.

Mr. Flood spends most of his days at the fish market. Some people believe he was some sort of official and some called him the "Mayor of the Fish Market." The last stop in the market every day was to pick up a bucket of fish scraps that he used to feed the sea gulls that had been wounded, usually struck by cars on a street in the market.

In "The Black Clams," Mr. Flood sent word to Mitchell that he'd come up with a bushel of rare black clams and invited Mitchell to share a meal with him. When Mitchell arrived at the appointed time, he found another resident of the hotel, Mr. P.J. Mooney, who said that Mr. Flood had been acting strangely, predicted that Mr. Flood wasn't "long for this world," and said that the black clams were a myth. Mitchell caught up with Mr. Flood at another establishment and Mr. Flood produced the clams, which Mitchell said were a polished black color and were delicious. During their conversation, Mr. Flood said that Mr. Mooney had begun looking over all the other residents and inquiring into their health. He said that Mr. Mooney was estimating how long each had to live and that Mr. Mooney's interest had made him angry that morning.

In Mr. Flood's party, the author told the story of attending the ninety-fifth birthday celebration at Mr. Flood's room. Matthew Cusack, "one of Mr. Flood's closest friends," was seated at the bottom of the stairs leading to Mr. Flood's rooms, which were on the top floor. Mr. Cusack had been given a radio as a gift and had become enamored with the health programs. He'd become convinced that he was near death and that various ailments were plaguing him, or that they soon would. He said that having the radio had saved his life because it woke him to the dangerous health maladies that he hadn't been aware of until he learned about them on the radio. Mr. Cusack told Mitchell to go ahead up the stairs, and it was some time before he arrived at the party. Upon his arrival, he said that he would probably not attempt the stairs again, meaning this would be his last visit to Mr. Flood's rooms.

During the party, Mr. Cusack began to tell about the excitement that always occurs during a full moon. He said that police accept the fact that things will be strange during that time and that he was once involved in a situation in which he found some young men throwing bales of newspaper into the river. He said he kept asking them what they were doing and why, but they couldn't answer. Finally, a fellow officer pointed out the full moon and Cusack accepted that as the explanation. He said he was somewhat embarrassed not to have recognized the boys as "full mooners."

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Mr. Flood is a compilation of a group of men Mitchell knew. He said that his purpose in doing this was to be able to tell the "truth" about the lives of these men, even if a particular scene wasn't factual. He seemed to be set on informing the reader about the ideals and typical attitudes of the men rather than on relating any specific event.

Mr. Cusack seemed typical of older men who had come to believe that they were suffering from some unrealized disease. When someone suggested that having the radio had been a bad thing, he promptly responded that the information he got from the radio programs had saved his life. What's interesting is that this mimics the attitudes of many in the current timeframe with the myriad of commercials for treatments, ailments and medications.

# Pages 437 - 621

## Pages 437 - 621 Summary and Analysis

In "Up in the Old Hotel," the author talked about a restaurant on the harbor called "Sloppy Louie's." The business was owned by Louis Morino, who had initially been angry when people called the business "Sloppy Louie's." But when it came time to replace his sign, the new sign carried that name. Louis was from a fishing family in a foreign country but had decided to move to America at eighteen, knowing that the limited resources of his home couldn't support his entire family of brothers and sisters. He'd spent a lot of time working in restaurants before buying the building that had once been the Fulton Ferry Hotel. Mitchell ate there sometimes, and one day Louis said that his business was so brisk that he was going to have to set up tables on the second floor. He said that he would have already done it except that the second floor was used as storage and it would be a lot of trouble to clear it out. Mitchell pointed out that he had two additional floors in the four-story building and that he could use the upper two for storage. Louis said that there were no stairs going to the upper two and that he wasn't sure the hand-maneuvered elevator was safe. Mitchell said that he'd go up with Louis and Louis accepted the offer.

Armed with flashlights and hard hats, they went up in the elevator to the third floor, where they found the rooms set up just as they had been in the days of the old hotel. Mitchell noted the signs from the days of the hotel, including one outlining the rules of a common area known as a reading room. They found a few items of furniture as well. Louis abruptly said that he wanted to leave and refused to explore any further. Mitchell suggested that they go on to the fourth floor, but Louis refused.

In "The Bottom of the Harbor," Mitchell described the ocean beds along the coast. He said that there had been so much trash and pollution added to the harbor over the years that laws were passed prohibiting the taking of oysters in the area. He said that some men, who knew when the oysters would be hibernating and would therefore be safe to eat, still harvested some occasionally for their own use. Mitchell said there were "many wrecks" in the area and that some sight-seeing boats positioned themselves so that passengers could fish around those wrecks, used by fish as places for cover. Some of the wrecks are visible from above.

The Bureau of Marine Fisheries of the State Conservation Department included a man named Andrew Zimmer, who carried the title, "Shellfish Protector." Zimmer was charged with enforcing the shellfish and finfish laws. Mitchell sometimes went out on patrols with Zimmer. One day they were having clam chowder at a restaurant called Lundy's on Emmons Avenue when Zimmer introduced Mitchell to a bayman, Leroy Poole. As the three shared a meal, Zimmer asked Poole if he believed the bay was becoming less polluted with the enforcement of laws. Poole said he didn't believe it was.

In "Rats on the Waterfront," Mitchell explained that the rats along the waterfront were sometimes brought from foreign countries aboard ships. Sometimes, these rats were carriers of disease, including the Black Death. When ships arrived in the harbor, they were held away from the docks until they could be inspected. He said that he'd been told the story once about a ship that had an inspection ticket from its last port of call indicating that the rats had been exterminated there. Mitchell said that the officials later decided that the ticket must have been faked. He said that rats caught in the area later were found to be infected with the Black Death plague and exterminators were hired to trap rats along the waterfront. However, there were no human cases reported as a result of that incident.

In "Mr. Hunter's Grave," Mitchell said he sometimes packed himself a sandwich and spent an afternoon walking through a cemetery, looking at gravestones and trying to identify wildflowers. He said that during one of these forays he was told about a community called Sandy Ground with a somewhat run-down cemetery. The caretaker there was George Hunter, and Mr. Hunter invited Mitchell to his home where Mr. Hunter was making desserts for the company he was expecting the following day. He said he was a good cook and enjoyed cooking. He had been married twice but both wives had died, as well as his only son. He said his mother had been born into slavery.

Mr. Hunter told Mitchell about coming to the town of Sandy Ground when he was "just a boy." He said he'd learned about the founding of the town from the old men of those days. The town had been built on the oyster business, but people had been forced to find other jobs after the local beds were closed down because of pollution. Mr. Hunter said that change prompted a "don't-care attitude." He said that men who were forced to work for a living were then caught up in their quest for possessions, which meant they had to work even harder to pay for it all.

Mr. Hunter took Mitchell for a tour of the cemetery, telling him about the people of the town and more about the history. He said the cemetery was becoming crowded and that he believed the answer was to bury two caskets to each grave. He said he'd planned to do that himself, being buried atop his second wife, but that the grave digger hadn't buried his wife deeply enough so that he could legally have that option.

In "Dragger Captain," Mitchell described the dragger as being a boat very similar to a crawler. One dragger captain was named Ellery Franklin Thompson. Ellery had borrowed money to buy his first dragger, sold her and bought a second before buying a larger one. Mitchell said that Ellery's attitudes as he matured were different than those of many dragger captains. For example, he didn't go out in all kinds of weather with the attitude that he needed to drag nets over huge expanses of ocean floor in order to catch fish. Instead, he plotted where he was most likely to make good catches and took the boat out only when conditions were favorable. When most captains caught lobsters, they shipped the best to market and kept the culls for their own tables, but Ellery did the opposite, saying that the rich people could "pay for the culls."

Ellery had a natural talent for painting and once took several canvasses home to show his mother. On the way, a friend noticed the painting and suggested he offer some of

them for sale. He displayed one and sold five for a total of four hundred dollars. He said that making that sale ruined painting for him because every canvas he started after that became something that should be worth selling. Three years later he resumed his painting, taking on the tasks of painting boats for their owners. But that soon became a problem as well, with owners insisting that he put their boats in horrific storms, each wanting a storm worse that the previous painting.

In "The Rivermen," Mitchell describes a group of men who work along rivers in the area. Many set nets or eelpots and some fish for a living, though others have jobs in various fields.

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Louis's sudden insistence that he and Mitchell leave the upper floors of the old hotel were not explained. However, just before he made that decision, the men noted a sign that said "The wages of sin is death." When Louis insisted that they leave immediately, though Mitchell was still curious and obviously wanted to look around some more, Louis said that he'd learned nothing. Mitchell, trying to put a light-hearted note into the situation, said, "You learned that the wages of sin is death." Louis didn't take it as a joke but shuddered "with revulsion." This reaction was not explained and it's left to the reader to decide the significance.

Mr. Poole was an example of a member of the older generation who had seen unfortunate changes in the world and believed everything was going wrong. He said that he'd heard that the bay was becoming less polluted but that he couldn't see a change for the better. He went on to say that "everything is getting worse everywhere."

# Pages 622-716

## Pages 622-716 Summary and Analysis

Mitchell said that Joe Gould, the main focus of the final story, "Joe Gould's Secret," was a misfit. He lived and acted the part of a bum though he had been educated in Harvard. He said that his family had been important in his home town but that he'd never felt at home until he moved to New York where he could become completely lost among the misfits. Gould was writing an extensive work he called "An Oral History of Our Time." He predicted that someday people would read this work in order to figure out what had happened to humanity, just as people often read "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" in order to figure out what happened to the Romans. Toward that end, he specified in his will that all his manuscripts be gathered together and weighed, and that "two-thirds" of them - by weight - be handed over to the Harvard Library while the other one-third would be given to the Smithsonian.

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Mitchell said that he'd come across a drawer filled with notes about Joe and that he realized he'd simply lost interest in the man as a possible source of a story. However, as he read through notes and letters from Joe to Mitchell, he discovered one that indicated Joe's interest in a painting by a friend. Mitchell sought out the friend and discovered that the painting was of Joe, naked and seated, with his genitalia replicated in several places throughout the painting. Joe had been particularly fond of the painting and the painter told Mitchell that she'd imagined that Joe was - at heart - an exhibitionist. Mitchell said that upon hearing this, he suddenly realized that he'd come to think of Joe differently after his death. He said that he also realized that Joe would not mind being the subject of a story nor of being presented honestly, rather than as the "cleaned up" person Mitchell's imagination had tried to make him into.

# Characters

## Joseph Mitchell

The author, Mitchell is a newspaper reporter and works at various times for several publications as beat reporter covering an array of topics. Mitchell talked at length about his work as a reporter during the Great Depression. He said that he'd spent a great deal of time working on stories about human misery because his editor believed that the human who was down on his luck wanted to read about others who were worse off. Toward that end, Mitchell spent time in places where people were having a rough time. He said that it sometimes bothered him to impose on the lives of those people. He said that he was often mistaken for a man with the public relief agency and he usually didn't try to explain otherwise. Mitchell found an array of unusual people with strange lives and backgrounds, ranging from the child prodigy to the bearded lady in a sideshow. He presented the lives of these people from his own perspective. Mitchell also worked the police beats at several times and had a knack for finding the unusual stories, such as relating the information about gypsies as a former police officer was telling recruits about the pickpockets and scams common to the gypsy people.

## Jane Barnell

Known in some circles as Lady Olga, she had made her living most of her life as the bearded lady in an array of sideshows, carnivals and circuses, including Ringling Brothers. Jane had struggled most of her life to accept herself as she is. Though she took pride in being an authentic "freak" of the sideshow world, she was also very self-conscious when people stared at her. This bothered her so much that she moved from her home to an apartment building with many other circus performers. She said that no one in her building noticed that she was different. Jane was sold or given away by her own mother at the age of four and she lived with a family of circus performers until she fell ill and they left her behind at a hospital. When her father found her, he took her to live with her grandmother and she remained there until someone convinced her that she would lead a happier life as a circus performer than a farm hand. She spent many years with several circuses, but then left the life behind in order to settle into a permanent home. From there, she made her living working small amusements and sideshows. She sometimes became depressed over her life and at those times hid out in her apartment for days on end. Jane dreamed of an ordinary life and studied stenography, though she admitted that it was nothing more than a dream.

## Mazie Gordon

The woman who worked as a ticket taker at the theater, The Venice. Mazie spent her time helping others. Mazie would sometimes allow someone to enter the theater if they

would first go wash, and she provided the soap. She spent most nights traveling the city, looking for people in distress and handing out change.

## John McSorley

The man who opened the saloon known as "McSorleys", though he initially named it "The Old House at Home." John operated the business until leaving the daily handling of the saloon to his son, Bill.

## Bill McSorley

Son of the man who opened "McSorleys" saloon, he wasn't much of a business owner and closed the saloon whenever he started feeling sleepy or when business became so brisk that it overwhelmed him. He always bought the patrons a drink just before closing the doors for the night.

## Joe Gould

The man who was writing the extensive work titled "An Oral History of Our Time." Joe was educated at Harvard but had quit all pretense of work in order to work on this project which was described by most as a "rambling" discourse on the people he met. Joe wrote on children's tablets and had twenty-seven tablets completed. He'd bequeathed them to Harvard and the Smithsonian upon his death.

## Captain Archie M. Clock

The captain who bought clams in the South Bay clam beds. He took Mitchell for a day of buying clams and told him how the clam industry worked in the area. Clock then took Mitchell to the warehouse where the clams were sorted and prepared for delivery before making some of the deliveries himself.

## Will Barbee

The man who owned a diamondback terrapin farm on the Isle of Hope. Barbee inherited the operation from his father who had seen a market for the terrapins and set up the farm. Barbee explained the farming operation to Mitchell from the breeding operation to the final stages of feeding and packaging the terrapins for sale.

## Peggy

A regular at Madame Visaggi's spaghetti house, Peggy was very self-conscious about a birthmark on her face. She sought acceptance but seemed to worry a great deal about

the birthmark and what people thought of it. When a little girl made note of the mark, Peggy frightened her so that the child became almost hysterical.

## Mr. Hugh Flood

A character in several of Mitchell's essays, Mr. Flood was actually a compilation of characters Mitchell had met rather than a single person. He was past ninety, ate nothing but seafood and planned to live to be 115 years old. Mr. Flood often invited Mitchell to visit and shared a bushel of black oysters with him. He was a very neat man, visited the barber every day and admitted that he was always relieved when someone else died because it left more room for him.

## Mr. George Hunter

The man who was the caretaker of the cemetery at Sandy Ground. Mr. Hunter was an elderly man who was a very good cook and knew all the people of the community. He was also familiar with the founding of the town, having been brought there by his mother when Mr. Hunter was very young. He took Mitchell for a tour of the cemetery, talking to him about the people and the history of the area, and naming wildflowers for him.

# Objects/Places

## An Oral History of Our Time

The extensive work being written by Joe Gould.

## McSorley's

A saloon owned by Dorothy Kirwan and located on the first floor of a tenement on Seventh Street.

## The Vencie

The theater where Maizie Gordon was a ticket taker.

## Captain Charley's Private Museum for Intelligent People

A "museum" operated by Charles Cassell, it was home to items such as ragged stuffed animals, and old women seeking antiques were the most common customers.

## Covenant Avenue

Where Philippa Duke Schuyler lived with her parents.

## South Bay

Where the clam beds were located where Captain Clock was a buyer.

## Isle of Hope

Where Will Barbee had a terrapin farm.

## Madame Visaggi's

Located on Third Avenue, it was a spaghetti house where a little girl was frightened by a lady named Peggy who had a birthmark.

## The Hartford

The hotel where Mr. Flood lived.

## The Old Fulton Hotel

The name of the building where Sloppy Louie's restaurant was located.

## Emmons Avenue

Where Mitchell ate chowder with Mr. Poole and Mr. Zimmer.

## Sandy Ground

The name of the community where Mr. Hunter was caretaker of the cemetery.

# Themes

## Lack of Self-Acceptance

Several of the people Mitchell meets have had trouble reconciling themselves to their situations in life. The biggest example of this was Jane Barnell, who had spent most of her life working as the bearded lady in various circuses and sideshows. Jane's lack of self-acceptance likely stems from her mother's attitude. As a child, her bearded state had been evident and her mother had taken her to various people, hoping that someone could "conjure" up a cure for the condition. When it became evident that Jane's situation wouldn't change, her mother sent her away with a traveling show. Jane was miserable away from her home and likely spent the rest of her life blaming the fact that she was bearded for every unhappiness in her life. She said that she had once believed that it would change when she was older but that it never had and that she sometimes fell into depression that lasted days. Another example of this theme is seen in Peggy, the young woman Mitchell knew as a regular of Visaggio's spaghetti restaurant. Peggy was miserably unhappy with her appearance because of a birthmark on her face. When a child asked about the mark, she seemed to grow angry and was very rude to the child, eventually sending the little girl away in tears.

## A Desire to Help Others

Many of the people described in Mitchell's stories were willing to invest time and energy in helping others. One of the most prevalent examples of this was Mazie Gordon. Mazie worked hard and spent a great part of every day at her job as ticket taker in a movie theater she owned along with her sisters. Despite the fact that she could have hired someone else to take tickets, Mazie was willing to work. With money that she could have used to hire someone for that position, she provided help to the homeless and the derelicts of the area. She often left work only to go to areas known as refuges for homeless people where she would hand out soap and money, and would help anyone she felt needed aid. Mazie felt a kinship to the Catholic Church because she'd seen nuns helping a young drug addict. The people at the deaf-mute club were another group who exemplified this theme. When the author visited that club to learn about its history and its purpose, he discovered that there were people there who volunteered their time in order to serve as interpreters whenever a deaf person was in need of that service. Most of those volunteers had grown up in homes with sign language and had an excellent grasp of the language. Mitchell also learned that there was a woman hired by the area's deaf schools who was charged with helping the deaf find jobs. While she was paid to do a job, she apparently went above the call of duty and placed many deaf people in positions every week.

## Everyone Has a Story

Many reporters work on the premise that everyone has a story and that the key is learning to find that story. Mitchell was an expert at this and found the stories buried in people through their friends, their daily routines, their work and their very natures. An example of this is Will Barbee, who owned and operated a terrapin farm that he'd inherited from his family. While Mitchell went to interview Barbee with the intention of telling the story of the terrapin operation, he spent a great deal of time telling Mr. Barbee's story. He learned about his father's realization that there was a market for the terrapins, his belief that they could be bred in captivity, and his willingness to try it, despite the fact that some said it couldn't be done. Another example is Joe Gould. Many might have seen Joe as a crackpot derelict, but Mitchell was interested in Gould's background. Most people wouldn't have taken the time to learn that Joe's father and grandfather were both doctors, or that Joe had followed in the family footsteps as far as receiving a degree from Harvard but then had basically dropped out of life to write. There are many other examples, including the couple who had lived in a cave for a year and the police officer who had studied the gypsies.

# Style

## Perspective

The stories in the book were written as a series of first-person essays. The reader should keep in mind that these originally ran as newspaper and magazine articles, making the interjection of the author into the stories somewhat unusual compared to today's typical newspaper and magazine articles. However, the use of first-person observations was acceptable for the time frame. The use of first-person means there were several things possible and the reader needs to keep these in mind. For example, the author may have skewed details and information based on his own memories. While he was probably taking notes during or immediately after the events, the reader should keep in mind that the people and events were presented from the author's perspective. This limited perspective also meant that the author might not have known everything about his subjects. For example, he goes into an abandoned floor of a building that had been used as a hotel with the building's owner. The owner became obviously traumatized and insisted that they leave. The author never explained the reason behind the man's reaction and it was never made clear whether the author even knew. A similar example was seen in the story of the woman named Peggy, who was very self-conscious of her birthmark. Peggy talked to a little girl and the child became hysterical, but the author didn't even speculate on what Peggy said to the child to create that reaction. Despite these limitations, the presentation of the stories from this limited first-person perspective is adequate for the stories.

## Tone

The stories were written in straight-forward style and most were originally published as newspaper articles. The majority of the stories were divided between dialogue and narration and this division seemed adequate for the story. There were times in which the author presented rambling sentences. Though these were often convoluted, they seemed believable, considering the characters and subject matter of the stories. There were many lengthy paragraphs, including some pages that were without a single paragraph break over the entire course of the page. The lack of paragraphs should not pose a problem for most readers. The majority of the stories were written with everyday language, though some words and phrases were particular to the place and time of the stories. For example, the stories that revolve around the fish markets used terminology that would likely be overheard in fish markets of this time period. There are few words and phrases that a reader with an average vocabulary would not understand. This is probably attributable to the fact that the original stories were intended for newspapers. The stories of Mr. Flood were interesting in that Mr. Flood did not really exist. The author explained up front that the character was a figment of his imagination but that Mr. Flood embodied the characteristics of various men he knew in that time and place. It's left to the reader to decide whether this character is ultimately believable.

## Structure

The book was divided into four main "books." These are titled, McSorley's Wonderful Saloon, Old Mr. Flood, The Bottom of the Harbor and Joe Gould's Secret. The author, Joseph Mitchell, explained that these were originally published as four separate books, though he added some stories to this compilation. The first of these books was further divided into three sections. These sections were numbered with Roman numerals I through III. These sections were also divided into stories. Section one of the first book has twenty stories. The second had four and the third has three. The stories ranged in length from just five pages to more than fifty-five. The second "book" had a total of three stories, all about the character invented by Mitchell named Mr. Flood. The third book has six stories. The final book was a single story about the man Joe Gould. The book opened with an author's note, in which Mitchell explained some facts about the various stories. Each of the stories included a date in parenthesis at the end, indicating the year the story was written. The majority of the dates ranged in the 1930s and 1940s. Events described by Mitchell were consistent with those dates. The book indicated that some of the articles were originally printed in the "New Yorker Magazine" while others were printed in "The New Yorker" newspaper.

# Quotes

"As a businessman, Bill was anachronous; he hated banks, cash registers, bookkeeping, and salesmen. If the saloon became crowded, he would close up early, saying, 'I'm getting too confounded much trade in here.'"
McSorleys, p. 9

"'To hear them tell it,' she says, 'all the bums on the Bowery were knocking off millions down in Wall Street when they were young, else they were senators, else they were the general manager of something real big, but, poor fellows, the most of them they wasn't ever nothing but drunks.'"
Mazie, p. 39

"That is the way I feel after I have listened to Captain Charley for a little while. I feel as if I had been hit on the head with a cow."
Hit on the Head with a Cow, p. 41

"'People don't laugh at clowns anymore but they want to see them around,' he says. 'Likewise, if there isn't a bearded lady in a sideshow, people feel there's something lacking.'"
Lady Olga, p. 91

"'To a gypsy feller,' he said on several occasions, with pride in his voice, 'there ain't but two kinds of merchandise, lost and unlost. Anything that ain't nailed down is lost.'"
King of the Gypsies, p. 145

"I sat down on the bucket and told him that one Sunday afternoon in August, 1937, I placed third in a clam-eating tournament at a Block Island clambake, eating eighty-four cherries. I told him that I regard this as one of the few worth-while achievements of my life."
A Mess of Clams, p. 304

"'This is something I got no business telling a young man,' Mr. flood said, 'but the pleasantest news to any human being over seventy-fvie is that some other human being around that age just died. That's provided the deceased ain't related, and sometimes even if he is."
The Black Clams, p. 400

"I'm going to take my time. It'll take me half an hour and when I get to the top I'll most likely drop dead."
Mr. Flood's Party, p. 414

"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 life, I become quite

cheerful, and then I go for a long walk."
Mr. Hunter's Grave, p. 505

"A lot of the life went out of the settlement, and a kind of don't-care attitude set in."
Mr. Hunters Grave, p. 522

"Instead of painting a picture for the fun of it, just something to show to Ma and the fellows on the dock, I was trying to paint a picture worth one hundred dollars."
Dragger Captain, p. 558

"In New York City, especially in Greenwich Village, down among the cranks and the misfits and the would-bes and the never-wills and the God-knows-whats, I have always felt at home."
Joe Gould's Secret, p. 623

# Topics for Discussion

What do you know about Joseph Mitchell? What kinds of stories interested Mitchell? What did he dislike about his job as a reporter? Why?

Who was Mazie Gordon? Who was Jane Barnell? How were the two women similar? How were they different? What might have happened if the two women had become friends?

Who was Peggy? Was she more like Mazie Gordon or Jane Barnell? What makes you think so? Compare the three women. Which was the most self-absorbed? Which was the least? Support your answers.

Describe three of the people Mitchell interviewed who had jobs related to the fishing industry. Describe their jobs. How were they similar? Dissimilar? What aspects of their lives did Mitchell seem to find most interesting? What aspects did you find most interesting? Why?

Describe McSorley's Saloon. Compare the business's owners. What kind of people were the "regulars" of the business. Why did these people like the saloon? How did this saloon compare to the spaghetti restaurant where Mitchell spent some evenings?

How did Sloppy Louie's get its name? Who was the owner? What was the original purpose of the building that housed the restaurant? What happened when Mitchell and the owner explored one of the upper floors? What was the owner's reaction? Why do you believe he reacted this way?

Several of the stories describe pollution in the harbor and bays of the area. List at least two instances in which Mitchell described the impact of this pollution on local people. What was the attitude of Mr. Poole about the pollution? Is that attitude typical of some people today? Was his attitude correct?