

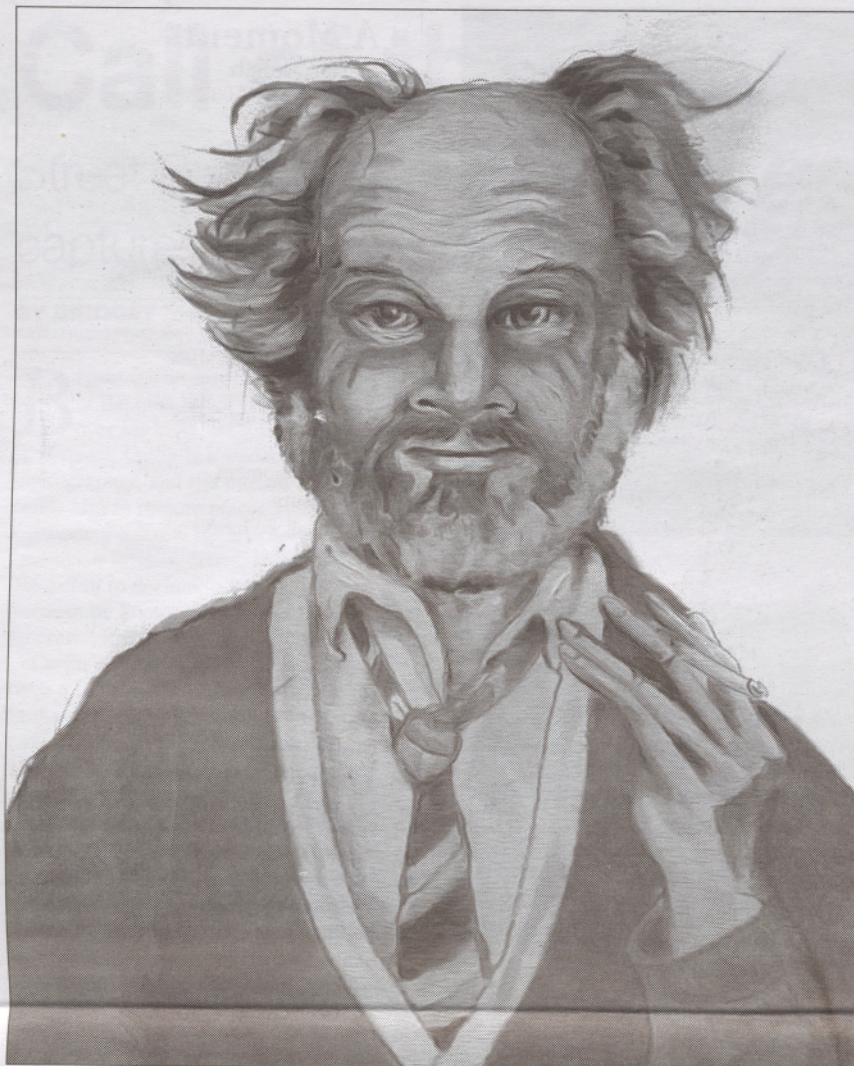


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BOOK REVIEW | Joe Gould's Teeth

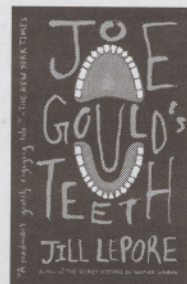
A deep dive inside the mind of a legendary but troubled writer

BY JOE MARTIN
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Who is Joe Gould? He has been dead since 1957 but he keeps popping up.

There was a time, during World War II, that his name had become known to many, thanks to a splendid profile about the unkempt little man entitled "Professor Sea Gull." It appeared in *The New Yorker* in December 1942, and revealed he was besieged by "homelessness, hunger and hangovers." The author was Joseph Mitchell, whom many revere as the greatest writer ever at that venerable publication.

New Yorker readers were charmed by Mitchell's portrait of the boozy bohemian ragamuffin, a Greenwich Village denizen who proclaimed to be writing "The Oral History of Our Time." It would be a sweeping chronicle of the common people left out of historical works by scholars with a penchant for memorializing the great and powerful. His would be a collection of plain talk and street slang overheard and recorded in a portfolio of many notebooks. In a letter

Joe Gould's
Teeth by Jill
Lepore

to a Harvard historian, Gould stated his aim "to present lyrical episodes of everyday life. I would like to widen the sphere of history as Walt Whitman did that of poetry." An ambitious project indeed.

Author Jill Lepore is a Harvard professor and New Yorker staff writer. In "Joe Gould's Teeth" she revisits the story of Gould and his vaunted plebian epic — trunks full of history scrounged from the daily speech of the masses, preserved by Gould for posterity. Mitchell returned to this story seven years after Gould died in a state psychiatric hospital. In his 1964 essay, "Joe Gould's Secret," Mitchell concluded that "The Oral History of Our Time" was stored mostly in the turgid imagination of Gould. Nonetheless, years later, Lepore became

drawn to the tale and began to wonder if there was something to it after all. Could thousands of pages of a unique historical record be awaiting discovery?

Before Gould's broader celebrity, he was known to an assortment of creative individuals who had long achieved fame. William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, e.e. cummings and Ezra Pound were friends. Bits of Gould's writings had made it into avant-garde publications, "nose to nose with essays by Virginia Woolf and drawings by Pablo Picasso." His weirdness intrigued other writers. He was the subject of a painting by artist Alice Neel, who depicted Gould with three penises. He navigated society and manifested his oddness with seemingly little concern about what others thought. As time went on, Gould's behavior became increasingly erratic. He could be irascible and vindictive. Mental illness had probably been percolating throughout much of Gould's life under a cloak of eccentricity.

In 1929, Gould had temporarily been a patient in a psychiatric facility. Lepore writes that he may have lost his teeth there. She quotes psychiatrist Muriel Gardiner: "The first thing they did was take out all their teeth." It's a strange approach to aiding the mentally disturbed. The rationale, according to Gardiner was that "physical infection" precipitated mental problems. It didn't, however, alleviate psychiatric ailments. Gould had to make do with false teeth — usually ill-fitting — that he was forever misplacing along with his glasses.

Yet the rumor of his growing vernacular history persisted. Partisan Review Editor Dwight Macdonald wrote that Gould "has in 25 years managed to fill incalculable notebooks which in turn fill incalculable boxes." That assertion is in an unpublished essay. No doubt Macdonald heard about, but never actually saw, the "incalculable" cache. Writer William Saroyan wrote a piece titled "How I Met Joe Gould," and implored Random House, Doubleday and other publishing houses to hunt down Gould's rambling magnum opus: "Long, dirty, edited, unedited, any how — print it, that's all." It was a feckless plea.

At a young age Gould, a white man, became interested in the subject of race and inequality; unfortunately, he also reproduced his fair share of sexist behavior. He wrote a few essays for the NAACP's publication, *The Crisis*. In 1914 he spoke at a conference on social justice called by Jane Addams. At a Boston showing of the racist film "Birth of a Nation" — which depicts the Ku Klux Klan as saviors of the South — Gould joined protesters who were mostly Black. He got arrested. Later, Gould professed his love for Black artist and sculptor Augusta Savage.

When his affections were unrequited, Gould became obsessed with Savage and began stalking her. Decades before the phrase "sexual harassment" would be coined in the 1980s, Gould made the woman's life miserable by making himself an unwanted presence, and only relented when threatened legally.

Immersed in his grandiose project — a graphomaniac who badgered friends and cajoled editors and whoever else for money — Gould's life was going downhill in this period. Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker arranged for him to reside at a house of hospitality, but he didn't stay. In 1952, Gould collapsed. He would spend the rest of his days in Pilgrim State Hospital, the

largest mental hospital in the world. It is not known what sort of treatment he may have received there. Lepore speculates: "Gould would almost certainly have been given electroshock treatments, and when that failed the next step would have been a lobotomy. The consent of the patient was not required."

After Gould's death in August 1957, there was a modest funeral. He left no will, and never quite completed the "Oral History of Our Time." Lepore writes that her search for Gould's magnum opus revealed "a man tormented by rage."

To me, his suffering didn't look romantic and his rage didn't look harmless." She closes her book by leaving the door to possibility slightly ajar. Somewhere, maybe a grand mound of Gould's febrile writing is moldering. One thing seems certain: Gould coined the phrase "Oral History." A director of Columbia University's Oral History Research Center admitted this, referring to Gould as "a dissolute member of the Greenwich Village literati."

Gould inspired the 2000 film "Joe Gould's Secret." He moved working class poet Philip Levine to write "Joe Gould's Pen," in which are the lines:

"You'd find him in the downtown libraries," someone wrote, "at all hours filling page after page, scribbling furiously, always chasing the last word." He carried his swollen books in a cardboard folder stained with black coffee and clutched to his chest as though they were His own life. Perhaps they were."

From *Street Roots* sister paper, *Real Change News* in Seattle.

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