

WILLARD ESPY, 1910-1999

Willard Espy, wordplay's great and good friend, died in New York on February 20, 1999 at the age of 88. It is difficult to do justice to this many-faceted man in a short tribute. I first learned of him when he published his first wordplay book, *The Game of Words*, in 1972. I reviewed it in the August 1972 *Word Ways*, mildly chiding him for an inadequate index and the lack of up-to-date examples of transposals and word squares. I sent him a copy of the review, but heard nothing until a week or so before Christmas, when his wife Louise telephoned to arrange for a subscription and a set of back issues. Soon, Wede himself was writing, sending me advance copies of excerpts from his next book for publishing in *Word Ways* ("Chair Aids Tool Is Into" in May, "Omak Me Yours Tonight" in August). He carefully went through the *Word Ways* back issues, eventually extracting material for 33 days in *An Almanac of Words at Play*. In May, he asked me to read the manuscript, bringing it out to Morristown on a Saturday in mid-June (our first face-to-face meeting). I found it a fascinating read--a wide-ranging collection of wordplay tidbits from many authors and eras, embellished by his own light verse to illustrate various points:

Transdeletions I was recently told by a girl in Algeria
 There was peace in Hepaticae, war in Wisteria.
 I put her in halter, that girl in Algeria.
 She wasn't insane, but she was in hysteria.

Haiku: Haikus show I.Q.'s.
 High I.Q.'s like haikus. Low
 I.Q.'s--no haikus.

3-Letter Words	Let her go; She is no Use to you Now. Do not pay For the hay Of a dry Cow.	You can get A free pet-- Let me say How. For a lie You can buy Any new Vow.
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Pi Mnemonic Now I sing a silly roundelay
 Of radial roots, and utter "Lackaday!
 Euclidian results imperfect are, my boy...
 Mnemonic arts employ!"

S-changed Words "My S's grow S's, alas," cried a lass;
 "My handles turn handless, my bras turn to brass.
 A girl who cares deeply is quick to caress;
 She dreams of the posses whose love she'd possess...

For Word Ways, the piece de resistance was the August 3 entry, an encomium to the magazine complete with address and subscription information that generated inquiries for many years after the book was published in the fall of 1975. (We are still reluctant to change our address 25 years later.)

Word Ways is a quarterly publication whose editors, contributors, and readers are all maniacs--logomaniacs. Who but Word Ways would serve drinks on the house because "unoriental"...has all the vowels in reverse order? Who but Word Ways would display, with the pride of a cat bringing home an eviscerated frog, a collection of three-syllable, four-letter words--Aida, area, aria, idea, iota, Iowa, ...

I have two fat file folders of correspondence with Wede, on a variety of subjects he wanted to treat in later books, from the origin of the Panama palindrome to names for animal droppings to the ugliest words in the English language.

Wede had strong family roots in the Pacific Northwest. His grandfather founded Oysterville, a former fishing village in southwestern Washington which Faith and I visited twice. In his 1977 book *Oysterville: Roads to Grandpa's Village*, he entertainingly wrote about many interesting escapades of his ancestors--one was hanged as a Salem witch in 1692, another visited the smoking crater of Popocatepetl. His last book, *Skulduggery on Shoalwater Bay*, published the year before he died, is an evocative vision of what various early settlers of Oysterville and its environs might now say (in blank verse) about their earthly experiences of a century earlier.

His own life was scarcely less interesting. As a public relations executive, he went sailing with Einstein, met noteworthies such as the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and Winston Churchill, and even tried to persuade Betty Friedan to serve him breakfast in bed! Perhaps he acquired his taste for story-telling and writing from his first wife, Hilda Cole, the author of two amusing books on the life of a housewife in suburbia, *Quiet*, *Yelled Mrs. Rabbit* and *Look Both Ways*.

One can argue that his most enduring book was *Words to Rhyme With*, a comprehensive list of rhyming words with a long introduction on the various kinds of rhyme, illustrated with his own light verse. A final sample exhibits his deft touch with unrhymable words:

MONTH
It is unth-
inkable to find
A rhyme for month
Except this special kind

ORANGE
The four eng-
ineers
Wore orange
Brassieres

OBLIGE
Love's lost its glow?
No need to lie; j-
ust tell me "go!"
And I'll oblige