

## WILLARD ESPY: A COINCIDENTAL ENCOUNTER

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Next month marks the 110<sup>th</sup> birthday of recreational linguist extraordinaire Willard Espy (b. Dec. 11, 1910; d. Feb. 20, 1999).

I had read his books well before I began writing about wordplay. As I was researching my first book in the late 1980s, I wrote to Wede (the soubriquet by which he was known to friends) several times with questions. He always responded with helpful answers. When my books were published, I sent him copies and he replied with cordial letters saying that he had enjoyed them, although by then he had serious vision problems.

Both of our day jobs were in marketing and advertising, so that was still another mutual synergy. I suggested we meet; his Manhattan apartment was almost precisely one mile south of mine. That didn't happen, which I attributed to his ill health, or perhaps because I was just one of many fans.

Then, some years later, there came a remarkable twist of fate. . . .

Politically, I'm a libertarian. A longtime friend, Andrea Millen Rich, operated Laissez Faire Books, the major bookseller in this field.

Andrea and her husband Howard occupied a magnificent apartment just off Washington Square. From time to time, they hosted elegant receptions for their favorite authors, and I was on the invitation list. Luminaries such as John Stossel and Thomas Szasz sometimes attended.

On this occasion, it was a party in honor of Richard Cornuelle (pronounced *cornell*), a writer of cerebral works on politics and economics. When I arrived in the lobby, an attractive elderly couple was waiting for the elevator. I guessed that they were headed to the same event, so I introduced myself.

"I'm Willard Espy," said the prepossessing mustachioed fellow, "and this is my wife, Louise."

I was so surprised that you could have knocked me over with . . . a father! I said that we had corresponded, but he didn't appear to recall that.

Then I challenged Wede: "What are you doing here? Are you a libertarian?"

"No," he responded. "Dick Cornuelle and I are old friends from college."

All evening, Wede and Louise sat quietly in a corner. I couldn't resist whispering to other guests: "Do you know who that is?" But of course, only the linguistic cognoscenti would have recognized his name or face.

I regret that Wede and I didn't get to know each other better. But after his death, I became acquainted with Louise, who invited me to several parties at her home and even to lunch at an exclusive city club where Wede had been a member. During one such meeting, she presented me with a nice gift: several of her husband's lesser-known books that I didn't own.

Whenever I think of that chance encounter, I'm reminded of the classic "worlds colliding" *Seinfeld* episode.