
In Memoriam

Stuart B. Flexner (1928–1990)

Stuart Flexner was a great lexicographer and a writer of distinction. Among his colleagues, he was a warm and dedicated leader, and in the words of Leonore C. Hauck, a co-worker at Random House, “a very observant, reflective, sensitive, a very human person.” In his human relationships, he was modest, witty, accommodating, amiable, and loyal. From the early 1970s, when I first met him through the offices of Gorton Carruth, he and I often met at MLA and NCTE gatherings and just as often held a social hour at which we talked about mostly what interested me and nothing at all about dictionaries. He was an accomplished listener, a good way to cement friendships. We exchanged holiday greetings, his always a personal letter, written in longhand, not a form letter passed around among acquaintances. A family man, he liked to write about activities and accomplishments of his wife Doris and his children Jennifer and Geoffrey.

But Stuart had a professional life, a very distinguished one that ended far too early. Educated at the University of Louisville, he studied under and with Professor David W. Maurer, author of *Whizz Mob* and many articles on the language of sub-cultures. No doubt, Maurer led Stuart into word studies, for Stuart’s first major publication was *The Dictionary of American Slang* (1960, revised in 1975), still the best dictionary of slang available and the most sensible, for the introduction should be a warning to those who make the usual derogatory pronouncements against what is called “slang.”

In the 1960s he served as the Senior Editor of the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* and Editor-in-Chief of the *College Dictionary*. His earlier experience with the first edition led to his being appointed Editor-in-Chief and Editorial Director, with complete responsibility for the Reference Book Division, including the publication of the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd edition, and new and updated editions of the college, school, and paperback dictionaries, as well as foreign editions and foreign dictionaries. His editing of this major dictionary and the many reference books deriving from it would have been the major achievement of any lexicographer’s life.

His best work probably was *I Hear America Talking* (1976), reviewed in *Names* 25.3 (1977): 174–76. It is a masterpiece of word reporting,

cultural history, and the way American English works. The writing is superb, scholarly, and readable, being as informative as any study of American English available, with the exception of Mencken's *The American Language*. But Flexner was a better writer than was Mencken. His *Listening to America* (1982), based on *I Hear America Talking*, was nominated in 1984 for a National Book Award. A last major work was his being chief editor and project director of *The Oxford American Dictionary*.

He was the author of many articles on language published in mass media magazines and newspapers, such as *Esquire*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping*, *The New York Times*, *People*, and others. He also published scholarly items in *American Speech*, reviewed books on language for *The New York Times Book Review*, and served as a consultant for the nine-part BBC and PBS television series, *The Story of English*. He served also as a scholarly and editorial consultant or advisor for many major institutions: Library of Congress, The Smithsonian, The Voice of America, the broadcasting companies (BBC, PBS, NBC, ABC), the U. S. Office of Education, National Endowment for the Humanities, and many others. It is not so well known that he founded and was president of Jugetas, S. A., a publishing house in Mexico City, where for six years he created and published a line of popular educational books for adults under the approval of the Mexican national Board of Education to help combat illiteracy.

Although his work with the American Name Society was not in any way central to his professional life, he attended meetings, asked members to serve as consultants for the dictionaries that he was editing, and wrote about names in his *I Hear America Talking* and *Listening to America*. Several members of ANS served as consultants to the *Random House Unabridged*, 2nd edition, and Stuart provided space for placenames, personal names, and forenames. He also encouraged members in their work and freely gave editorial advice to at least one editor of *Names*, directions that did much to save the magazine during some lean years.

Stuart was an innovator, a restless practitioner of his trade, and a leader. He was a founder of The Dictionary Society of North America and served the society in several capacities. Whatever project in which he was involved, he either carried it through to completion by himself or became the leader who saw complex undertakings through to publication. Alberto Vitale, President of Random House, Inc., wrote that Stuart's "was a splendid career, and he has left behind a contribution to Random House, and to the American reader, that will last for many years to come."

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