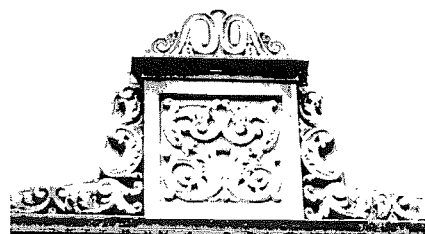


# NEWS



*of the History Department at Boston University*

December 1997

## ***Rebellious Laughter*, new book by Joseph Boskin, is published**

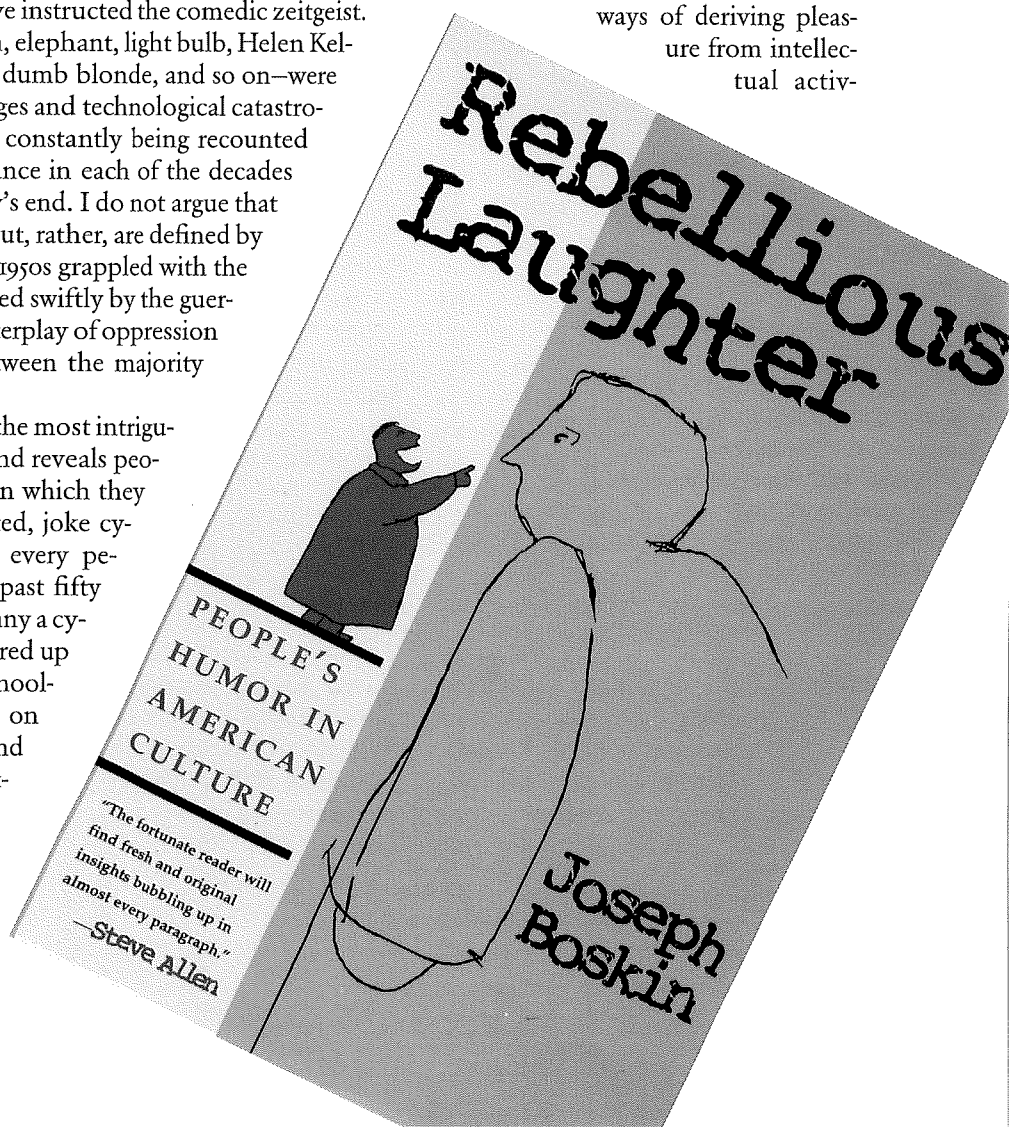
In mid-November Syracuse University Press published Professor Joseph Boskin's new book, *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture*. We are pleased to reprint a section of the Introduction:

Over the past half-century, overlapping and intersecting joke cycles and racial, ethnic, and gender sallies have instructed the comedic zeitgeist. The joke cycles—sick or cruel, Polish, elephant, light bulb, Helen Keller, Jewish American princess, WASP, disaster, dumb blonde, and so on—were in response to powerful socioeconomic changes and technological catastrophes. Although they flowed over the years, constantly being recounted and extended, the cycles made their appearance in each of the decades from the post-World War II period to century's end. I do not argue that they fall precisely within a ten-year stricture but, rather, are defined by its orientation. The subversive humor of the 1950s grappled with the repressive tactics of the McCarthyites, followed swiftly by the guerrilla humor of the counterculture. And the interplay of oppression and resistance, backlash and retaliation, between the majority and minorities produced a major joke war.

Of these various byplays, the joke cycle is the most intriguing, without doubt the mode that contains and reveals people's feelings and attitudes about the times in which they live. Seemingly inconsequential and unrelated, joke cycles have nonetheless recurred in virtually every period—six major scripts surfacing within the past fifty years—and serve as a popular fad in joking. Many a cycle has appeared in paperbacks, has been offered up by talk show hosts, and has been rapped by school-children. Although this study concentrates on the past fifty years, humor's content, style, and language have been shaped by forces operating throughout the century. The American Dream, the urban milieu, and the multicultural have influenced the entire course of people's humor. For this reason, these catalysts are analyzed prior to exploring the cycles and wars.

What end does all this joking

serve? The content, thrust, and energy of such behavior more than strongly suggest that humor possesses transformative qualities. Humor is the working out of uncertainty and confusion, not only providing psychological release but also enabling perspective. Sigmund Freud emphatically noted, "Humour has in it a *liberating* element. But it has also something fine and elevating, which is lacking in the other ways of deriving pleasure from intellectual activ-



ity. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or to be compelled to suffer." Joking, in short, enables people to take unto themselves aspects of shamanism.

Humor does not always, of course, provide such balming or psychological value. Derogatory joking is a seasoned American ploy. Especially in the competitive atmosphere of American culture has a considerable portion of humor been used to inflict psychological harm, to humiliate through stereotyping. Onslaughts of derisive joking have been directed toward the new immigrant, the powerless minority, the physically disadvantaged, the sexual "deviant," the economically downtrodden. At the same time, however, humor's extraordinary qualities enable acts of retaliation, leading in effect to an ongoing cultural conflict between groups. While much of humor emanates from aggressive intent, its overall thrust, as Freud noted, liberates.

It is folly to ignore the sociocultural and historical dimensions of folk or people's humor. Jokes form a unique

record, one that is underutilized in historical analysis. To slight such expression limits the historical chronicle, reinforces the false notion of humor's irrelevance, and undermines a significant scholarly tool. At the

very least, this work offers a social record of people's humor in operation while at the same time highlighting the extent to which humor was at the center of social change and conflict. During this period a rebellious humor reaffirmed communal identities and empowerment while enlarging personal and national perspective. ♦

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Lest our readers think the title *Rebellious Laughter* is misleading: yes, the book does contain jokes, and some very funny ones at that. Of those we can reprint, here is a favorite:

A doctor calls his patient to give him the results of recent tests.

"I have some bad news and some worse news. The *bad* news is that you have only 24 hours to live."

"Good God," exclaims the man, "what could be worse?"

"I've been trying to reach you since yesterday."

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We continue our collection of hints for making better use of the World Wide Web:

At [www.utexas.edu/world/univ](http://www.utexas.edu/world/univ) the University of Texas maintains a very useful list of all accredited colleges and universities in the United States with links to the main server at each. There is an alphabetical guide to help navigate the list.

For those interested more specifically in history departments, undergraduate major Rick Massel suggests [chnm.gmu.edu/history/depts](http://chnm.gmu.edu/history/depts), which has links leading directly to department sites (including Boston University's).

Rick also suggests [kuhttp.cc.ukans.edu/history](http://kuhttp.cc.ukans.edu/history), which offers an Index of Resources for Historians with about 2500 links; topics include early modern Europe, France, medieval Europe, military history, United Kingdom, urban history, and world history.

Anyone who keeps up with computer software news knows of the "browser battle" between the older Netscape Navigator and the newcomer to the field, Microsoft's Internet Explorer. Each has now released version 4 (Netscape has incorporated its browser into a larger package called "Communicator"). Most reviews favor the Microsoft product (IE4), which can be downloaded free from [www.microsoft.com/ie](http://www.microsoft.com/ie) (the version for Windows 3.1 is still in "preview"—that is, in testing phase—as is a version for the Macintosh, but the version for Windows 95 is a finished product). Netscape Communicator must be purchased, though the price is quite low (\$30 after a rebate). Several caveats apply: To access student records at Boston University, faculty members need to have Netscape Navigator on their computers; BU is working on an adaptation for Internet Explorer, but it is not ready at this time. Those wanting IE4 should download the software in the morning hours, when the operation takes only a few

minutes; later in the day, it can take hours. Windows 95 users should be aware that IE4 makes some changes to the operating system (without warning, one might add!). One of these changes makes moving from directory to directory much faster than before, and another alters the way on-screen windows appear when they are moved. It is a questionable policy, however, to change a user's operating system without offering the chance to refuse the changes. IE4 does offer the opportunity to make the entire desktop (that is, computer screen) look like a Web page or to continue with the familiar Windows 95 look. Since Microsoft has announced that Windows 98 (or whatever the next version will be called) will feature this new look, one can interpret IE4 as an effort to get users accustomed to the change. It is not entirely clear that making the desktop into a Web page is a useful idea, but clearly Mr. Gates has decided (belatedly but now determinedly) that the Web is the future.

Finally, for lovers of books, there is [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), which bills itself as "Earth's Biggest Bookstore," with 2.5 million titles. Users can search for books, read reviews, and order books by means of an online form.

We invite contributions to this ongoing column: e-mail them to [jtdutton@bu.edu](mailto:jtdutton@bu.edu).

James T. Dutton

#### Foreign Language Reading Courses for Graduate Students

In the spring, reading courses for graduate students will be offered by the Dept. of Modern Foreign Languages (there is no charge):

- GRS LF 621: Reading French. Mondays 4-7 p.m.
- GRS LG 621: Reading German. Tuesdays 4-7 p.m.
- GRS LS 621: Reading Spanish. Mondays 4-7 p.m.

Stamped approval is required for admission to these courses; see Modern Foreign Languages (718 Comm. Ave.) for details.

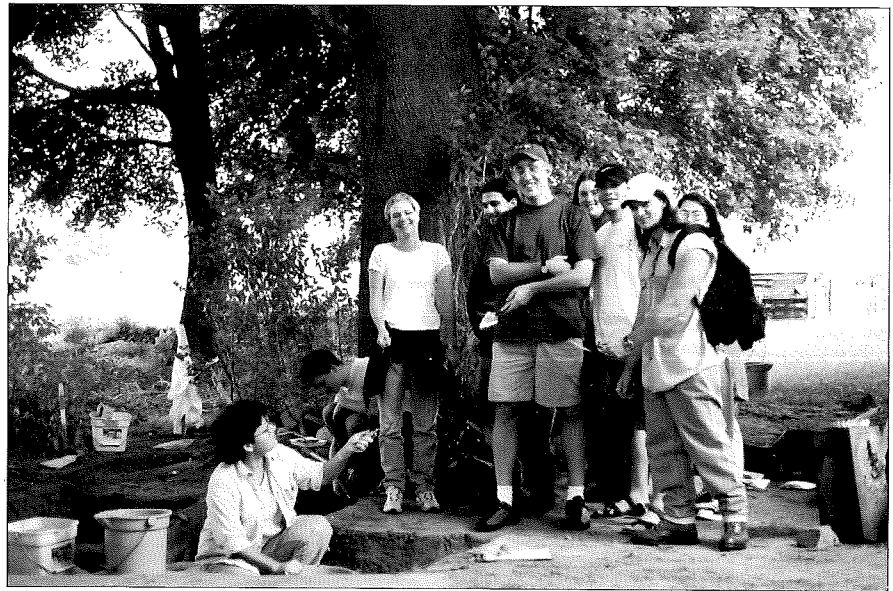
## Early American history first hand

BY JILL LEPORE

In October, students from HI 455 hit the road. On two crisp autumn Saturdays, juniors and seniors in Professor Jill Lepore's Early American History and Culture colloquium traveled first to the town of Newbury and next to Middlesex Fells.

In Newbury, they visited the Coffin House, a seventeenth-century home now owned by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) and toured its interior to explore early American furnishings. As part of a course unit on family life and the social use of space, students learned about how generations of the Coffin family lived and worked in their home. Just across the street from the Coffin House, they ambled through an early cemetery, charting changes in gravestone iconography. And, down the street from the Coffin House, they visited the Spencer-Pierce-Little Farm, another SPNEA home.

After students toured the house,



Professor Mary Beaudry (front left) explains archaeological methods to a group of students from Professor Lepore's HI 455.

Professor Mary Beaudry, from Boston University's Anthropology Department, introduced the class to the archaeological dig she and a host of graduate students and volunteers have been conducting over the past several years. While at the site, one volunteer made a well-timed discovery in the dirt: a buckle for a leather strap!

A few weeks later, the same group of intrepid students traveled to the Middlesex Fells, a reservation spanning land in Winchester, Stoneham, Malden, and Medford. At the Fells, students attempted to chart development along the now-abandoned Spot Pond Brook, a region of the Fells that was once densely settled (and the birthplace of Converse rubber). After doing some reading in environ-

mental history, students were skeptical about what historians can discover by walking through the woods, but their own "reading" of the landscape proved insightful.

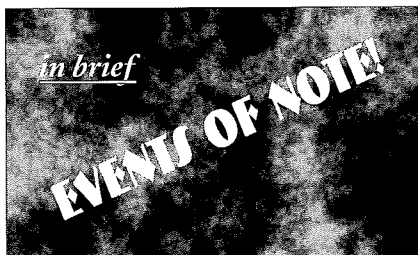
But, for all the tombstones, brickwork, and brooks, no aspect of the October outings was more appreciated than the boxes of donuts supplied during the drive. Dunkin' Donuts, of course, being a staple of early American cuisine. ♦



HI 455 students in front of the Spencer-Pierce-Little Farm. Professor Lepore is at the far right.

Jill Lepore joined the Boston University history faculty in September 1996 as Assistant Professor of History.

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Graduate student **Kyri Claflin** writes: "I attended a national graduate student conference at the University of Michigan October 24-26 at which just over twenty dissertation-level grad students presented work on topics of the Third French Republic (1870-1940). It was a dazzling collection of talent. A great group of faculty from a variety of universities was there to comment on the papers of what they kindly labeled the 'next generation of scholars.' The faculty (including Philip Nord and Herman Lebovics) engaged and critiqued the grad students' work but did so gently and extremely supportively. I warmed over my essay on the meaning of the Parisian penchant for eating rat during the Prussian siege of 1870-71; however, pretty much all the others in the group were in the post-research writing stage of their theses."

Professor **Fred Leventhal** has succeeded to the presidency of the North American Conference on British Studies for a two-year term from 1997 to 1999. He was elected as Vice President in 1995, having previously served as Pro-

gram Chair for three years between 1991 and 1994. With more than 1000 members, the NACBS is the principal professional organization of American and Canadian historians of Britain as well as scholars in other areas of British studies. It has links with the British Council and the Royal Historical Society in Britain in addition to seven regional CBS organizations in North America....At the annual meeting of NACBS at the Asilomar Conference Center in Monterey, California, October 31-November 2, Leventhal delivered a paper entitled "Eric Knight's War: The Campaign for Anglo-American Understanding," a longer version of which was presented at the department brown-bag seminar on November 21.

On November 17 Professor **Merle Goldman** appeared on the Lehrer News Hour to discuss the significance for U.S.-China relations of the release of the human rights activist Wei Jingsheng. She was also quoted in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Newsweek* on the subject. On November 1 she appeared on local television to comment on President Jiang Zemin's visit and speech at Harvard University.

The November 8 *New York Times* included an article on recent interest in millennial studies, featuring a report on the conference "The Apocalyptic Other: Millennialist Views of Unbelievers Among Jews, Christians, and Muslims" held at Boston University in

early November and organized by Professor **Richard Landes**. The piece was accompanied by a photo of Prof. Landes and other participants in the conference.

**Jonathan Reynolds** (Ph.D. 1995) is a jazz composer, guitarist, and vocalist, not to mention historian. Some of his musical work may be heard on a new CD "Original Sins" featuring his group, Defenders of the Faith. ♦

## CONFERENCES

The Northeast Popular Culture Association holds its 21st annual conference in Boston at Suffolk University on November 6-7, 1998. Proposed papers or panels on any culture studies or pop culture topics may be submitted (one-page abstract and brief cv) by July 1 to the program chair. An award (certificate and \$200) is offered each year for the best paper by a graduate student. Contact the program chair: Professor Joseph McCarthy, Suffolk University, Department of History, Boston, MA 02114.

The New England Historical Association, an affiliate of the AHA, holds its spring conference at the University of Vermont on April 17-18, 1998. Proposed papers or panels may be submitted (one-page abstract and a brief cv) by January 15. Contact the program chair: Professor Borden W. Painter, Trinity College, Department of History, Hartford, CT 06106. Papers on any historical time, topic, or place are invited.