

Book reviews

Joseph Boskin (ed.): *The Humor Prism in 20th Century America*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997.

The Humor Prism in 20th Century America is a collection of essays, almost all reprinted journal articles, some originally published as long ago as the early 1970's, with the majority from the 1980's. Some of them are familiar classics, e.g., Louis Rubin, Jr.'s "The Great American Joke," which has appeared as a journal article, as the introduction to Rubin's USIS collection of essays on humor in American literature and the American-published version of it, and in Enid Veron's book *Humor in America*. Others are more obscure, and only one, apparently, Boskin's essay on African American humor, is new. Most of the essays deal with American humor from the perspective of cultural history or folklore studies. The book is an entry in a series entitled *Humor in Life and Letters*.

Joseph Boskin's is an important voice in humor studies. Many study humor using social and cultural manifestations of it to understand how it works. Boskin studies American culture and society using humor to understand how it works. Many in the cultural studies end of the business (as opposed to the linguistic and psychological) are insufficiently aware of the importance of an historical dimension to their inquiry. Boskin is interested in the present rather than the past *per se*, but he has a powerful grasp of how the past affects the present and of how our understanding of the past is vital to our appreciation of the present. Also, he is not a disinterested observer with something funny trapped under his microscope. He presents humor as a significant way in which society functions, as serious, with real implications for how we treat one another and live our lives. He has recently published another book,