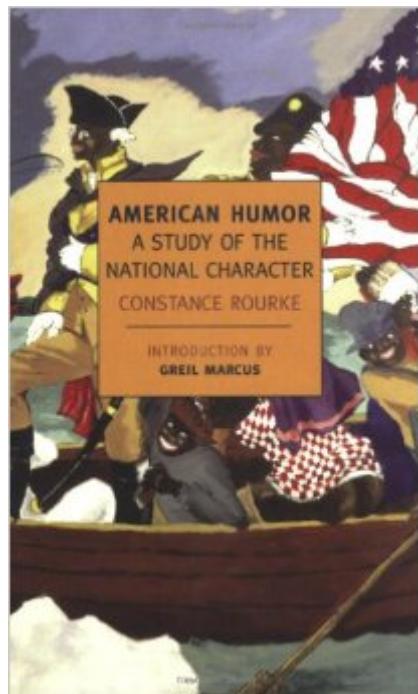


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American Humor: A Study Of The National Character (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

Stepping out of the darkness, the American emerges upon the stage of history as a new character, as puzzling to himself as to others. American Humor, Constance Rourke's pioneering "study of the national character," singles out the archetypal figures of the Yankee peddler, the backwoodsman, and the blackface minstrel to illuminate the fundamental role of popular culture in fashioning a distinctive American sensibility. A memorable performance in its own right, American Humor crackles with the jibes and jokes of generations while presenting a striking picture of a vagabond nation in perpetual self-pursuit. Davy Crockett and Henry James, Jim Crow and Emily Dickinson rub shoulders in a work that inspired such later critics as Pauline Kael and Lester Bangs and which still has much to say about the America of Bob Dylan and Thomas Pynchon, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In this critical study, Rourke ranges far and wide across the landscape of American culture, from the post-colonial beginnings of an identifiable American culture up to the 1920s. Her focus is on humor, but only loosely, as she emphasizes the importance of humor in relation to her real topic: the development of the American character as it is presented in the literature and theater of the times. She engages in a large number of critiques, none of them particularly in-depth or biographical, but many of her insights, particularly in regard to an author's tone and relationship to the march of

cultural history, are intriguing. Rourke regards the shrewd and dry-humored Yankee as the basis of much of our culture. He gave rise to the woodsman and his tall tales of frontier life. The Black sensibility of course developed on its own. She points out the central presence of a variety of types of humor in American life. From examining the work of some dramatists and tale-spinners, she takes us through a cursory discussion of some of the giants of American literature: Poe, Melville, James, Dickinson, and Lewis, to name a few. By today's standards, this is pretty quaint stuff - but it is still valid and interesting; a good book for any student of American literature and culture.

When I was in grad school I heard about "American Humor" but never found my way to it. Now, many years later, I found it, and found it rather unreadable--which may mean nothing. Perhaps its day has come and gone; perhaps a new day will dawn and it will resume its former fame. One never knows.

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