

A Brief History of College Humor Magazines



The college graduate, wearing the traditional cap and gown, sits on top of the world.

A closer look shows the world is actually a bomb and a lit fuse is coming out of one side.

The date on the cover is May 1939, more than two years before the United States entered World War II, but the University of Michigan [Gargoyle](#) humor magazine was clearly on to something.

Published near the end of what is considered the heyday of college humor magazines, that issue of Gargoyle is one of more than 1,000 recently donated to the University of Wisconsin-Madison from what may be the largest collection of its kind.

The magazines tell the story of a humor movement that served as a training ground not only for some of the nation's most well-known comedians, but also its most respected writers. Late-night talk show host Conan O'Brien famously served as editor of the Harvard Lampoon for two years, James Thurber worked at the Ohio State University Sundial and playwright Arthur Miller had his first writings published in Gargoyle.

The magazines help to define the times in which they were produced, said Don Nilsen, secretary for the International Society for Humor Studies and English professor at Arizona State University.

John Dobbertin Jr., who revived Gargoyle and served as editor from 1962 to 1964, donated the collection. Gargoyle is still published, one of just a few dozen still in print, down from a peak of more than 200 in the 1920s.

Incoming editor Cathy Fisher, a 20-year Michigan student, said Gargoyle strives for original content different from the plethora of fake comedy news already in print and on TV.

“The weirder it is, the more likely somebody is going to pick it up and read it,” she said. “We try to think of things that are a little raunchy, unorthodox.”

That approach certainly is consistent with the history of the college humor magazines, which tended to provide an outlet for an irreverent, satiric brand of wit, especially when there were few other mainstream options, said Stephen Kercher, a University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh history professor who has studied American humor and satire.

The magazines, even in the 1920s, focused heavily on jokes about sex and drinking, Kercher said. But as the 1939 cover shows, they weren’t afraid to take on political issues.

One of the most famous cartoons to hit a college magazine came in a 1967 issue of Gargoyle. Titled “Kill a Commie for Christ Man,” the image shows a soldier killing a Communist, with Jesus looking down glumly from behind. The cartoon came after Dobbertin left Gargoyle, but he said it shows the power that well-done satire can have.

“A good campus humor magazine pushes the envelope,” Dobbertin said.

For a magazine to fall under Dobbertin’s definition of a college humor magazine, it must have some connection with a university, be created by students and be in print, not just on the Internet.

That leaves perhaps the best known national humor publication at the moment out of the loop. While The Onion was created by students at UW-Madison in 1988, it has long since moved on from its humble roots and is now produced by a paid professional staff in New York City.

“It might as well be the New Yorker,” Dobbertin said, explaining why The Onion is not in his collection.

The first college humor magazines can be traced to 1834 to Princeton University. The Harvard Lampoon, the most well-known, started in 1876.

Titles of other magazines that have come and gone run the gamut from the whimsical to the nonsensical. The meaning of many are lost to time. They include the Colorado Dodo, the Cornell University Lunatic, University of Chicago's The Shady Dealer and University of California, Berkeley Heuristic Squelch.

The period from the 1920s to World War II is generally considered the most fertile time for the magazines. Only 10 that have been published for 90 years or more survive. Most are at Ivy League schools. Dobbertin estimates that just a couple dozen or more remain in print nationwide, down from a high of around 200.

World events and the evolution of comedy, not to mention the advent of MAD magazine and Playboy in the early 1950s, helped kill off many of the college publications. Too often those producing the magazines knew how to be funny, but weren't so good at selling ads, Dobbertin said.

The type of humor showcased in the current magazines differs from their predecessors, said Nilsen, the English professor.

"The humor is not as in your face as it used to be," Nilsen said. He blames political correctness.

Fisher, Gargoyle's editor, agreed that compared to past issues she's looked through, the current magazine is relatively tame.

"We're trying to have something that's a little more rebellious in some ways, but it's sort of hard," she said. "We're a lot more careful now about not offending people. We live in a fairly sensitive society."