

Follow The Bunny

Even in its heyday, Hef's magazine was a yokel's idea of sophistication.

By Edward Kosner

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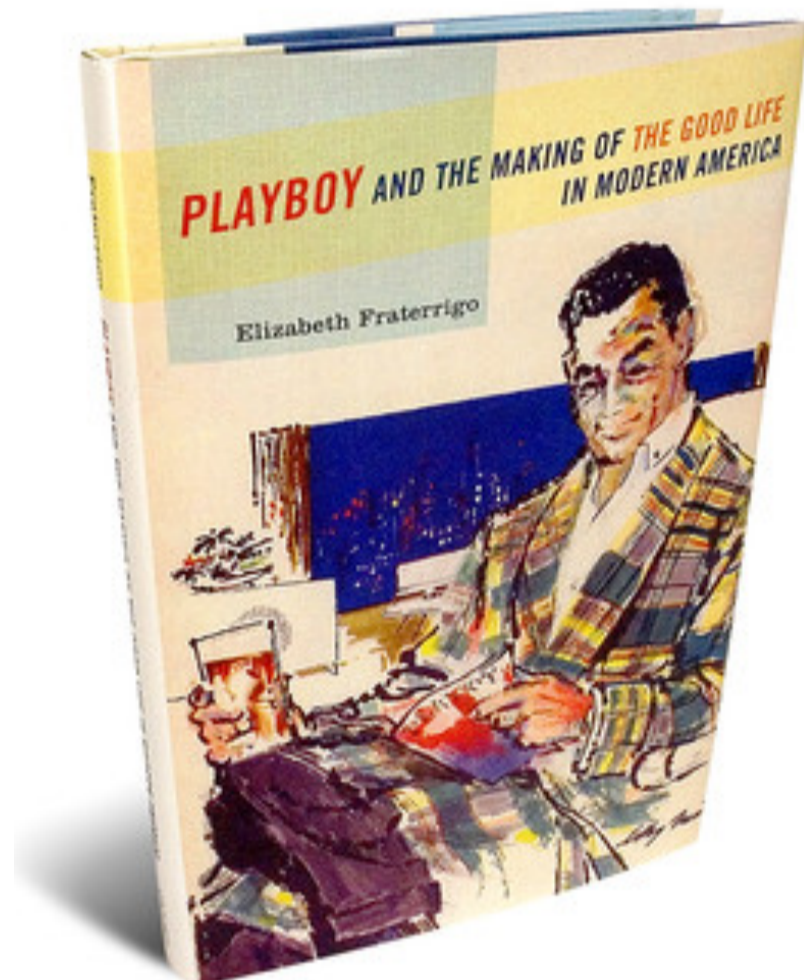
There has always been something faintly ridiculous about Hugh Hefner—lounging in those silky pajamas with his interchangeable twin sets of blond honeys and that erect pipe jutting from his jaw, like Popeye. Still, he created an empire out of his own fervid longings, and attention of a sort must be paid.

Now, 56 years (and 670 or so playmates of the month) since he published the first issue of Playboy, Mr. Hefner's domain—the magazine, the one surviving club, the soft-core cable channels and the bunny-tailed tchotchkes—is up for sale. And, as irony would have it, the valedictory for this pioneer of Middle American hedonism has been written by an earnest academic.

Don't expect backstairs gossip from the Playboy Mansion West or glimpses of topless bunnies cavorting with Hef and his showbiz pals in the Woo Grotto from Elizabeth Fraterrigo's "Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in America." Nor does the book include much detail about how Mr. Hefner turned his skinny little Chicago slick into a publishing colossus that, at its peak in 1972, sold more than seven million issues a month and operated 40 Playboy clubs, hotels and resorts, including a London casino that was the most profitable gambling joint in the world. Mr. Hefner's manifesto, his stupefying 25-part Playboy Philosophy, rates barely a mention.

Instead, Prof. Fraterrigo, who teaches history at Loyola University in Chicago, devotes herself to the chicken-and-egg question of how much Playboy shaped mid-century American mores and consumer taste and how much it reflected the profound changes that convulsed the country as it emerged from nearly 30 years of Depression and war. The answer is simple enough: Like Harold Ross of the New Yorker, Clay Felker of New York magazine and Helen Gurley Brown of Cosmopolitan, Hef was a great editor whose taste and preoccupations synched with the emerging spirit of his time and became iconic.

Still, it's entertaining to scoot down memory lane in Mr. Hefner's roadster to revisit Playboy's early days as Hef dictated every detail of his evolving masculine pleasure principles. "To keep it sexy and acceptable," he instructed one playmate photographer, "we'll want the breasts exposed and yet covered—this distinction is very important to us." He went on to feature in the magazine various Playboy penthouse pads, stage sets where his aspiring sophisticates could seduce "sexually available" young women with expertly mixed cocktails, Paul Desmond on the hi-fi, and gourmet tasties whipped up by the host himself—all leading to guiltless romps on the big circular bed amid a mildly psychedelic light show. Cool!



PLAYBOY AND THE MAKING OF THE GOOD LIFE IN AMERICA

By Elizabeth Fraterrigo

Oxford University Press, 295 pages, \$29.95

In fact, even in its heyday, Playboy was a yokel's idea of sophistication. There was, for example, the Bunny Watchers' Society, a bunch of guys in special black blazers with the Playboy logo who would sip free drinks at a Playmate Bar each afternoon while ogling cottontail cocktail waitresses and guessing their measurements.

Beneath the swagger ran a deeply unattractive misogyny. Mr. Hefner constantly proclaimed his adoration of women, but the magazine went berserk over the "womanization" of American society, especially the dire threat of women competing with men at work. From the archives, Prof. Fraterrigo unearths a memo from editor A.C. Spector, Mr. Hefner's éminence grise, to the author Philip Wylie ordering up a hatchet job on career women—"these chromium-plated, castrating, driven, vicious, unhappy, destructive, asexual or anti-sexual devouring, insatiable" menaces. Later, Mr. Hefner tried to ally himself with the feminists. He supported abortion rights and even the Equal Rights Amendment, but the women had long memories and most weren't impressed.

Mr. Hefner's basic conviction was that hard-working young men—and young women—deserved a few years of sexual road-testing before settling into marriages that would be the better for their carefree experience. Thus, Prof. Fraterrigo suggests, his advocacy of hedonism was ultimately in the service of turning out ever more stable American families whose success would fuel the consumer economy and bolster our side in the Cold War with communism. For his part, Mr. Hefner thought he was crusading against Eisenhower-age conformity. He was actually pushing a new orthodoxy of individuality, Hefner-style.

Inevitably, Mr. Hefner and his magazine were victimized by their own success. Even as Playboy flourished in 1969, Bob Guccione brought Penthouse to the U.S., promising "the pictures without the lectures" and "the pinups without the hang-ups." In practice, this meant that, unlike Playboy bunnies, Penthouse pets showed as much as the top-less and bottom-less girls at the local strip-mall "gentleman's club." For a time, Mr. Hefner tried to compete in what came to be known as the Pubic Wars, but he soon retreated. The Playboy clubs seemed increasingly outdated, and by 1975, Playboy Enterprises began posting losses, and the publicly traded stock started to tank.

Mr. Hefner increasingly holed up in his Los Angeles mansion, taking up with the first of his ballyhooed gal pals, Barbi Benton. He went through a bout of Dexedrine addiction, got married and sired two children, and then slid into his dotage with a bouncy blonde at each elbow. Aside from old quotes, Hef, now 83, isn't much heard from in "Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in America" until the epilogue, in which he grants an interview to Prof. Fraterrigo. "I have been on the side of the angels from the very beginning," he concludes, a prophet with a shred more honor than you might expect after a gaudy half-century run.

Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News. His memoir, "It's News to Me," has been reissued in paperback.

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