

SEX EDUCATION JOHN SUTHERLAND

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The lust picture show

THE HISTORY OF MEN'S MAGAZINES

BY DIAN HANSON  
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These are the first of what will eventually be a six-volume set. They cover the subject (previously uncovered, as you might say) from Victorian prudery to the eve of the "let it all hang out" 1960s. It's less a history than a visual anthology, with a thin thread of text (in English, French, and German) linking the 800 pics — most generously full-sized. This is a good strategy for a book that is less coffee-table than bedside. The author is a woman who can clearly hold her own in the man's world. Dian Hanson is, as the bio-

graphical note informs us, "a 25-year veteran of men's magazine publishing. She began her career at *Puritan Magazine* in 1976 and went on to edit a variety of titles, including *Partner*, *Out*, *Hooker*, *Outlaw Biker*, and *Jugs* magazines. In 1987 she took over the *Sixties* title *Leg Show* and turned it into the world's bestselling fetish publication." The lady knows whereof she speaks. Her research for this project has been conducted less in copyright libraries, which have been scandalously lax in archiving men's magazines, than among "specialty" collectors and eBay, which does a roaring trade in them. You can't, Hanson ruefully notes, "touch" the December 1953 edition of *Playboy*, with its nude Marilyn Monroe calendar shot, for less than six grand — and rising. Perhaps because she is a woman, Hanson has themed her illustrations with a view to their charm and period quaintness. She downplays the inherent grubbiness of the materials

with which men habitually perk up their jaded manhood. These are bedside, but not under-the-mattress volumes. The "Phwoar!" factor is comfortably low. I'm not so sure of the forthcoming volumes which promise to explore the "most daring and extreme edges of adult publishing". They are fluid edges. Hanson astutely notes cynically strategic relaxations during wartime. Testosterone is always good for military morale. There may be a born-again Christian in the White House but, be assured, the Pentagon will have arranged for a discreet supply of hardcore, 2004-style, for the warriors fighting in Iraq. Osama's men doubtless have their own morale-boosting reading matter. The bulk of Hanson's illustrations are colourfully pictorial, not grainily photographic. She has a connoisseur's eye for the elegant covers that glossily encased the pulp content of the men's mag in its glory days. Illustration reaches a peak with



Lusts of men sublimated into images of sylph-like beauty: from *The History of Men's Magazines*

George Petty and Alberto Vargas, artists who sublimated the lusts of man into images of sylph-like beauty. Both, of course, are American, as are about 80 per cent of Hanson's images. This national bias reflects the core product. In Britain, in the early 20th century, the street name for them was "Yank mags". There was another street name which rhymes. The English mag is, the chauvinist in me laments, sadly unimpressive. One is grateful that Hanson pays scant attention to *Spick*, *Span*, *Razzle*, *Blighty* and *Reveille* (items that excited me and my schoolmates in the 1950s; in those days one could even get a tingle from the front page of *Tit Bits* — a magazine whose title promised much more than it gave). National pride is redeemed by June Wilkinson, an Essex girl who went on to be one of the biggest (and breastiest) Marilyn-era models of the 1950s. Now in her sixties, as Hanson records, Ms Wilkinson is "still gorgeous". Hanson takes sideways looks at the French men's mag (silk knickers), the German (hairy nudists), and such exotics as the Turkish (vast rumps) and Argentine (bad perms). The American focus is consistently on legs (typically astride something phallic, like a bucking bronco or a bicycle) in the early decades and on thrust-out breasts in the later. The climate slowly changes from 1920s "spicy" to 1940s "sultry" to 1950s "sophisticated". Stereotypes come and go: "the girl next door", "the bad girl", "the vamp", "the sweater girl", "the good-time girl", "the pin-up", "the sex goddess".

the naturist magazines, model magazines uncovered the interesting bits — but as "still life"; something that has never got men off. The *True Detective* magazines smuggled in sexual sadism ("White Slaves in Black Harlem", "Jailbait Sweetie!") under the spurious flag of documentary realism. *Hollywood Confidential* and its knock-off tell-all mags had a brief florescence terminated by the suicide of the genre's founder, Robert Harrison. His lurid exposés live on in the *National Enquirer*. Fetish magazines (a pet interest of Hanson's) originated in France, with publications such as *Paris Tabou* and *Paris Satan* and peaked into high art with the tormented genius John Willie's *Bizarre* — a magazine for very strange men indeed. Hanson makes informative digressions into such specialty items as the African-American man's mag (black diver to



Hanson is good on the sub-categories of male magazines. Naturist magazines offered full frontal, but in a testicle-freezing way. What red-blooded male could get aroused by wholesome matrons playing volleyball in the woods? After the Hayes code neutered on-screen sex, "film-fun" magazines filled the fantasy void. "Fun" (along with "Zippy", "Snappy", "Nifty") was a passport word, allowing mild transgression of the current decency standards. Hanson traces the rise and fall of "model magazines" ("not smut, my dear fellow, but art: like that Rubens fellow"). Like

YOU CAN'T TOUCH THE DECEMBER 1953 PLAYBOY FOR LESS THAN SIX GRAND

white mermaid: "Forget it, baby: we're only two miles off the coast of South Carolina". The pinnacle of the period's magazinery, as Hanson tells it, is *Playboy*. Hugh Hefner's stylish organ rose in 1953 from a ruck of "gentleman's magazines" with nudge-nudge names such as *Rogue*, *Knave*, *Cavalier*, *Monsieur*, *Vagabond*, and *Bachelor*. Hef's genius was to merge the highbrow sophistication of the "slicks" (notably *Esquire*), pulp raunchiness and an ultra-liberal political agenda. In *Playboy's* pages, as the pyjama-clad, Playmate-bonking, pipe-smoking, Pepsi-swilling, ever-swinging editor boasted, "skin" was the accompaniment to discussions of "Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, and Karl Marx". In short, Hefner brought class to men's magazines. It's a good point for Hanson to climax on. One's fingers twitch in expectation of the next four volumes, promised for arrival over the next couple of years.