

Jeanette Winterson

'I have a soft spot for Playboy: I wish women had such sexual freedom'

AUGUST IS PLAYBOY MONTH. IF YOU were wondering what to read on your holidays, and you don't mind the weight, take the sumptuous black-bound *The Playboy Book*.

Celebrating 50 years of the world's most famous men's magazine, this is the complete pictorial history — and if your bunny ears have already pricked up at the word "pictorial", you won't be disappointed. All the covers are here, from Marilyn Monroe on the very first issue in 1953, through to Cindy Crawford and Carmen Electra. The Playmates of the Month are in full colour, beaded and bosomy, bleached or bronzed, and of course there are the Bunny Girls themselves, wearing heels as high as their ears, scuts nicely powdered to dust your crotch.

It is a mesmerising volume; the record of half a century of changing sexual tastes and values, a sometimes silent, sometimes hard-fought liberation, with *Playboy* itself in the front line of battle. In the 1960s *Playboy* funded a number of court challenges against censorship and restrictive sex laws, culminating in the Supreme Court, *Roe versus Wade* decision, legalising abortion.

That decision is likely to be reviewed if President Bush gets his way. Those who think that *Playboy* is just a porn magazine might find that once again it becomes an ally.

Playboy was never conceived as just a porn magazine. Its founder, Hugh Hefner, believed that intelligent, sophisticated men would buy a magazine mixed around lifestyle, literature and ladies. He was right. Within a year sales had passed the million mark. Articles about bachelor pads, seduction cooking, cars and cocktails sat bedside fiction by the likes of John Updike and Philip Roth. Ian Fleming launched James Bond in the pages of *Playboy*.

The *Playboy* interview was always serious; Miles Davis, Jimmy Carter, Bill Gates and, perhaps more surprisingly, Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan. The Playmates were the girl-next-door type, pushing the Hefner philosophy that it's not just whores who do sex.

At WH Smith I looked at the porn shelf, which is now called men's lifestyle. Boobs the size of the Albert Hall and pubes as smooth as Barbie's seem to be the selling points.

Feminists complain that porn depends on a fantasy of the female which is nothing like real women. In porn, as in cartoons, body parts are caricatured — inflated like airships at the top, squeezed tight as a snake around the middle, and weeded and prim as a pot

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plant below the waist. Hair is allowed only on top of the head, and it has to be as abundant as a Medusa's. Nails are long as talons and the trout pout swells into a *Moby Dick*.

Playboy's girl-next-door style has argued from the beginning that these are real women, and the mag still holds hugely popular competitions for its Playmate of the Month. Real, they are; recognisable they are not, at least not in most people's bedroom experience. The boom in cosmetic surgery for women, particularly bum and boob jobs, is directly linked to soft porn's obsession with fantasy females. Now that the soft porn standard has taken over modelling, celebrity icons and pop videos, young women in particular are vulnerable to a lifetime of inadequacy. Porn may be liberating for men — yes perhaps it really is, but I doubt that it is liberating for women.

Playboy's success was always aspirational. It has gone on outselling its rivals — whether *GQ* at the smart end, or *Hustler* at the only-one-hand-to-turn-the-pages end, because it is both stylish and serious. Its politics are left of centre, it has never supported discrimination

by religion, sexuality or colour, and it is not afraid to take on big business when it feels there is a cause. Its recent exposé of Wal-Mart and its pursuit of phoney and puritanical TV evangelists give it full marks for activism.

Unfortunately, its seriousness depends on the women in its pages being deeply unserious — how serious can you be wearing nothing but a bracelet, or a pair of rabbit ears? Its worldwide clubs and casinos are brokered on harem-style service; lots of important rich men, and lots of available girls in silly outfits.

Yet, I have a soft spot for *Playboy*, and I wish we lived in a world where women could be celebrating a similar kind of sexual freedom and privilege during the next 50 years. While the men were doing *Playboy*, we were doing Feminism. We've come a long way, but we still haven't got blokes in bunny-wear serving us Martinis by the pool.

The Playboy Book — Fifty Years, edited by Gretchen Edgren with an introduction by Hugh M. Hefner (Taschen, £19.99; offer £17.99 from Books First: 0870 1608080)