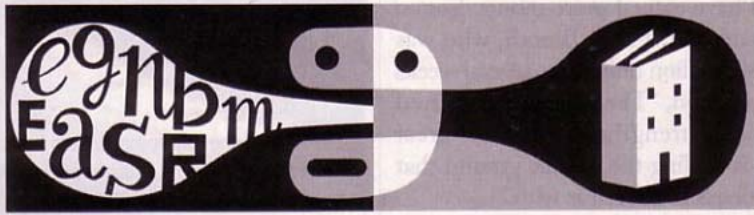


THE CRITICS



BOOKS

THE GIRLS NEXT DOOR

Life in the centerfold.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

Hugh Hefner, the founder and editor-in-chief of *Playboy*, always said that his ideal for the magazine's famous Playmate of the Month, the woman in the centerfold photo, was "the girl next door with her clothes off." In other words, he was trying to take his readers back to a time before their first sexual experience, a time when they still liked their stuffed bear and thought that a naked woman might be something like that. Taschen has just published "The Playmate Book: Six Decades of Centerfolds" (\$39.99), by Gretchen Edgren, a contributing editor to *Playboy*, and the book is a testament to Hefner's fidelity to his vision. Six hundred and thirteen women are represented, but there is one basic model. On top is the face of Shirley Temple; below is the body of Jayne Mansfield. *Playboy* was launched in 1953, and this female image managed to draw, simultaneously, on two opposing trends that have since come to dominate American mass culture: on the one hand, our country's idea of its Huck Finn innocence; on the other, the enthusiastic lewdness of our advertising and entertainment. We are now accustomed to seeing the two tendencies combined—witness Britney Spears—but when Hefner was a young man they still seemed like opposites. Hence the surprise and the popularity of *Playboy*. The magazine proposed that wanton sex, sex for sex's sake, was wholesome, good for you: a novel idea in the nineteen-fifties.

When Hefner started out, he couldn't afford to commission centerfold photos,

nor did he know any women who would take their clothes off at his bidding. So he bought girlie pictures from a local calendar company, and he chose well. In his first issue, he ran a nude photograph that Marilyn Monroe, famous by 1953, had posed for in 1949, when she was not famous, and needed money. It made the first issue a hit. Within a year, *Playboy* was able to afford its own photography, at which point the calendar girls were swept aside in favor of the girls next door. Unlike their predecessors, these girls tend to have their nipples covered, and they are not brazenly posing but, oops, caught by the photographer as they are climbing out of the bath or getting dressed. Several have on regulation-issue white underpants, up to the waist; one wears Mary Janes.

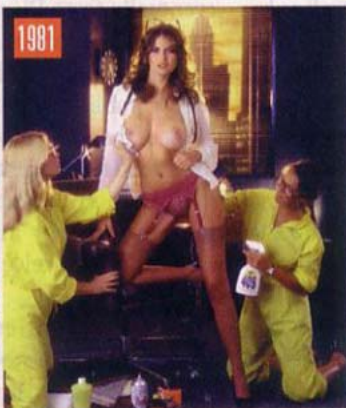
A decade later, the innocence has become less innocent, more self-aware—in a word, sixties. Now we get racial equality. (The first African-American Playmate appeared in 1965.) We get the great outdoors: Playmates taking sunbaths, unpacking picnics, hoisting their innocent bottoms into hammocks. Above all, we get youth. In January of 1958, the magazine had published a centerfold of a sixteen-year-old girl, with the result that Hefner was hauled into court for contributing to the delinquency of a minor. (The case was dismissed. Miss January had written permission from her mother.) After that, he made a rule that *Playboy* would never again publish a photograph of an unclothed woman under eighteen, but in

the following years he did everything in his power to make the centerfold models look like jailbait. Two of the sixties Playmates have pigtails, tied with bows. One is reading the funny papers. Most of them have chubby cheeks, and flash us sweet smiles. At the same time, many of these nice little girls are fantastically large-breasted. Strange to say, this toploading often makes them appear more childlike. The breasts are smooth and round and pink; they look like balloons or beach balls. The girl seems delighted to have them, as if they had just been delivered by Santa Claus.

Now and then over the years, Hefner experimented with small- or smallish-breasted Playmates. In late 1960, he had a serious fit of restraint: Joni Mattis, Miss November of that year, is posed in such a way as to cover not just her chest but most of her bottom. According to "The Playmate Book," this centerfold was the least popular that the magazine ever published. Mattis received exactly one letter, from a clergyman advising her to find another line of work. By contrast, DeDe Lind, Miss August 1967, who looks to be about thirteen, and who displays, together with a big yellow hair ribbon, a pair of knockers rivalling Mae West's, got more fan letters than any Playmate before or after. *Playboy* learned a lesson from DeDe: breasts count. At the end of "The Playmate Book," we are given the average measurements of the Playmates from the sixties to the present: a modest 35-23-35. I don't believe this. Or, if it's true, there's more to photography than I understand. In response to the *Playboy* centerfolds, *Esquire* eliminated its own pinups, the celebrated George Petty and Alberto Vargas drawings. In the words of Clay Felker, an editor at *Esquire* at that time, "*Playboy* out-titted us." Hefner then had the field to himself. By the end of the sixties, one-fourth of all American college men were buying his magazine every month.

In the nineteen-seventies, because of competition from the new and raunchier *Penthouse*, *Playboy* made the decision to show pubic hair, and with this upping of the sexual ante a certain coldness set in. Now the makeup becomes very heavy, causing the women, who already looked alike, to seem as if they were clones. (If the book's text didn't tell

COURTESY PLAYBOY ENTERPRISES



us that Miss June 1971 was Japanese-American, we would never guess it.) The setting also becomes sleeker. Hefner said from the beginning that he was not producing a girlie magazine; *Playboy* was a "life style" magazine, of which sex was only a part. He was put off by the men's magazines of his youth, with their emphasis on riding the rapids and fighting bears. Why did virility have to be proved outdoors? Why couldn't its kingdom be indoors? "We like our apartment," he wrote in his editorial for the first issue of *Playboy*. "We enjoy mixing up cocktails and an hors d'œuvre or two, putting a little mood music on the phonograph and inviting in a female for a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex." Whatever one may think of DeDe Lind's interest in Nietzsche—or Hefner's, for that matter—this was the scenario he had in mind. He grew up in a comfortless Chicago family. His father was an accountant, his mother a Methodist disciplinarian. He has said that there was never any show of affection in his house. One suspects that there was likewise little evidence of jazz or hors d'œuvres—pleasure for its own sake. This is what he set out to sell: an upscale hedonism, promoted by the magazine's articles and ads as well as by its nudes.

In 1956, looking to raise the tone, Hefner hired Auguste Comte Spector, an East Coast sophisticate, as his editorial director, and Spector brought in fiction by Vladimir Nabokov, James Baldwin, and the like. But to the history of journalism, and probably to the readers, too, *Playboy's* fiction was far less important than its interviews, inaugurated in 1962. Among the subjects were Miles Davis, Peter Sellers, Bertrand Russell, Malcolm X, Billy Wilder, Richard Burton, Jawaharlal Nehru,

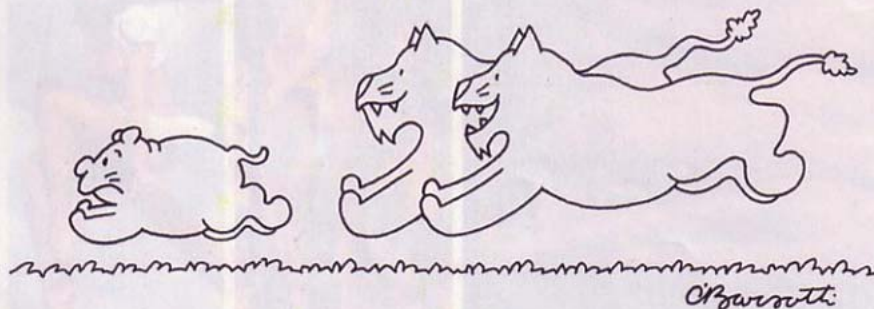
Jimmy Hoffa, Albert Schweitzer, Nabokov, Jean Genet, Ingmar Bergman, Dick Gregory, Henry Miller, Cassius Clay, and George Wallace, and that's just for the first three years. The questioning was long (seven to ten hours) and confrontational. Presumably for that reason—and maybe, too, because this was a skin magazine and what the hell—the subjects often said what they did not say elsewhere. As a result, their words are still being quoted.

In 1959, with the money rolling in, Hefner bought a palatial house in Chicago and spent four hundred thousand dollars, a fabulous sum in those days, on its renovation. The magazine repeatedly ran photo features on this seventy-room "Playboy Mansion": the vast ballroom, presided over by two burnished suits of medieval armor; the indoor swimming pool with a glass side, so that from downstairs, on party nights (Friday and Sunday, without fail), you could watch the other guests skinny-dipping; and, most important, Hefner's bedroom, with a round bed that could accommodate twelve. (He liked group sex.) The house also had a girls' dormitory, and after 1960, when Hefner's corporation opened the first of its Playboy clubs, in Chicago—there were eventually forty Playboy clubs, casinos, and resort hotels in the United States and abroad—many of the waitresses, the highly publicized Bunnies, lived there. Most of the women who were being photographed for the centerfold also stayed at the Mansion. Hefner says that during some years he was "involved" with maybe eleven out of twelve months' worth of Playmates.

In the seventies, the Playmates tended to be photographed not outdoors but in a setting that bespoke the editor's deluxe headquarters—wood-paneled rooms with Oriental carpets

and brocade upholstery. It's very clear that the woman in the photograph does not live there; she's just staying the night. By this time, the centerfold was flanked by a lot of auxiliary material. There was a bio of the Playmate, its information no doubt heavily airbrushed. There was also a "Playmate Data Sheet," where the woman, in a sort of Catholic-schoolgirl handwriting (which, curiously, was the same from month to month), listed her goals in life, her favorite movies, and so on. There were also side photos, in which, released from the master's library, the Playmate is shown in more natural situations—taking a shower, walking on the beach—and finally she looks sexy. But in the centerfold she is stuck in the Ralph Lauren world of Hefner's imagining, and she looks as though she were thinking about how much she's going to be paid and whether, in consequence, she can get brocade like that for her couch.

In the nineteen-eighties and thereafter, the artificiality only increased, as did that of all American mass media. The most obvious change is in the body, which has now been to the gym. Before, you could often see the Playmates sucking in their stomachs. Now they don't have to. The waist is nipped, the bottom tidy, and the breasts are a thing of wonder. The first mention of a "boob job" in "The Playmate Book" has to do with Miss April 1965, but, like hair coloring, breast enlargement underwent a change of meaning, and hence of design, in the seventies and eighties. At first, its purpose was to correct nature, and fool people into thinking that this was what nature made. But over time the augmented bosom became confessedly an artifice—a *Ding an sich*, and proud of it. By the eighties, the Playmates' breasts are not just huge. Many are independent of the law of gravity; they point straight outward. One pair seems to point upward. Other features look equally doctored. The pubic hair becomes elegantly barbered—the women favor a Vandyke—or, in a few cases, is removed altogether. This was part of an increased explicitness. With the shrinking of the pubic hair, the labia majora become visible. From the seventies onward, the magazine now and then offered twin Playmates, even a set of triplets—all in the same bed, of course—and with them



"Well, whatever it is, it has an amusing will to live."

comes the first whiff of lesbianism. In Mirjam and Karin van Breeschooten's centerfold, Mirjam is casually unlacing her twin's teddy.

Much of the costuming is standard erotic wear: lace and leather. The poses, too, are often traditional. Again and again, we see the full-frontal stance with the *déhanchement*—said to have been discovered by the sculptor Polyclitus in the fifth century B.C.—in which the body's weight is shifted onto one leg, thus creating two different, beautiful curves at the two sides of the waist. But, not infrequently, the magazine—or Hefner, for he is said to have carefully controlled all the centerfold shots—gets bored with these time-honored arrangements and puts the women in poses that no one else ever dreamed of. Isn't it hurting Miss December 1966's bottom, you think, to have it propped on the edge of those piano keys? That stereo turntable that Miss January 2004 is splayed over: Is it a B. & O.? How much is the repairman going to charge? Strangest of all are the scenarios in which the women are presented to us. Miss December 1992 is our waitress at the diner. She wears a collar and cuffs, a sporty little hat, red pumps, and nothing else. The magazine, in other words, has ceased trying to imagine a situation in which a woman might conceivably be naked; it has just come up with any situation—the girl might be receiving the Nobel Prize—and then removed the clothes. How much irony is operating here? I don't know. Maybe none. In the introduction to "The Playmate Book," Hefner says that looking through these pages should be "not unlike visiting your high school reunion."

The models don't seem to have shared his view. In a 2002 article in *The New York Review of Books*, Janet Malcolm remarked on Irving Penn's tendency to crop the heads of his nudes: "There does not seem to be any way that a naked person in front of a camera can fail to betray his or her sense of the . . . inherent silliness or pathos of the situation. Whether the object of the exercise is art photography or pornography, the model does not know what to do with her face." If Penn's subjects were stymied, so were the Playmates, but of course their heads weren't cropped, and Hefner wanted them to look straight

into the camera. The poor girls either smiled ("We're going to have a good time") or snarled ("Come and get me, big boy"). Both seem equally fake.

What did these women think of the job they were doing? For "The Playmate Book," Gretchen Edgren and her staff put a lot of questions to the centerfold alumnae, and the women's answers, though no doubt edited with care, tell us a lot—above all, that for many of the models the centerfold was simply a career move. "I didn't come from money," Kerri Kendall, Miss September 1990, points out, and many of her sister Playmates would probably say amen to that. When they were offered the centerfold, some were posing for calendars; others were waitressing at Hooters or working in hair salons. Several were single mothers. And though a few tell of having to change their names so as not to embarrass the folks back home, others report that their families urged them to seize this opportunity. Miss March 1968 got into *Playboy* because her grandmother wrote to the magazine, "My granddaughter is much better looking and much bustier than any of the girls you've been shooting."

The fee for a centerfold shoot was five hundred dollars in the fifties. Today, it is twenty-five thousand dollars. That's a lot of money. Miss December 1973 used her earnings to make the down payment on her parents' house. But the fee was only a start. What these women wanted, and hoped the centerfold would get them, was a career in modelling or acting. Many went on to such work, though not at the high end. The blond bombshell Anna Nicole Smith, Miss May 1992, modelled for Guess jeans, but others are more likely to speak of swimsuit or lingerie ads, and, especially, of beer ads. As for the Playmates' acting history, the statement on Miss October 1999's page—"On screen, Jodi's best known as Ramdar, the 'Super Hot Giant Alien Chick' from 'Dude, Where's My Car'"—more or less sums it up. But film jobs seem to have been gravy. Miss July 1973 reports having appeared, presumably as a hostess, on "every game show ever created by man." Another says that she did "about a hundred rock videos." The lucky ones got roles in soap operas or sitcoms. Miss January 1957 went on to be David Nelson's wife on "The Adven-

tures of Ozzie and Harriet" and in life.

Marriage, of course, was another thing the Playmates had in mind, and several of them landed rock musicians or professional athletes. Anna Nicole Smith bagged an eighty-nine-year-old oil billionaire, J. Howard Marshall, and after his death, the following year, became entangled in a long series of lawsuits with his family over the estate—a joy to the tabloids. The case finally went to the Supreme Court earlier this month. For her appearance, Smith wore a little black dress and a big silver cross. The court's decision will be rendered by the end of June.

Not surprisingly, however, many of the Playmates, once they passed their twenties, fell back into regular life. One is a dental hygienist for dogs and cats, two are cops, one taught creative writing at the City University of New York. Several have become artists. Miss September 1998 is a "traditional Aztec dancer"; Judy Tyler, Miss January 1966, creates "Fronds by Judea—original art from palm trees." Miss July 1999 is making "hip-hop action sports videos" with her boyfriend. "I want to be taken seriously," she says, "because I intend to be a good producer one day." Quite a few of the ex-Playmates, in keeping with the book's insistent claim of normality, list their families as their sole and beloved project. At the same time, the text is very forthcoming about how many divorces these women have had, and how a number of them are no longer eager to have a man in the house. Several Playmates have found God. Debra Jo Fondren, the gorgeous Miss September 1977, who now does temporary secretarial work, reports that she finally stopped participating in *Playboy* promotions. There was "too much emphasis on sex," she explains.

Today—or, actually, by the eighties—one wonders whether sex, as it is experienced by human beings, is still the point. The current centerfolds, buck naked though they may be, communicate almost no suggestion of anything. In *Playboy* pinups, one is not looking for the note of the divine that one finds in the Venuses of ancient statuary, let alone for the pathos of Rembrandt's nudes. Nor should one ask for naturalness—a real-looking girl. That is a sentimental preference, and one that many great nudes

(Ingres's, Degas's) can refute. But what is so bewildering about the later *Playboy* centerfolds is their utter texturelessness: their lack of any question, any traction, any grain of sand from which the sexual imagination could make a pearl. Kenneth Clark, in his classic book "The Nude" (1956), repeatedly compares a period's nudes to its architecture. The Playmates of the past few decades look to me like the "cereal box" buildings that went up on Sixth Avenue in the sixties, those cold, shiny structures, with no niches, no insets—no doors, it seemed. Likewise, the current Playmates seem to have no point of entry. And wasn't entry the idea?

Perhaps, despite the continuing girl-next-door protestations, the very remoteness of these women is their attraction. Clark, in his book, speaks of the "smoothed-out form and waxen surface" of the academic nudes of the nineteenth century. Hefner's latter-day nudes have the same look: the skin like polished armor (and it is polished—a side photo of Miss June 1981 shows her getting her hip sprayed with Formula 409); the golden light; the velvet thickness of the paper. This is not so much sex, or a woman, as something more like a well-buffed Maserati.

It is clearly appealing. *Playboy* sells about three million copies a month in the United States. But three million is less than half of what the magazine's circulation was in the early seventies. Hefner has repeatedly portrayed himself as a major force in the sexual revolution—he seems to think that he and Alfred Kinsey were its prime movers—but eventually the revolution left him behind. After "Debbie Does Dallas" or "1 Night in Paris"—indeed, after Internet pornography—who needs Miss December 2004, flashing her little heinie at us from aboard a yacht? One might answer that some people prefer their sexual materials soft-core. If so, they can turn to the new "lad" magazines, such as *Maxim* and *FHM*, which show the women clothed (if barely) and, at the same time, look more up-to-date than *Playboy*.

That, in the end, is the most striking thing about *Playboy's* centerfolds: how old-fashioned they seem. This whole "bachelor" world, with the brandy snifters and the attractive guest arriving for the night: did it ever exist? Yes, as a fantasy.

Now, however, it is the property of homosexuals. (A more modern-looking avatar of the Playmates' pneumatic breasts is Robert Mapplethorpe's Mr. 10½.) Today, if you try to present yourself as a suave middle-aged bachelor, people will assume you're gay. But though times have changed, Hefner hasn't. He has described *Playboy* as a projection of "the wonderful world I dig," and he has gone on innocently digging it no matter what. In 1967, he moved the corporation's offices into a thirty-seven-story skyscraper—which, to the grief of the city fathers, beamed the name *Playboy*, in bright lights, over Chicago's skyline—but he almost never went to the office. He stayed in the Mansion, and sent his employees memos. When a face-to-face meeting was absolutely necessary, it was held at the Mansion. In Russell Miller's thorough and unadmiring book "Bunny: The Real Story of *Playboy*" (1984), Robert Gutwillig, a vice-president of the corporation, says that the purpose of these gatherings, as far as Hefner was concerned, was just to let the editorial staff blow off steam, after which, he hoped, they'd go away and leave him alone for another few months. According to Art Paul, the magazine's longtime art director, one of Hefner's girlfriends would sometimes call in the middle of the meeting, and then the boss excused himself: "We'd sit there waiting for him while he got laid." Frequently, however, what he wanted was just to get back to the Mansion's game room. Hefner is addicted to games: pinball machines, electronic games, board games. He likes to do forty-hour Monopoly marathons, fuelled by Pepsi (of which, it has been said, he used to consume three dozen bottles a day) and Dexedrine. Often, the meetings cut short by these exigencies had to do with the competition, but Hefner, unlike his staff, doesn't seem to have cared much about the competition. When *Penthouse* went "pink"—that is, began photographing what was between the labia majora—*Playboy* refused to do so. As for the insurgents on the other side, he hired the former executive editor of *Maxim* to make suggestions about pitching *Playboy* to younger readers, but this man lasted less than two years. Hefner liked the magazine the way it was.

Over the years, he has become a kind of Howard Hughes recluse, if less eccentric. In 1971, he bought a second man-

sion, in Los Angeles, and, indifferent to the fact that the magazine's headquarters were half a continent away, he enclosed himself there more or less permanently. He wasn't hiding, though; he welcomed camera crews. In the magazine, and in *Playboy's* books and on its Web site, we see him tooling around the manor, in his trademark silk pajamas, with a posse of blondes in tow. And he wants us to know that though he is seventy-nine, he is not just playing Monopoly with these women. In his most recent publishing venture, "Hef's Little Black Book" (2004, co-authored with Bill Zehme), we are offered a chapter on "making love like the master." He recommends Viagra: "There's always a time when you're looking for wood." Another tip: "It is a good idea not to fall asleep while you're actually having intercourse."

How long can this story go on being told? Maybe for a long time, on the electronic media. By the mid-eighties, Hefner's corporation had closed down its *Playboy* clubs and resort hotels, but it has since spawned an ambitious "entertainment" division, consisting of Internet programming, pay-per-view and subscription TV, radio, DVDs and home videos. This division now supplies sixty per cent of the corporation's revenues. As for the magazine, the surprise is not that it has lost fifty per cent of its readers but that, outdated as it is, it has lost only that many, and that the faithful are not all in nursing homes. (According to a 2005 market study, the readers' median age is thirty-three.) A good comparison, made recently in *Time*, is with *Mad*, which was launched a year before *Playboy* and was as much a product of the fifties as Hefner's publication. *Mad* is still in print, but with one-tenth the circulation it had in the early seventies. Next to that, Hefner's half a loaf looks pretty good. It looks even better when you consider that, while all print media are suffering in the face of electronic competition, no sector of old-style journalism has been more vulnerable than men's magazines. Unlike, say, book reviews, sex lends itself to the screen, and, God knows, it has prospered there. (Sex sites, it has been estimated, account for forty per cent of all Internet traffic.) *Penthouse* only lately emerged from bankruptcy hearings. Meanwhile, *Playboy* is still the best-selling men's magazine in the United States. ♦