

TORY



The girls next door

In a world where the most explicit pornography is a mere click of the mouse away, **Jo McCarroll** ponders 50 years of *Playboy* Playmates and wonders at the quaint innocence of it all.

IF HUGH Hefner has been faithful to nothing else, he has held true to one vision. That is the *Playboy* beauty ideal, the dream Playmate of the Month – who, as *Playboy's* founder and editor-in-chief has always put it, was “the girl next door with her clothes off”. She is an incendiary combination of both sex and innocence, of cheesecake and apple pie: the perfect Playmate would, Joan Acocella in the *New Yorker* suggested, have the face of Shirley Temple and the body of Jayne Mansfield. She is both Madonna and whore (or better yet, Madonna and Britney, circa 2000), innocent and lewd, as-yet-uncorrupted but eminently corruptible.

And she is pictured – month after month, year after year of her – in *The Playmate Book: Six Decades of Centerfolds*. “In a real sense, the Playmate of the Month was as much a political statement as *The Playboy Philosophy*,” Hefner writes in the introduction to *The Playmate Book*. “And had much to do with female emancipation than exploitation, although I didn’t think in those terms in the magazine’s early days.”

A political statement? Hefner writes that the political climate was the genesis for the magazine itself, launched in 1953 as a response to the “suffocating conservatism” of the times, the wave of repression that had swept the United States after World War II (“When women’s skirt lengths went down instead of up – as they had after World War I – I knew we were in big trouble,” Hefner writes). Inspired by the pin-up art of magazines such *Esquire* (a George Petty drawing is thought to have inspired the *Playboy* bunny), Hefner wanted to create a magazine that celebrated female beauty and sexuality and promoted an upmarket hedonistic world aspired to by what could still then

be termed the gay bachelor. Not a girlie magazine but a “lifestyle” magazine with sex as a part of that lifestyle.

“We like our apartment,” he wrote in his editorial in the first issue in December, 1953. “We enjoy mixing up cocktails and an hors d’oeuvre or two, putting a little mood music on the phonograph and inviting in a female for a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex.”

The very first girl with whom readers were invited to contemplate Nietzsche was, of course, Marilyn Monroe, the magazine’s very first Playmate of the Month (although she was called Sweetheart of the Month, it wasn’t until issue two that Hefner’s then-wife Millie suggested the now iconic Playmate title).

Hefner didn’t convince the star to appear in the new magazine, he merely bought, for \$500, the rights to a nude picture Monroe had posed for four years earlier. “Surely the best investment in the history of publishing.” It was a year before *Playboy* could afford to do its own photography; until then Hefner bought girlie pictures from a local calender company. With a smiling Monroe on the cover and cover lines trumpeting “the famous Marilyn Monroe nude”, the inaugural issue’s success was virtually assured.

After Monroe, hundreds of other Playmates followed and *The Playmate Book* has them all; surprised in the bath, frolicking in waterfalls, lying in front of open fires, at the beach, riding horses, on picnics, drinking cocktails, decorating the Christmas tree, hanging paintings (doesn’t everyone do that naked?). There are Playmate sisters (pictured separately): Janice and Ann Pennington, respectively Miss May, 1971, and Miss March, 1976; a Playmate mother and daughter (again – and thank God – pictured separately): Carol and Simone Eden are Miss December, 1960, and Miss February, 1989; Playmate twins (three sets) and Playmate triplets (one set).

“Without you,” Hefner told a Playmate Reunion at the Playboy Mansion in 1979 (he has said in some years he would be “involved” with 11 of the 12 Playmates), “I’d be publishing a literary magazine.”

The book’s aim is to “catch up” with the Playmates. Where possible, author Gretchen

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Joni Mattis (Miss November, 1960) was allegedly the least popular Playmate ever. She received precisely one fan letter, that from a clergyman.

Edgren (for 25 years a *Playboy* staffer) tracks down the women today and fills us in on the intervening years. Some went on to fame (Jayne Mansfield, Anna Nicole Smith, Jenny McCarthy), many more to fame-of-sorts (a lot mention beer ads and bit parts in the sort of films that go straight to video). Some have died or been killed (Dorothy Stratten, Miss August, 1979, mentioned in her "Playmate data sheet" that a turn-off was "jealous people"; less than a year later she was dead, murdered by her possessive husband), some have come out as gay (Stephanie Adams, Miss November, 1992 was later named "best lesbian sex symbol" by New York's *The Village Voice*). But most have returned to regular life and are teachers, nurses, authors, mothers, painters – and a lot work in real estate for some reason. One is the mayor of her town, another is president of a company that markets "Studtrainer – a natural male enhancement product". Many have children, many – a rough guess would estimate about twice as many as any average group of women – have divorced.

A lot of the women Edgren talks to describe their experience posing for the magazine as liberating, and often in purely financial terms (in 1959 a Playmate was paid \$500, in 2004 \$100,000 plus a car). "I didn't come from money," said Kerri Kendall, Miss September, 1990. Several used the money to move cities or countries, or mention they lived on it "until it ran out".

But whatever their personal motives for posing, does the Playmate of the Month stack up (ahem) as a political statement when looked at collectively? She is, inarguably, some sort of barometer of the social and sexual mores of her time.

The Playmates of the 50s appear almost childishly innocent, usually with their nipples covered, often wearing the sort of kidney-warming white underpants that now suggest incontinence rather than eroticism. By the 60s, she has become more self-aware, there is no longer the assumption she has been "surprised" by the photographer while innocently hanging festive decorations naked. She is posing more flagrantly and found in more elaborate locations. And whether you consider it a step forward



Janet Pilgrim (Miss July and December, 1955) was "discovered" by Hefner working as *Playboy's* circulation manager. The pair briefly dated and she posed for one of its most popular centrefolds.

for racial equality or not, the first African-American Playmate appeared in 1965.

In the 1970s, in the face of increased competition from rival titles, especially the raunchier *Penthouse*, Playmates reveal pubic hair for the first time (Miss January, 1971) and posed full-frontal (Miss January, 1972). She is posing in increasingly upmarket settings (often suggesting the erotic Elysium of the *Playboy* Mansion, the first of the current two was purchased in 1959 and already was the most famous private house in the world).

Her makeup is more elaborate, her hair more styled, her appearance increasingly artifi-

cial. And through the 80s and 90s that artificiality increased. The Playmate starts going to the gym (in early years quite a few girls are clearly sucking their tummies in), she starts going to the surgeon (by the 90s, Playmates' breasts almost invariably point north) and, to put it discreetly, she starts visiting a certain part of South America, appearing virtually hairless apart from the abundant, wind-machine whipped locks on top of her head. But looked at purely academically (as *Playboy* so often is), as the *Playboy* pin-up has become more explicitly sexual, she has managed somehow to be more asexual than her 1950s forerunner.

"What is so bewildering about the later *Playboy* centrefolds is their utter texturelessness: their lack of any question, any traction, any grain of sand from which the sexual imagination could make a pearl," says Acocella.

The contemporary Playmate also manages to seem, surprisingly, old-fashioned. Now, with explicit hard-core porn allegedly never more than two cyber-clicks away, these buck-naked Playmates reclining on satin sheets seem almost laughingly out-of-date. "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?" says Acocella.

While the world may have changed around the Playmate of the Month, she has remained curiously unchanging within it, still smiling out sans garments in a variety of improbable locations.

Looked at en masse you wonder if there is some sort of irony operating here, if the Playmate of the Month has become some sort of post-modern pastiche of herself? But really that justification is simply another variation of "I read it for the articles". Readers would no sooner look for irony than underwear. While *Playboy* now sells about half the copies it sold in its heyday in the 70s, given the inroads made into the magazine market by electronic media it has held on to an impressive amount of its market share.

It is still, apparently, the bestselling men's magazine in the United States. And it is not just the magazine's original readers still buying a copy each month and hiding it under their mattress in their rest homes. Acocella cites a 2005 market study that puts the readers' median age at 33.

Possibly when the magazine came out, Hefner's favourite mantra "that good girls like sex too", was provocative and groundbreaking.

But now, one would think, it hardly needed to be said, let alone endlessly repeated month after month.

If the Playmate is the "political statement" Hefner claims, what does she say about women, about men, about society now?

The Playmate Book – Six Decades of Centrefolds, by Gretchen Edgren (Taschen, \$89.95).