

Hugh Hefner's life has been one long fantasy of sex and conspicuous consumption. But now *Playboy* magazine is in decline, Hef has embarked upon a messy divorce and his daughter has quit the family firm. So what next? **Edward Helmore** meets a titan of soft porn who's older, but not necessarily wiser

Bunny business

Before the mansion and the grotto, the circular bed with the black satin sheets, the international chain of clubs and casinos; before even the black Big Bunny DC-9 with its elite corps of Jet Bunnies in black leather jumpsuits and bunny ears Hugh Hefner was like every other teenage boy: looking for an identity and finding its

variants in fantasy.

This month, a six-volume compendium of Mr Playboy's life will be published by Taschen. The most illuminating passages, with regards to Mr Hefner himself, now aged 83, are not necessarily those concerning the 50-odd years of Playboy Enterprises Today what seems to interest Hefner most is Playboy's creation

myth, the original concept that he sketched out as cartoons in his schoolbooks. Hefner imagined himself in a variety of heroic poses: storyteller, freedom fighter, accomplished lover-man, jazz cat musician. 'As impressive as the six volumes are the most personal

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and intriguing part for me is the first half of the first volume,' the publisher and pornographer told me in August. 'One really gets a sense of the boy who dreamed the dreams and made the connections that led to *Playboy*.'

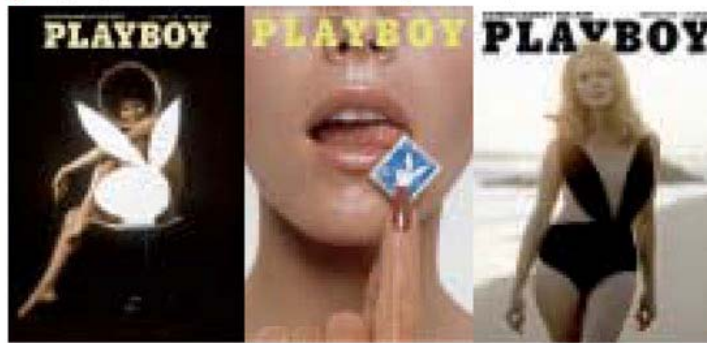
A life spent in search of love, he diagnoses, started early. 'The boy,' he offers, 'is father to the man. I created a world of my own and set myself centre-stage. That evolved into a graphic autobiography - a scrapbook - that's grown to a work of 2,000 volumes.' The scrapbook, of course, is *Playboy* itself.

A half century later, the magazine and Playboy Enterprises, the concomitant empire he founded, are in decline. Most serious, perhaps, is the departure of Christie Hefner, 57 (his daughter from his first marriage to Mildred Williams), after 20 years as CEO. She is stepping down to concentrate on philanthropy, a move apparently inspired by Barack Obama's election. 'Just as this country is embracing change in the form of new leadership, I have decided that now is the time to make changes in my own life, too,' she said.

Hugh and his serious-minded daughter have always had divergent approaches to life, but her new undertaking only serves to highlight Hugh's increasing isolation. At the same time, the magazine, which used to sell seven million copies a month in the 1970s, has lost nearly 600,000 readers since 1999 and its circulation is falling fast. Two months ago, the company warned that advertising sales could be down as much as 39 per cent. Its stock hovers at just over \$2, down from nearly \$20 a decade ago. And it faces the same problems as other publishers - how to get customers to pay when so much on offer is free elsewhere.

Playboy's business of titillation has been battered by a proliferation of outlets that chip away at the company's share of the adult-entertainment market. Nevertheless, stock in Playboy Enterprises is still held by big financial players. Major shareholders include Fidelity Investments, the largest investment fund in the US, Barclays Global Investors and Blackrock. The board says the company was 'willing to listen' to acquisition offers but no deal has been struck.

 **Playboy covers** (from left): October 1971; April 1973; August 1968



Nor will it be. It's no more likely that Hefner will relinquish *Playboy* than it is Murdoch would abandon News Corp or Mike Bloomberg would sell the firm bearing his name. It's just not what moguls do. Although, obviously, Hefner is not your average mogul. He invented the idea of the modern playboy, the potentate with his harem, fast cars and faster women. And he lived the dream, bedding the majority of his monthly Playmates and installing them in his 1920s mansion.

But recently Hefner's personal life has been as turbulent as his business ventures. Girl trouble, money trouble - a playboy's life was never supposed to be this complicated. In July, he sold the five-bedroom home in which his estranged wife Kimberley Conrad Hefner (Playmate of the Month, January 1988, and Playmate of the Year, 1989) lived, for \$18 million. They married in 1999 and had two sons, Marston, 19, and Cooper, 18, both now at college. Despite separating ten years ago, the two had maintained cordial relations until this year. In September, he sued her for divorce, claiming infidelity, and requested the judge cut her monthly allowance in half to \$20,000. The friendship had soured when Kimberley, 47, made claims that Hefner owed her \$4 million from the sale of the house.

Hefner, who was required to disclose his income of \$290,000 a month, thinks she should

get a job. 'There is no reason she cannot take the steps to become self-supporting immediately,' his lawyer states. A little wearily, but not without optimism, Hefner reflects that 'it's easier

to deal with several girlfriends than one wife'. He is now with the 19-year-old blonde twins, Kristina and Karissa Shannon, and Crystal Harris, newly selected as 'official' girlfriends.

But is it? Several years ago, at a birthday party for Leonardo DiCaprio, Hefner turned up with then girlfriends Holly, Bridget and Kendra. It seemed like a good moment for me to say hello - until a bouncer pushed in to say Mr Hefner doesn't like men talking to his women. There followed an absurd exercise in which the girls began ravishing and dry-humping Hef, who stood in his smoking jacket, his back to the wall, looking only moderately engaged by these attentions. The performance stopped as mysteriously and abruptly as it had started and Mr Playboy and the girls departed.

Afterwards a bunny in a yellow costume came over to chat. Bunnies, it turned out, are given

their colours according to the background colour of their debut Playmate spread. The bunny hated her colour but Mr Hefner was adamant. In the Playboy code, bunnies have no choice – you are the colour you are given and no switching. The encounter was memorable for its undercurrent of pathos.

Direct accounts of life at the Playboy Mansion suggest it is a lot less playful than the presented image. One visitor, Jules Feiffer, recalls that it was more like a 1940s after-school party of lemonade and light games than a nonstop orgy. Last summer, former bunny Izabella St James published *Bunny Tales: Behind Closed Doors at*

the Playboy Mansion in which she revealed that Hefner was not such a hot lover after all. He likes to pop Viagra twice a week, Wednesdays and Fridays, and sleep with up to four girls at a time, who are duly encouraged to shout out 'Oh Daddy!' at the appropriate moment. 'It seemed to me he just lay there like a dead fish,' Izabella noted, adding that Archie the house dog would often urinate on the curtains, adding to 'the general scent of decay'.

Hugh Hefner was born on 9 April 1926 to Methodist Nebraska teachers Grace and Glenn (he has a younger brother, Keith). By repute, Hugh had a genius IQ of 152 but did not excel at school. He was a fantasist, looking for an escape from his Puritan background in Chicago's cinemas. At university in Illinois, where he studied psychology, he worked on the student newspaper, drawing cartoons and becoming president of the student council. After his release from the army in 1946, he enrolled in the Chicago Art Institute, married Mildred in 1949, then got a job as a promotion copywriter for *Esquire* magazine. Soon after, he came up with the idea of a new men's magazine.

In 1953, with \$10,000 raised from 45 investors, he launched *Playboy*. The first issue, published in December of that year, provided one of the scoops of the century: a nude Marilyn Monroe (Hefner purchased the photograph for \$500). The issue sold 53,000 copies.

Sex – at least male sexual fantasy – created a compelling identity and a profitable business for Hefner. By 1959 the magazine was outselling *Esquire* and Hefner had transformed himself into Mr Playboy. The fantasy came with silk

pyjamas, a TV show (*Playboy's Penthouse*), an annual jazz festival, cigars, sports cars and, of course, women. And bunny ears. That year he divorced Mildred and, with the money rolling in, bought the first Playboy mansion in Chicago (the LA pile was bought in 1971) and spent \$400,000 on its renovation. The magazine repeatedly ran photo features on it: the vast ballroom; the indoor swimming pool with a glass side, so that from downstairs, on party nights (Friday and Sunday, without fail), you could watch guests skinny-dipping; and, most importantly, Hefner's bedroom, with a round bed that could accommodate 12 (he liked group sex). Then came the jet and the casinos (the most profitable, on London's Park Lane, was closed in 1981 after losing its gaming licence).



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In its heyday, the magazine offered long-form feature writing and cultural interviews long before newspapers and glossy magazines caught on. JG Ballard, Norman Mailer and Ian Fleming were early contributors; even two months ago, *Playboy* acquired the serial rights to Vladimir Nabokov's final, unfinished novel, *The Original of Laura*. It tells the story of a man, unhappily infatuated with his promiscuous wife, who had been obsessively in love with a young girl in his youth. (Nabokov left instructions it should be burned after his death.) But by the 1980s the magazine had lost its edge and today the writing is generally limited to interviews with minor actors, while the endless spreads of Identikit blondes look tired and dated.

Hefner still shows up for work. 'I pick the Playmates, the covers, the cartoons, the party jokes, edit the letters and pictorials...' Maybe this is the problem. Hefner is, after all, 83 and a little deaf.

The one part of the business that is thriving, however, is the bunny. The iconography of Playboy's rabbit is now as much a part of our collective consciousness as the McDonald's Golden Arches or the Nike Swoosh. 'I selected a rabbit as the symbol for the magazine because of the humorous sexual connotation, and because he offered an image that was frisky

and playful,' Hefner once explained. 'I put him in a tuxedo to add sophistication.' With the bunny as its logo, the company's licensing business has never been better, increasing from \$5.5 million at the end of 1999 to \$40.4 million last year. In its most recent re-incarnation, *Playboy* has spawned a hit TV show (*The Girls Next Door* on E! and its spin-off, *Kendra*), a recent Hefner biography

(*Mr Playboy: Hugh Hefner and the American Dream* by Steven Watts) and there's talk of a Hefner biopic, starring Robert Downey Jr, and a new casino in Macao, the Asian gambling hub.

Within Hefner, as so often within those who present themselves as revolutionaries, there is an underlying conservatism born through an early understanding of the value of hard work. As Steven Watts pointed out, Hefner's blueprint for living - marked by his allegiances to Tarzan, Freud, Pepsi-Cola and jazz - proves to be a kind of gloss on the Protestant work ethic. But Hefner has always presented himself as a kind

of benevolent sugar daddy. 'I consider myself a very moral man,' he says. 'Always have.'

But what about sex? At 83? 'It's no secret I have several new girlfriends,' he offered recently. 'I have sex more often at the moment cause I have a bunch of new girlfriends... so I would say three or four times a week.' And he adds: 'Sex is better at 83 than at 33 because I've learned a few tricks since then...'

'My passions have remained essentially the same,' Hefner continues. 'I was always fascinated with pop culture.' Although he never met her, Hefner still feels a strong affinity with Marilyn Monroe. They were both born in 1926, and grew up under the influence of Hollywood. 'Our ideas of romance, of relations with the opposite sex, one's self-perception and one's ideas all came essentially from the movies.' He hopes to take his bond with Marilyn with him into the afterlife - he's bought the burial plot next to her 'so we'll be spending eternity together'.

But wanting to spend forever with the most spectacular - and spectacularly damaged - sex symbol of the 20th century probably tells us more about

Hefner than *Taschen's* six volumes ever could. He's described how the lack of love at home informed his later life. It could be true. But these anecdotes have been reported and re-reported for decades. Publishers have tried to get Hefner to write a candid autobiography but it never comes. Perhaps he doesn't want to and never will.

Even *Playboy* itself remains frozen in a time warp. On several occasions, the firm has hired new editors to reinvigorate the publication. It's a running joke in publishing that editors would send new-looking pages to California for approval and they would come back looking just as they have always done. Hefner, no doubt resting his weary head on the bosom of another pneumatic blonde, probably no longer cares. In his opinion, he's been massively successful in his lifelong quest for love. But is there one more adaptation of the original *Playboy* fantasy? What would it be? 'Just to keep it going for as long as possible.'



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Rex Features, Empics, Retna, Corbis

Jet-set bunnies Hefner's private jet Big Bunny in London, 1970

Playboy family values (from left): with wife Kimberley and sons Marston and Cooper, 1994; with daughter Christie, 2001; with twins Karissa and Kristina Shannon, 2009

