

# HOW PLAYBOY CAPTURED THE WESTERN WORLD

*Sex was only part of Playboy's attempt to bring sophistication to conservative 1950s America, its creator Hugh Hefner tells Lucy Davies*

It's easy to forget that, in his day, Hugh Hefner was something of a visionary. The louche, laconic 82-year-old, best known these days for lounging around his luxurious Californian mansion dressed in silk pyjamas and velvet loafers, spent his youth devouring the culture of Depression-era America. He read, watched, saw whatever he could get his hands on, and then copied, transformed and invented.

When the first copies of *Playboy* appeared in November 1953, the magazine read like a literary who's who (with the odd titillating photograph thrown in). Sherlock Holmes nestled alongside Ray Bradbury, F Scott Fitzgerald, Vladimir Nabokov and John Updike. When husbands said they read the magazine for the quality of the writing, you can see why their wives might (at a pinch) have believed them.

Next month, as the magazine approaches its

56th birthday, comes the publication of Hefner's magnum opus: a 3,506-page, six-volume autobiography furnished with an array of material from his 2,000-odd personal scrapbooks. The first of these volumes is by far the most engaging. It takes us through his early years in the suburbs of Chicago, where his father worked as an accountant and his mother as a teacher. It also covers his adolescence, his experiences studying psychology at Illinois University, and his army years. He was discharged in the spring of 1946 with the rank of corporal. "I would have made sergeant," he says, speaking on the phone from California, "but my lieutenant didn't like the fact that I spent so much time drawing cartoons."

In retrospect, Hefner sees his dynamic early years as a "rehearsal for the life I would live in the years to come". The bittersweet autobiography shows him as a small boy growing up in what he calls

"a very typical, conservative, puritan home... [where he] wasn't getting many hugs and kisses". We see him haunting newsstands, devouring comics; lying on his bedroom floor scratching out his own versions of *Jekyll & Hyde* for his friends. "Creating my own world in a comic or selling my first penny newspaper aged nine, was a way of gaining recognition and acceptance by my peers," he says. "Though I didn't recognise it at the time, I did exactly the same thing when I created *Playboy*. One grew directly out of the other."

Hefner acknowledged his love of mystery and horror stories in the summer of 1941 - "*King Kong* was my favourite, but *Frankenstein* and *The Bride of Frankenstein* were special too" - by forming the Shudder Club, a horror fan club with its own magazine, secret handshake, code, merit badges and a special insignia, a skull with a bloody dagger. He loved

cinema, too, and Chicago's Montclaire Theatre became his home away from home. "In that darkened theatre all things were possible: I escaped into wonderful dreams of adventure and romance," he says. "But the Hays Code [strict censorship guidelines governing moral standards in film introduced by Will Hays in 1930] destroyed all that. Eventually even the married couples on screen slept in twin beds. I was very connected to that kind of repression early on."

When he later came to establish *Playboy*, Hefner says he was trying to recreate the footloose joy of those early films: "I looked back on the roaring Twenties, with its jazz, *Great Gatsby* and the pre-Code films as a party I had somehow managed to miss," he says. "After the Second World War, I expected something similar; a return to the period after the first war. But when the skirt lengths went down instead

of up I knew we were in big trouble. It turned out to be a very conservative, serious period – socially, sexually and politically."

Hefner entered adulthood at the very moment America was undergoing a domestic revival. There was a powerful cultural emphasis on security and family life after the Second World War, propelled, to a considerable degree, by

**The original Playboy package became the blueprint for magazines ever after**

the onset of the atomic age and the tensions and fears associated with the Cold War. "I just thought there was another way of living a life," says Hefner. "Under all the conservatism and the repression there was this yearning for something different. That's the reason the magazine was successful, why people embraced it from the very outset. There were also

all these outdoor adventure magazines that advocated healthy pursuits for family men who never dreamed of thrashing through thickets or wading rivers. They sat at home playing cards and watching television.

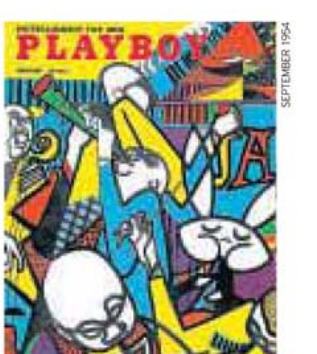
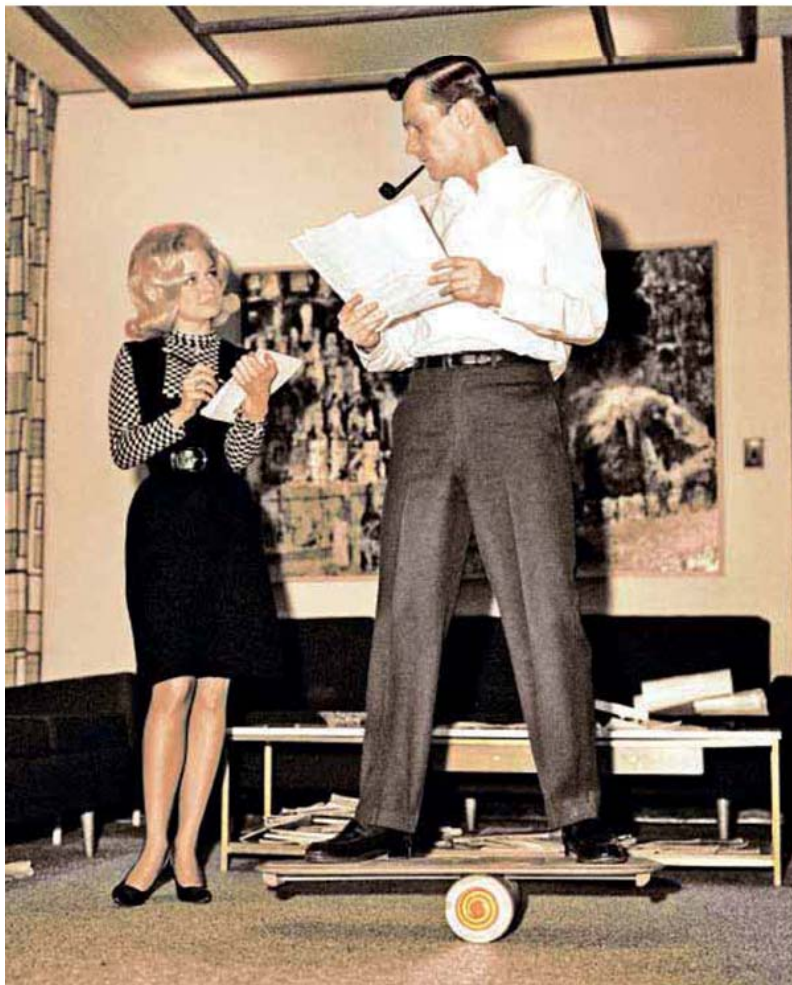
"Let's get this straight," he continues. "*Playboy* was not a sex magazine, as far as I was concerned. Sex was simply part of the total package; I

was trying to bring sex into the fold of a healthy lifestyle. When *Penthouse* and *Husler* came along they confused what I was trying to do. Before they arrived, we were perceived as a sophisticated men's magazine."

Issue one, with a succulent Marilyn Monroe adorning its cover and centrefold, was a humdinger. After hitting the shelves in December 1953, it

sold 53,991 copies on its first print run. "If you're a man between the ages of 18 and 80," ran Hefner's inaugural editor's letter. "*Playboy* is meant for you. If you like your entertainment served up with humour, sophistication and spice, *Playboy* will become a very special favourite... a pleasure-primer styled to the masculine taste... We like our apartment. 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 acquaintance for a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex."

It all bowls along in this delightfully hammy way, until: "If you're somebody's sister, wife or mother-in-law and picked us up by mistake, please pass us along to the man in your life and get back to your *Ladies Home Companion*." It's bizarre to think that in the same year the English translation of



Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* reached America (albeit with a naked woman on the cover), vociferous in its condemnation of the way in which men profit from the "otherness" of women. "No one is more arrogant towards women, more aggressive or scornful," she wrote, "than the man who is anxious about his virility."

Hefner, however, insists his aim with *Playboy* was always light-hearted, irreverent. As his influential art director Arthur Paul once put it, the magazine's mission was to bring the "high art of low art" to readers. "The word 'Playboy' itself is not a serious one," said Paul, who had studied at Chicago's Institute of Design under Hungarian artist and photographer László Moholy-Nagy. "The rabbit is not serious; it was basically a signal that we could make fun of ourselves."

For *Playboy*, Paul employed a series of groundbreaking graphics that used die-cuts,

pull-outs, and pop-ups to keep the readers' attention. He also helped secure the participation of Warhol and Picasso, just two of the artists who contributed pieces to early issues.

His famous rabbit-head logo with cocked ear and tuxedo bow-tie was developed by Paul in time for *Playboy's* second issue. Initially intended as an endpoint for articles, it soon became their corporate logo. Just five years later it had become so widely recognised that a New York reader was able successfully to send *Playboy* a letter with a hand-drawn rabbit head as the only address.

Over the years, *Playboy's* nobler aims have become overwhelmed by vulgarity – not helped by countless snaps of Hefner surrounded by an ever-young colony of primped, pert, peroxide blondes. But that shouldn't disguise the fact that the original *Playboy* package – aimed at the man who wanted fine wines, a

contemporary apartment, elegant cars and modish clothes to complement (or maybe ensnare) the beautiful woman in his life – became the blueprint for magazines ever after. I challenge you to open any glossy coffee table publication today and not see in it the influence of Hefner's ground-breaking combination of lifestyle sold with the magic of sex.

Today *Playboy* boasts a circulation of 4.5 million. But even now for Hefner, who remains editor-in-chief, nothing beats the feeling of holding that very first issue in his hands all those decades ago.

"I felt like Clark Kent going into a phone booth and coming out as Superman," he says. "I became Mr Playboy."

● Hugh Hefner's 'Playboy' is published by Taschen as a signed, limited edition of six volumes for £900. It includes a facsimile copy of the first issue and a 7cmx7cm piece of Hefner's silk pyjamas

## Bunny tales

### Top writers who have appeared in Playboy

● John Updike, Gore Vidal, John Steinbeck, Boccaccio, Somerset Maugham, Guy de Maupassant, Casanova, Voltaire, Roald Dahl, Alberto Moravia, Anton Chekhov, PG Wodehouse, Herodotus, Evelyn Waugh, Anatole France, Jack Kerouac, John Keats, JP Donleavy, Robert Graves, Ian Fleming, Arthur C Clarke, Ray Bradbury, Françoise Sagan, Petronius, Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, Goethe, Bernard Malamud, Aldous Huxley, Philip Roth, James Baldwin, Kenneth Tynan, Lawrence Durrell, Vladimir Nabokov, Harold Pinter, Woody Allen, Henry Miller, John LeCarré, Alexander Pushkin, Jean-Paul Sartre, Len Deighton, Gustave Flaubert, Italo Calvino, JG Ballard, Nadine Gordimer, Kingsley Amis, David Mamet



Rabbit, rabbit: far left, the top two covers were designed by Andy Warhol. Main picture: Hugh Hefner at work with Cynthia Maddox (a Playboy receptionist, secretary, assistant cartoon editor, five times cover girl, and sometime girlfriend) in 1958. Left, three of the cartoon sketches that Hefner made to chronicle his work, and the white rabbit by Arv Miller which became the Playboy logo. Above, Arline Hunter, Playmate of the Month in August 1954