

# 'I've made most of my dreams come true'

Entrepreneurial spirit and a bid for sexual freedom were behind Hugh Hefner's launch of Playboy in 1952. So why does he describe himself as a romantic? In LA, **Jaci Stephen** meets the man in the silk pyjamas



**T**here wasn't a moment in my childhood when I dreamt of being a princess. Nor did I sit and daydream about the day I would walk down the aisle in a meringue with the man of my dreams. I didn't want to be a beauty queen or a ballerina. What I wanted to be when I grew up, more than anything, was a Bunny Girl.

I had always been keen to meet Hugh Hefner, the man behind these iconic creations and who was something of a hero to me in the sexual wasteland of my youth. And now, living in Los Angeles, and with the publication of Hefner's six-volume,

illustrated autobiography, I was finally going to get my chance. Maybe it was not too late to fulfil my Bunny aspirations.

The Playboy Bunnies were waitresses at the Playboy Clubs between 1960 and 1988. A direct spin-off of the magazine of the same name, Hefner established the clubs and bunnies after he founded the men's magazine *Playboy* in 1953, with just \$8,000. To earn their floppy ears, prospective bunnies had to undergo intense audition procedures and, if successful, adhere to strict guidelines. They had to be able to identify 143 brands of liquor and know how to garnish 20 cocktail variations. They were not allowed to mingle with customers and had to perfect certain manoeu-

vres, including the "Bunny Dip". This required a Bunny to lean gracefully backwards while bending at the knees, with the left knee lifted and tucked behind the right leg. This allowed her to serve drinks while keeping her low-cut costume in place.

Yes, the costume. Oh, the wonderful costume. That was what I really wanted. A pair of ears. A bow tie. And a pompom on my arse.

I kid you not. If you were a young person growing up in Wales in the Sixties, your fantasies began and ended with dressing up as a druid and/or winning the "Chair" (heaven forbid; talk about crap prizes) for having written incomprehensible verses for the National Eisteddfod – and at that time, only men had been the recipients, anyway. So what were we girls left with? Well, dressing up in black hats and pinafores every St David's Day on March 1st, with a leak pinned to our chests, belting out "Calon Lan" in the school hall. The life of a Bunny seemed a world of sophistication and freedom a long way away.

The not-so-glamorous life of the Bunny Girls was exposed by the feminist writer Gloria Steinem in 1983, and also, most recently, by Hefner's ex-girlfriend Izabella St James, in her book *Bunny Tales – Behind Closed Doors* at the Playboy Mansion. Hefner has always had girls installed at his home, but St James writes as if she was little more than a slave, pandering to an old man with outdated sexual attitudes and sleeping with up to four girls a night – also adding that he's not that hot a lover anyway.

Like others, though, she took the deal and writes that upon picking up the \$1,000 from Hef's bedroom every morning (the time when he would discuss their failings), girls also received a \$10,000 down payment on a car, and all the plastic surgery they wanted. Apparently, breast augmentation is the first and most urgent of Hef's requirements in his girls and costs him over \$70,000 a year.

It's not the life that every woman would want, but one that St James, like many others, was quick enough to buy into in her own quest for fame and fortune. And despite the bad press ex-girlfriends continue to heap upon their sugar daddy (nobody held a gun to their heads), there is a lot more to the story.

In the just-published autobiography (at six volumes and over 3,500 pages, it begins with childhood and covers *Playboy's* first 25 years), a much fuller picture of this extraordinary man's life emerges. Artist, writer, dancer, businessman, husband, father, film buff, eternal romantic – it is a story of someone who undoubtedly changed the world, for better or worse, depending on your viewpoint.

For me, it is undoubtedly for the better. There is nothing we take for granted more than our

freedom, and in particular where sexuality is concerned. In 1960, Penguin Books, which had published DH Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, was prosecuted under the Obscene Publications Act; seven years earlier, on the other side of the pond, Hugh Hefner was refused the special rate postal permit to transport *Playboy* which, on the cover of its first edition, featured Marilyn Monroe. In 1945, *Esquire* had also nearly lost its permit for the same reason as Hefner did – the publication of nude shots of women – and became more conservative as a result – but Hefner took his case through the Washington courts, and won.

Hefner reminds me a great deal of Lawrence, who is my literary hero. Both men stood up for the free expression of sexuality at a time when it was not only unfashionable, but illegal, to do so. Far from being a slap in the face to feminism, both men, it seemed to me, allowed women to celebrate their sexuality in the same way that men always had. In *Playboy*, that sexuality went hand in hand with other aspects of a traditionally male lifestyle – drinking, smoking, having fun – and far from being exploited, women were finally competing on the same terms as the men who had been doing the exploiting.

The Playboy Mansion is just up the road from me in central Los Angeles. Home to dozens of charity events (Hefner raises millions for many different causes), it is a Tudor style house, homely rather than ostentatious, and set in beautifully kept grounds that also house a waterfall and a zoo. Hefner is a big animal lover, and visitors must take heed of the sign on the road leading in, warning "Playmates at play".

I don't see any playmates, but know they are there. The new lot. Holly Madison, Kendra Wilkinson and Bridget Marquardt departed in October 2008, after starring in the TV series *The Girls Next Door*, about life for Hefner's girlfriends living at the Mansion. In their place, Hefner has installed his new "Number One" girlfriend, 22-year-old Crystal Harris, and identical 19-year-old twin models, Karissa and Kristina Shannon, who are starring in the new series.

I discover the twins are lurking somewhere when a lady approaches the PR and whispers that the twins require assistance in the drawing room. Maybe they need help with pumpkin carving practice, a traditional Mansion Halloween activity that will feature in the series and about which Crystal wrote about on her blog. There are worse things women have been asked to do.

The house surprises me. St James's descrip-



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My quest for love was filling a space because I didn't get attention when I was young”

tion of a decrepit time-warp, old, stale, and with a stench of wee from Archie the house dog allegedly relieving himself on the curtains, isn't what I find. There is exquisitely carved wood in the hallway and up the staircase; stained glass looking out onto the magnificent grounds; and the tiniest dog that greets me like ... Well, a new Playmate, though I may be jumping the gun.

I am placed in the library, next to the enormous viewing room where, on different nights of the week, Hefner holds film nights for his celebrity friends, complete with introduction and well-researched notes, which he delivers. There are dozens of film books lining the shelves; the six-volume autobiography sits on a rather fine coffee table; the adjoining bathroom is a shiny black palace containing Listerine, aspirin and stomach soothing liquids (clearly, entertaining ladies can take its toll physically).

Hefner appears, in his trademark red smoking jacket, and is remarkably youthful for his 83 years. He is still undoubtedly good looking, and the years have given him a rugged charm. He moves easily to the sofa, although it is clear that his hearing isn't great, when he notes my accent and tells me that his "best girl", Crystal, was conceived in England but born in Arizona, even though I have stressed I am from Wales. But he is keen to put me at my ease, and he is gracious when I express my pleasure at meeting him. Even so, I suspect that my British connections won't be enough to get my suitcase through the door. So what qualities does he look for in women?

"Smart, sincere, funny ..." So far, so good. I feel I am several steps closer to gaining my ears. "What I look for, by and large, is somebody I'm

physically attracted to, who has a sense of humour, common interests." Alas, judging by the photographs of girls dotted around, I can see, as Izabella St James said, that physical attraction also involves a whacking great pair of knockers, and no Bunny Dip in the world is going to give me those. In fact, I think I would probably take up about 68,000 dollars' worth of the 70 Hefner allegedly sets aside for these ops.

It is instantly clear that Hefner is used to interviews and that he is not going to be giving anything away that he doesn't want you to know. His answers are articulate and considered – some a little too well-honed and unlikely to stray into uncharted territory. But when he laughs – which he frequently does – it is the most delightful guffaw, like a boy in cahoots with another behind the bike-shed, plotting, and taking delight in the misdemeanour they are about to commit.

I quickly discover that it is not overt sexuality that really turns him on; it is love, a subject that he warms to with a longing in his voice that has the air of a life fulfilled, rather than one of regret. Growing up during the Great Depression, his dreams and fantasies were fuelled by pop culture and the movies, and they were a world away from his Puritan home life.

"My younger brother and I were raised in a home in Chicago with no real affection; we knew we were loved, but there was no display of affection. I think that my quest for romantic love and the adventure of romantic love was filling the space that was left because I didn't get the affection when I was young."

It did not, however, affect his own ability to show affection, much of which has been heavily



**Flight of fancy:** (left) Hefner aged two; (right, from top) the hands-on boss; Arnold Schwarzenegger, Hefner, centre, and basketball star Wilt Chamberlain, 1977; covers from 1958 and plugging a landmark interview with President Jimmy Carter, in 1976

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documented in stories about his thousands of conquests over many years. "I was very demonstrative, because I'd seen it in the movies. Most of us learned, in that time frame, how to be cool, sophisticated, whatever, from the films."

The little boy looking for love is a far remove from the image of the playboy with a roving eye, so has he been engaged in a lifelong pursuit of female affection because he didn't get it from his

mother? "I think so, yes. What I'm really saying is that my own conscious and unconscious, my own definition of love, has been an essentially romantic perception of love ... I am romantically driven. If I'm not in love, if I don't have a primary relationship, at minimum, I don't really feel fulfilled or happy, no matter what else is going on. I'm a big fan of Dennis Potter, and in *Pennies from Heaven* - I'm paraphrasing - he says somewhere there must be a world where the words to the songs are true; and I think that my life has been a quest for - that impossible quest - for that perfect world of those old-fashioned songs."

He nevertheless recognises that it is an illusion, and romantic love an invention and not part of nature: "But I've managed to dream impossible dreams and make most of them come true beyond anything I could possibly have imagined." There is still disbelief and incredulity in his voice.

The dreams that are rooted so firmly in childhood fantasies feature most heavily in volume one of the autobiography, the first half of which is Hefner's favourite part of the work. It reveals him to be an exceptional artist, heavily influenced by the likes of Flash Gordon: the male protector against bizarre interplanetary forces, heroes and monsters fighting in an exclusively male world. It is a childhood that he still feels very much connected to, and when he talks about it, he does so with such passion, the years fall away from his face and you can see the little boy, still taking delight in, and living again, those youthful pleasures and touching base with his young self. "I always felt, from a very early age, that I was a one-eyed man in a blind world. I see things in terms of human behaviour and the way of things that other people seem to miss. Most people live religious myths, superstitions, that confuse the way they live their lives, and I have always been fascinated with, from a very early age, why we hurt each other the way we do, and a lot of it has to do with sex."

This fascination led him to major in psychology in the University of Illinois, where, as a post-graduate, he wrote a paper on sexual behaviour and US law. While he believes that the State has a place in legislating for sexuality on some issues - to protect children, for instance - its interference in the private activities of individuals mystified him, as it continues to do. Religion, he says, is largely to blame.

"The idea that the only purpose of sex is procreation is a ridiculous view. Think about the morality of that - no population control, when one of the major problems we have on this planet is the need for population control." Despite the sexual revolution, in which he played so significant a part, does he believe that with the rise of right-wing fundamentalism, that the US is as sexually repressed as ever?

"I don't think we're more sexually repressed but I think we're very screwed up. This is a very strange country, and in a curious way it's become more apparent with the election of Obama. I'm a big fan and a supporter of Obama, but him becoming President has brought out from under the rocks this really dark, right-wing part of America. Once religion got really actively involved in



politics in 1980, with Ronald Reagan, we were on our way down a very slippery slope. And what we had with Bush was really bizarre, because he was anti-science, he was anti-education, and his presidency was based on a right-wing, religious view -

very scary. Those views are scary if they're in a Muslim country, they're scary if they're here."

Hefner is an erudite man, with an innate sense of fairness and would have made a great lawyer - for the defence. The logic he applies to all subjects, which he expresses with great precision, makes it hard to disagree with his views, but there is nothing didactic about him; he would have made an effective politician. Politics, however, never attracted him - "not for a moment". But that hasn't stopped the State fearing him as a political animal with influence.

"The real problems I had, back in the Sixties and Seventies, had less to do with naked women than the fact I was trying to change the world. I had provided money to decriminalise marijuana and they came up with a bogus drugs case that resulted in my secretary committing suicide, when they were trying to get something on me." Although never into drugs himself, he still believes they should be legalised and abhors a system that puts people in prison for taking them. "You have to solve these problems in a social-medical way. What is the rational justification for these laws? Moral views based on what? Not on reason. These laws are truly hurtful to society. Prohibition gave us organised crime. Our laws in terms of drugs not only put all kinds of people who have drugs problems in prison, but in the process completely corrupt entire countries."

He is also fearful of the wider international problems he sees his country at the forefront of creating, in particular since the Second World War. "The last moral war America had to do with was the Second World War. The rest were for all the wrong reasons. The Second World War had two sides to it, and the same thing goes for Israel and Palestine. They should be solved amicably. You can't force the rest of the world to live by your particular values - because some of your values are a little suspect. A lot of it has to do with oil - economic considerations. You have to be very suspicious of what really lies behind some political actions."

It strikes me that Hefner is one of the most moral men I have ever met. Not hurting people, whether that be socially, politically or sexually, is always at the top of his agenda, and his sense of doing the right thing is clearly something that has influenced him both personally and professionally from childhood. He was, for example, desperately hurt when his first wife was unfaithful to him when he was in the army for two years, and remained faithful to her. Likewise his second wife. He also says that he and his various girl-

friends are faithful to one another – just not within a monogamous relationship.

How that apparent contradiction and sense of morality sits alongside his role as the founder of *Playboy* and its various spin-off enterprises is something that many might question, but the attacks still leave him as confused as they did when first aired.

“I was blindsided by it; I couldn’t make any sense out of it because as far as I was concerned, the women’s movement was part of something larger, which was the sexual revolution, and the major beneficiaries of the sexual revolution were women. It was women who were historically held in bondage by church and state.”

He began *Playboy* with funds raised by putting his furniture in hock; his mother also gave him \$1,000. While she disapproved of the venture, she said that she believed in her son, and of course, her risk reaped huge financial dividends. His father even went on to work as an accountant in the organisation, and then treasurer. What gave Hefner the self belief that the magazine would work?

“I think it was, by and large, a eureka moment that came immediately, but at the same time, in retrospect, I think I was in preparation for it all my life – doing cartoons, creating stories and doing mini-publishing. I did my first penny newspaper when I was nine. I remember a specific day when I stood on the Michigan Avenue Bridge and looked out at the lake and thought, ‘Is this all there is to my life?’ I was working as a circulation manager for a children’s magazine and immediately I began making plans for this men’s magazine – what it seemed to me *Esquire* had been in the Thirties and then stopped.”

The autobiography is packed with fascinating material from the magazine’s first 25 years. All the great American writers are there – John Cheever, John Updike, Saul Bellow – and the six volumes are a slice of international history like no other. There is a fascinating interview with Martin Luther King in 1965, a time when the notion of a black President was almost laughable. There are hilarious adverts, in particular items featured in *The Men’s Shop* – a lampshade that is really a TV antenna, for instance. There are regular *Drinks Quizzes* and, of course, women: all of them what I would call classy broads.

“If you’re a man between the ages of 18 and 80,” the first issue reads, “*Playboy* is meant for you.” It points out that it is not a family magazine and comes with a warning: “If you’re somebody’s sister, wife or mother-in-law and picked us up by mistake, please pass us along to the men in your life and get back to your *Ladies Home Companion*.” You can see why the feminists didn’t like it, but Hefner insists he wrote the introduction with his tongue firmly in his cheek. “We like our apartment,” it went on, “and inviting in a female acquaintance for a quiet discussion on Picasso, Nietzsche, jazz, sex.” It was, it claimed, to be “a diversion from the anxieties of the Atomic Age”. It was certainly that.

Today, with the proliferation of internet porn, the *Playboy* empire does not appear to be as powerful or influential as it once was, and there have been whisperings of financial problems.

But, says Hefner: “The brand itself has never been more popular.”

Far from finding a man poring over a salacious empire of exploitation, I left the *Playboy* Mansion with a strong sense of the importance of Hefner not only within the sexual history of the world, but in history as a whole, a Renaissance man in the fullest sense of the word – and the brilliant autobiography confirms this. It is the best history book the 21st century has so far produced, and the limited edition of 1,800 copies (£900) also comes with a 7x7cm piece of the man’s infamous silk pyjamas.

I realise, upon leaving, that it’s as close to them as I’m going to get. I will never be a *Playmate* – the “wholesome girl next door” that Hefner says is the number one criteria, and I didn’t earn my ears – or my breasts. And I’m a really crap pumpkin carver. But that’s OK. I’ve been a girl at the *Playboy* Mansion, and that has to beat dressing up in Welsh national dress anyday.

“Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy*, 6 Volume” is a limited edition book (1,500 copies signed and numbered by Hugh Hefner) published by *Taschen*, £900

“It seems to me that Hefner is one of the most moral people I have ever met”



Male liberation: (clockwise from far left) Hefner at home in Brentwood, California, with yet another bunny; outside the mansion in the 1970s, living the lifestyle he had defined and sold to millions but which only he had the means to enact; service culture or an opportunity for glamour – a Bunny in 1962; at work in Chicago as John Dean testifies in the Watergate hearings, 1973

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