



Book review: *Hugh Hefner's Playboy*

Before becoming the elder statesman of sex and a cultural icon, Hugh Marston Hefner published a great magazine. He was also pretty conservative.

That's the reasonable conclusion one comes to when poring through [Hugh Hefner's Playboy](#), a lavish six-volume history of *Playboy* magazine just out by Taschen publishers. *Playboy* celebrates its 60th anniversary in December, but before getting into the details of what that means, let it just be said that Taschen, a German publisher founded in 1980, deserves high praise for the beautiful job they did. This is a glossy collection with gorgeous illustrations and smart editing. When it comes to big and bold books, Taschen [doesn't skimp](#).

The general contours of Hefner and *Playboy* are well known. He grew up in Chicago, was interested in magazines and especially cartooning from an early age, and struck gold in the 1950s when he purchased the rights to publish some naked pictures of Marilyn Monroe. Yet from the start *Playboy*, whose first issue appeared in December 1953, was much more than a girlie magazine. Hefner had a great eye for clothed talent as well, whether it was great cartoonists and graphic artists or capable writers. Hefner was brilliant at graphic design; after immersing myself in the wonderful colors and shapes of six decades of *Playboy*, other magazines look amateur, even crappy. *GQ* looks like an unimaginative fashion catalogue with awful fonts that was printed in someone's basement. *Esquire*, which was Hefner's inspiration, is graphically flat and hasn't published anything interesting in years. *Maxim* and the other "lad mags" have all the skin and none of the wit of *Playboy*.

Editorially, *Hugh Hefner's Playboy* is an incredibly rich collection of literature, art, cartoons and interviews. It makes our digital age, with its thousand and one niches, look very poor in comparison. Today we have a million journalists and Buzzfeeders who can hit their niche and rack up hits; we don't have any renaissance men who can publish a magazine or website — an attractive, compelling, and intelligent magazine or website — about music, politics, sex, art and religion, and anything else that interests the owner.

Say what you will about Hefner, and yes he's always been kind of cheesy, but the man had a philosophy. Unlike today's publishers, who go out of their way to avoid offending advertisers and the public, or journalists, who push their agenda then hide behind claims of "objectivity." Hefner had balls. In 1955 *Esquire* magazine rejected "The Crooked Man," a story by science fiction writer Charles Beaumont. It

told the story of a man who lived in a homosexual society and was persecuted for being straight. Hefner published it. Hefner is also a known jazz fan, and the early *Playboy* ridiculed rock and roll as “noise.” It also made fun of beatniks and hippies. And, of course there was *Playboy*’s ridicule of feminism. Here’s *Playboy*’s call-out accompanying a 1970 article about the feminist movement: “militant man-haters do their level worst to distort the distinctions between male and female and to discredit the legitimate grievances of American women.” Such a piece might appear today in the *American Spectator*.

In the 1970s and 80s *Playboy* lost its way, making the mistake of following the pop culture through disco (Hefner rollerskating always looked weird) and showing more and more skin, which eventually kills the lovely artistic shape of the female body with crude biology (although Hefner never plumbed the depths of *Screw*, *Oui*, and other butt mags). But in the first two decades, Hefner was full of common sense. The best book about *Playboy* is Elizabeth Fraterrigo’s *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America*. In it Fraterrigo explores *Playboy*’s place in American culture, and she offers some interesting insights. The first is that Hefner, at least in some areas, was conservative — or at least would be considered so today, when the culture has moved so far left that the early *Playboy* centerfolds could be published on the front page of the *New York Times*.

The *Playboy* philosophy was never about making easy money through laziness and hedonism, and even nihilism, which is what so much modern porn is about. Hefner championed hard work and capitalism — “work hard and play hard” was a favorite phrase. He loved the booming 1920s and often harkened to them as an ideal time of great jazz and economic expansion, yet embraced modern technology and modernist art, architecture, and graphic design.

Hefner also felt that a well employed young bachelor was good for the American economy because of his disposable income. People forget because these days Hefner resembles a viagra-chomping Crypt Keeper, but in the early days *Playboy* advocated not the destruction of marriage, but rather letting a man have a period of exploration between college and marriage. Hefner had married his first wife Mildred right out of college; the marriage didn’t last, leading Hefner to not unreasonably conclude that having a period of bachelorhood between school and starting a family might be good for men, women, and the economy. Of course, that period for Hefner has now lasted about 107 years. But the *Playboy* founder’s original feeling was sound: men should have a time to be men and be able to buy stuff and date a lot of girls before taking the gas pipe and getting married.

Hugh Hefner’s Playboy carries a price tag of \$150, but it’s six volumes, and in my mind worth the cost. I never thought I’d say it, but journalism could do worse than another Hugh Hefner. As long as it’s the 1953 Hef and not the 2013 one.