

Book Review: Bachelors and Bunnies

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Bachelors and Bunnies: The Sexual Politics of Playboy. Carrie Pitzulo. University of Chicago Press, 2011. 40 pp. \$25 hardcover.

Playboy Enterprises, Inc. (PEI) is best known for the magazine founded by Hugh Hefner in December 1953 to celebrate a hedonistic bachelor lifestyle in a manner startling for its time; yet *Playboy* today is but a money-losing appendage of a company that has largely shed its risqué reputation. When PEI went public in 1973, the magazine had reached its apex in circulation and influence, selling more than 7 million copies per issue. Nearly three decades later, in an era of Internet competition and within a culture far more accepting of the sexual freedoms *Playboy* so shockingly trumpeted in the post-World War Two period, Hefner and a private equity firm once again took the company private. This compelling, well-researched, and astutely argued book came out that same year, in 2011. Hefner contractually remains editor-in-chief of *Playboy*, whose print circulation is still respectable but far smaller at about 1.5 million. The empire he built has shrunken in size, notoriety, and profitability, while expanding its marketing ambitions into fashion, fragrance, and licensing endeavors aimed at women as much as men.

In other words, it seems, PEI has become just another brand-centric company with a media flagship but dependent on much else. Yet this book by Carrie Pitzulo illuminates far more than the story of how a once unusual magazine guided by a particular and controversial editorial ideology grew and flourished through its first two decades. More broadly, Pitzulo's work illuminates how a key organization of the magazine landscape evolved in the context of post-war politics, economics, demographics, sexual mores, and popular culture. Further, it helps us understand how we came to where we are today.

The book, growing out of Pitzulo's dissertation work (she is now an assistant professor of history at the University of West Georgia, specializing in women's history, gender, sexuality, and popular culture), rests on exceptional scholarship that delves considerably deeper than the sort of reading (and reading into) content on which so much study of magazines rests. Pitzulo had full access to *Playboy* archives in Chicago (PEI headquarters has since moved to Beverly Hills), and thus to the sort of insider discussion revealed in memos, manuscript drafts, and other company documents as well as Hefner's own papers (he has long been an obsessive keeper of scrapbooks). She also interviewed key

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individuals associated with the magazine past and present, ranging from Hefner himself to other editors and executives to centerfold subjects. The project incorporates essential second-wave feminist writings and accounts as well. On the basis of these rich materials, Pitzulo shows the complex, contradictory, and diverse nature of both the *Playboy* enterprise and the women's movement itself, and examines how their activities, values, and causes were intertwined—frequently clashing over the objectification and commodification of the nubile young female body, but also often coinciding around issues of sexual equality and reproductive rights.

Pitzulo's sophisticated and compelling discussion does much to qualify the well-worn critique of *Playboy* as merely a sanitized version of sleazy pornography—soft porn it may well have been (and remain), but there was always more to Hefner's mission than Bunnies and Playmates. Indeed, *Playboy* promoted a hedonistic, fun, glamorous lifestyle characterized by sexual abandon, albeit couched in rather traditional representations of feminine beauty and masculine desire; but along with what masqueraded as revolutionary, Pitzulo finds glorification of rampant consumerism and reinforcement of conventional standards of heterosexuality, monogamy, and personal responsibility no less important. She takes seriously the magazine's journalistic and literary merits and its contributions to post-war political and cultural discourse; and looks closely at articles, forums, letters, columns, and both public and private debates indicating that *Playboy* proffered a more inclusive (if decidedly heterosexual and merchandise-driven) agenda than is generally acknowledged. In short, she shows how "*Playboy's* gender politics defy easy categorization" (p. 179).

Eventually, in Pitzulo's analysis, American culture caught up with the once novel notions of the magazine both implied and articulated. *Playboy's* lifestyle emphasis paved the way for what is now commonplace celebration of the sophisticated male hetero-metrosexual. Unintentionally, the company pioneered strategies that publications nowadays must pursue to survive, through brand extension into other activities and mediums. And in overtly engaging sexual topics and valorizing sexual pleasure for both women and men, *Playboy* presaged attitudes and conversations that are now part of the mainstream. Not that the familiar feminist critique of *Playboy* is wrong, but there's much more to the picture. In this rigorous and readable book, Pitzulo has greatly expanded the feminist analysis of a prime purveyor of masculine and feminine mythology.