

Book Review: *Playboy* Renegotiates Gender, Fights Suburbia

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Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America. Elizabeth Fraterrigo. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 295 pp. hardback.

In what many remember as the “Father Knows Best” era, American men were fighting an ironic crisis of masculinity with the help of a scandalous new magazine. In *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America*, Elizabeth Fraterrigo provides a sophisticated analysis of the social context in which *Playboy* emerged and won a following. Thanks in part to Hugh Hefner’s philosophy, Fraterrigo argues, young adults now have a license to enjoy an extended period of singlehood before committing to a marriage and a mortgage.

Gender relations in the postwar era are often remembered through portrayals of American women, who suffered through daily abuse (as in the 1950s sitcom “The Honeymooners”) or a boring life in suburbia while their husbands enjoyed careers outside the home (as in the TV series “Mad Men”). Fraterrigo suggests, however, that many husbands thought they were the ones getting the short end of the stick. Led to the altar, American men felt the pressure of being breadwinners. Many complained of being “dominated” by idle and demanding women in what critics saw as a “feminized” society.

Who was to correct that problem if not a man who had suffered such a plight? Hugh Hefner, who had wed his college girlfriend and fallen into a loveless marriage, founded *Playboy* in 1953 and divorced shortly after that. A former copywriter for *Esquire*, Hefner wanted to create a magazine for men interested in the pleasures of single life—luxurious living in the city (in contrast to family life in suburbia), expensive goods, cars, gourmet food, and, of course, women. A playboy could afford such things because he did not yet have a wife and children to support. It was not necessary, Hefner philosophized, for a man to marry just to have sex with a woman. And it was not true that “good” girls avoided premarital sex. *Playboy* set out to dispel such myths by engaging, in Fraterrigo’s words, “in a project of formulating gender, often overtly, sometimes implicitly, for which nude pictures served as just one important element.”

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Hefner's emphasis was on consumption—sexual, visual, and otherwise. Even men with limited means could experience the Playboy lifestyle by joining Hefner's chain of Playboy Clubs, famous for their cotton-tailed, rabbit-eared beauties. Their ranks at one point included undercover feminist Gloria Steinem, who had set out to expose the humiliations of the Playboy Bunnies. Animalized and objectified, the club waitresses were forced to endure the male gaze, just like the centerfold models, who took off their clothes for the pleasure of male readers.

These were the main critiques that second-wave feminists leveled at Hefner's enterprise in the 1960s and '70s. But Fraterrigo suggests that *Playboy* and feminists were not exactly on the opposite side of the moral debate. Conveniently for urban skirt chasers, the magazine supported birth control, abortion, and women's right to work (ensuring the presence of single girls in the city). Despite editorials ridiculing sex-role convergence in dress and duty, Hefner signed a petition to extend the ratification deadline for the Equal Rights Amendment. In 1982 he put a woman in charge of *Playboy*, passing the reins on to his daughter and longtime assistant, Christie Hefner. Fraterrigo argues that even being a Bunny was seen by some as more feminist than oppressive, allowing unmarried women to work flexible hours, earn decent wages, and feel empowered by customers' look-but-don't-touch attention.

Sadly for Hefner, his sexual revolution failed to develop on his terms. In the 1970s and '80s, more crude and pornographic magazines eroded *Playboy's* profits (a trend that continues nowadays with online pornography). Playboy Clubs were forced to move from inner cities to more affluent suburbs and, unable to compete against topless bars, even to welcome patrons' wives. But nothing worked. The last club closed in 1985, and *Playboy* gradually fell out of the Top 25 magazine list.

As a historian, Fraterrigo offers erudite insight into the interaction between the magazine and its readers. The book is rife with examples of the postwar social scripts found in films, TV shows, and bestsellers, thus offering not only a history of *Playboy* but also an account of 20th-century materialism and desire. Mass communication students and scholars of gender and media can learn from the ways in which the book challenges assumptions and illustrates *Playboy's* influence on American culture.