

Recensie

Elizabeth Fraterrigo, *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 295 p. ISBN 978-0-19-538610-3. € 25,20.

In *The Magazine Century: American Magazines Since 1900*, David E. Sumner argues that five periodicals – *Mad Magazine*, *TV Guide*, *Sports Illustrated*, *National Enquirer*, and *Playboy* – were archetypal representatives of the developments taking place in the 1950s in U.S. periodicals publication specifically and in American culture more in general. Sumner sees these publications as filling a need for special interest magazines that had been stimulated by the advent of television, just as the appearance of previous new media had prompted the popularity of such periodicals as *Scientific American* and *Popular Mechanics* in a prior era.

In *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in America*, Elizabeth Fraterrigo, an assistant professor at Loyola University of Chicago, posits that in the case of the latter of the five periodicals there is much more going on than a straightforward accommodation of the market to media-induced changes in taste. Fraterrigo argues that *Playboy*, founded by

Hugh Hefner in 1953, is the embodiment of a deep-rooted discontentment among American men following the Second World War, as they struggled with the shift they were required to make from citizen warriors in the 1940s to wage earners and prospective suburbanites in the 1950s.

Hefner himself provides a convenient template for Fraterrigo's dissatisfied postwar male: a veteran of Army service at twenty, his life seems to fast-forward in the postwar period through an abbreviated stint in college and marriage soon after graduation to fatherhood at a relatively young age and the prospect of a lifetime career in corporate America. In 1953, the year he started *Playboy*, Hefner was working as a circulation manager for a children's magazine. As Fraterrigo points out, the publication of the first issue of *Playboy* marked a break in Hefner's life: in the 1950s, he went from being a somewhat modish family man to being one of Chicago's most eligible bachelors, following a 1959 divorce from his first wife.

Using Hefner's biography as a point of departure, Fraterrigo, whose primary research interests center on both popular culture and public history, elegantly

plots out the life of the magazine from its origin in an individual's discontent to its position as the latest word in things hedonic in the United States of the 1950s and '60s. As she sketches the magazine's trajectory, Fraterrigo also succeeds in clearly elucidating Hefner's positions on consumerism as a form of patriotic expression, and the magazine's well-known, but not always well-understood, *Playboy* philosophy.

In order to achieve the dual goals of chronological narration and cultural analysis, Fraterrigo limns the biographical line of Hefner's life to a thematically-based chapter division. The early *Playboy* years are used as the basis for a discussion of the changing work (and play) ethic in America in the postwar years. Hefner's peak years as the magazine's publisher, and his most influential as an arbiter of taste and culture, are dealt with in the sections entitled 'Pads and Penthouses' and 'The Ideal (Play)mate', which discuss the cultural dynamics of urbanization and suburbanization in the U.S. of the late 1950s and early 1960s and gender, sex, and the workplace in the 1960s and early 1970s, respectively. Finally, the later period of Hefner's life and the more recent history of the magazine form the basis for a discussion of the rise of the feminist and anti-pornography movement in America, as well as the subsequent post-feminist developments in the U.S.

As she makes clear, *Playboy* is a mix of conservative capitalist economic views, pragmatic racial politics, and sexually progressive standpoints. At times, the various positions clash, such as Hefner's and the magazine's purported support of both sexual freedom and

clearly-defined gender roles. It is a testament to Fraterrigo's skills as a writer that her explanation and delineation of *Playboy*'s varied positions remains consistently clear, thus contributing considerably to a better understanding of the often-puzzling assortment of proponents and adversaries the magazine has collected over the years.

With respect to gender roles and *Playboy*'s role in the debate on the position of women in society, specifically, one of the noteworthy features of this book is the attention Fraterrigo gives to Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962) and her creation of the 'Single Girl' as a sexually liberated and consumption-oriented female counterpart to the male *Playboy*. This section provides depth to Fraterrigo's position that *Playboy* was the product of a specific generational outlook that to no small degree transcended gender, even if *Playboy* itself did not. It also helps explain Hefner and *Playboy*'s confused and often ill-advised response to the feminist movement of the 1970s: Hefner believed his publication embodied sexual liberation for both genders, and regularly pointed out that it championed such feminist causes as abortion rights. The provision of the *Single Girl* parallel makes this tension between Hefner and the women's movement more clear in its complexity and illustrates the difficulties in trying to categorize and contextualize such publications as *Playboy*.

As an extension of this point, the author describes the antagonistic relationship between Hugh Hefner, at the helm of *Playboy* and Gloria Steinem, the founder of *Ms.*, and a onetime investigative journalist who worked as a *Playboy*

bunny to write an ‘inside’ story on the *Playboy* clubs and their most visible employees. Again, it is made clear that there is some ambiguity in Steinem’s opposition to the magazine: upon hearing that both she and Hefner are to be inducted into the American Society of Magazine Editor’s Hall of Fame, she claims it is like ‘a conservationist being given an award with a head of a timber company’. Yet it was this same Steinem who points out, while interviewing Hefner in 1970, that he was ‘partly responsible for Women’s Lib.’ Indeed, it is in dealing with these paradoxical relationships between *Playboy* and its publisher and other movements in American society that Fraterrigo’s meticulous research comes to fruition. The copious bibliography makes clear that a substantial survey of the extant work on *Playboy* took place in the writing of this book, originally a Loyola University of Chicago Ph.D. dissertation. Additionally, Fraterrigo makes good use of this background work by foregrounding it with citations and insights gained from interviews with Hefner and access to his journals.

Yet, this book does not focus solely on *Playboy*’s various conflicts with the women’s movement, nor for that matter does it take a particularly feminist perspective in discussing the periodical. Instead, it follows a number of defined threads – lifestyle, relationships, and architecture – to illustrate how *Playboy* both influences and is influenced by

developments in American culture and society. As such, it is a worthy representative of what in the field of economics would be termed a ‘thick’ study, as denoting investigative work that takes a multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives into account in order to provide a deeper understanding of a given phenomenon. Here, *Playboy* is discussed in a context including sociological, psychological, and economic viewpoints which lead to a book that can claim to discuss its subject matter with no small degree of profundity without sacrificing the bigger picture, a balance sometimes missing from such studies.

Finally, and this should not be underestimated, the prose of the book is very accessible: it is clear that Fraterrigo has taken considerable care to ensure that *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* does not suffer in terms of style and structure from its provenance as a doctoral thesis.

As a result, it is a book that can be recommended to all scholars and students of magazine publication and cultural studies, particularly those keen on gaining greater knowledge of the role played by specialized wide-circulation periodicals in shaping the sensibilities of the postwar United States.

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