

Playboy Founder Embodies American Dream; Changes American Culture

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There is little doubt that Playboy founder Hugh Hefner has become one of the most controversial figures of the past half century. From his highly publicized lifestyle to his risqué magazine, to his multi-million dollar company, Hefner has played a leading role in reshaping America's social values.

After more than four years of research, Steven Watts, professor of history in the College of Arts and Science at the University of Missouri, examined the publisher's life in his latest biography, *Mr. Playboy: Hugh Hefner and the American Dream*. He found that Hefner had a profound impact on American culture, in the areas of advertising, business, politics, consumer values, and sexual openness.

"The first time I arrived at the Playboy Mansion was like parachuting onto a new planet," Watts said. "Hefner is one of the smartest people I ever met and a genuine romantic. For him, the glass is not only half full, it's completely full."

For his biography, Watts was given unprecedented access to Hefner and the Playboy archives. Watts interviewed Hefner for more than 40 hours and searched over 1,800 scrapbooks about his life. As a historian who also has written best-selling biographies of Walt Disney and Henry Ford, Watts tried to discover the real person behind the flamboyant public persona. He found that Hefner pursued a dream of "personal, political and economic freedom" and viewed his pursuit of fun not as immature, but as a happy embodiment of childhood optimism in a cynical world.

“Whether for good or bad, Hefner deserves considerable credit for the sexual openness that has become so characteristic of modern America. We often forget that even in the 1960s, married characters in television sitcoms slept in twin beds,” Watts said. “Following the Great Depression and World War II, which had slowed the surge of consumer capitalism, Americans stood ready to resume their love affair with material affluence and Hefner captured this yearning.”

Hefner offered in Playboy a stylish model for the modern male, presenting fine stereo equipment, good wine and progressive ideas in advertisements, and urging a standard of urbane, gentlemanly behavior. Although some accused Hefner of degrading women as sexual objects, Watts notes that Playboy overturned traditional gender standards by advocating economic opportunity, social equality and abortion rights for women.

“Ironically, Hefner and Playboy became a symbol of women’s freedom to make choices. More than any other single figure in his era, he symbolized the combination of sexual liberation, material affluence and personal self-fulfillment that characterizes the modern American dream,” Watts said.

To explore Hefner’s personal life, Watts interviewed many close friends, girlfriends, ex-wives and family members. The book describes Hefner as an obsessive movie fan, hosting moving screenings in his house almost every night. Like clockwork, Hefner strictly regulates his schedule, having a set meal and activity for each day of the week.

“With the exception of maybe one person, everyone I talked to – from past wives to people that work for Hefner – seemed to adore him,” Watts said. “Every time he made his grand entrance at a party, his face would glow and he would turn 10 years younger. He is truly happy being Hugh Hefner.”

Watts's biography offers is a chronological story of Hefner's life and career, as well as a searching analysis of modern American values. It is scheduled to be published on Oct. 1.

Source: University of Missouri

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