

## **The Death Of Playboy And Intellerotica**

Back in the late 1960s, my then-young parents (one German, the other Indian) lived and worked briefly in the eastern US state of Virginia. They witnessed Woodstock, took a lot of blue-jeaned road trips, hung out with peace-loving beatnik friends and colleagues and came to love the dynamism of an inclusive, meritocratic nation of immigrants.

They also subscribed religiously to a certain publication called Playboy magazine, a faded stack of which I discovered one night, years later in 1987, shoved to the back of a cabinet in the spare-room of our home in India.

I was fifteen and captivated. Not being a hormonally-charged boy, I wasn't interested in covergirl Bonnie Drucilla Hunter, Miss Playmate of September 1968 (although I loved her long fringe and obsessed for years over her thigh-high shiny white platform boots).

Budding writer that I was, what set me on fire was the sheer literary quality of Playboy. The content was both sensual and cerebral, earthy but not low-brow, witty and wise and sardonic and teasing. The Questions segment was a provocative delight. Here was an army soldier asking for technical advice on foreplay that would pleasure his girl. There, was a naïve college jock wondering about the benefits of tantra. Letters to the Editor contained anecdotes about moisture-resistant LP players, four-wheeled Sedans, the latest Hendrix album, and how a newly-divorced man with unfortunate 'disco hair' might succeed on a date with a lady without scaring her off. Playboy's quirky, inventive language turned me on, especially when I came across its iconic publisher Hugh Hefner's interview with Timothy Leary, a Harvard professor described as the 'prophet of LSD' who lovingly narrated what exactly made for a 'good psychedelic trip.'

Sure, Playboy back then was full of outrageous gender biases and double standards. But for those who saw below the surface innuendo, it was also a rare and genuine tribute to womanhood. It loved the female form, worshipped the female mystery, and sometimes – many times – it applauded the wonders of the female mind.

Take for instance, the 1964 Playboy Interview with author Ayn Rand, a tough, complex woman to deconstruct in those zero-feminist times. Countless gems followed, written with intensity and sharp turns of phrase. Mick Jagger talked about the Stones and a volatile star groupie called Marianne Faithfull. Bob Dylan rapped on free love and the politics of the Vietnam War. Stanley Kubrick was awed by certain women in cinema. Martin Luther King keenly explained the Civil Rights movement and his memory of being kicked off a bus as a boy. These profiles were smart, bold, and intimate.

There was also crackling fiction by award-winning as well as little-known authors. Interspersed with photographs of stark bare breasts and soft-lit curved butts, lay a short story by Saul Bellow, a novella by Joyce Carol Oates, an essay by Doris Lessing, Germaine Greer, or Erica Jong.

This, even to my young mind, was a true marriage of art and life. With its smooth and natural balance of sex and intellect, Playboy managed that near-impossible feat of combining rather than separating the two. It enticed the brain as much as the libido, and it's no surprise that while the majority of its readers were male, many – my mother included – were women.

That's how Playboy, at first derided as mere 'porn' by the usual moral brigade, quickly became known within more urbane circles for its high standards of content and

aesthetics. Sadly, in the decades since the magazine's peak, never has the divide between sexuality and intellect become wider in popular culture. Most voyeurs of internet porn today – let's face it – aren't readers. And in the same vein, the dwindling number of readers who define their taste as literary, are exposed to very little quality within the realm of unabashed sex and erotica. From that point of view, Playboy did the world a whole lot of good.

For me, it performed a miracle. As I grew up, I knew I wanted to write to the high standard of the folks at Playboy. And I knew I would always see the beauty and aesthetics of female nudity, the celebration of what it is rather than the manipulated 'let it all hang out' vulgarity it has become.

My parents received Playboy through international subscription until a spring day in 1973, when the Indian Government sent them a sternly-worded court order. No more importing 'obscene literature' – Or Else. With that, Playboy, like my Mum's embroidered bell-bottoms and our cranky Ambassador car, began its slow fade outwards family history.

I can only laugh now at the pointlessness and irony of the court order. By the mid 1980s, our local market would be flooded with cheaply dubbed Scandinavian 'blue films'. By the end of the 1990s, unadulterated porn could enter every Indian home through the democratic miracle of cyberspace. Miss Playmate was almost virginal when one saw what thrills buxom Malayali aunties, C-grade Bollywood extras and Greek-Armenian pole dancers had to offer on YouTube and YouCumHere. Porn – soft porn, hard porn, triple XXX porn, orgy porn, bestial porn – was everywhere.

With this has come the death of Playboy's unique brand of 'intell-erotica,' which first blazed across newsstands in 1953 and shook up the conservative heartland of America. It may have horrified some, but for many it represented a new, fresh wave of sexy classy pleasure with sophistication, liberalism and yes, dignity – a wave that's crashed in the current era of male 'locker-room' phraseology. Somewhere, according to my many dear American friends, sexy has found itself traded in for crude sexism just as the word 'liberal' has been shown the door by an in-your-face right-wing nationalist vocabulary.

In 2015, Playboy decided to stop featuring frontal nudity; a wise decision, considering the competition from explicit easy-to-access porn today. What remains unrivalled, however, was Playboy's trademark saucy opinion, searing socio-political debate and legendary profiles of culturally and racially diverse achievers.

But who's reading?

**Selina Sheth**