PLEASURE READING:
PLAYBOY’S LITERARY FICTION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes short literary fiction published in Playboy magazine for the first two decades after its 1953 inception. Although Hugh Hefner’s magazine was best known for its nude pictorials, its editorial mix also included journalistic features, politically progressive opinion writing and short stories from a staggering list of established fiction writers. This project confronts the central question of how literary fiction functioned in the context of Playboy culture and Hefner’s agenda of consumerism, and this study reveals that these stories relied on an enduring emphasis on individualism to connect to emerging social impulses in the postwar period.

After an introduction of the magazine’s history and the Playboy philosophy of consumerism, this project analyzes stories from Charles Beaumont and James Thurber as defining narratives for a new incarnation of the American Dream following WWII. The second section examines Playboy’s efforts to reformulate marriage in part through stories from Philip Roth, Irwin Shaw and John Updike. Finally, this project calls on fiction by Joyce Carol Oates and Vladimir Nabokov as indications of how Playboy’s commitment to self-interest helped the once-subversive publication to assume a relatively conservative posture.