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THE NATIONAL GAY & LESBIAN NEWSMAGAZINE

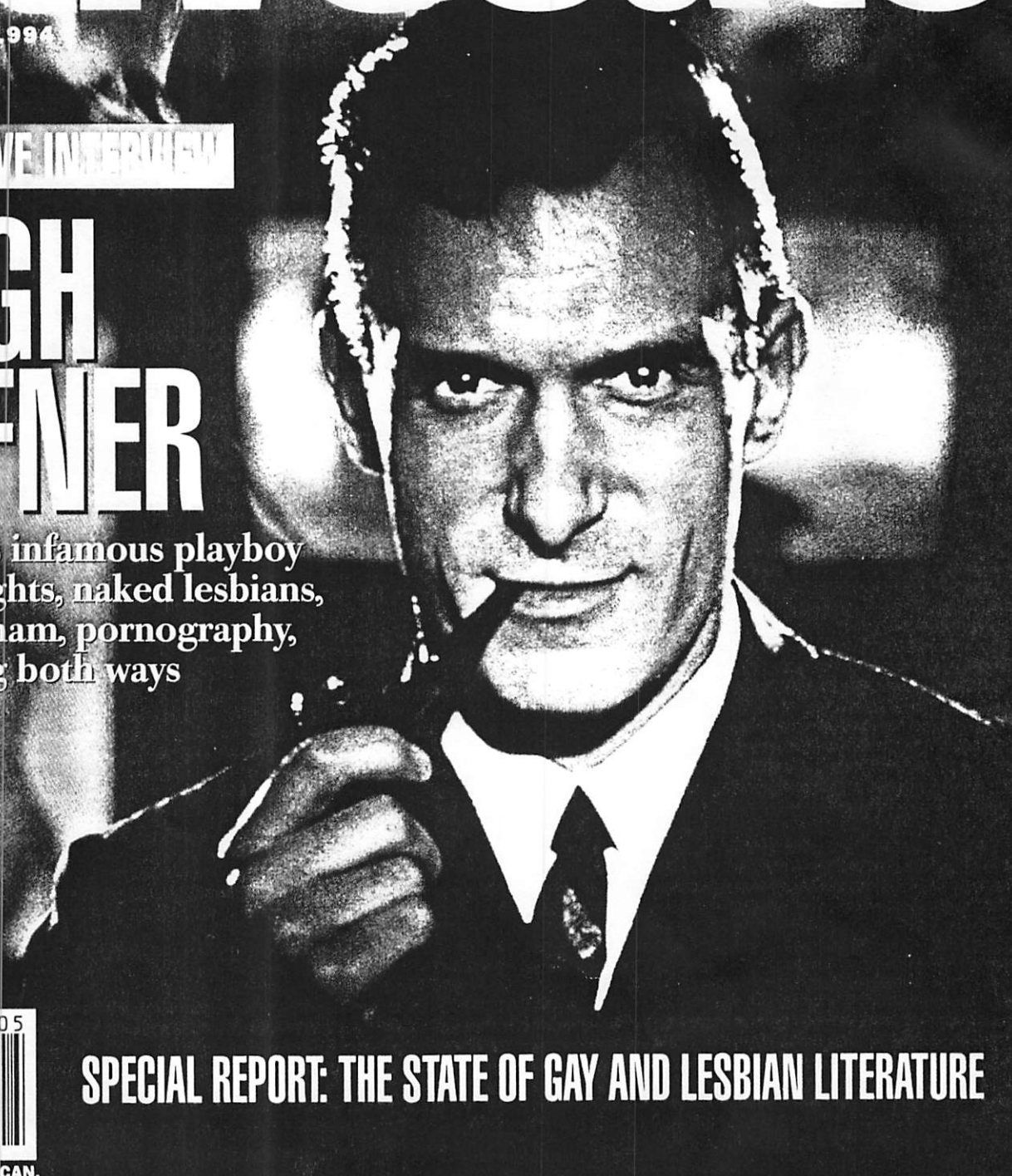
THE Advocate

MARCH 8, 1994

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

HUGH HEFNER

America's infamous playboy
on gay rights, naked lesbians,
Billy Graham, pornography,
and going both ways



ISSUE 650



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SPECIAL REPORT: THE STATE OF GAY AND LESBIAN LITERATURE

HUGH HEFNER

THE ADVOCATE INTERVIEW

By Jeff Yarbrough

Much like the rabbit hidden on every cover of his magazine, *Playboy* founder and editor in chief Hugh Hefner is something of an enigma. He's been quoted as saying, "[I'm] convinced that the people who write about me and about *Playboy* are involved in what amounts to a Rorschach test. It's as if I'm an inkblot. What journalists take away with them when they write about my life is a little bit of me and a great deal of their own preconceived perceptions, their prejudices."

Possibly because of a fear of being reduced to inkblot status, Hefner rarely gives interviews. And when he does his comments are almost always controversial. "I don't aim to shock," he says. "I'm not Howard Stern. I just think I've given a lot more thought to certain issues than others who have access to the media. A lot of people just get out there and blow their own horns. I'm not

interested in doing that. So I don't, as a result, talk much in the public arena. And I guess when I do, it tends to be a little shocking for some people. Maybe it's just seeing my face on television. I mean, you really don't hear much from me. The last thing I am is overexposed."

Yet his magazine, which celebrated its 40th anniversary in January with a gala in Los Angeles benefiting the American Foundation for AIDS Research, is all about exposure. Its photographs of nude women expose its primarily straight readers—all 5 million of them—to, as Hefner puts it, "profound beauty," and the magazine's interviews with the famous (John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Jimmy Carter, Marlon Brando) and the infamous (Malcolm X, Fidel Castro, Larry Kramer) attempt to evoke "profound thinking."

Through years of editing the world's most difficult interviewees, Hefner himself has learned how to handle the occasional inane interview question. Last year, in one of Bryant Gumbel's less-than-shining moments, the *Today* show's host asked Hefner which historical person he would like to have dinner with. After looking at Gumbel as if he were mad, Hefner replied, "I'd certainly like to talk to Christ. Our values are probably very similar. He forgave the whores." Instant controversy.

Although some of Hefner's remarks might seem contrived, "he means what he says," says Hefner's

STEVEN E. JOHNSON FOR THE ADVOCATE

daughter, Christie, 40, who now runs the *Playboy* empire from its Chicago offices. "If you go back through the editorials in the magazine, you'll see that he's always been consistent. He's not been an advocate for only the *Playboy* readership. He's been in there fighting for everyone—gay, straight, whatever. This, of course, has made him enemies. During Nixon's presidency he was on the Administration's enemies list. The ultraconservative religious right is also always after him; most

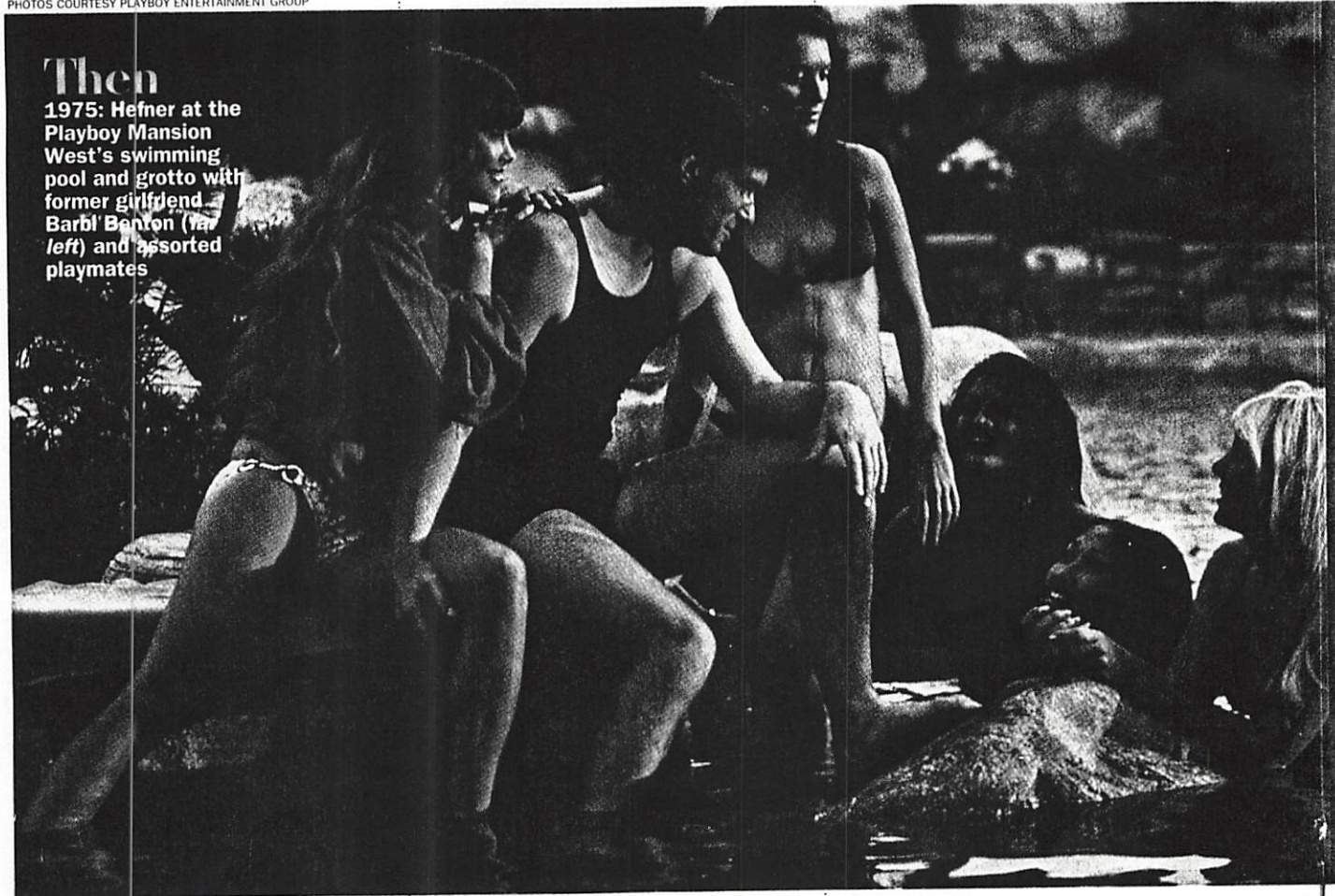
for women putting silicone implants in their breasts." Gillespie, whose January/February issue focuses on pornography, says of Hefner's product, "Meat is meat is meat. You can dress it up, you can shoot it with a soft-focus lens, but it's still the objectification of women, which is the thing I struggle against."

Hugh Marston Hefner was born in Chicago in 1926, the elder son of conservative Protestant parents and a direct descendant of Massachusetts Puritan patriarchs William Bradford

produced a feature in *Shaft's* pages called Coed of the Month, which profiled an attractive, bright, and clothed BWOC.

After gigs as a personnel manager and an advertising copywriter, Hefner soon found himself back where he'd always wanted to be—in journalism. *Esquire*, then headquartered in Chicago, hired him in 1951 as a copy editor. When the magazine moved its offices to Manhattan later that year, Hefner requested a \$5 raise (to \$65 a week) so he could afford to move

PHOTOS COURTESY PLAYBOY ENTERTAINMENT GROUP



Then
1975: Hefner at the Playboy Mansion West's swimming pool and grotto with former girlfriend Barbi Benton (far left) and assorted playmates

visibly, Donald Wildmon."

No surprise, since Hefner's mere existence—much like that of any controversial media figure—produces almost violent polemical opinions. "Obviously, he wasn't sufficiently breast-fed," says Marcia Ann Gillespie, editor in chief of *Ms.* "He's fixated, like a lot of his readers, on large breasts. The images that *Playboy* has helped to foster as normal have caused real harm to many women. Those images are partly responsible

and John Winthrop. From an early age Hefner dabbled in journalism, founding a school paper, reporting, writing, and even penning political cartoons.

Enrolled at the University of Illinois in Champaign/Urbana, Hefner managed to earn his bachelor's degree in 2½ years by doubling up on classes. Throughout his undergraduate tenure, he drew cartoons for *The Daily Illini* and edited the campus's humor magazine, *Shaft*. Hefner in-

himself and his wife, Mildred, to New York. His request was denied, and he left the publication.

In 1953 Hefner launched his own magazine with a borrowed \$8,000. In December the first issue of *Playboy*, featuring the now-famous calendar photo of Marilyn Monroe, hit newsstands. It carried no cover date because Hefner was not sure whether he'd be able to produce another. But the first issue was a hit, selling 50,000 copies. By the end of

the decade, *Playboy* was regularly selling more than a million copies per month.

In 1971 *Playboy* was reaching 7 million readers with each issue, a circulation so phenomenal and profitable that Hefner took the privately held corporation (which included book publishing, merchandising, a modeling agency, a limousine service, a record label, and a television and motion picture company) public. He also established a second residence in Los Angeles, and in 1975

Playboy Foundation awarded its first research grant to New York University Medical Center to explore the disease's pathogenesis. Since then Hefner has donated more than \$1 million to AIDS-related projects, funding research as well as bankrolling legal and political initiatives. He has provided grants and contributions to education projects, advocacy groups, and hospices and is a founding member of the National Leadership Coalition on AIDS, an organization dedicated to combating

ery was almost complete. Throughout his battle with the stroke's debilitating effects, Christie kept the magazine on track (Christie's brother David, 38, has maintained throughout his adult life no interest in his father's company and remains today, as she puts it, "a private citizen"), scaling back spending and reorganizing the corporation after the stock market crash of 1987, which caused an industrywide panic among magazine advertisers.

The late '80s brought Hefner's

And now

1992: Hefner with second wife Kimberly Conrad and sons Marston (left) and Cooper



he decided to make the city his permanent home. He firmly established himself as America's definitive playboy (he had divorced his first wife in 1959 after ten years of marriage), and his sprawling Holmby Hills estate, known as "the mansion," became a sexual playground for the cultural elite.

The '80s profoundly changed Hefner's life. His attention became riveted on AIDS soon after the disease was identified. In 1983 the

spread of HIV. Additionally, since July 1983 the pages of *Playboy* have kept a spotlight on the AIDS epidemic with articles that examine everything from the disease's origins to safer sex practices.

Hefner's own health became a primary concern in 1985 when he suffered a stroke. Terrified of hospitals ("I've always thought I'd die in one"), he converted his mansion into a care and rehabilitation center for himself. Within a year his recov-

life full circle. The world's most famous bachelor took a second wife, 1989 Playmate of the Year Kimberly Conrad, 30; the couple has two sons, Marston Glenn, 3, and Cooper Bradford, 2.

"It's great being a father again," says Hefner. "I don't think I gave it my all the first time around. The same with marriage. I don't look at marriage the way I did before, as some sort of bondage. I look at it as a partnership in life. In that sense I

can certainly understand the idea of gay and lesbian marriages. Two against the world is better than one."

Why did you consent to talk to *The Advocate*?

I think our magazines have a lot in common. One of the main points of *Playboy's* philosophy from the beginning was that we were and are anti discrimination. For some reason we humans tend to define certain forms of behavior as "unnatural." That's a lot of bullshit. I hate the walls and boundaries that people create to separate us, whether the issue is sex, religion, or ethnic background.

We're here on this planet for reasons we really don't understand. That we spend time discriminating against one another rather than celebrating the mere fact of our mutual existences is the great tragedy of being alive.

What surprises me about that statement is that *Playboy* and you, of course, are both known as representations of male heterosexuality and, to some degree, the objectification of heterosexual women. I'm surprised you recognize the issue of oppression concerning gays and lesbians so clearly at a time when most Americans still don't.

When I was creating the *Playboy* Philosophy, which was in the early '60s, and then formed the *Playboy* Foundation, one of the first real challenges that we spent our money on and editorialized about was the censoring of personal mail. And the victims by and large were gay men. We were involved in a series of cases and got some gay people out of prison.

You're a gay rights activist?

I'm a human rights activist. After I graduated from the University of Illinois, I went back for one semes-

ter of postgraduate work at Northwestern and did a study that contrasted the sex laws of the then 48 states with the actual sexual behavior of Americans according to the Kinsey reports.

The most outrageous laws were the sodomy laws, the "abominable and detestable crimes against nature," and they included homosexual and heterosexual acts. Anything other than procreative sex was criminalized. Now, you and I know what crimes against nature are, and if any, they don't include consensual sex acts. Try raping the planet's rain forests. Try murder.

ered that you've alluded to having had homosexual sex.

In the context of heterosexual swinging, yes. Really bisexuality.

I think people who picture you in a Jacuzzi with ten naked women would be shocked to hear you say that.

Well, primarily that picture is—or was—an accurate one. But it's not been an exclusive one.

So on the Kinsey scale, where would you place yourself?

Very heterosexual.

Do you think it's perfectly logical for a heterosexual man to engage in a homosexual act?

If you are sexually adventurous, then I don't think heterosexuality should preclude you from trying whatever's out there.

Is it really that simple for you?

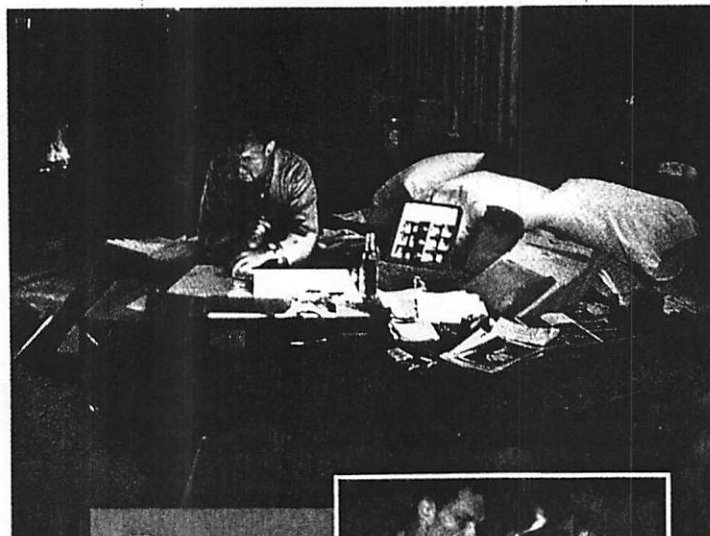
It's that elementary.

Do you realize how revolutionary that thought is?

Of course I do. The thing that is most remarkable to me is that those thoughts were obvious to me when I was very young. I saw the opposite—the narrow-mindedness—as one of the great sources of hypocrisy and hurt—real pain—

in our society.

There was this article on youth in *Life* magazine. It was actually the theme of the issue. It came out in 1939. I was 12 or 13 years old. In that issue was a story of a couple who, in their teens, were going together and were intimate. And the woman became pregnant. She was terrified to tell her parents. She read aloud to her boyfriend from *Romeo and Juliet* and talked him into killing her and then himself. A double suicide. He shot her, then himself, but he survived the gunshot wound. Later he went on trial and was con-



Busy as a beaver

The editor at work at home in Chicago in 1965 (above) and in 1953



Oral copulation—heterosexual or homosexual—is still illegal in 23 states.

Yes, and the Supreme Court recently upheld a Southern state's sodomy law in a homosexual case. If the pursuit of happiness has any meaning at all as it is written in the Constitution, the government's intruding into one's bedroom, into personal sexual behaviors, is as unconstitutional as anything can be.

In doing research on you, I discov-

victed of her murder. I didn't see any difference between what happened to that couple and what happened when a young person felt shame, isolation, and guilt for being attracted to a member or members of the same sex.

The inability to share our humanity with one another is the real tragedy. However it manifests itself, sex is just a natural expression of our humanity. It's so stupid that some people can only accept what is natural to *them*.

And here we sit in the midst of Beverly Hills—supposedly a liberal environment—where many closeted, shame-filled actors reside. The reason for it is very clear. They are concerned with their public images, and they perceive—with some justification—that the public is fickle and hypocritical about these things.

But by not coming out, don't they do their own humanity—and their real community—a disservice?

I think everybody has to make that decision individually. The reason I talked earlier about the limited amount of bisexuality that existed within the heterosexual swinging that I was involved in was because I have increasingly been appalled by the "us versus them" mentality. I was trying to say that if the guy who is known for his heterosexuality can say, "Look, it's no big thing," then maybe it's OK.

Lenny Bruce was a good friend of mine, and he said a lot of things that were wonderfully politically incorrect and very insightful. One of the things he said was, "If a man was on a desert island alone, he would shtup mud." The ability to respond to every kind of sexual situation is just a part of nature. The opposite view is just hurtful politics.

Do you have any gay friends?

I have friends that I later discovered were gay. They were not friends that I was involved with in a sexual way. I don't really ask other men what

they're into when I meet them. It doesn't really matter to me. I care much more about their politics.

You've known openly gay people since the '60s?

Yes. But I just don't think of them in terms of their sexual preferences.

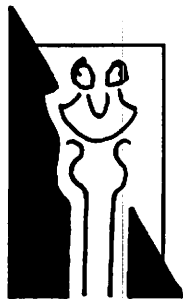
That's interesting, coming from the founder of *Playboy*.

It's like, "Do you have any black friends?" I mean, I don't think of them as black. I was raised in a home in which those distinctions didn't exist. But my mother never got the implications of discrimination regarding sexual preference, so when I did see that sort of bigotry in my parents, it was traumatic for me, horrendous for me. I mean, I couldn't even comprehend the concept.

You, your magazine, and quite a few people who were or are close to you have been the subjects of numerous governmental inquiries. From *Playboy's* very beginnings.

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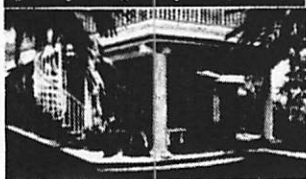
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Also, for a brief period of time they refused to deliver our mail. We had to go to court in both cases and get injunctions against the post office. The government, in one form or another, was our enemy from the very beginning. They felt they had the right to censor books and magazines.

What do you think it was about *Playboy* that they feared? Nudity?

Something different. Nudity portrayed as something not to be hidden. Maybe open discussions of sex and sexuality? I'm not really sure.

You've also been a frequent target of the religious right.

You betcha.

If one argues that getting *Playboy* at a 7-Eleven is going to drive up the rape rate, then one has to give credence to the religious right's claims that gay and lesbian erotica is going to cause homosexuality to proliferate. Personally, I don't see pornography, hate speech, gay and lesbian imagery, or violence on television causing a certain kind of behavior. Do you?

No. But to some people *Playboy* is just centerfolds. They see it only as imagery. There's more to it than that. Throughout the '60s and beyond, *Playboy* did more for women's rights than almost anybody. Through the Playboy Foundation we funded *Roe v. Wade*. Not many people realize that we've paid for a series of court cases that culminated in the *Roe v. Wade* decision.

With the Right's current visibility, do you see them as gaining ground?

When I was younger I thought that the sexual revolution was over and

we had won. Well, we certainly know that isn't true. We're still fighting for the same rights—abortion and gay rights—that we were fighting for in the '50s and '60s. Now I think it's always going to be two steps forward, one step back in these arenas.

The '80s clearly were a backlash to the freedom gained in the '70s. I see a lot of the '50s in the '80s. It's an ongoing battle, really, that's built into the psyche of the country; it's the founding fathers, their Puritan ethics.

The Right seized upon AIDS as some sort of evidence of where we as a society had gone wrong, had become impure. The only thing "wrong" with AIDS is the way our government responded to it. They are culpable on many, many levels.

Do you really buy the argument that AIDS effectively ended promiscuity? You, yourself, got married recently. And so did your old pal and fellow playboy Warren Beatty. Any fear of AIDS at work here?

No, no. The end of the sexual revolution predates AIDS. The media started doing stories like that in the late '70s. But the genie is out of the bottle, you know. And communication is so universal and immediate now that I don't think people can be pushed back into the same positions of ignorance that existed before the sexual revolution—even by the virulent fanatics attached to the religious right. By the way, my own marriage isn't about fear at all. It's about love.

Billy Graham, who's really the margarine of evangelists, recently said in a sermon to 44,300 people that AIDS may be "a judgment of God" for sin. A couple of weeks later he apologized, saying that he made the remark because he was tired. He was certainly right about that.

The revitalization of born-again values has been a real mindblower for me. I'm old enough to remember the Monkey Trial in the '20s and then reading about it as a schoolboy

in the '30s. I was fascinated with the controversy surrounding evolution. To me, from a very early age, it was like superstition and bigotry on one hand and truth and beauty on the other. To be revisiting that crazy notion and others—like AIDS as some sort of retribution—is so preposterous! Society as it stands today certainly isn't worthy of entry into a new millennium. We may be technologically and scientifically advanced, but socially we are no more than superstitious savages.

Obviously you don't believe in the concept of a God.

I don't. Whatever this awe-inspiring existence is all about, the answer does not lie in a book. The closest that I'm able to come to the concept of God is nature. The greatest religious experiences I've had are walking this property and walking through the redwood forest and feeling a sense of awe, of smallness.

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the feminist movement?

Oh, yes. It's part of that political correctness that obviously is having a major impact in our society, although I think it's peaked and is on the wane. Did you hear about what happened late last year at Antioch?

You mean the Antioch College Sexual Offense Policy paper that defined sexual conduct rules for all students and faculty?

Yes. It makes a joke out of real sexual harassment.

The guidelines suggest, among other things, that if two people are kissing while fully clothed and decide to undress for something called "direct physical contact," the people involved need to express their clear verbal consent before moving to that new level.

Sex is getting a very bad rap lately. It's like when a woman looks back and decides that something that happened a couple of years ago was rape. She never perceived it as rape at the time. Don't you think that if you were raped, you would have known from the start that that was what happened?

I would hope so, but—

When did sex become the enemy? The thing that I find so curious is this antisexual element in society joining forces with the women's movement to create a very strange marriage of people from the Left and the Right. I see this whole politically correct phenomenon as a new form of Puritanism. We've come full circle.

Once again women are being perceived as victims. I thought that feminism had done a pretty good job at eliminating all that nonsense. The notion that women are always victims and men are always predators and need "guidelines" issued to them so they know how to behave on a date seems to me to be very much the opposite of liberation.

But don't you think that some women, such as Anita Hill, felt that at the time there was really nothing they could do about the strange, sometimes abusive situation they were in and just let it go? Now, years later, they realize that




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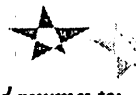
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It was indeed rape or sexual harassment or whatever.

Concerning the Anita Hill hearings, I don't think either of them was telling the whole truth. And that was because of the nature of the process. They were talking in a public political forum. Reality wasn't present.

Certainly, some members of the lesbian community feel, much like some straight women, that Playboy is purely the objectification of women and an enemy of furthering their movement.

That's the opposite of reality. If a lesbian who has to pay the kind of dues that she must in our society can't see that what we need in this country is an end to that kind of thinking and that a celebration of our sexuality—in whatever form—is a positive thing, then I think it's kind of like a Jew becoming a Nazi. It's just crazy. What a lot of women have come to call "sisterhood" is merely an unhappy childhood raised to the level of a political agenda.

Author Susan Brownmiller has been one of your most outspoken critics. She always challenges you with the idea that there is nothing erotic about Playboy, that it's all pomography and—

Is pornography not erotic? Pornography, after all, is largely a matter of taste. Pornography is like beauty; it's very much in the eye of the beholder.

What's the matter with explicit images of sex? What's wrong with sex? If there's something that's really negative, like depictions of nonconsensual sex or images of people blowing each other's brains out, then I might think that to be pornographic. I don't understand how images of the most loving, life-affirming act on this planet are the ones that we're most afraid of. Why are we embracing with such fervor the images of death and pushing away those images that reflect life?

Give me your definition of pomography.

I think pornography is a useless concept, really. It doesn't have a def-

inition. It's an example of Orwellian newspeak.

Then what has been the editorial thought behind keeping Playboy very restrained photographically in its depictions of sex?

Because what I wanted to try and do was incorporate and make acceptable the images of sex. It was never my intention with the magazine to push the outer boundaries as far as they could go. I wanted to say something nice about sex.

In 40 years, though, you've had very few naked men in the magazine.

And when we do, it's usually in our annual report on sex in the cinema.

Which, as a kid, was the only place I could ever see images of adult men naked. How does it make you feel for your magazine to be one of the places where young gay men turn to see naked men?

Sounds like a positive thing to me. In other words, if you're going to be aroused, let's try to create a society that connects arousal with attractive and positive images.

A great debate rages within the gay movement about imagery. The argument generally goes like this: Every time we have a march or a gay pride festival, the only things that end up being covered by the mainstream media are the drag queens, the leathermen, and the bare-chested women. There's a growing conservatism within the gay and lesbian community that is actively trying to push those fringe elements out of our movement in order to ensure us a place at the table socially and politically. What do you think?

As a movement you're suffering from your own political correctness. You need to take a step back to see that what you're really doing is trying to, in so many words, purify your own race.

There's no question that now that the gay movement is trying to establish itself as something mainstream, its highly visible fringe elements are a problem for it. But isn't there a

bigger, more important consideration here? That "live and let live" is what this ought to be about?

You've placed yourself on the fringe of straight society because of some of your more radical views regarding sex and sexuality. Has your place at the table been affected? Do politicians avoid you?

No. I've been in kind of a curious situation, quite frankly. I've never in my personal or professional life tended to run into the part of society that would probably like to avoid me. But there have been certain people and certain politicians who wouldn't do a *Playboy* interview for, most likely, the reasons you're speaking to.

Who?

Robert Kennedy declined. He said he didn't want to do an interview for a magazine that his children couldn't read—a statement, I think, that's reflective of the hypocrisy that was a big part of the Kennedy regime. In saying that, though, I should point out that I was a big supporter of Bobby's on the political level. In fact, I planned a party that was to have taken place on the night he was assassinated. Obviously, it didn't happen.

It's understandable that former president Jimmy Carter would do a *Playboy* interview, but I doubt if he would have come over to the mansion and hung out for a movie.

Carter never hung out, but he was up at Warren Beatty's for a party in the same time frame. My house here has always been a hangout for liberal Democrats. [Former Los Angeles mayor] Tom Bradley and Jerry Brown have been here many times, as have Gary Hart and George McGovern.

Why is it that straight men love to see nude lesbians going at it yet are generally repulsed by the idea of lesbianism itself as well as homosexuality?

It's one of the most dramatic examples of straight society's ambivalence concerning homosexuality and bisexuality. Two naked les-

bians together is a turn-on for heterosexual men. *Penthouse* uses it a lot. The reason it's such a turn-on is quite sexist: Men think the women would be really thrilled to have them join in.

You also have done lesbian pictorials. Last year I came to a party here at the mansion for Sandra Bernhard, who was featured nude in a layout. And in your December issue, you featured a layout on Fem2Fem. Obviously these photo spreads are a turn-on for your readership too.

No question. Lesbianism is both controversial and very contemporary. The readership's reaction to both layouts was mixed, by the way.

What do you think of President Clinton?

Well, he certainly disappointed us on the issue of homosexuals in the military.

I'm curious about his association with you during the campaign. Was he ever around?

No. I've gotten personal letters from him. That's about it.

Have you had anyone close to you die of AIDS?

I've had no close friends die of AIDS, but we've had some staff people at *Playboy* die.

You're more motivated on a broad, societal level regarding the fight against AIDS?

I have chosen every aspect of human sexuality—and the discrimination that goes along with some of those aspects—as my major concern. Homosexuality and, later, the homophobia that surrounds the AIDS crisis are part of a much bigger picture for me. I'm terribly concerned about the state of our human rights in this country.

Concerned enough to run for public office?

That's not in the cards. Life is too short to have to live under the circumstances that those who hold public office must. You have to give up too much. But if I did run, what a Western wipeout! ●

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