



# 'A', My Name Is Alice

*The saga of the feminist Playmate novelist*

BY JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER

## CHAPTER 1: ALICE COMES TO NEW YORK CITY

**A**lice Denham, a fiercely independent and dazzling redhead with a Phi Beta Kappa from the University of North Carolina and a master's degree in English from the University of Rochester, came to the Big Apple in 1953 determined to make it as a writer. Within a few days of pounding the pavement in her pumps, Alice's innocence was shattered: There weren't any jobs in publishing for women. "Screw the bastards!" Alice declared as she poured herself a tea cup full of whiskey and tried to work out Plan B: the one where she could get the respect she deserved in this macho town.

"All they wanted was secretaries," she says with a drawl that suspends her words in honey. "And I had purposely not taken shorthand to avoid that fate." Denham realized that no one needed to give her permission to do what she wanted, anyway: "I decided I would be a writer if it killed me." All she needed was a job that paid well and didn't require a lot of time.

## CHAPTER 2: ALICE BECOMES A PINUP MODEL

**I** was living with a friend who was an actress, and she introduced me to a model. People had asked me to pose for photos from time to time, and soon I started to be sent out to do

romance novel covers," she says. Modeling a few hours a week to pay the bills, she taught herself to write a novel during the rest of the week by observation, fiction technique books and "trial and error."

Poring over Dostoyevsky, Denham gleaned the magic of a strong lead, the art of withholding information and the importance of characterization. Before she finished her first novel, she put out a serendipitous piece of fiction called "The Deal." Originally published in the then-pres-

tigious literary magazine *Discovery*, the story centers on a rich man who is so taken with a beautiful woman that he offers her \$1,000 to sleep with him once. At that time, another magazine was printing serious (read: male) fiction: *Playboy*. Given her day job, our uppity heroine had an idea. "I told my literary agent to say that if *Playboy* would reprint the story, I would be the centerfold."

Soon Denham found herself at the Chicago airport, destined to be Miss July 1956 and the only playmate to have a piece and be a piece in the same issue. "Hef met me at the airport. I thought he was the limo driver. He was so stiff and formal in his black suit that I got into the back seat of the car. He said, 'Sit up front.' I said, 'What?' He said, 'I'm Hugh Hefner.'"

"Ultimately, we had sex," she continues, with a sigh. "It was all right, though he had to watch dirty movies. All of this is in my novel *Amo*, except I changed the names. I called the magazine '*Meat*' and I called the Playmates 'Tidbits of the Month' and I called him 'Pelth Pedlar!'" she says, laughing.

**"I think diag**

"The Deal" was her break. Still, Denham admits her family was horrified by her national exposure, no matter how tame the shots were back in the early days of girlie mags. That is, except for her brother, an Episcopal priest who assured Denham that she looked very cute. "I would-

*Miss July 1956 may be the only Playmate to have a piece and be a piece in the same issue.*



n't have to resort to *Playboy* nowadays," the 66-year-old says. "I could be an assistant editor or a freelance writer."

### CHAPTER 3: OUR HEROINE DISCOVERS THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

There was a thriving Bohemian literary scene at the time of her arrival in New York, and Denham soon found herself amid the swirl. Denham thought she was part of the gang, sexually liberated as the boys, shooting for the same brass ring. According to an April 30, 1997 piece in the *New York Press* by Darius James, she enjoyed a close "sexual friendship" with that fey icon of early-'60s cool, James Dean. She was also said to have dated James Jones, Philip Roth, and to have spent a couple of "casual" evenings with Norman Mailer. But when it came time to blurb her book, these scribes of the masculine experience made themselves scarce.

Fortunately, she had discovered another Downtown intellectual scene, one more interested in her body of work than in her body. As

### CHAPTER 4: CANCER

Ten years ago, when Denham was 56 and had been married for eight years to an accountant she met in her part-time home of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, she discovered she had breast cancer. "I think diagnosis refocuses your head," she says. "You no longer think so much about physical beauty or the beauty of your breast. It's whether you're going to live or not."

The former model didn't find that the mastectomy changed her body image so much. In fact, she chose not to have reconstruction. But cancer did affect her desire to create. "My work habits were always good, but I started working harder and faster. I wanted to complete all of these things that were halfway done."

### CHAPTER 5: THE FUTURE

Alice Denham recently finished an autobiographical family saga called *Shabby Genteel: A Southern Girlhood*. She spends summers in Mexico and the rest of the year in New York and writes and publishes in both locales.

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an early second-wave feminist, Denham came to the movement as part of the campaign to legalize abortion and was part of the original National Organization for Women chapter.

Always independent, her work became even more confidently pro-woman. *My Darling From the Lions* (1968) chronicled a feminist's mad passion for her tragically sexist husband, and *Amo* (1974) concerned a feminist centerfold model from outer space. Prominent early feminists championed her women-on-top bodice rippers and sexually voracious heroines.

As for her cancer, there is no recurrence chapter. Typically, Denham is candid about her recent mammography appointment. "They were going to do something awful called a mamotome, where they lay you down on a table with your breast hanging down through a hole," she says, eyes rolling. "After taking my breast photos in about a thousand different ways, they decided they couldn't do it because [the calcifications were] too close to the skin," she snorts.

"Have you ever had a mammogram?" she inquires, peering across the table with a half-smile on her face. "You wait." 🍷

# Life Saver

TV producer goes  
public with the personal

BY CHRISTINE PELISEK

When Cathy

Masamitsu was diagnosed with Stage I breast cancer for the second time, she decided to

hit the airwaves with her story. This was back in the late '80s, before the Jerry Springer era, and Masamitsu's intimate documentary, titled *Cathy Saved Her Life And You Can Too*, was considered highly unusual. But the Los Angeles-based TV producer and reporter was determined to chronicle her experiences before and after her mastectomy for a television audience—the audience of the ABC-TV daytime show *Home*, where she served as assistant to the executive producer. "If you are up against an enemy, you want to know everything about it," she recalls.

"You are there. You are sitting with my mom," Masamitsu explains, describing the five-part series. During the second show, surgical bandages were carefully peeled away to expose her reconstructed breasts. Initially, the producers refused to tape the scene, considering it too difficult for viewers to watch. Masamitsu, however, persevered, and that revealing moment has since been shared with approximately ten million people. Her guiding purpose: "To help women like myself who didn't know what to expect from this type of surgery."

Since the series aired in 1989, the slight, attractive Masamitsu has