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Armed Liberal Defends Concealed Weapons, Assault Rifles: Books

By Craig Seligman - Mar 12, 2013 12:00 AM ET

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Q QUEUE

Dan Baum is a liberal who loves guns. As he confesses early in "Gun Guys," his tour of firearms-friendly America: "I didn't have to go far to learn about the nation's conflicted attitude toward guns. I could just tour the inside of my own skull."

He's subtitled his book "A Road Trip," but "White Male Rage" would have worked, too. As Baum drives from rifle range to gun store to shooting competition, he meets an increasing number of men who fit a similar profile:

Enlarge image



"Gun Guys: A Road Trip," by Dan Baum. Source: Knopf via Bloomberg

Enlarge image

"Job security: gone. Employer-provided health care: gone. Pensions: gone. House: underwater. They'd had their livers pecked out while women, immigrants, blacks and gays all seemed to have become groovier, sexier and more dynamic players in American culture than they were."

For these guys, guns have enormous symbolic power. Baum quotes the advertising tagline Colt used a century and a half ago: "God made all men, but Samuel Colt made them equal."

As a writer, Baum doesn't have it in him to lay down a dull sentence. His sketches of the people he meets (not all of them white, and not all of them guys) are charming and funny -- until the subject turns to gun laws.

In time he resigns himself to "walking away from gun guys starting to puff themselves up with fury" and "avoiding the gun bloggers and online forums. Gun politics," he complains, "all but ruined my enjoyment of firearms."

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Dan Baum, author of "Gun Guys: A Road Trip." Photographer: Michael Lionstar/Knopf via Bloomberg

Scary NRA

He dislikes the [National Rifle Association](#). "Its white-hot combativeness and inflexibility put a scary face on the American gun guy, and this was hardly the way to win people over and expand the circle of firearms-tolerant Americans."

But he also rolls his eyes at the [Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence](#) and its goal of banning assault rifles, which are not, he maintains (with statistics to back up his argument) a big public-safety problem.

Rifles are responsible for no more than 3 percent of our rapidly declining homicide rate, and assault rifles for only a fraction of that. The issue is almost entirely symbolic, he says. (He puts banning large-capacity magazines in the same category.)

As for handguns, the Brady Center doesn't support a ban, and neither does the public. Gun laws have remained loose, Baum concludes, "because that was the way most Americans wanted them."

Concealed Carry

He stresses the sense of responsibility that comes with carrying a gun. To see what it feels like, he became one of the 6 million Americans with a concealed-carry permit, holstering a snub-nosed Colt .38 revolver and later a Glock 19.

"Wearing the gun," he writes, "I was Mr. Together. There was no room for screwing up when I was equipped to kill."

So it was with the gun owners he met: They were "admirably careful, sober, self-reliant individuals. They had taken up the responsibility to handle incredibly dangerous weapons with great care, and were doing so safely."

My problem is not that I don't believe him -- I do -- but that his sampling is anecdotal and tiny. What about the genuine wackos out there? The rage and anti-government paranoia he encountered was hysterically pumped up. Somebody, somewhere, is going to snap. Again.

I recommend "Gun Guys" to anyone on either side of the debate. It's wise, considered, delectably written, fun to read and wholly lacking in tendentiousness, and thus likely to deepen anyone's thinking on the subject.

In one area, though, it's incomplete. Massacres by armed killers may be, like plane crashes, of minor statistical significance. Yet they do raise questions.

Columbine, Tucson, Aurora, Newtown: Could gun restrictions have stopped or at least mitigated any of these disasters? Maybe not -- I don't know.

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But Baum doesn't go there. By failing to confront the topic of gun nuts, he has left a hole in his defense of guns.

"Gun Guys: A Road Trip" is published by Knopf (338 pages, \$26.95). To buy this book in North America, click [here](#).

Muse highlights include [Peter Rainer](#) on video and [Lili Rosboch](#) on art.

([Craig Seligman](#) is a critic for Muse, the arts and leisure section of [Bloomberg News](#). The opinions expressed are his own.)

To contact the writer on the story: Craig Seligman at cseligman@bloomberg.net.

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Manuela Hoelterhoff in [New York](#) at mhoelterhoff@bloomberg.net.

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