

BOOK REVIEWS

'Gun Guys' by Dan Baum; 'Vagos, Mongols, and Outlaws' by Charles Falco

By Ethan Gilsdorf | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 12, 2013



FROM THE COLLECTION OF CHARLES FALCO

A party at a clubhouse in Petersburg, Va., included members of gangs examined in Charles Falco's "Vagos, Mongols, and Outlaws: My Infiltration of America's Deadliest Biker Gangs."

We debate the issues of gun rights, mass shootings, and brutal video games. Yet nothing fully explains the problem of violence in our culture, nor slakes our citizenry's taste for blood. The hard evidence evades us, in a twist of gunpowder smoke.

That said, two new books map the lay of the land: Dan Baum's travel memoir inquiry into gun subcultures, "Gun Guys: A Road Trip," and Charles Falco's tell-all memoir of the savage realm of drugs, violence, and intimidation, "Vagos, Mongols, and Outlaws: My Infiltration of America's Deadliest Biker Gangs."

To compare the books would provoke an unfair fight — think Glock versus zip gun. But both Baum and Falco, each in his own way, plumb our national obsession with all that is crude and loud, explosive and dangerous.

"Gun Guys" is an evenhanded and witty exposé of hardcore firearms culture and gun control controversies. Baum, a journalist whose last book was "Nine Lives: Mystery, Magic, Death, and Life in New Orleans," hones and polishes his investigation like he would an antique Winchester. But he might not be this journey's most obvious first-person narrator. A lifelong Democrat and a Jew, he's a closeted gun fan. To up the ante, Baum's personal stunt is to carry a concealed weapon, "stepping out armed," for an entire year as he criss-crosses the country in search of his quarry: gun guys.

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Baum asks these fanatics to explain why firearms inspire such passion. To get answers, our fearless and affable author hangs out at shooting ranges in Colorado and attends gun shows in Ohio. He talks to a reformed killer in Detroit and, in New Orleans, where guns are "a lagniappe of misery," he chats with a paralyzed victim. He enters the "hypothalamus of the conservative movement," the Goldwater Institute in Arizona, and the NRA mothership in

GUN GUYS: A Road Trip

Author: Dan Baum

Publisher: Knopf

Number of pages: 320

Book price: \$26.95

Washington, D.C.

At one stop at a suburban Denver gun shop, a patron calls the uber-customizable AR-15 semi-automatic rifle “Barbie for men.” That’s one, gear-nerd explanation for guns’ appeal. But what explains the national rash of “gun guy rage”?

You’d think an East Coast liberal would eviscerate Second Amendment nuts whose zealotry “permanently inflamed their outrage gland,” but Baum’s diagnosis offers compassion. “A certain slice of gun-guy America appeared to be suffering some kind of mass, self-inflicted anhedonia, choosing, despite all the evidence, to play the role of victim.” Even as, overall, violent crime was down and gun freedoms were at an all-time high, Baum writes, “guns and religion were keeping them from feeling bitter about the indignities inflicted on the middle class.”

As for his own enthusiasms, Baum is refreshingly eager to train his sights on his own psyche. Strolling about wearing a holstered handgun, he succumbs to fantasies of empowerment and self-improvement that packing heat can breed. “Carrying a gun tightened the laces on my life a bit. I like that.”

Baum’s final verdict, that “guns give us an identity” and that mastery of a gun “returned some dignity and meaning” to the lives of disenfranchised, should speak to Charles Falco and his coauthor Kerrie Droban. Their “Vagos, Mongols, and Outlaws” is a blunter instrument, all atmosphere and in-the-moment action. A former drug dealer-turned ATF informant, Falco worms his way into three dangerous biker gangs — The Vagos, Mongols, and Outlaws — whose members have names such as Psycho, Rust, Rhino, and Snuff. He wears a wire, which adds considerable tension to his role. Will his cover be blown? Each night, he and his team of undercover agents review “the conversations we’d had, the inflections and tones, the facial expressions. These were our maps. We studied them, memorized them, and learned to read them like white water.”

But for every riveting moment, this hardened, hard-boiled narrative is undermined by hackneyed phrases like “dirty beauty” and “raw instinct.” We see a “dark street glittered with broken glass” several times and “light drizzle” arrives on cue during

dramatic scenes. As a cliffhanger, Falco often whispers something like, “I didn’t know it that night, but I had just met two of the Vagos’ most violent killers.” We don’t ever learn enough about biker gangs, their history, or their constantly shifting Machiavellian alliances to fully comprehend how they fit into America’s overall picture of organized crime.

But absorb “Vagos, Mongols, and Outlaws” as one part juicy scoop, one part machismo on parade, and Falco can take some sad and beautiful snapshots. A biker named Powder, “with pale blue eyes framed by white lashes” and an AK-47 over his shoulder “resembled a human negative, underdeveloped.”

The two books do share the question of dignity. In “Gun Guys,” guns are a route to self-respect and pride. For Falco’s Vagos, Mongols and Outlaws, the prospect of restoring dignity is beyond hope. One desperate gang member called, predictably, Terrible, had “lost what made him human, his dignity. Without that, he tumbled down a dark hole where he lived in arteries of hard, packed black dirt, wasted and lost.”

More information:

VAGOS, MONGOLS, AND OUTLAWS: My Infiltration of America’s Deadliest Biker Gangs

By Charles Falco

with Kerrie Droban

Thomas Dunne, 253 pp., illustrated, \$25.99

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Ethan Gilsdorf, author of “Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks,” can be reached at www.ethangilsdorf.com. Follow him on Twitter [@ethanfreak](https://twitter.com/ethanfreak).

