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Dan Baum discovered a love of guns on the rifle range at summer camp.

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'Gun Guys' injects sane note into debate

BY: [GENE WARNER \(MAILTO:GWARNER@BUFFNEWS.COM\)](mailto:GWARNER@BUFFNEWS.COM) / NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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On the surface, he looks like the typical liberal – a New Jersey-bred Jewish Democrat committed to all the left-wing causes, from gay rights and reproductive choice to unions and permissive immigration.

Scratch below the surface, though, of this balding, middle-aged liberal from Boulder, Colo., and you find something else, a dedicated gun lover. It all started for Dan Baum as a young kid at summer camp, where he finally found a sport where he could compete with the young jocks who could swing a baseball bat or tennis racket so deftly.

That sport was riflery, the one place where Baum found a level playing field. Guns have remained his passion since that day.

Who better to give us a fair, middle-of-the-road, see-both-sides portrait of the psyche of gun lovers?

He's one of them. But at the same time, he's not.

"By the time I was a voting adult, I'd begun to perceive the gun lover in me as some kind of

malevolent twin,” he writes, reeling off all his liberal positions that make him an atypical gun lover. “The diatribes of the gun-rights movement often came wrapped in appeals to limit government, deport immigrants, cut taxes and elect conservatives – everything I opposed. I felt like the child of a bitter divorce with allegiance to both parents.”

That’s what makes this book so great. Baum, a master of self-deprecating humor, pokes fun at himself as the guy with glasses and pleated pants who struggles to blend in with the gun crowd, even with his NRA baseball cap on. He’s also none-too-shy about deprecating others, especially knee-jerk gun-control activists and cliché-spouting “gun guys,” both sides settling for easy answers and inaccurate stereotypes of their opponents.

This is a breezy, anecdote-filled, humorous read, penned by a terrific writer who travels across much of the country to learn what makes his fellow gun owners tick. He frequents the obvious – gun shops, shooting ranges and gun shows – and some places you might not think of, including a Hollywood “rubber gun” armory, a German shooting society, “run and gun” competitions, a machine-gun club and even a Texas pig hunt. He also interviews those at both ends of a gun barrel, killers and shooting victims.

Baum gives the readers fresh perspectives, taking the gun debate well beyond the usual loud, angry and simplistic arguments.

One example: Aaron Zelman, founder of Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership. Zelman complains to Baum that many elected officials pushing gun control have been Jewish, including Howard Metzenbaum, Charles Schumer and Dianne Feinstein, calling them guilty of a “myopic self-delusion,” after what happened to Eastern European Jews during the Nazi era. Zelman even found a smoking gun, an English translation of Hitler’s 1938 gun-control laws, containing many of the same phrases found in the U.S. Gun Control Act of 1968.

“What could be clearer?” Baum writes. “American’s premier gun-control law was based on laws the Nazis had written to disarm the Jews before exterminating them. It was a solid-gold slam dunk.”

Hmmm. Interesting.

But just when you think Baum’s writing a manifesto for gun-rights activists, he blasts much of their us-against-them tone, rhetoric and strategy, including their constant railing that violent crime is “out of control,” when data show the opposite. And he takes them to task for talking about protecting themselves from “criminals.”

“You’d have thought that ‘criminals’ were a distinct community, like pilots or bus drivers, a card-carrying profession whose members could be identified by their striped shirts, Lone Ranger masks and newsboy caps. But a lot of shootings were ... done by people who were law-abiding until the moment they picked up the gun.”

And here’s Baum’s take on the lure of hunting:

“But for me, hunting was more about the unworldly relationship with one special animal that gives himself over in return for the care you’ve taken to understand him and his habitat. Then his flesh becomes your flesh, sealing the bond.”

Baum unveils a modest three-step suggestion to start a saner debate over gun policy, including making gun owners criminally liable for crimes committed with guns stolen from their homes. The other two components are improved training and better background checks, none of which he believes imperil gun rights.

But for now, he says, the gun “debate” has turned into “sanctimony and name calling on one side, a snarling defensive crouch on the other.” In Baum’s world, you have to stop to think which side is which.

Gun Guys: A Road Trip

By Dan Baum

Alfred A. Knopf

338 pages, \$26.95

Gene Warner is a veteran News reporter who hasn't touched a gun since riflery competition at summer camp, more than 50 years ago.

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