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'Gun Guys: A Road Trip,' by Dan Baum

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Dan Baum may be exactly what America needs right now: a liberal journalist with a gun.

Even in the wake of Aurora and Newtown, the middle ground on gun control usually is more like a no-man's land between trenches. But Baum is an intelligent and entertaining battlefield guide in *Gun Guys*, his exploration of firearms and the Americans who love them.

Whether you like his politics or loathe them, you should be able to appreciate his mission. His goal is to do what he thinks nobody has been doing: "*listening* to gun people — asking the questions that most puzzled me about myself: Why do we like these things? Why do they move us so deeply?"

He succeeds because he approaches gun guys (and women) with respect. He shares their affection for armament and has since that day in 1961 when, as a bed-wetting, weepy kid at summer camp, he finds salvation by putting five shots cleanly on-target with a Mossberg 340 KA .22 bolt-action rifle.

He's no stereotypical gun nut. He finds the NRA repugnant and admits to feeling obnoxious as he walks into a Whole Foods packing his 1917 Smith & Wesson .45 revolver. It's one of many arms-bearing experiments he conducts. Some of them lead to understanding; some seem a bit like stunts.

Baum, who so deftly told the story of New Orleans Katrina victims in the phenomenal *Nine Lives*, brings in all kinds of real-life characters to tell his story, but keeps himself center stage here. He thrills to the feel of a submachine gun in his hands at an explosives-laced range in Arizona: "Choose the most adamant anti-gun peacenik you know and give him a Tommy gun to shoot at a stick of dynamite. Then strap him to a polygraph and ask him if it was fun."

He also is more than willing to call out the "armed chowderheads" whose bullets ricochet in front of him during a rafting trip. "You can project idiocy a long ways with a gun," his wife notes. And in his search for a middle ground, he grows weary of constant encounters with paranoid, Obama-hating, gun-rights absolutists. "When it came to whether restrictive gun laws did good or harm, reasonable people could disagree," he writes. "Finding reasonable people was the problem."

Baum seems more than reasonable himself. He provides enough statistics to make both sides uncomfortable but prudently points out, "Few are going to be shaken off their fondness or antipathy for guns by a page of statistics." So he does not wallow in them.

He talks to the young owner of an AR-15 and draws a direct line between video games and the appeal of the semiautomatic rifle among young men. In a gun shop, he learns that the weapon itself costs \$800 but can be accessorized with thousands of dollars in extra gear: scopes, grips, stocks, kits that can turn it into a shotgun or crossbow.

"You know what it is, right?" he's told. "It's Barbie for men."

Baum writes of the first deer he killed, goes hog hunting in East Texas and notes that the more stringent gun enthusiasts dismiss hunters as "Fudds," whose devotion to the gun cause should be questioned.

He walks the country with a .38-caliber Colt Detective Special snub-nosed revolver in his waistband. Later, after a series of increasingly intense training courses, he upgrades to a less-elegant, more-powerful Glock, and wonders, "Was I carrying the gun, or was the gun carrying me?" He touts rules of gun safety repeatedly, while at the same time contemplating that a concealed-carry class "wasn't about teaching us gun skills. It was about recruiting us into a culture animated by fear."

I'm not sure whether those fear-driven people — the ones who keep loaded guns in quick-open safes on their nightstands or bury AR-15s vertically in their yards so the government gun-grabbers can't find them with metal detectors — will learn much from Baum. He's balanced, but the mere fact that he's open about his biases

may lead the most extreme enthusiasts to dismiss him.

But the gun-averse might learn from Baum. He's proof that armed is not necessarily synonymous with dangerous. And he captures the frustration gun lovers feel when the "elitists" who argue most stridently for bans also display comedic levels of ignorance about the way guns actually work.

The book is horrifically timely. This is not always a strength. The dealer lamenting slow sales of AR-15s — "I need Obama to say the word 'gun' one time on television. He doesn't have to say anything else. Just 'gun' to get people buying again." — clearly has not had that issue lately. The dead children at Sandy Hook Elementary (where Adam Lanza used an AR-15 style rifle) are relegated to a postscript.

But guns are hardly going away. And for those who prefer humorous, literate and honest discussion about them to frothy ranting, *Gun Guys* will hit the spot.

Follow Michael Merschel on Twitter at @mmerschel.

Gun Guys

A Road Trip

Dan Baum

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