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BOOK REVIEW: "Gun Guys: A Road Trip," by Dan Baum.

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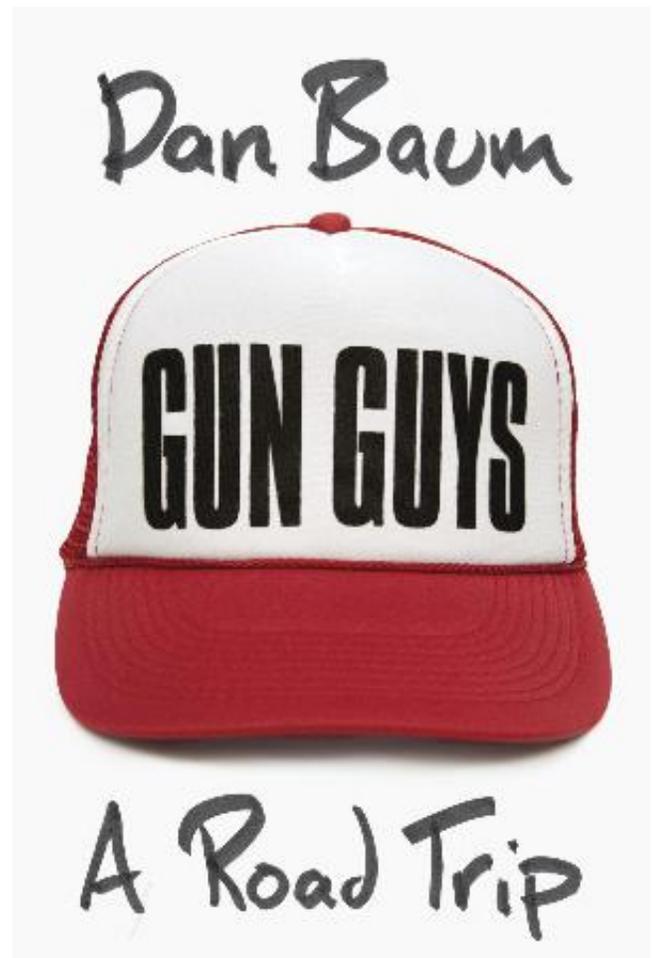
There is a powerful cultural/political divide over guns across our nation, intensified in the months since the shooting deaths of 20 children in a Newtown, Conn., school. Dan Baum examines that divide like a cultural anthropologist in his fascinating, intelligent new book, "Gun Guys: A Road Trip" (Alfred A. Knopf, 336 pages, \$26.95). A self-described Jewish Democrat from New Jersey, Baum visits the places "gun guys" inhabit, from gun stores to shooting ranges to gun shows, and asks simple, probing questions, listens with an open mind for answers, and closely observes what happens around him. He (and we) learn a lot.

Baum understands the allure of guns because he feels it himself, having formed his own identity around guns since he first shot one at summer camp when he was a boy. But Baum also realizes how viscerally unpopular guns can be, explaining how his enjoyment of guns (and his carrying of one) has often alienated him from others. The best qualification Baum has for writing this eye-opening, important guide is his ambivalent, complex relationship with the people at both extremes of the gun divide. "I was a gun guy," he explains, "but I didn't belong to gun culture."

At a gun store in Colorado Springs, Colo., Baum asks about buying an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle, only to be warned by a fellow shopper how addictive and expensive the gun-buying habit can be. "It's like heroin," the shopper says. "Scopes, triggers, packs, sights. You get one on there, and the next week they come out with something even cooler, and you have to get that." Baum finds gun guys both suspicious and surprisingly inclusive.

During his forays into "gun country," Baum hears passionate (sometimes paranoid) hatred of President Obama and his perceived efforts to control guns. This "white-hot combativeness and inflexibility put a scary face on the American gun guy," Baum writes.

He even compares gun guys to the Taliban: "Either you agree with them about absolutely everything or you're Satan." Perhaps unsurprisingly, Baum finds that gun control advocates, along with those harboring a visceral hatred of guns, can be equally



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intolerant.

Baum learns that people appreciate guns for a variety of reasons: self-protection; their mechanical, visual elegance; hunting; target shooting; as an expression of freedom and individuality, and more. Baum summarizes the gun guys' cultural ethos: They "valued the individual over the collective, vigorous outdoorsiness over pallid intellectualism, certainty over questioning, patriotism over internationalism, manliness over femininity, action over inaction."

"Gun Guys" is a necessary, insightful dose of down-the-middle reporting on a debate largely defined by extremes.

Chuck Leddy is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. He also reviews for the Boston Globe.

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Dan Baum, author of "Gun Guys: A road trip."