

Dan Baum meets America's 'Gun Guys'

March 8, 2013 by DANIEL AKST. Special to Newsday



GUN GUYS: A Road Trip, by Dan Baum.
Alfred A. Knopf, 336 pp., \$26.95.

Dan Baum is an unlikely apostle of the firearm. A middle-aged intellectual from [New Jersey](#), he now lives in "a university town so liberal that its city council once argued for three days over whether people were 'owners' or 'guardians' of their pets."

Yet this wittily cosmopolitan [Democrat](#) -- and talented journalist -- is also a passionate lover of guns. It's an unusual set of qualifications, and it has enabled him to produce "Gun Guys," a vivid and sympathetic portrait of U.S. gun culture.

But sympathetic doesn't mean airbrushed. On the contrary, many of the gun lovers Baum encounters come across as just the kind of grotesque caricature he accuses liberals of propagating. Many of these guys are boiling with paranoia and rage, and their [gun ownership](#) occasionally worries even the author, who wears a loaded handgun during much of the time he spends reporting this book. [advertisement | advertise on newsday](#)

There are underemployed young men smitten with their AR-15s and online fulminators whose rhetoric is so violent and profane that nary a word can be quoted here. The great majority of these individuals are white men, often blue-collar traditionalists who haven't fared so well in the 21st century, and they blame [Barack Obama](#). "Never," Baum writes, "had I encountered a business or a hobby as tangled up with a political worldview as firearms and [shooting](#)."

Yet, as Baum observes, the overwhelming majority of these fellows do not use guns to kill humans -- and therein lies a problem with [gun control](#) laws. Mostly, they inconvenience law-abiding citizens, while criminals exempt themselves, often by stealing weapons. The other problem, Baum notes, is that there are already something like 270 million firearms in this country, and one of the things that makes them so appealing to their besotted owners is durability. At the [National Rifle Association's](#) firearms museum, the author admires flintlocks and is told by an official: "A gun that went to San Francisco in the [Gold Rush](#), you can pull out of the case and fire today."

There is a lot of talk about constitutional rights and resistance to tyranny from the gun guys here, but Baum recognizes that there is more to their love of firearms than red-blooded American individualism.

"Many of the partially educated, rural, middle-aged guys in the bulge of the gun-guy demographic hadn't seen a real wage increase since 1978," he writes. "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. . . . If the ashen aftermath of the financial meltdown was making everybody feel like a loser, those guys must have felt like the bottom of the bottom."

Freud isn't mentioned much in this book, but it's hard not to see a massive case of castration anxiety at the root of all this gun lust -- including that of the author, whose interest in guns was ignited during an unhappy stay at summer camp in his nebbishy youth. He couldn't play most of the sports very well, but he could [shoot](#). "Guns give us an identity," he writes. "They make us supermen."

Baum can still [shoot](#), as demonstrated by a riveting chapter on some arduous gunfight training he endures. But more important, Baum can write. Schlepping among the gun lovers with this guy is unfailingly diverting as well as illuminating. If you've ever wondered, for instance, whether the Holocaust wasn't a powerful argument against [gun control](#), the author will introduce you to Aaron Zelman, founder of Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership.

Baum appears to hold a variety of progressive views but ultimately comes down against tougher [gun control](#), even as he indicts gun owners and the [NRA](#) for failing to offer sensible proposals to keep guns away from crazies and minimize accidents. He's got the courage of his convictions, too; in a postscript, he stands his ground even after the gun massacres in Aurora, Colo., and Newtown, Conn., arguing that relatively few Americans are killed by fast-[shooting](#) guns and big magazines, that too many such items are already in circulation, and that talk of a ban will only spur more panic buying while distracting attention from more important causes.

He doesn't make a detailed case or try to explain away the much lower rates of violence in the many comparable countries with stricter [gun laws](#). His goal instead is to help one large group of Americans understand another. It's a worthy undertaking, whether you agree with his conclusions or not.

[< back to article](#)