

AIMING FOR THE MIDDLE GROUND

Liberal gun enthusiast Dan Baum takes readers on a trip into America's firearm culture

By [John Wilkens \(/staff/john-wilkens/\)](#) 12:01 a.m. March 17, 2013 Updated 1:42 p.m. March 15, 2013

Write what you know, the saying goes, and Dan Baum is a gun guy. He owns guns. He shoots guns. Sometimes he carries them around in holsters under his jacket.

Baum is also a New Jersey-bred liberal who lives in Boulder, Colo. He's troubled by the gun culture's hair-trigger revulsion to any talk about controlling firearms. He doesn't appreciate that the NRA has become like an armed wing of the Republican Party, opposed to the things he supports: unions, gay rights, abortion rights, environmental regulations.

As he straddles what has become one of America's great divides, he sometimes feels "like the child of a bitter divorce with allegiance to both parents."

All of which makes him an ideal guide for "Gun Guys: A Road Trip," a provocative, probing and frequently funny journey deep into the mentality of the approximately 40 percent of Americans who own guns.

These are people worth knowing, he writes, "because their enthusiasm for firearms said something about us as a people" and worth listening to "because nothing lasting or decent could happen in gun policy without them."

Baum, a former New Yorker staff writer whose previous book, "Nine Lives," was an eloquent look at post-Katrina New Orleans, is a gifted listener.

He takes us to gun stores and shooting competitions, where he shows us, in a way that only an insider can, the fascination people have with firearms — their history, their craftsmanship, their power.

He takes us to gun shows, where we come to understand the deep contempt gun owners have for legislators and commentators who want to control weapons they clearly have never held, let alone fired.

We also get to witness the bewildering black-helicopter paranoia some of them have about the government taking away their weapons. Baum doesn't get it either, especially since the gun-rights side has won almost every legislative and legal battle of late, although that may change in the wake of the Newtown school massacre.

We meet Rick Ector, a Detroit auto-industry worker robbed by thugs who put a gun to his head in his own driveway. He decided to get a gun, too, and when the police tried to talk him out of it, he asked: "Where were you when that 19-year-old punk was making up his sweet mind whether to leave my babies fatherless? You can't protect me." Hard to argue with his decision to arm himself.

We also meet Peter Benoit, who bought a .38 revolver on a whim at a gun show, put it in a dresser drawer and forgot about it. Until he bickered with his girlfriend and she pulled out the gun and shot him. He's in a wheelchair now, paralyzed, and it's hard to argue with what happened to him either. No gun, no tragedy.

In one of the book's most stirring passages, Baum uses the Benoit story as an opportunity to move the gun debate beyond government regulation. Plenty of other things could be done to decrease the roughly 30,000 annual gun deaths in America, he writes — including gun owners being more careful with their weapons so that they don't wind up in the hands of curious children, depressed teenagers and thieves.

"Gun guys were right to object to government officials who proposed bans without understanding what they were banning," he writes. "But until they took responsibility for the gun violence that continued to frighten and desolate their fellow Americans, they were setting themselves up for more of it. Taking collective responsibility is not the same thing as knuckling under to a tyrannical government. In fact, it's the exact opposite."

Strong words from a strong writer, straddling a great divide and maybe through this book helping to bridge it.

John Wilkens is a U-T staff writer.

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