

## 'Gun Guys,' by Dan Baum

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It's hard to imagine a hotter political topic than guns right now. Since the Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in December, almost everyone has one of two views on firearms. Guns, like abortion, are seen by some as a life-or-death issue that merits careful regulation, and by others as a matter of personal freedom and constitutional right. Each camp makes little attempt to understand the other, much less to compromise.

That could soon change, as the gun issue is about to find a new ambassador in Dan Baum. A self-professed "gun guy," the former New Yorker staff writer is far from a stereotypical gun nut. He's an urban Jew whose liberal views on everything but guns align with those who abhor firearms the most.

Yet something about shooting rifles at summer camp in 1961 captured his fancy and never let go. Even when his friends outgrew GI Joe and war games, Baum didn't. As an adult, he took up hunting as a way to legitimize his gun hobby.

All of this makes him the perfect tour guide for a well-timed trek through gun culture in modern America. A surprisingly funny book, "Gun Guys: A Road Trip" is an insightful exploration that brings some much-needed humanity to gun lovers and gun haters.

Over 18 months, Baum travels to gun shows, a Hollywood armory and various shooting competitions. He visits the headquarters of the National Rifle Association and the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence. Thanks to an app on his iPod Touch called Gun Store Finder, he visits every arms peddler along the way. He goes pig hunting in Texas. He meets a criminal turned firearms safety instructor, a gunshot victim and a machine gun collector, among others.

Certain characters veer depressingly close to the stereotypes that Baum initially hopes to debunk. He meets a man in his 20s who wrote in Sarah Palin on his 2008 ballot, for example, because he didn't trust John McCain on guns. A video game habit as a teenager first introduces him to the AR-15. Though deeply in debt and still living with his parents, the college dropout plunks down \$3,500 on a real-life gun, scope and other accessories. Soon he's hooked.

Other characters, however, more than defy the stereotypes. The most adamant gun rights activist that Baum encounters, for example, is a Midwestern Jew who doesn't seem to particularly like guns.

Baum further explores gun culture by diving into it himself. In one humorous scene, he tests the "open carry" law by holstering a long, bulky revolver in plain view and then padding around a Whole Foods store in his hometown of Boulder, Colo.

Eventually, he obtains a concealed carry permit and begins wearing a gun, hidden under his clothing, everywhere he goes. He conjures a quaint theory to explain the skyrocketing numbers of concealed handgun licenses in the United States even as crime continues to fall: They're a way for law-abiding folks like Baum to play with their guns whenever they want. "Imagine a musician," he writes, "who got to touch a guitar for one week a year."

But to Baum, a gun's power to kill remains as troubling as it does thrilling. "I didn't have to go far to learn about the nation's conflicted attitude toward guns," he writes. "I could just tour the inside of my own skull."

In New Orleans, one of the few places he is comforted by the bulky revolver pressing into his kidney, he still feels conflicted: "Even if it made me feel safer, it made me lonely," he writes.

"The gun had lowered a screen between me and the people I loved. It made me careful how I hugged. It made it hard to take off my jacket in a hot restaurant. It made me feel like a traitor to all that New Orleanians were trying to accomplish. The thought of having to send more bullets whizzing through its fragrant, damp air was almost unbearable."

Baum is forced to confront the real and sober connection between guns and death when a 22-year-old friend, featured in "Nine Lives," Baum's earlier book about post-Katrina New Orleans, is shot and killed in a domestic dispute.

If Baum never makes the appeal of guns universally clear, he does come across some compelling possible explanations. A man whose job it is to handle guns on Hollywood movie sets, for example, suggests that guns fit into the American narrative, appealing to our love of equality by giving the small and weak a chance against the big and strong.

A manufacturing entrepreneur convinces Baum that "enshrining an armed citizenry into a country's founding document did seem to imply a rather extraordinary amount of trust in ordinary people."

"Gun Guys" is a thoughtful, well-reasoned antidote to the polarized hysteria that currently passes for a national gun debate. By the end of the book, Baum arrives at something that feels truly fresh: a middle ground on guns.

## **Gun Guys**

### **A Road Trip**

**By Dan Baum**

**(Knopf; 338 pages; \$26.95)**

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