Books

‘The Gunning of America,’ by Pamela Haag and ‘The Way of the Gun,’ by Iain Overton

By Kevin Canfield

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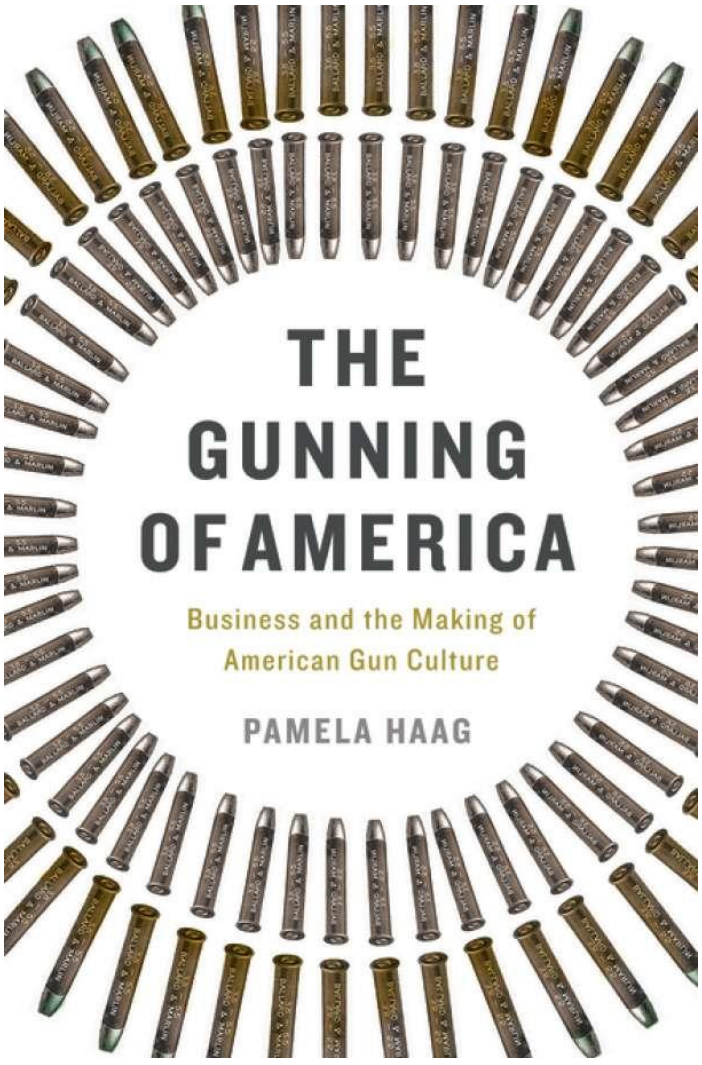

The fundraising prowess of the gun rights movement, and the influence it wields over lawmakers, has had a devastating impact: It's said that there are now almost as many guns in the United States — about 300 million — as there are citizens. Every year, more than 30,000 of us die from gunshot wounds, and in the three years after the December 2012 murder of 20 schoolchildren and seven adults in Sandy Hook, Conn., school shootings in the U.S. reportedly occurred at a rate of one per week.

This story is well chronicled. But what precipitated this appalling set of circumstances? How did gun culture first take root in this country?

In "The Gunning of America," her inspired new book, Pamela Haag tries to answer these questions by diving deep into the history of the firearms trade. Her findings challenge some of the founding myths about our national relationship with guns.

As the gun industry struggled to find its footing in the 19th century, Haag writes, it's not as if residents of this new nation were uniquely predisposed to worship weapons. On the contrary, America's embrace of guns was a fitful process, one that had as much to do with banal business imperatives as it did with the country's burgeoning frontier ethos.

"The civilian market needed to be invented and shaped," Haag says, and Winchester, Colt and other manufacturers did so with great ingenuity. "They envisioned markets where they were currently hypothetical or hazy at best; they were on the leading edge of advertising, mass distribution, and an understanding of market segmentation; they established modern distribution and sales networks to move guns throughout the country."

Drawing on historical archives in six states, Haag, the author of three previous books, demonstrates how the industry became ever more skilled at peddling "mass-produced individualism."

Her conclusions puncture the notion that Americans have always fetishized their guns. For a substantial part of the 19th century, she notes, “the Second Amendment was a slumbering giant,” and the gun, as manufactured by humble Connecticut firms, was treated “like a buckle or a pin, an unexceptional object of commerce.”

During these years, Haag explains, stateside gun companies stayed afloat by looking abroad, selling to “European regimes of the mid-1800s, embattled with each other and brimming with imperial ambition.” Remington alone dealt 130,000 guns to Spain and 145,000 to France. Indeed, “the nations that today are appalled at the American gun culture were the ones that kept the American gun business solvent for many years.”

Haag’s book also features a compassionate portrait of Sarah Winchester, the heiress who built the so-called Winchester Mystery House in pre-Silicon Valley San Jose. Haag suggests that the ceaseless construction of her massive home — “200 rooms on seven stories, 10,000 windows, and 2,000 doors, trap doors, and spy holes” — might have been a calculated distraction from the deaths of her husband and daughter, and the guilt she felt about deaths caused by Winchester rifles.

An ardent believer in the spirit world, Sarah might have built for less earthly reasons: “She created gorgeous rooms, perhaps for ghosts … and closed them off, never or rarely to be used.”

Though these chapters are intriguing, Haag’s book is strongest when it upends the belief that America has had an uninterrupted love affair with guns. In times of strife, of course, firearms were in great demand. As Haag says, “the Civil War … was a peculiar new thing: an advertisement.” But at other points, the nation’s gun culture was muted. In the late 1860s, Smith & Wesson was forced to slash production, Colt scaled back the size of its factory and Winchester cut two-thirds of its workforce.

Was there a postbellum gun surplus that led to these belt-tightening measures? Definitely, but it's also true that some Americans never wanted to see another firearm. As one historian cited by Haag puts it, this was "a gun weary nation."

American gun manufacturers reacted to flagging demand for their products with increasingly sophisticated marketing schemes. They expanded their advertising campaigns from niche publications to general interest and boys' magazines, offered "pages upon pages of guns" in the new Sears & Roebuck catalog, employed gun "missionaries" whose stunt-shooting performances boosted sales, and encouraged the market for pulp fiction about heroic gunmen.

"It's a tendency with any product, whether mouthwash or a gun … that if the author of the market is successful, then his authorship is erased, and the desire for the product appears obvious," Haag writes, "as if it had always been there."

"The Gunning of America" has its flaws. Haag authors some jarring juxtapositions. Discussing Sarah Winchester's miscarriages and the company that made her wealthy, she writes, "These rifles, and designs to follow, would proliferate and carry the Winchester name forward intergenerationally, whereas Sarah's womb had failed in the task, and would fail again." This isn't the only instance of awkwardness.

But Haag's book is generally quite readable, and it's the more incisive of two new gun-centric titles. The other, Iain Overton's "The Way of the Gun," is smart but scattered.

Overton, a former TV and print journalist who now works for a London antiviolence organization, reports from more than 20 countries. Some of his stops yield unforgettable details. In Honduras, an undertaker describes the

intricacies of reconstructing a gunshot victim's face. And in the West Bank, a Palestinian man recalls losing his teenage son — "the promise, the happiness of this house" — to a bullet fired by an Israeli soldier.

But Overton's consideration of America's gun problem does little to advance the conversation, and he has an off-putting penchant for installing himself as the star of the show. In South Africa, his desire to understand hunting ends with him shooting a gazelle and posing for a snapshot with its carcass. Looking at the photo, he sees "bloodlust" in his eyes: "I wondered what this journey was doing to me." To say nothing of the gazelle.

Later, Overton gets cranky when he's not shown proper deference. A rude gun company employee is "not helped by a lazy eye and a hunched back," and a woman who bumps into him at a gun show is overweight and tackily dressed: "Her red T-shirt read 'I carry a gun 'cause a cop is too heavy.' The fat on her back caused the letters to bulge."

In moments like these, Overton tells us more about himself than the objects of his derision.

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The Gunning of America
Business and the Making of American Gun Culture
By Pamela Haag (Basic; 496 pages; $29.99)

The Way of the Gun
A Bloody Journey Into the World of Firearms
By Iain Overton (Harper; 356 pages; $26.99)