

Joan Burbick. *Gun Show Nation: Gun Culture and American Democracy*. New York and London: The New Press, 2006 ISBN 1595582045



232 pages, HBK

\$24.95 / £14.99/\$31.50 Can

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*Gun Show Nation* is an appealing book to read.

The jacket blurb references the 'hit documentary' *Bowling for Columbine*, promising to answer Michael Moore's question 'why are Americans so obsessed with guns?', while the title recalls *Fast Food Nation*, suggesting parallels with Eric Schlosser's gritty, witty, expose of the food industry. The common tie is a thematic interest in the potential for self-destruction through excessive abuse; but, where fast food is a truly national (and global) phenomenon, America's fascination with guns is seemingly channelled into a more particular array of cliques and enclaves.

Essentially fleshing out the South Park-style cartoon in *Bowling for Columbine*, Burbick's main focus is the link between gun ownership and identity politics. The gun in America 'reeks of white power' (27) and is historically tied

to romantic tales of 'white frontier heroes and valiant Southern plantation owners rescuing their white daughters from the hands of black predators' (27). Burbick's explicit reference to *Birth of a Nation* (1915) fits into a chain of American cinematic imagery and icons of masculinity, from Buffalo Bill Cody through Charlton Heston and Ronald Reagan to Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, who subsequently act as cultural reference points for the social and political values of the gun (the phallic symbolism being taken as a given).

The usual suspects predictably emerge as Burbick links the fantasies and mythology of the Western frontier to the white, male, right-wing gun advocates who fervently perceive *their* right to the Second Amendment (or, at least, to their interpretation of the Second Amendment) as a stone-wall 'litmus test for *their* democracy' (108) [my italics]. Somewhat at odds with the notion of a 'gun show nation', the militia groups, gun enthusiasts and National Rifle Association (NRA) members tend to fall under a familiar demographic of middle-aged and aging white men, based predominantly in the mid-West and Western United States, whose politics - we are told - are shaped primarily by paranoia and fear. The American nation as a whole is not necessarily obsessed with guns - rather, the gun is a 'political fetish' (131) that operates as a potent, though increasingly outmoded, cultural symbol of white male power.

Despite entering the gun show arena as a 'casual shooter' (xix) willing and able to fire a gun at recreational targets, Burbick's liberal feminist credentials are never far from the surface. Race and gender issues are frequently used to help explain the darker side of the political identity associated with gun ownership, and there is even a thinly diluted sense of irony when Burbick briefly recounts the statistics for gun fatalities - finding suicidal white men over fifty-five (a key demographic in the pro-gun camp) to be amongst the most

vulnerable (132). While such a self-destructive impulse can be used to counteract the logic of 'the right to bear arms' as a means of self-defence, it also hints at a significant shortcoming of *Gun Show Nation*. In seeking to answer the question of why Americans are so obsessed with guns, Burbick fails to address the issue of high school and college shootings, preferring instead the soft, flabby target of aging white guys who still think of Charlton Heston as Moses.

Burbick also seems caught, at times, between wanting to express an enthused journalistic sort of reportage and having to hold back, assuming the more distanced analytical stance of the professional academic. It would be interesting to read a more controversial, outspoken polemic on gun culture - especially Hunter S. Thompson's unpublished manuscript on the gun lobby, written amidst the turbulent politics of the late 1960s, which threatened to discuss (from a gun freak's point of view) how the NRA uses its members rather than representing them. Nevertheless, while not startlingly original or revelatory, *Gun Show Nation* delivers a compelling and accessible analysis of the symbiotic relationship between American gun culture and Second Amendment identity politics.