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# Book Review: Shooting from the Hip

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Shooting from the Hip: Americans' Love Affair with the Gun

Kim MacInnis

A.J. Somerset, *Arms: The Culture and Credo of the Gun* (Biblioasis, 2015).

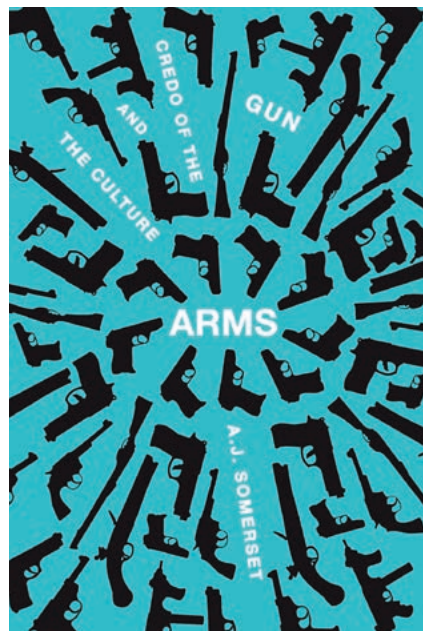
**A**rms: *The Culture and Credo of the Gun* is a thorough historical and contemporary examination of United States' gun culture from the perspective of Canadian journalist, A.J. Somerset. A former soldier and general gun enthusiast, Somerset presents a compelling argument that much of what we take for granted in American society is what is killing us. Somerset traces Americans' perpetual battle with gun ownership and gun control

from the Wild West to today's society and critiques its one-size-fits-all solutions to gun-related violence, suicide and accidental deaths.

Somerset's work is clearly timely. The United States continues its very public battle over gun control in the midst of increasing gun violence. Although many commentators have written and spoken about this issue, Somerset delves into the history of gun control in the United States with impressive detail. His insight is unique given that he is a Canadian writing about America's romance with the gun. Somerset points out that although Canadians and Americans share some cultural similarities, their relationships with guns are far from similar.

Somerset writes from a first-person perspective that establishes a very subjective feel for his work. However, the book is much more than mere opinion: he substantiates his main contentions with historical and contemporary evidence. Somerset brings the reader through an "A-to-Z" look

at cultural ambiguities and flip-flopping legislation regarding the role of guns in American society. Somerset's style is judgmental and forthright and this is captivating to read. He brings to the surface a fundamental irony: Americans combat their government's threats to restrict the availability of guns by using more guns. Somerset's



tone is often characterized by exasperation, as he sees the gun problem in simple mathematics: more guns equals more gun deaths; the solution, then, is fewer guns. But this is not his only argument. His book skillfully dissects American culture in order to make his main contention that the United States is a gun culture, and that guns are a taken-for-granted condition of everyday life.

Somerset revisits American history to point out that the desperate hold on the Second Amendment as a tool to protect and promote the right to bear arms is relatively new. Gun control in the United States was initially established as it related to racism. Somerset claims that it was Black men who argued in the early nineteenth-century that the Second Amendment guaranteed their right to bear arms despite the fact that the Second Amendment was constituted to keep Black men unarmed. This was the first "official" battle for gun control. Somerset is convincing when he places gun control in a racial context as opposed to an exclusively political one that focuses on the abstract "right" of every citizen to bear arms. He posits that the Second Amendment is conveniently used today to protect mainstream gun activism. Equally interesting is Somerset's gender analysis as he writes about gun activists' manipulation of female cultural fears of violence. Somerset contends that American women are convinced that they need protection from evil-doers in society and the easiest solution is gun possession rather than attacking the misogyny inherent in the fabric of American culture and the failure to address persistent violence against women.

It is hard not to be sympathetic to Somerset; he takes the reader with him as he surveys every imaginable variable influencing gun violence. He presents the media as an unforgiving culprit, one

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that instills fear every day in the lives of far too many Americans. Somerset contends that the media works to keep guns in the hands of many who should not have them and it works to convince American people that every day is a battle to survive—so they had better be armed. The author asks the reader to reconsider who the enemy really is in the midst of this gun battle.

Guns represent power, according to Somerset. He dismisses the consistent American attribution for gun violence to individual malady or a random incident or accident. He is particularly quick to point out that the information we are given about the relationship between gun violence and mental illness is shortsighted and intentional. For example, it has been well documented by social scientists that the majority of mass murderers are not mentally ill, but American society is convinced

otherwise by gun activists and conservative media voices. Somerset argues that it is easier to accept the mental-health explanation than to publicly admit that Americans have, too often, a knee-jerk tendency to settle disputes using gun violence. If the American public continues to accept the idea that gun violence is the result of mental illness, the work of random individuals or the result of “terrible accidents,” cultural violence in American society will never be addressed properly and we can expect even more gun-related violence.

It is difficult to put this book down. Somerset writes as he talks and readily acknowledges this. At times, his analysis of American gun culture is emotional but only slightly does his tone take away from his remarkably powerful presentation of the perils of gun violence in the United States. He correctly names gun manufacturers as partners in crime with gun activists,

and for obvious reasons. In corporate America, guns are big business. Somerset suggests that, not surprisingly, money is at the root of this gun evil and the most formidable obstacle to any significant advances in gun control.

*Arms: The Culture and Credo of the Gun* is a cautionary tale, and one that presents both the arguments and the ammunition needed to remake American society from a greedy gun culture into one that puts its citizens first.



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## Defending Our Libraries

*Cynthia J.W. Svoboda*

**John Palfrey, *BiblioTECH: Why Libraries Matter More Than Ever in the Age of Google* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).**

**I**n this era of information explosion, many brick-and-mortar retail bookstores are being replaced with online ordering systems and downloadable resources. Some small, independent bookstores with unique characteristics or novel approaches geared toward specific clienteles, survive and continue to

draw customers. However, many others have surrendered to online giants such as Amazon, Google, and Barnes & Noble, who offer a wide array of resources and often provide sales or incentives that are not possible for small independent bookstores to provide. What is more, these large competitors threaten the future of public libraries. Given the magnitude of change to the

way information is delivered today, John Palfrey, educator, scholar, law professor, and technology adviser, wrote *BiblioTECH* to explain why libraries matter more than ever in the age of Google.

Author of *Born Digital* (2008), *Intellectual Property Strategy* (2012) and other books, Palfrey is Head of School at Phillips

Academy in Andover, and a director at both the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University and the Data & Society Research Institute. He was formerly a professor at Harvard Law School and served as Vice Dean for Library and Information Resources. He was also the founding President of the Board of Directors of the Digital Public Library of America. Though not a librarian, Palfrey's education and work experience qualify him as an expert on the subject of information technology.

Despite the similarity in names, Palfrey's *BiblioTECH* is not an introduction to BiblioTECH, the first all-digital public library in the United States, which serves the City of San Antonio and Bexar County, Texas. However, the novelty and creativity in the design of this Texas digital library supports many of Palfrey's basic principles. In *BiblioTECH*, Palfrey discusses public libraries in a broader perspective, maintains the importance of supporting libraries, and upholds the need for them to change with the times. The author