

GUNS & GOD

LINES IN THE SAND

BY

RAIN STORY

PREFACE

This story is based on bipartisan ideals. That is to say, it addresses concerns and values of conservatives, liberals, and independents as well as a few teetering on the fringes of political nihilism or ostrich politics. No matter what your position is on the topic, this is a must-read novel. All of these political leanings toward guns, religion, politics, and culture are the foundation of this adult crime-thriller novel.

In December 2012, I visited family for the holidays in Conway, Arkansas. At one point during the visit, friends of family came over to discuss the pro-gun rally scheduled to take place soon in Little Rock. One of those friends, in particular, waltzed in through the front door, wearing a homemade confederate uniform complete with a gun belt and holster.

I sat at the kitchen table, working on my laptop, listening and watching. They ranted about gun rights and the fears that Obama would take all their guns away and haul them all off to concentration/death camps.

I took it all in and wondered how we—American citizens—could ever come to an agreement on the topic when such deeply-embedded fears seemed to fuel both sides of the debate.

That stirring stuck with me.

Days later, as I drove across the desert back to Los Angeles, I was listening to NPR on the radio. I was thinking

about what a good visit we had with all the music, laughter, great Southern cuisine, hugs, and genuine love for one another.

Then, a guest on the radio show said, “Let’s just take all the guns away from everybody! Problem solved!”

It shook me from my daydreaming.

I distinctly remember turning off the radio and staring out onto the desert landscape. Then it hit me like a whirlwind. “They don’t understand. That would never work. It would, in fact, cause a war.”

My head began to spin. The stirring that stuck with me from days earlier gnawed at me.

I could see both sides of the argument. Of course, my own belief that massive gun control changes are urgently needed to save lives in this country stayed firm. However, I could also understand how ingrained firearms are in the Southern gun culture, how entrenched they have been for dozens of generations, and how tied-in they are with religion and a mode of survival for so many.

These folks would give their lives to hang on to their heritage. In that respect, for these people, guns are not just ‘guns.’ They represent generations of legacy and tradition. They represent pride and freedom. They represent honor and dignity. It is unlikely that anyone will ever be able to change these facts as they are so incredibly emotionally-loaded and perspectively-threatened.

Gun control supporters can either choose to denounce these actualities or choose to educate themselves and try to understand the underpinnings and long-held traditions of this culture. I firmly believe that, until we can all choose the latter option, we will never come to any kind of compromise or

resolve for this serious issue that our country faces. We need sincere discussion.

My drive back to Los Angeles was consumed with these thoughts. “How can I tell a story that will help create a better understanding of the culture but also be interesting and thrilling at the same time?”

Then the faint images of this narrative appeared before me. I knew I had to create two rival families—both strong-headed in their beliefs. Yet there had to be arcs, action, suspense, and love. There had to be far-leaning characters that stumble off the edge of reality. There had to be bad choices and bad actions on all sides. There also had to be a powerful expression of the good, wholesome side of living in a Southern gun culture. Believe it or not, it isn’t all about guns.

This culture is steadfast in genuine hospitality, sharing great food and meals, including most strangers and new neighbors, creating incredible music, and enjoying the outdoors. It is a generous culture that normally doesn’t hesitate to give the shirt off its back to help anyone in need.

As far as locations, many scenes take place outdoors, in a kitchen, or in a living room where most folks normally hang out. The action occurs in places where relationships are more likely to be forged, bonded, or fall apart. Think of your own family in comparison to this story.

The kitchen is the hub of life. Cooking and food are the foundation of everything, and sharing food is the ultimate expression of inclusion, affection, and gratitude. Next to the kitchen is the living room where family and friends often gather to support one another, visit, or just hang out.

These are real-life sets with real-life language and linguistics. Caution to the faint-hearted: there is rough language in this story.

In order to attain the realistic dialogue for this journey, I tapped into my own family's linguistic norms. Besides the frequent use of vulgarities, you will also notice slang and pronunciations that are common in the South. For instance, "ya" is often used in place of "you" when it is hurried, blended into a sentence, or used affectionately. "You" is most often used in instances where the identity of someone is stressed or the sentence is spoken more harshly than in an affectionate tone.

The literary structure and use of language are purposely constructed and arranged. Here are a few examples:

Just as the creation of food and aromas give living texture to the adventure so do the linguistic exercises and the survey of ideas. To help the reader imagine seeing, touching, hearing, smelling, and tasting is important to the experience.

You will notice a repetition of words or the circular wrapping around of movement with words (i.e. "eye to eye," "one by one," etc.) which are representative of both the action taking place and the dynamics of the characters' thought processes at that moment. These flecks of circular motion that occur from time to time also occur in our real-life relationships and interactions every day. They give us short glimpses into not only how we interact with each other but also how our thoughts process interaction within ourselves.

You will also notice the use of metaphors. There are many. Some are subtle. Some are not. For instance, it isn't difficult to realize that the man, Searcy, is a metaphor of an overall cultural tsunami of sorts. I won't spoil it for you here. Other characters, like Dorene and Fuzzy, as well as the town of Beebe may also be viewed as symbols. However, there are more delineated analogies such as the framework around trees, numbers, colors, and a certain pair of boots. The

configuration and placement of these images are consciously positioned within the global design.

The machinations employed in relating this narrative are expressed through morphology and careful organization. They display the complex anatomy of one American gun culture out of many that exist.

Hopefully, this story will encourage other authors to write about the gun culture that they can identify with and know like the back of their hands. Together, we can bring these interrelated issues to the forefront for serious discussion and work toward a kinder, less violent, and less gun-oriented American society.

If I may make one thing clear: this story is not a glorification of guns in our country. It is, however, a direct and explicit expression of a Southern gun culture and its local community. It outlines its beliefs and values along with the far-reaching hooks that anchor it firmly in American culture.

It is fiction. It is an adult crime-thriller. This is the format and vehicle for delivering the story and the messages it must share.

Looking back to the societal aspects, while there is a wholesome side, there is also a diametrically and profoundly dark side of this culture. As anyone from the South can attest, there are both verifiably authentic and mythical tales of wicked, immoral, and nefarious acts that lurk naughtily just underneath the façade of the congenial, moral, and upright veneer of it all.

On the surface, you might never hear the stories. Although, if you spend much time bonding with Southern folks, you will most definitely become acquainted with the accounts more and more, depending on how much time you invest. Another way to get a glimpse of the noxious dirty

laundry is to stay abreast of the local news stories. More than likely, if you miss it on the first time around, you might never hear it again.

An important forewarning to heed is that there are instances of dark and horrible expressions of hate, bitterness, and racism in this story. As much as it repulses me and goes against my spirit, it would seem unreal to me to try to tell a Southern tale without showing this obnoxious truth as it still thrives to this day. It will undoubtedly offend readers, but the basis of what underlies the mentality and fear needs to be brought into the light so we can try to mend it.

Please keep in mind, not everyone who lives in the South adheres to these dark concepts. There are many who fight these evils every day and seek to change hearts and minds to live in peace and harmony with everyone. These are the real heroes behind the story.

While this is a work of fiction, many of the characters and their thoughts and actions are based upon people I've known and things I've heard, seen, or experienced while growing up and living in the South. We write about what we know. Therefore, everything from the beauty, compassion, love, and joy to the nasty, terrible, and evil things were written true to form. As far as the characters themselves, some are redeemable, others not so much. As the reader, you determine this for yourself.

In this regard, other issues had to be addressed as well, such as mental illness, drug use, alcoholism, and the fear that either causes these issues or exacerbates them. For some, these problems arose from bad past experiences. For others, they were a choice or a remedy that was self-prescribed in lieu of professional medical care. They are not excuses for the issues but rather explanations of how they began and grew.

Until we understand where they arose from, we can never fix the path forward.

Religion had to play a huge part in the story. It is the deeply-rooted twin to guns in this culture. Belief in God is what stabilizes the community and the family unit in basic morals and the comfort of not being 'lost' once someone dies. It solidifies the core being of not only the individual but also the community as a whole. It is the powerful security net that makes living every day alright. It alleviates the fear of death itself.

The manipulation of religion or the fear of God's wrath also had to be shown in order to bring to light the all-too-often realities. Spiritual abuse cannot be de-emphasized.

Finally, there were guns. The topic had to be addressed in a powerful way. It was truly difficult for me to briefly relate the innumerable tentacles that extend from the main roots of this critical issue. Again, it is the twin to religion in this Southern gun culture. You cannot talk about one, without addressing the other.

For many Southerners, it is confusing how, for countless generations, the right to own guns was never questioned and, in fact, owning guns was expected. Then, in the past few decades, it all changed. Gun control gradually became the hot topic issue that it is today.

For these folks, they don't understand the shift or why everyone who owns a gun is vilified. They don't understand why they are being punished and ridiculed for a handful (in their minds) of mentally ill killers who got their hands on guns and murdered people. The way they see it, they didn't commit the murder and would never do such a thing. So why punish them? To them, it's like throwing everyone who owns a gun in a box and rocketing them all into outer space. It

doesn't seem fair to be compared to a murderer when you're not one yourself. Certainly, that is an insult, in their minds. Thus, the idea arose that "a good guy with a gun can beat a bad guy with a gun."

The topic of military-grade and assault-type weapons is a totally split matter. Of course, liberals thoroughly decry the sale and use of these guns, as do I. What many Americans don't realize is that a considerable number of conservatives do not support it either. While there is an abundance of folks who want to own whatever guns they want and as many as they want, there is a multitude who believe that is wrong. There is no black-and-white division on this issue. There is only a chasm filled with a sundry of greys.

It is that chasm that the NRA and politicians manipulate to create enormous wealth, gun sales, and the manufacturing of hordes of more guns, including military-grade weapons. More guns that are released out into our streets, in America, where there are already more guns than people. The Washington Post stated that, in 2017, there were 393 million guns in contrast to the U.S. population of 326 million.¹

All of these ideas, thoughts, and research led to the creation of the Rose and Barton families in late 2012. (Please see the family charts in the Appendices.)

Then, in 2013, as I began writing the TV pilot for this story, the gun laws in Arkansas were changing, rapidly. In February, Republican Representative Denny Altes introduced Act 746 that was passed (82-1 in the House, 28-0 in the Senate) as it proposed to clarify carrying a weapon while "on

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/06/19/there-are-more-guns-than-people-in-the-united-states-according-to-a-new-study-of-global-firearm-ownership/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.77b57aa21aba

a journey.” In essence, it allowed for open carry with a permit in the State. In April, Democratic Governor Mike Beebe signed the bill into law, creating “Constitutional Carry.” In July, it went into effect. These are the foundational facts that propel the narrative forward in this story.

Since 2013, other laws have passed and gone into effect. As it is now, open carry without a permit is legal in Arkansas as long as a person has “no intent” of harming another person. So this saga will continue.

For now, this book is based upon the initial TV pilot and following episodes that I began back in 2013. It is a powerful story that needs to be heard even though a handful of literary agents in L.A. paused. They stated that they loved the narrative, but it was too controversial. Then came 2016. Nothing is ‘too controversial’ anymore. This story needs to be told now.

While the Democratic Party and its constituents overall seek to increase gun control or abolish guns altogether, they will never succeed until they humble themselves and try to understand pro-gun advocates, their lifestyle, their heritage, and their fears. As long as they attack the culture and demonize it as a whole, they will only find retribution and growing hatred. This only makes the problem worse.

Not as an endorsement but rather as a fact, this society, these people, have fought to protect their own for hundreds of years. They will not simply lay down their roots and give up the fight. Therefore, the abolishment option would be an ill-advised route to take as it would create even more division in our country. As a liberal myself, rooting for stronger gun control, I must say, there has to be a better way.

Reflecting on fear, we should consider the psychology that fuels it. Although it dives as deeply as primordial fear,

this type of angst involves, I believe, mainly fear of annihilation or loss of oneself, one's community, or one's identity. It frightens the bejesus out of these folks and often causes them to react with exaggerated retaliation, vengeance, or even hate.

Now, while you'd expect that people who harbor this type of fear would sincerely want to escape from it and seek out peace and love, that's not at all what a lot of these folks experience. It is a horrifying thought but one that we need to address truthfully. This type of profoundly-embedded anxiety regularly turns into something else: comfort and thrill.

Human beings have this weird and unbelievable talent of finding comfort and thrill in fear. Some of the people in the Southern gun culture experience exactly this phenomenon in which the fear described above turns into a love and longing for conflict, war, and hate with other human beings. But what causes us to tap into these desires and act upon these yearnings?

I'm no doctor or scientist, but I am a careful observer of people around me. My observation has led me to believe that it might be because we quite simply get bored. I mean, seriously, if we look back at human evolution, humankind was once a species that truly had to struggle to survive by hunting wild animals, killing ferocious beasts, fending off warring tribes, and on and on. It makes me wonder if we have some built-in mechanism in our brains (or DNA) that causes us these days to create our own chaos. Is there some freaky little bug within us that causes us to inherently love what we say we abhor?

Stay with me here. Guns and God, violence and religion. Are they such a new combination or is it that we, as a "civilized society," wish to think of ourselves as evolved past

that point? History begs to differ, I think. I won't list all the historical references here. You can easily Google those for yourself.

My point is that there are people in this culture that are religious and believe in tolerance, peace, and love. They, in fact, despise the dark side of their world and try to change it as often as they have an opportunity. They truly have love in their hearts toward all people. However, there are plenty who want to believe in tolerance, peace, and love but only within the confines of their own little world. For these folks, they will commit any act, even violence, to protect and further their own kind. Some call it "survivalist instinct;" some call it "hate," "racism," "mental illness," or other things.

This is no joking matter. I believe that sometimes, especially when manipulated or stoked, this fear can become mental illness. It can turn into an obsession which is a lot of what we are dealing with in our world today. In other instances, it is not.

For a multitude of gun rights supporters, it is just a matter of wanting to own guns to hunt and feed their family or to protect themselves or their families. I don't believe it is this part of the population that is the problem in America. However, we need to understand that they feel singled out and compared to those who do wish to create chaos and violence. How can we close the divide and find resolve in this instance?

Then there are those who start out as gun control proponents but, for some reason or experience in their lives, end up using or owning guns due to circumstances that they could have never foreseen. How could they have ever known? The answers are never simple.

The human psyche, such a fragile intricate facet of who we are, is something that I believe we should all nurture and

treat with the utmost of delicate care at least as much as we do our physical health, our finances, our relationships, or any other aspect in our lives. It not only defines us, but it can also destroy us and our planet if we do not wake up and act to bring ourselves back to relatively moderate mental health.

To me, the remedy for the issue at the heart of the gun problem in our country must begin with the mental health, welfare, and treatment of each of us individually and collectively. No matter which side of the debate you're on, you should be driven to believe that we simply have to put down whatever thinking causes us to hate, seek vengeance, or any other violent thought as much as we have to put down the manipulators and instigators that turn up the heat and stir the sickness into a roaring boil. We must.

Let's just agree as a species that it's time to finally evolve to a higher form of human being—a compassionate and less violent one. I cannot believe that a violent and vicious world full of hate and ugly things is what you want for yourself, your children, or your grandchildren; nor do I.

Keep in mind, dark things never begat good. Only a change of heart can accomplish that feat.

Maybe we can begin by addressing the underlying fears and disarming the deceptions and manipulations of big money and corporate greed by shining the light on them for everyone to see. Maybe we can actually enforce effective and sensible gun control laws. Maybe there is a viable option in creating a counter-NRA establishment that will commit to real facts, education, and teaching responsible gun ownership while execrating the use and sale of military-grade and assault-type weapons. Maybe we can elect politicians that will fight to strengthen prison sentences for offenders and illegal dealers to keep them off our streets. Maybe we can disarm hate groups

by holding educational and instructional seminars in small towns across the nation that can alleviate the deep-seated fears of pro-gun folks and those who fear “otherness.” Maybe we can begin mandatory education to teach children from a young age how to deal with their anger in ways other than harming others. Maybe we, ourselves, can be the change. That will only come through knowledge, understanding, hard work, and your vote.

My challenge to you, to everyone, is to read this story with an open mind. Don’t give up on it. The arcs, action, and narrative flow work as a whole. The shifts and changes all culminate in the end. My hope is that once you have read it, you will not only be satisfied with the crime-thriller aspect of the story but also have a better understanding of what is like to live in a Southern gun community.

Armed with this knowledge, let’s find ways to work with the culture to implement reasonable gun control laws that keep guns away from the mentally ill and those with criminal backgrounds, remove and keep military-grade weapons off our streets, stop mass shootings, protect schools and public venues, and stop the insanity of gun violence. Together, let’s do this thing!

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