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More than a book about guns

## The Saturday Night Special

And Other Guns With Which Americans Won the West, Protected Bootleg Franchises, Slew Wildlife, Robbed Countless Banks, Shot Husbands Purposely and by Mistake, & Killed Presidents Together with the Debate Over Continuing Same.

By Robert Sherrill.

Illustrated. 352 pp. New York: Charterhouse Books. \$8.95.

By ERIC REDMAN

Guns kill 20,000 Americans each year. But consider the bright side. That's less than one death per year for every 10,000 guns in private ownership—a small price to pay for such an important privilege. Moreover, as Robert Sherrill says in "The Saturday Night Special," we should be candid with ourselves: Gun victims are rarely middle-class folks; they are the "refuse" (he puts it bluntly) of our "trashy" society, mostly criminals or people who "wouldn't have come to much" anyway. Highway accidents, by contrast, cause three times as many fatalities, and wayward automobiles—unlike bullets—are wickedly egalitarian. May we not, all things considered, "fairly ask ourselves if the typical victim of gunfire cannot be spared?"

Such is the cynical and unconventional beginning of a cynical and unconventional book. But cynicism is often the last refuge of sensitive writers driven to despair, and "The Saturday Night Special" is an unnering work by one of the most sensitive writers in America today. More than a book about guns, it is a detailed and disturbing inquiry into the type of society that let the gun problem spiral out of control.

The liberal myth, which Sherrill rejects, is that guns could never have been controlled because guns and gun lore spontaneously rooted themselves in American culture (and became entrenched in the misunderstood "constitutional right to bear arms") too long ago. We blame our frontier heritage, our witless idol-

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izing of outlaws and gangsters, or we sadly repeat the one bit of pop psychology we all know: Guns are potent, the too-easy truss for a ruptured sense of *machismo*.

Sherrill toys with this myth, irreverently and anecdotally (if you want the surprising truth about Jesse James or Machine Gun Kelly, it's all here), but he argues effectively for a simpler thesis: "At bottom, it isn't tradition but trade that controls this issue." Firearms and related products form a multi-billion dollar industry—an industry that works hard to perpetuate the liberal myth and the lucrative American gun culture underlying it. But for this "fire arms economy," Sherrill insists, "the individual emotions wrapped up in gun-ownership could be dissipated."

The major portion of Sherrill's book offers the most probing study yet of the gun trade and its techniques for survival. More than a mere gun lobby, Sherrill reveals what can only be termed (in Douglass Cater's phrase) a firearms "sub-government." For we do not, as a nation, determine our gun-control policy: We allow a relatively few individuals, all industry-oriented, to determine it for us. Besides the industry, the fear-mongering National Rifle Association, and key members of Congress and the bureaucracy, the firearms subgovernment draws support from surprising sources: "conservation" groups, for example, who know only too well (as most of us do not) that 99 per cent of all fish and wildlife funds come from gun taxes and hunting fees.

Within this subgovernment, of course, disagreements sometimes arise. Sherrill introduces us to the plucky firearms importers, who despite the protests of American gun

manufacturers succeeded in flooding the United States with millions of military weapons declared surplus by our NATO allies. (The justification, not surprisingly, was "national security"—we couldn't let Communist guerrillas snatch up those rifles.)

The manufacturers, on the other hand, scored intermittent victories in obtaining import restrictions, also on national security grounds—if our domestic gunmakers were forced out of business, how could we expand our arms production in wartime? Presiding over this intra-industry tugging and shoving was none other than the late Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut, a man of infinitesimal integrity who manipulated Congressional gun-control efforts to milk New England's gun manufacturers for all they were worth. Dodd's staff struggled valiantly for meaningful controls, Sherrill tells us, but neither their boss nor his patrons saw the issue in human terms. The calculations were strictly those of the cash register.

Dodd's unlamented demise changed the cast of characters, but not the basic script. Today, for instance, the Nixon Administration is supporting the most audacious ploy yet concocted by American gun manufacturers. By speciously blaming cheap handguns ("Saturday Night Specials") for rising crime and "gun abuse," the manufacturers hope to shut off



imports and wipe out troublesome domestic mini-competitors, thus securing the entire market for their own wares. Sherrill shows that the Special's disappearance will do less for the crime statistics than for profits, at Colt and Winchester, but once again, most gun-control advocates have been completely taken in, this time by the "snooty caste-consciousness in gun traffic." Ultimately, the industry itself decides the terms of every debate.

Ironically, the National Rifle Association will probably quote Sherrill more often than all the book reviewers combined. For after savaging those wonderful people who brought you the dum dum bullet, Sherrill shifts abruptly in mid-book to an equally depressing examination of why gun control alone can never work, and why the N.R.A.'s concept of the "armed citizen"—protecting himself and his family, vigilante-style, from pervasive lawlessness—may be the most realistic vision of

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our future, if not the most attractive.

The National Guard and the police cannot protect us, Sherrill asserts, especially since they're more trigger-happy than the crooks. Rounding up the guns would be impossible—there are simply too many (200 million), and they are too easily produced. Government agents enforcing existing gun laws have more than once burst into homes, pistols blazing, only to discover they had the wrong address. For these reasons, and more, Sherrill concludes flatly that "every reasonable gun-control bill would be . . . an unreasonable bill in effect."

The proleptic cynicism of Sherrill's opening chapters does not adequately prepare the reader for this sudden twist in the argument, nor does a memo from Sherrill's editor (reprinted in the early pages) warning the author that those who mistake his irony will consider him "anti-anti-gun." The puzzle, then, is what he means by this disconcerting and harsh new tack.

Apparently, Sherrill wants to jolt us into recognizing that our concern over guns is more alarmist than "humane," and that in an inhumane society, "brutality and crime" are inevitable, with or without guns. We fear insurrection and riot-

ing, muggings and murder, but we do not genuinely care about society's "refuse," the most frequent victims. If we did care, we would realize that even perfect gun controls would change nothing, save the entry on their death certificates. But in a truly humane society, Sherrill implies, the gun problem—like many others—would simply wither away.

This closing plea is not really novel, although using the gun problem as a lens through which to view America's failings is. But because of the scope, the subtle nuances and ultimate ambivalence of his thought—and above all, because of his unfailing literary skill—Sherrill has produced something unique, and uniquely compelling. As literature or journalism, "The Saturday Night Special" is relentless and irresistible. But one hopes that public officials and proponents of gun control will at least resist the book's Sisyphian worldview. Sherrill notwithstanding, a little progress on gun control wouldn't hurt America. And progress comes from those who don't yet realize the futility of it all. ■

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