

# thunder in the mountains

A PORTRAIT OF  
AMERICAN GUN CULTURE



Craig K. Collins

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Lyons Press is an imprint of Globe Pequot Press.

Project Editor: Lauren Brancato

Layout: TK

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available on file.

ISBN 978-0-7627-0385-3

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To all the victims of American gun violence—more than 100,000 annually—their  
families, loved ones, and communities.*

*I offer this work of prose, meager in the face of an epidemic so vast, with the greatest of  
humility and respect.*

## A Note from the Author

Let's get one thing clear: *Thunder in the Mountains* is not an antigun book.

I would never presume it to be so. Not in America. Not in 2014.

Plus, that is not for me to decide. Or presume. That job—complete with heavy lifting—is for the reader.

I am reminded of the rambling prologue of sorts that Kurt Vonnegut Jr. tacked on to the opening of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, his novel that is ostensibly about the World War II firebombing of Dresden, Germany, but ends up being mostly about life, death, time, the nature of man, and flying saucers from the planet Tralfamadore. I think. Vonnegut leaves to his readers much heavy lifting. As he should.

Here's what he says. Listen:

Over the years, people I've met have often asked me what I'm working on, and I've usually replied that the main thing was a book about Dresden.

I said that to Harrison Starr, the movie maker, one time, and he raised his eyebrows and inquired, "Is it an anti-war book?"

"Yes," I said. "I guess."

"You know what I say to people when I hear they're writing anti-war books?"

"No. What do you say, Harrison Starr?"

"I say, 'Why don't you write an anti-*glacier* book instead?'"

What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too.

And even if wars didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death.

The part about the glaciers, in retrospect, is a bit of a hoot. But in 1969 very few people saw the coming of global warming. How could Vonnegut know? Still, we get the point. And the gravitas of Harrison Starr is neither lost nor diminished by our now carbon-sullied atmosphere.

More than 1,200 American and British bombers were dispatched to Dresden in February of 1945. The Allied pilots and crews were expert in flattening and incinerating the once grand and historic city on the banks of the Elbe. Up to 25,000 people, nearly all civilians, were killed. So it goes.

More than 32,000 people, nearly all civilians, are killed by guns each year in the United States. So it goes.

But enough about war, death, and sadness. Let's get back to *Thunder in the Mountains*.

It is a book of literary nonfiction. Two names have been changed out of courtesy and care, but everything contained within actually occurred. And everything that occurred, happened as depicted. More or less.

Few people want to read antiseptic studies and statistics of gun violence. We have reams of those, and by all accounts, readership is quite low. I've perused many. Be thankful you've been spared.

While there are no aliens or flying saucers in *Thunder in the Mountains*, there is some time travel, I suspect. The historical sections of the book are as factual as I could make them without sucking the life out of the prose. That's where the "literary" part of literary nonfiction comes in. I don't know what one gunslinger said to the other, verbatim. I don't know if the hanged man's shirt was blue or red. I can't remember the exact dialogue I had with my brother when I was thirteen. I don't know exactly what was going through a classmate's mind as he stood alone in a

field with a gun. No one does. But I can imagine. And in most cases I have a pretty good idea what was said or how someone might have reacted or what might've happened next. In most cases.

But as a practitioner of literary nonfiction, it's my job to fill in the blanks. To do my best to keep the story moving. To keep the reader engaged; enraptured, even. To interpret the past. To use all the tools available to a writer—imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism, plot, denouement. All those things that can provide clarity in art, but usually elude us in real life—in the here and now. To paint a picture—with strokes both broad and fine—all the while keeping as true as possible to the essence of the story at hand.

It's quite a trick—an artful balancing act—no matter if one is writing fiction or nonfiction.

While fact-checking this book, I was struck by how little anyone from my past was willing to talk to me about their brush with gun violence. Understandably, it is a difficult and painful thing to approach. Even after four decades, in many cases. How do you begin?

“Hi, this is Craig Collins. Not sure if you recall, but we were great friends in the eighth grade. Remember when your brother got shot and killed? Good times, huh?”

Of course, I was more tactful than that, but no matter what was said or how delicately it was phrased, the message between the lines seemed just as coarse. Guns are a touchy subject in America. And the pain of gun violence within a family never subsides. The years never come close to wearing down the sharp edges of grief.

For that reason, the cloak of silence about guns is exceedingly thick. And I don't doubt that I've made some people as mad as hornets for even attempting to pull back that cloak and let the light shine in. But it can't be helped. It's an issue whose time has long since come.

Thomas Wolfe and John Steinbeck poked at beehives in their hometowns of Asheville, North Carolina, and Salinas, California, with their thinly veiled works of fiction, *Look Homeward, Angel* and *East of Eden*. There were swarms of angry villagers buzzing in the wakes of those tomes, hurling invectives and launching diatribes. But all these years later, the anger has faded, the villagers have passed—as have the authors. So it goes. What remains are two iconic novels—treasures, really—enduring monuments to truth and beauty.

It's all any writer, if they're honest, can aspire to.

Craig K. Collins  
San Diego, California

## Chapter One

The shot cracked sharp through the crisp October sky. It echoed once, boomed twice, and tore off into the distance like the fading hiss of a car speeding toward the horizon.

Its first concussive wave had slammed into boulders across the ravine. One thunderous clap raced up an aspen-filled draw toward the top of a 10,000-foot Northern Nevada peak. The other plunged down a creek-carved canyon before spilling onto sage-covered flats a half-mile below, rumbling, nearly spent, through glades of yellow-leafed cottonwoods.

Somewhere, a deer flinched, then froze, waiting for the sound to roll by. A man in an orange vest cocked his head, trying to discern the origin of the shot, certain that one of his fellow hunters had encountered good fortune.

And then silence. Aspen quaked gold. The sage was riffled by an autumn breeze. The sun blazed cool amid some gathering clouds.

My ears rang as though someone were holding up a tuning fork. The high-pitched whine consumed me. I had been sitting on the ground, my back propped against a large boulder with my legs stretched out during a break in my trek through rugged deer country. My .30-30 Winchester lay on my lap. It was just like the one Chuck Connors had wielded so deftly in *The Rifleman*. My grandfather had reluctantly given it to me after some prodding by my dad. He'd had misgivings about arming a thirteen-year-old with a high-powered deer rifle. My dad? Not so much.

Trembling, I leaned forward to inspect my foot.

Moments before, I'd plopped down against an inviting rock nestled amid the sage and bitterbrush. Bored, I'd decided I should make sure I had a full complement of bullets loaded into my gun. And, just like the Rifleman, I had cocked the Winchester's lever-action handle. An unspent shell flipped out of the chamber, twirled through the air, and landed in the dirt. Concurrently, a lever had pushed back the gun's hammer while simultaneously sliding a new shell into the chamber. I was fascinated by the ingenious mechanics—a series of interconnected metal parts that functioned like a compact Rube Goldberg device. I'd cocked again. Another shell had flipped out of the chamber and onto the dirt. And again, the hammer was cocked back. It coiled above the firing pin, which was designed to be about as stable as a mousetrap. The slightest pressure, the smallest jiggle, would release the hammer, which would slam into the firing pin, which would pierce the brass primer, which would spark the gunpowder-filled brass casing, which would flame in a contained violent explosion, which would hurl a one-third-ounce lead slug out of the muzzle at roughly two and a half times the speed of sound.

I'd cocked the lever once more. Another shell flipped skyward. My index finger had carelessly slipped off the trigger guard. I'd snapped the lever back into position, and the trigger guard had clamped a small sliver of skin between it and the trigger. Time slowed. The brass shell gleamed gold as it hung in midair. My finger jerked. My mind said, "No." The trigger tensed. A spring clicked. The hammer slammed. The shell exploded. The barrel jumped. The trigger went limp. The shot echoed. My ears rang.

In the days and months and years since, I have often pleaded to have that moment back. I have startled awake from a nap or winced during a daydream—always reaching my hand into the cold, rushing stream. Always with my fingers outstretched. Always hoping to grab a fistful of water. Always hoping to stop time. But the brass shell never freezes in midair. My finger never avoids the trigger. The muzzle never moves away from my boot. Rather, the seconds hurtle onward. And I am always left sitting, stunned, with a high-pitched whine in my ears, wondering what happened to the bullet.

Ah, yes, the bullet.

My eyes widened. My chest tightened. My stomach knotted. I waited for a rush of pain. And waited. And waited.

It didn't come.

Maybe I'd missed. Maybe the slug had slammed harmlessly into the dirt.

Maybe.

I hoped it was so. And then I breathed. I squinted warily at my hunting boot, afraid of what I would surely see. I knew the damage a .30-30 could inflict. I expected to witness half a foot dangling from a shredded ankle. Instead, my intact boot was still propped leisurely on a rock, seemingly no worse for the wear. I leaned closer. Nothing was amiss, aside from an almost imperceptible tear in a seam on my dust-covered leather uppers.

But still, a calm terror gripped me. I was like a fugitive looking for an escape, for an explanation, for a slug in the dirt. My chest was still tight, my stomach nauseous. I wasn't fully convinced of any good fortune. I wasn't sure I'd literally dodged a bullet. And then the bottom of my right foot began to tingle. It felt like I'd stomped hard on a concrete sidewalk. Perhaps that was from the shock of the gun going off so close. Perhaps the bullet had hit a rock and ricocheted harmlessly into the sole of my boot.

Perhaps.