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ShortList

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Instinct or brainwashing?
Why men love guns

GUN CULTURE

The first time I had a gun pointed at me, it seemed quite funny. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon, about a month after I'd left home, when a crazy old man sitting behind me on the bus to Muswell Hill tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I was a prostitute. I turned around to see him waving a revolver at my head. I assumed this was the sort of thing that happened in the big city all the time, and so I pretty much just laughed it off. This wasn't quite as moronic an action as it seems in black and white.

ridicule for displaying such pusillanimous MacGyverism. In short, guns were a great source of entertainment.

DAY OF THE HUNTER

In reality, as anyone who's seen the news recently will know, guns are the source of unbelievable and distressing crimes. Oscar Pistorius – last year, a double gold medal-winning Paralympian hero – is currently awaiting trial for the fatal shooting of his girlfriend.

In Serbia on 8 April, Ljubisa Bogdanovic, a veteran of the Balkan conflict, went on a rampage with a

What is it that draws men to firearms? ShortList's Eddy Lawrence takes aim at our relationship with guns

ARTWORK:
BEN TURNBULL

Having been born during the Cold War, guns had always felt like an intrinsic part of my life, even if this was the first time I'd actually seen a real one. By the time I reached junior school, film, television and video games had made the Uz, AK-47 and Mac 10 as familiar as Kermit and Miss Piggy.

Guns were present in images of every type of heroism, from folk to anti-heroes. Good guys who didn't blast their way out of any given situation clearly had something wrong with them.

When the A-Team constructed its notorious 'cabbage cannon', they still shot as many people as they did during a regular gun-toting episode (ie none), but became the subject of playground

handgun, leaving 13 relatives and neighbours dead. Less than two weeks ago, Neil Macneil, a would-be mass killer, invited users of the 4Chan messageboard to track him shooting up a US mall live as it happened.

Following the Newtown massacre – one of 16 US mass shootings in 2012 alone – the Senate refused to reintroduce a 1994 ban on assault weapons despite the backing of 75 per cent of the electorate.

Real-life stories about how heroic, vest-clad gunowners have foiled terrorist plots at Nakatomi Plaza are thin on the ground, to say the least. Yet guns retain a powerful appeal to even the most level-headed men.



➔ It's easy to assume that this affection for guns is the product of cultural indoctrination – an adolescence spent in the company of *Call Of Duty* and Arnie marathons. According to clinical psychologist Martin Seager, however, it's down to our old friend natural selection.

"The male has evolved as the hunter and the fighter," claims Seager. "They have a role to protect their group against aggression, and also to hunt. Our species is about 200,000 years old, and most of that time, men have been killing things and defending themselves against being killed."

"These rules of masculinity still exist today – that you must be a breadwinner, you must be a provider and a protector, and you must have mastery and control."

Guns confer the power of life and death on the bearer, and you don't get much more mastery or control than that, evolutionarily speaking.

To put it in terms fit for the digital age, evolution provides us with factory settings for our behaviour, and guns hack our sense of vulnerability. This is a cause for concern for Kevin Godlington.

A former soldier, now active in most conflict and post-conflict territories around the world, including Afghanistan, Libya and Sierra Leone, Godlington has carried a gun as part of his day job since joining the Army at 16, and (for reasons we'll come to later) would much prefer it if he never had to see one again.

"Guns inevitably empower people," he says. "We will always look for methods to protect ourselves and our own, and of course one of the greatest equalisers in any type of violence is the firearm, because you don't actually need to be able to fight with a knife or your fists."

LEGO FOR GROWN MEN

This fact is at the heart of the allure of firearms. It's an uncomfortable truth, but firing a gun can be the kind of powerful, visceral experience that lets you know you're alive. The kick of the recoil along with the eruption of flames and smoke is impressive, but nothing can prepare you for the big bang – at 150 decibels, a shotgun is louder than thunder.

Clive Hetherington is relatively new to sport shooting, but he certainly exhibits the zeal of the convert. "You shoot 100 cartridges and you know you've done it, because it's actually quite tiring," he chuckles. "It's the noise and smoke, the smell of cordite and the thump in the shoulder."

Hetherington is adamant that more people would enjoy shooting if they had the opportunity, so much so he is now launching the London Shooting Club, an organisation intended to



HARROGATE-BASED LANNER TACTICAL HAS STARTED SELLING A SINGLE-SHOT AR15 RIFLE, AND ACCESSORIES TO UK CUSTOMERS THROUGH ITS WEBSITE

improve access to the otherwise intimidating world of clay pigeon genocide. "It's a very quick return on your emotions," he reasons. "Especially if you hit the target and see a clay pigeon shatter into tiny particles."

The firearms industry has 200 years of practice in playing on these emotions, exploiting the delicate balance of male insecurity, power-lust and show-off tendencies.

While little clinical research has been carried out into the love affair between men and guns, the industry's understanding of the nuances of this relationship is especially apparent in its product design and advertising. And no single gun embodies this more than the AR15.

The M16 (AKA the AR15 in its civilian guise) is a Sixties design classic. Aside from its cinematic looks, it's also almost infinitely customisable, with a huge array of bespoke stocks, sights, barrels and other add-ons that make it the Harley-Davidson of assault weapons – perfect for the conformist



individualist. Even Jay Duncan, the vice president of sales for AR15 maker Daniel Defense, has described the weapon as "like Lego for grown men".

More than three-million Americans own one, and if you don't have a criminal record or a mental illness, you could too – Harrogate-based company Lanner Tactical has started selling a single-shot version of the rifle, and all the accessories you could want, to UK customers through its website.

But as well as being the US's most popular rifle, the AR15 is also its most controversial. It was advertised with the slogan 'Consider your man card reissued', via a campaign belittling hypothetical males for hypothetical crimes against humanity such as – gasp! – being a vegetarian.

This sort of thing is harmless enough when it's being used to shift Yorkies or grab-bags of McCoy's, but given that a sense of inadequacy is often the trigger for indiscriminate violence, equating not having a gun to a lack of sexual potency is potentially



dangerous. Unsurprisingly, the campaign was pulled after the AR15 was used in spate of shootings, including the one in Newtown.

FIREARM FETISH

Firearms advertising speaks to a masculinity in crisis. The tagline for the Savage Arms Model 10 BA – 'We call it the BA even though it's the farthest thing from "liberal arts" imaginable' – revels in anti-intellectualism while an ad for a concealable holster, on the other hand, is classic fearmongering. It depicts a burglar breaking into a darkened house, the makers offering, ironically for a product that hides guns, 'A little certainty in an uncertain world'.

This marketing suggests problems that the products step in to solve. Product design is carefully nuanced to appeal to every facet of machismo, so it's no more an accident that a particular gun looks sexy than it is if a car does. Whatever type of impression you want to make about your masculinity, whether it's your



➔ capacity for brute force or your desirability as a provider, there's at least one gun for you.

"A gun is very much like a wristwatch for some men," offers Hetherington. "It can be like an antique piece of furniture, and I suppose it's also an heirloom if you pass it down to your children."

Gun enthusiasts are also happy to shell out for accessories that enhance the sensation of power and trademarked manliness.

Simply shooting gun-range paper to bits isn't enough for some. There are Tannerite squibs that can be affixed to targets to make them explode, and even a risible new 'Life-size bleeding zombie ex-girlfriend target' (which we might cynically suggest may first have been devised without the 'zombie' bit).

This fetishisation of firearms suggests a less healthy relationship with masculinity. And this is where guns get *really* dangerous. While it may be in the nature of men's biological reward systems for us to like guns, our environment can lead us to abuse them.

No causal link has been established between the watching of violent films or playing of violent video games and actual violence. In fact, during the

OSCAR PISTORIUS IS CURRENTLY AWAITING TRIAL FOR THE FATAL SHOOTING OF HIS GIRLFRIEND



"FIREARMS ARE COWARDLY. THEY PUT DISTANCE BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR TARGET"

video-game boom of the past 20 years, violent crime has gone down in most Western societies. But for men who have sustained emotional damage through neglect or abuse in childhood, guns can become a surrogate family, god and penis extension rolled into one.

"Men who are more damaged and more troubled are going to use more aggressive means to express their feelings," explains Seager "It's a deadly combination."

However, this isn't always the case. Godlington grew up in care and experienced violence which had "no

reason and no structure – it was just violence". He credits the Army with enabling him to arrive at his current, evolved attitude to guns.

"Firearms are cowardly," he notes. "They put distance between you spatially and your target. If you ask somebody to do the same with a knife they will be deeply traumatised for the rest of their lives."

Not everyone in the UK shares his view. Arm Britain is an organisation with 2,500 members who support the legalisation of the possession of firearms for home protection. It would be easy to write them off as paranoid wingnuts, especially if



ROCK RIVER ARMS AR15 RIFLE EQUIPPED WITH COMBAT LIGHT

"GUNS ARE FORBIDDEN FRUIT"

BEN TURNBULL, THE ARTIST BEHIND OUR DESK-CARVED GUN COVER AND VENDING-MACHINE ARTWORK, EXPLAINS HIS INSPIRATIONS



TURNBULL LIVES AND WORKS IN LONDON

How did you get started as an artist?

I copied all the Iron Maiden covers on to my desk at school, so I've come full circle. It must be some psychological thing. I've worked in workshops since I was 15 years old. That led to me to working on film sets.

Our cover is based on your piece 'I Don't Like Mondays'.

How did that come about?
I was making a plinth based on *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. I was looking for some wood and someone said to me "What about these old school desks?" I made a beautiful crate-like plinth for this work, and then left a few of the desks around.

Did you carve it freehand?

Everything is done by hand. I had an argument with a guy who said it was laser-cut. I took offence, because the difference is incredible. I'm a list man and things do not begin by drawing, ever. They begin with notes. People should throw their technology away and buy a bloody notepad.

US gun culture is in the news again.

What is your take?
It's the forbidden fruit – which is what draws me in. Here in the UK, you can't actually obtain the guns, so I have to hunt them out. If I were to live in the US I would be allowed to buy as many as possible, and I wouldn't bother.

Are you anti-gun?

I don't think I can be. I'm just commenting on the reality of the situation. Art doesn't commend it, it just holds up a mirror – or nowadays a widescreen TV – and it is society that is violent. It's not my job to say whether it's right or wrong.



Are men inherently violent?

I'm violent in my head due to unfortunate events in my life, but I'm fortunate enough that I have an outlet in my work to get rid of it all.

What is your next project?

It's top-secret, but I did just buy some Eighties replica *Rambo* weapons. Oh yes. They were actually banned. The tagline in the US was 'Every child should have one'.

➔ you look at its website for 10 seconds, but the outpourings of bullish tabloid support for a clause in the Crime And Courts Bill 2012-13 enshrining the right to use even 'disproportionate' force against domestic burglars suggests they could yet strike a nerve.

So what would happen if, and it's an enormous and oddly shaped 'if', its petition to have UKIP adopt anti-gun control measures as an electoral pledge is successful, and that UKIP somehow achieves enough power to make these statutes a reality?

DONE WITH GUNS

Well, it's unlikely the streets would be safer. The UK's gun control model, which keeps firearms out of the hands of even the majority of the police force, is envied internationally.

While US gun control is a broad argument – should Americans living in isolated locations populated with dangerous animals be denied their protection? – the evidence suggests that the UK would be better off leaving that genie snoozing in the bottle.

ARM BRITAIN HAS 2,500 MEMBERS WHO SUPPORT THE LEGALISATION OF THE POSSESSION OF FIREARMS FOR HOME PROTECTION

The first time I actually fired a gun, I thought it was going to be great fun. I'd booked time on a range in San Francisco, where a friend and I planned to spend an afternoon playing with iconic film handguns.

In the cocky fashion of the young and blissfully ignorant, we were already planning the hilarious photos we were going to impress our non-shooting acquaintances with, not a single one of which were ever taken.

My very first shot with a .22 made me realise – guns are designed to *kill people*. As we worked our way up the calibre range, from the Glock 17 to the Magnum, I thought back to that afternoon on the bus, and was retroactively terrified.

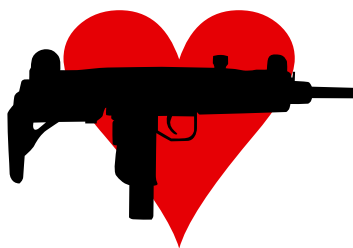
I've fired several guns since, including a 7.62m sniper rifle and an M-203 grenade launcher (the weapon last seen playing the role of Rose McGowan's left leg in *Planet Terror*) and learned to enjoy the sensation, sort of. But I sure as hell wouldn't laugh at the wrong end of one again. **S**

Kevin Godlington is a former soldier who now runs large-scale agriculture businesses in current and former war zones. His TV show *Operation Homefront* will air on Five from 5 June, 8pm

THE SHORTLIST GUN SURVEY

WE CONDUCTED AN INDEPENDENT STUDY OF 421 *SHORTLIST* READERS TO GET YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE MODERN BRITISH MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO FIREARMS AND VIOLENCE

EXPERIENCE



53% have fired a gun for sport. **92%** enjoyed it

41% have fired a real gun on a firing range and **91%** enjoyed it

Own up: are you fascinated by deadly force?

"I love guns. But they promote a climate of fear."
Martin, 29, London

"It is a strange feeling to have a gun in your hand. But most men would have no interest in owning a gun."
Tom, 29, Manchester

"I fired guns on a stag-do in Budapest. I found the experience pointless and grotesque."
Andrew, 27, London

BLOODTHIRSTY FILMS



58% enjoy violent films very much

13% don't enjoy them at all

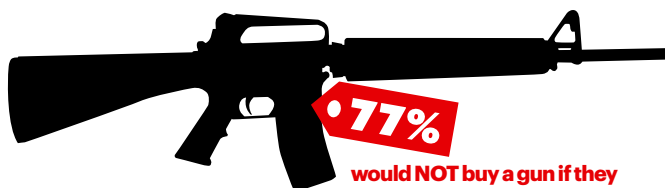
Is violent cinema a dangerous accelerant?

"I do enjoy watching violence, be it on TV or in a film. Scenes of violence increase the heart-rate."
Tom, 29, Manchester

"I enjoyed *Kill Bill*, but not because I take pleasure out of seeing people cut in two with a samurai sword."
Andrew, 27, London

"The fact that some films are labelled as torture porn, for me, means the industry has gone too far. It desensitises the public."
Richard, 29, London

GUN SALES



77% would NOT buy a gun if they were available in the UK. But **9%** would, mostly "for protection"

Should there be a 'gun aisle' in your local supermarket?

"It would be a terrible idea to allow men to buy handguns in the UK – but I would feel forced into owning one for safety reasons."
Zeph, 28, Glasgow

"Owning a firearm would become a horrifying fashion accessory among men; a sign of 'manliness'."
Richard, 29, London

"We'd quickly fall into a vicious circle of people buying guns to defend themselves against crime – triggering more gun sales."
Andrew, 27, London

THE WORLD OF VIDEO GAMES



35% prefer video games that are first-person shooters



82% play first-person shooters "just for fun"



42% play shooters in order to "test their skills"



15% use games to "get aggression out"

Is it acceptable to commit gruesome acts in the pixelated world?

"I would gladly beat up a granny in a game – but never in real life. It's an internal release that channels frustration out of your system."
William, 32, London

"Some games can be a good outlet for stress."
Joaquim, 33, London

"Men respond to situations with an element of the Neanderthal. Games invoke such a response."
Morris, 25, London



FIGHTING TALK

45% of readers have been in a physical fight as an adult

10% of those have instigated a fight as an adult

32% believe men are more violent than in the past

41% believe men are equally violent

Is it ever acceptable to use physical violence?

"Hitting another human being outside of a controlled environment is ridiculously risky."
Richard, 29, London

"Three years ago I punched a guy after he was cheeky to me and my friends. This is not something I'm proud of and I've matured since."
Zeph, 28, Glasgow

"I was headbutted in an unprovoked attack. I'm hugely saddened someone would do this."
Chris, 32, Birmingham