

NANCY FLOYD



SHE'S GOT A  
GUN



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## INTRODUCTION

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n June 30, 1991, I bought a gun. I did not buy it for self-defense, sport, or hobby. I bought it because I missed my brother. The catalyst was Desert Storm. People I knew were being sent to fight in Iraq, and this stirred up strong memories of Jimmy and the Vietnam War. An excellent marksman who had had hopes of becoming a gunsmith, Jimmy left for boot camp when I was nine and died in Vietnam when I was twelve—he was all of twenty-one years of age. Guns were always a part of his life. I bought my gun because I wanted to understand what he loved about firearms. By doing what he loved most, I thought I might learn more about him.

I bought my revolver out of curiosity, with no intention of becoming a long-term gun owner. I had ideas of what gun people were like, and I wasn't going to become one of them. I thought I would shoot for a while and then sell my gun. This didn't happen. I grew to enjoy shooting for a number of reasons; being in the company of gun women played a major role. I enjoyed target practice—shooting at paper targets and learning how to improve my skills. My gun range welcomed women, and a few of us formed a club and met weekly to shoot. Nothing formal. We talked about our accomplishments and failures, and we encouraged each other. We even invited a female police officer to talk to us about her experience as a cop, and some of us took a shooting class together. I found myself hanging out after practice, talking about different types of firearms.



Maggie C. Brown in her garden with her Remington Single Shot .22, Farmington, Georgia; 1997.  
[Chromogenic print. Photograph by Nancy Floyd.]

Maggie Brown: My mother had eleven children. I'm the baby. The youngest sister left home when I was eight years old and I grew up with my brothers. They would take me hunting and they got me a .22 rifle. We'd hunt sometimes two or three times a week. And I finally learned how to shoot as good as they did, even better.

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Off the range we didn't know each other, but on the range we were a small collective with a focus. Our group was not an anomaly: around the country, in various places, women shooters in the 1990s were seeking the company of other women and looking for information and training to meet their needs.

The first year I spent with my revolver I read everything I could find on guns, including *Women & Guns* magazine (1989 to present) and Paxton Quigley's best seller, *Armed and Female* (1989). *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), new movies my gun friends and my feminist friends

talked about, provoked debate over definitions of self-defense and the reasons behind Hollywood's increased interest in armed female characters. Because my own documentary projects as a photographer often included research about social or cultural issues, armed women interested me, and in 1993 I began interviewing and photographing some of the women I met at the range.

I was curious—I wanted to know who these women were and what motivated them to pick up a gun. I wanted to know how they handled their difference at a mostly male shooting range, police precinct, or military base. Where did they get their training? What kinds of guns did they shoot? Even the clothing they wore and the types of carrying cases they chose interested me. Why were they entering, in many cases, troubled waters where “no women allowed” signs were posted in most people's minds?

My interviews and photographs evolved over the years, moving far beyond my initial gun range contacts. Since that first visit to the gun range, I've conducted more than fifty interviews and made portraits of women from California, Georgia, New York, Massachusetts, South Dakota, and Wyoming, and I've amassed hundreds of photographs of gun-related activities. While a few of these women are well known in the gun world, most are not. They come from all walks of life, and their stories include those of a woman whose grandmother was killed by an intruder, an eleven-year-old girl competing in her first gun competition, and a woman who experienced firefights in Iraq.

By the second half of the 1990s I was traveling to archives and libraries to further my research. Because of my interest in visual materials, I focused on the period from the Civil War to the present. Since the mid-nineteenth century, advances in publishing and photographic technology have allowed stories, photographs, and illustrations of armed females to be circulated widely in the popular press, in fiction, and in advertising. For the past 150 years American women have acquired guns for hunting, competition, and self-defense. They've gone to war, some by cross-dressing, and they've joined police departments when allowed to. Because their actions are still contrary to standard notions of femininity and female behavior, these wives, abolitionists, feisty girls, rioters, suffragists, feminists, and military wannabes have often been thought of as curiosities, novelties, and, sometimes, freaks of nature. These women, especially those who bucked oppressive systems or chose their own path, regardless of the challenge, captivated me.

The gun I bought in 1991 was a revolver, a Ruger .38 Special. After the fifteen-day waiting period required by California law, the gun became legally mine, even though I had never before owned or fired a firearm. For six months I flinched with each trigger pull; a year passed before I knew that I was keeping my gun, and



"Sowing and Reaping." *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, May 23, 1863. This is an illustration of Confederate women during the Richmond Bread Riot of April 2, 1863. The Richmond riot was one of many that occurred during the war, when local food supplies ran low in the south.

[Reprint courtesy of Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.]

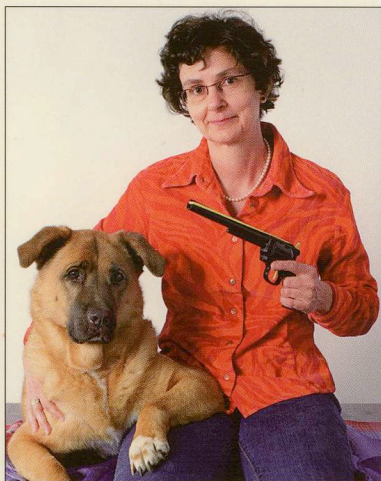


"**S**he's Got a Gun is both entertaining and informative. Floyd's wonderful writing voice has a genuineness that makes me trust what she's telling me. The continuous moving back and forth between real-life gun experiences and representations of gun-toting women in movies and books works well and makes *She's Got a Gun* unique among books on women and guns. Floyd's evenhanded approach combined with the many photos she presents challenge common assumptions about women's relationship with firearms."

—Martha McCaughey, Director of Women's Studies, Appalachian State University, and author of *Real Knockouts: The Physical Feminism of Women's Self-Defense*

"**T**he book's greatest strength is the unique perspective Floyd brings as a documentary photographer, a specialist in visual images and their power—her passion for her subject, her no-nonsense attitude, and her comprehensive perspective on the subject of women and guns. And Floyd's framing of her discussion through references to her family history, and more especially her relationship to her lost brother, is a very effective device both for personalizing her discussion and for drawing the reader into it."

—Mary Zeiss Stange, Professor and Director of the Women's Studies Program at Skidmore College, and author of *Woman the Hunter*



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Author photo: Self-portrait with Ripley and my brother's Slammer 6-38 rubber band gun, 2007. Photograph by Nancy Floyd with the assistance of Jyl Kelly.

Front cover illustrations: A photograph from the hand series, 1993-2007, by Nancy Floyd, superimposed on an image of Annie Oakley from an 1898 Buffalo Bill's Wild West poster, courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

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