

Book Review

American Psychoanalyst

In his new book, rock-star French philosophe Bernard-Henri Lévy hits Route 66. With his driver.

By Carl Swanson



(Photo credit: Sean Kernan)

French celebrity intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy has certain things he wants to say to America, and he wouldn't mind saying them on *The Daily Show*. "Jon Stewart for me is the best," he says. "There is nothing equivalent in France. I often read that in America there is nothing similar to BHL. So it could be a good combination."

If you've never heard the initials BHL, which is what Lévy tends to go by, if you've missed his appearances on *Charlie Rose* or this year's *Vanity Fair* best-dressed list, he's hoping that will change with the publication this month of his new book, *American Vertigo*. In it, he travels the United States "in the footsteps of Tocqueville." The trip was the idea of the *Atlantic Monthly*, which serialized his observations and hired a young assistant to chauffeur him down the open road because BHL doesn't drive. ("It's my infirmity," he apologizes.) The book, his 30th and the first to be published in the United States before France, is a somewhat expanded collection of those dispatches.

"The trip was under three shadows," BHL explains. "The shadow of the war in Iraq, the shadow of an election, and the shadow of Katrina," although the hurricane hadn't struck at the time he wrote the book. "The *anti-ci-pated* shadow of Katrina, as you see. I was in New Orleans four or five months before Katrina, and I more or less foresee what is going to happen."

BHL, 57, is not a man particularly encumbered by modesty. When he comes downstairs from his room at the Carlyle—where he's stayed whenever he's been in town for the past 30 years—he's wearing a black velvet jacket and a white shirt unbuttoned, as is his habit, to display his tanned chest. A self-described "Baudelairean," he is adamantly libertine, with a long history of mistresses. He's also clearly rich—his father owned a large lumber concern, and BHL owns a palace in Morocco and is married to the extraterrestrially beautiful actress Arielle Dombasle.

As a sort of Parisian amalgam of Susan Sontag and Warren Beatty, he's sometimes referred to in France as—trailing Nietzsche here, not DC Comics—"Superman" by admirers and detractors alike. In his daughter Justine Lévy's 2004 novel, *Nothing Serious*, the main character, Louise—a writer who wants desperately to please her father, "BHL"—gets addicted to amphetamines, which she'd seen him take to write more quickly. On them, she becomes "Superlouise," with "direct access to Dad's cortex." (BHL denies it's a tell-all: "My daughter is a writer. The more she reveals, the more she hides.")

At 29, Bernard-Henri Lévy took the first major step toward becoming BHL when he published a book, called *Barbarism With a Human Face*, attacking his fellow intellectuals' fascination with Marxism. It established the patterns of his life and notoriety: anti-totalitarian, internationalist, atheist, and what he calls "anti-anti-American." (He later wrote a book about how the French are "wired for Fascism.") In 2002, he went to Pakistan and wrote a book called *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, about the *Wall Street Journal* reporter, which is how he caught the attention of the *Atlantic*, which was looking for a suitable Frenchman to do a post-9/11 Tocqueville.

"It is not a book of philosophy," BHL says, between digging for cashews out of the bowl of mixed nuts. "Because it's journalism, it is literature, it is funny—I hope you laugh sometimes. But it is a philosophical work in spite of being journalistic, comic, and so on. *C'est un geste philosophique*—a philosophical gesture." He set out to uncover America's "crisis of identity. The most

powerful country in the world does not know what it is, it feels itself in a deep trauma, a deep neurosis. It was interesting to go behind the curtain." A van full of French filmmakers followed him the whole trip, so there'll be a documentary as well. *Synergie!*

American Vertigo, while somewhat adhering to the "footsteps of Tocqueville," careers around, allowing him to drag the ironies out of Cooperstown (which he describes as a church), a suburban Chicago megachurch ("neo-paganist"), an anti-Semitic Indian leader, the Mall of America ("a church," again), John Kerry ("a European at heart"), and a big retirement community (it reminds him of apartheid). He visits with clueless Hollywood liberal Sharon Stone (whom he manages to observe crossing her legs) and finds Las Vegas strippers mechanically standoffish ("the wretchedness of Eros in the land of the Puritans"). In Michigan, he marvels at the solidity of the American identity among Arab immigrants. (The book was finished before the riots broke out in Paris: "We have our crisis there, sure," he says. "You had your riots in the nineties.") In Dallas, at the assassination site of JFK, he wonders, "What is a myth that you no longer believe in that still functions?"

And amid all that is what seems to be his conclusion: that America is a curious sort of empire—not at all like Rome at its zenith or decline—with a particular character of individualism that he hopes will cause the country to do the good it could do in the world. He's disappointed that we aren't living up to our noblesse oblige responsibilities. "The reason I am so angry against neoconservatives is that they spoiled the very idea of intervention," says the self-described Wilsonian. And he's flabbergasted that the American left can be so accommodating to the puritanism of the right. There is, in fact, for a secular blue-stater, little in this book to disagree with: It has, at times, the reinforcement-of-a-worldview pleasures of a well-argued Frank Rich column, or, for that matter, *The Daily Show*.

So is his goal with *American Vertigo* to become BHL in America, a branded public intellectual? "No comment," he says, punching my shoulder lightly. "What I would like is if I could participate in the ideological intellectual debate here and contribute in a slight way."

Still, he's not going to move here. This is, after all, a man with many mistresses, and this country is just one of them. But, in the end, what did he like best about the U.S.?

"Everything, my dear. I will tell you. Sometimes in your private life you have a mistress you love, love being with. You spend time to time in a grand hotel, with good room service, great champagne, and you separate—and when you are really in love with her, you inevitably think, *Could I wake up with her, near her every morning?* And then you try it. This is exactly what I did in America. America was a great mistress. I had a great fuck with America. It was like a weekend in the Hotel du Cap."

American Vertigo
Bernard-Henri Lévy.
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