

Book Review

Section 7 Copyright © 2006 The New York Times

On the Road Avec M. Lévy

By Garrison Keillor

Any American with a big urge to write a book explaining France to the French should read this book first, to get a sense of the hazards involved. Bernard-Henri Lévy is a French writer with a spatter-paint prose style and the grandiosity of a college sophomore; he rambled around this country at the behest of *The Atlantic Monthly* and now has worked

AMERICAN VERTIGO

Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville.

By Bernard-Henri Lévy.

Translated by

Charlotte Mendel.

308 pp. Random House.

\$24.95.

up his notes into a sort of book. It is the classic Freaks, Fatties, Fanatics & Faux Culture Excursion beloved of European journalists for the past 50 years, with

stops at Las Vegas to visit a lap-dancing club and a brothel; Beverly Hills; Dealey Plaza in Dallas; Bourbon Street in New Orleans; Graceland; a gun show in Fort Worth; a "partner-swapping club" in San Francisco with a drag queen with mammoth silicone breasts; the Iowa State Fair ("a festival of American kitsch"); Sun City ("gilded apartheid for the old");

Continued on Page 9



Richard Reeves's 'President Reagan'

On the Road Avec M. Lévy

Continued from Page 1

a stock car race, the Mall of America; Mount Rushmore; a couple of evangelical megachurches; the Mormons of Salt Lake; some Amish, the 2004 national political conventions; Alcatraz — you get the idea. (For some reason he missed the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, the adult video awards, the grave site of Warren G. Harding and the World's Largest Ball of Twine.) You meet Sharon Stone and John Kerry and a woman who once weighed 488 pounds and an obese couple carrying rifles, but there's nobody here whom you recognize. In more than 300 pages, nobody tells a joke. Nobody does much work. Nobody sits and eats and enjoys their food. You've lived all your life in America, never attended a megachurch or a brothel, don't own guns, are non-Amish, and it dawns on you that this is a book about the French. There's no reason for it to exist in English, except as evidence that travel need not be broadening and one should be wary of books with Tocqueville in the title.

In New Orleans, a young woman takes off her clothes on a balcony as young men throw Mardi Gras beads up at her. We learn that much of the city is below sea level. At the stock car race, Lévy senses that the spectators "both dread and hope for an accident." We learn that Los Angeles has no center and is one of the most polluted cities in the country. "Headed for Virginia, and for Norfolk, which is, if I'm not mistaken, one of the oldest towns in a state that was one of the original 13 in the union," Lévy writes. Yes, indeed. He likes Savannah and gets delirious about Seattle, especially the Space Needle, which represents for him "everything that America has always made me dream of: poetry and modernity, precariousness and technical challenge, lightness of form meshed with a Babel syndrome, city lights, the haunting quality of darkness, tall trees of steel." O.K., fine. The Eiffel Tower is quite the deal, too.

But every 10 pages or so, Lévy walks into a wall. About Old Glory, for example. Someone has told him about the rules for proper handling of the flag, and from these (the flag must not be allowed to touch the ground, must be disposed of by burning) he has invented an American flag fetish, a national obsession, a cult of flag worship. Somebody forgot to tell him that to those of us not currently enrolled in the Boy Scouts, these rules aren't a big part of everyday life. He blows a radiator writing about baseball — "this sport that contributes to establishing people's identities and that has truly become part of their civic and patriotic religion, which is baseball" — and when, visiting Cooperstown ("this new Nazareth"), he finds out that Commissioner Bud Selig once laid a wreath at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington, where Abner Doubleday is also buried, Lévy goes out of his mind. An event important only to Selig and his immediate family becomes, to Lévy, an official proclamation "before the eyes of America and the world" of Abner as "the pope of the national religion... that day not just the town but the entire United States joined in a celebration that had the twofold merit of associating the national pastime with the

traditional rural values that Fenimore Cooper's town embodies and also with the patriotic grandeur that the name Doubleday bears." Uh, actually not. Negatory on "pope" and "national" and "entire" and "most" and "embodies" and "Doubleday."

He worships Woody Allen and Charlie Rose in terms that would make Donald Trump cringe with embarrassment. He admires Warren Beatty, though he sees Beatty at a public event "among these rich and beautiful who, as always in America... form a masquerade of the living dead, each one more facelifted and mummified than the next, fierce, a little mutant-looking, inhuman, ultimately disappointing." Lévy is quite comfortable with phrases like "as always in America." Bombast comes naturally to him. Rain falls on the crowd gathered for the dedication of the Clinton library in Little Rock, and to Lévy, it signifies the demise of the Democratic Party. As always with French writers, Lévy is short on the facts, long on conclusions. He has a brief encounter with a young man outside of Montgomery, Ala. ("I listen to him tell me, as if he were justifying himself, about his attachment to this region"), and suddenly sees that the young man has "all the reflexes of Southern culture" and the "studied nonchalance... so characteristic of the region." With his X-ray vision, Lévy is able to reach tall conclusions with a single bound.

And good Lord, the childlike love of paradox — America is magnificent but mad, greedy and modest, drunk with materialism and religiosity, puritan and outrageous, facing toward the future and yet obsessed with its memories. Americans' party loyalty is "very strong and very pliable, extremely tenacious and in the end somewhat empty." Existential and yet devoid of all content and direction. The partner-swapping club is both "libertine" and "conventional," "depraved" and "proper." And so the reader is fascinated and exhausted by Lévy's tedious and original thinking: "A strong

bond holds America together, but a minimal one. An attachment of great force, but not fiercely resolute. A place of high — extremely high — symbolic tension, but a neutral one, a nearly empty one." And what's with the flurries of rhetorical questions? Is this how the French talk or is it something they save for books about America? "What is a Republican? What distinguishes a Republican in the America of today from a Democrat?" Lévy writes, like a student padding out a term paper. "What does this experience tell us?" he writes about the Mall of America. "What do we learn about American civilization from this mausoleum of merchandise, this funeral accumulation of false goods and nondesires in this end-of-the-world setting? What is the effect on the Americans of today of this confined space, this aquarium, where only a semblance of life seems to persist?" And what is one to make of the series of questions — 20 in a row — about Hillary Clinton, in which Lévy implies she is seeking the White House to erase the shame of the Lewinsky affair? Was Lévy aware of the game 20 Questions, commonly played on long car trips in America? Are we to read this passage as a metaphor of American restlessness? Does he understand how irritating this is? Does he? Do you? May I stop now?

America is changing, he concludes, but America will endure. "I still don't think there's reason to despair of this country. No matter how many derangements, dysfunctions, driftings there may be... no matter how fragmented the political and social space may be; despite this nihilist hypertrophy of petty antiquarian memory; despite this hyperobesity — increasingly less metaphorical — of the great social bodies that form the invisible edifice of the country; despite the utter misery of the ghettos... I can't manage to convince myself of the collapse, heralded in Europe, of the American model."

Thanks, pal. I don't imagine France collapsing anytime soon either. Thanks for coming. Don't let the door hit you on the way out. For your next book, tell us about those riots in France, the cars burning in the suburbs of Paris. What was that all about? Were fat people involved? □

In more than 300 pages, nobody tells a joke. Nobody does much work. Nobody sits and eats and enjoys their food.