

On the Road

Writer follows a map of the stars to understand America. Warren Beatty for president, mon ami?

By [Brian Miller](#)

THE FRENCH Charlie Rose, Bernard-Henri Lévy, is as well-connected and charming as anyone you're likely to meet, here or in Paris. He's also got a sound sense of society in crisis in *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville* (Random House, \$24.95), researched in 2004 as our presidential election and the Iraq war were raging. Things weren't quite as eventful in 1831, when Alexis de Tocqueville, aged 25, spent nine months touring the U.S., venturing as far west as Michigan (then all wilderness) and as far south as New Orleans (then sitting a little higher on the delta than it is today). His mission was to report on the American penal system, but his observations ("the tyranny of the majority") went famously further.

Lévy, now 57, already has his fame: He's the author of some 30 books, an occasional filmmaker, a pop intellectual/journalist well known on French TV screens. *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine had the bright idea to have him re-create Tocqueville's journey—actually extending it to all corners of the U.S.—and that serialized reportage now forms the entertainingly skimmable middle section of *American Vertigo*. The introduction and final "Reflections" are considerably denser going, full of Leo Strauss, Francis

Fukuyama, Nietzsche, neocons, Edward Gibbon, the fall of Rome, the Hapsburg Empire, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Susan Sontag, and sentiments like, "In short, no doubt the American intellectual landscape is even more complex, multilayered, and contradictory than I feel at the end of this provisional and imperfect assessment of the current state of affairs."

In short? The book works best in Lévy's random road-trip encounters, not his ponderous musings. Not that he's particularly original in either regard. The aging boomer is nostalgically drawn to icons like Kerouac, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Elvis, the Kennedys ("they are America's Greeks"), and Norman Mailer. Worse, he's a name-dropper not just of European intellectuals, but of celebs including Sharon Stone, Woody Allen, and Warren Beatty—all of whom he flatters with a visit. He also parleys with name-brand political thinkers like Richard Perle, William Kristol, and Christopher Hitchens, watches a pathetic South Dakota powwow with Sen. Tom Daschle on the (losing) campaign trail, and interviews John Kerry, "so good and yet so enigmatically disappointing . . . a European at heart." (Dubya's handlers sensibly won't



Lévy's *pensées* range from brothels to baseball.

Thierry Dudoit / *l'Express* / Editing

allow him close enough to make that kind of comparison.) Yet direct quotes are conspicuously few, and nobody says anything interesting to the author; it's all about his generous generalizations, not theirs.

LÉVY MOSTLY sees the good in America and in its citizens, which is why so many are willing to talk to him. He seems genuinely infected by our optimism, by "this magnificent, mad country, laboratory of the best and the worst, greedy and modest, at home in the world and self-obsessed, puritan and outrageous, facing toward the future and yet obsessed with its memories." As you'd expect from the author of *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, he's quick to call bullshit on anti-Semitism, racism, and the intolerance of both Islam and our own neo-Puritanism. He's a member of the elite who believes, profoundly and democratically, in sticking up for the little guy.

And boy does he like "Seattle, Mon Amour." EMP, Le Pichet, Frank Blethen, Ron Reagan, the market, the mountains, the bay. "If I had to choose an American city to live in—if I had to pick a place, and only one, where I had the feeling in America of rediscovering my lost bearings—it would be Seattle."

So I can't criticize Lévy too strongly, and *American Vertigo* is also a record of his charming and disarming everyone he encounters. He can't even bring himself to actively dislike the neocons, only disagree with them, especially when it comes to Iraq. He sees in them a dangerous "messianism . . . an excess of morals" which impels them to remake the world. But, as with any religious belief carried too far, he argues, the core values can still be worthy—and its believers should be judged by those better impulses.

Not to say Lévy approves of everything he encountered. He sees in our gated communities and interest-group, single-issue politics "that temptation of apartheid," the old communitarian ideal being sliced up into "identarian allegiances" that our politicians exploit so well. It's a weakening of federalism, he warns, citing "the evil of factions" prophesied by our Founding Fathers. In our wacky, ersatz shrines and monuments (Mount Rushmore, San Simeon, Graceland, etc.), he diagnoses "the American museographic delirium"—a fetishizing of the irrecoverable past, history as it never was. He also deplors a general "social obesity" (since there are fat people in France, too), a pervasive super-sizing mentality that leads to hubris abroad. In which sense, the Iraq war isn't an imperial adventure so much as a hand caught in the cookie jar, a failure to control appetite. For Lévy, Gitmo, illegal rendition, and our secret gulag of post-9/11 prisons are more damning moral failures.

Valid criticisms all: And wouldn't you rather hear them from a friend?

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Bernard-Henri Lévy will appear at University Book Store, 7 p.m. Thurs., Feb. 9.