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**Author Q&A: Bernard-Henri Levy**

By John Freeman  
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French philosopher and best-selling author Bernard-Henri Levy. (Jim Watson/Getty/AFP)

French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy may be the only intellectual in the world more famous for his wardrobe than for what he does in it, but he does roll up his shirt sleeves on occasion.

His 2002 book, "Who Killed Daniel Pearl," drew upon years of research conducted in Pakistan, while his latest took him on the road in the good ole U.S. of A.

At the request of the Atlantic Monthly, the raven-locked social critic set out on a modern-day retracing of the 1831 travels of French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. Levy may not have been on the road as long as his predecessor, but he is equally eclectic.

"I would not eat at McDonald's by choice," he says while sipping Diet Coke, "but I did not mind it so much."  
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He talked about "American Vertigo" while in a New York

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hotel lounge, his shirt unbuttoned so far one has to lean back not to glimpse his navel.

**Q:** In "American Vertigo," you visit cities such as Buffalo and are cheered by the blight - why?

**A:** You see this idea that life is a permanent movement. When (Americans) are finished with a city, you go to another one. This, I like this idea. This idea of movement. This idea that you never turn a city into an icon, an idol - the nonidolatry of places. This is a beautiful idea, which is part of the best of the American mind.

**Q:** Were there any cities you fell in love with?

**A:** Savannah, Seattle, Chicago.

**Q:** De Tocqueville originally began his project to write about American prisons, and so you went to some, too. What do they say about the country?

**A:** On one hand, there is the death penalty, which cannot be minimized, which gives a very dark light in jails. The other thing is that, compared to my country, you have a huge number of petty delinquents. ... in America (it seems) there is a penal treatment of the social question.

**Q:** In your travels, do you find this is unique to America?

**A:** Except that what is new in America is that there is a bigger proportion now who are stuck into poverty and will never get out. And statistics seem to show that the poor don't vote. This is not a problem of America - it's a problem of all the democracies in the world. New democracies vote; old democracies don't vote. There are big proportions of nonvoters in Italy, for instance.

**Q:** When you were traveling in, say, Tennessee, or in Savannah, Ga., did you feel the regional affinity was stronger than their national identity?

**A:** Maybe, but the strength of this country and, in a way, the miracle is that even in these parts of the country, even these states where you have a strong local, specific culture, where they have a historical grievance against this country, even there is the strength of the feeling of being an American.

**Q:** Did you come to any conclusions about where that comes from?

**A:** No, I don't know. In Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, there is a huge river, full of blood, between America and them. And there is a deep memory of that, of that time, a deep memory, a cult of the memory, as you know. When they say "the war," they don't mean the Second World War, or even the First World War, they mean the Civil War.

**'American Vertigo'**

By Bernard-Henri Levy

Random House, 320 pages, \$25

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