



'I wrote it for the son'

Bernard-Henri Levy is France's most celebrated intellectual, famed as much for his flamboyant lifestyle as his philosophical works. Now, in his latest book, he unravels the mystery surrounding the murder of US journalist Daniel Pearl. He tells Amelia Gentleman why he had to do it

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Monday morning at the Cafe de Flore and waiters in long-white aprons are dancing attendance on the tourists. Hard-boiled eggs and baguettes are waiting on the counter; champagne is cooling in large silver bowls. This is a four-star guide-book destination. Once the canteen to Picasso, Hemingway and Simone de Beauvoir, it is not a neutral venue for a rendezvous with the man who allows himself to be described on his bookjackets as France's leading philosopher.

Bernard-Henri Levy appears to spend a lot of time here. When he arrives, the maitre d' hands him some post and the waiters acknowledge him with deference. Levy casually lets slip that he drank here with Sartre in his youth.

BHL, as he is semi-affectionately known in the French media, comes with just as much baggage as the Cafe de Flore. Over the decades, a powerful cult of personality has developed around him and he has become as notorious for his flamboyant lifestyle as for his writing. He has worn the same signature outfit of black suit and white shirt, unbuttoned to somewhere halfway between the navel and the throat, for the past 30 years. Details of his passionate relationship with his wife, Arielle Dombasle (one of the world's most beautiful women, according to Paris Match) are more familiar to most than his academic work; the two have hardly parted since their marriage, dividing their time between palatial residences in Morocco, the South of France and Boulevard St Germain.

In France, Levy is lionised and lampooned in equal measure. Admirers compare him breathlessly to Charles Baudelaire, Emile Zola and Victor Hugo. His detractors, railing against the phoniness of the playboy philosopher, have frequently arranged to have custard pies hurled at his immaculate hair. A

prolific writer who has tackled subjects as diverse as Salman Rushdie and Piero della Francesca, he has also dabbled, with varying success, in film, documentaries, fiction, theatre and, bizarrely, diplomacy. When the US-led coalition began sending troops to Afghanistan, France announced it would be sending BHL as a peace envoy instead. The subjects he broaches are eminently serious - forgotten wars in Sudan, Cambodia and Somalia as well as tracts on Sartre - and yet he is more likely to be featured on the party pages of French magazines than quoted in the latest philosophical journals.

He is irritated by this popular obsession with his image, which he feels deflects attention from his writing and could not be more irrelevant to the subject of his latest book - an investigation into the murder of the journalist Daniel Pearl. "I am not a writer who cultivates his image," he says with prickly distaste, as yet another button on his shirt slips open. "I've never spent time on it. I do what think I should do, I write what I want to do, and life goes on."

But it is obvious that his celebrity is partly responsible for the book's extraordinary success in France, which has no particular connection to the death in February 2002 of the American journalist who was targeted by a British assassin in a remote part of Pakistan.

An extraordinary narrative has emerged from the laptop of this darling of the French media. In the abstract, it is no surprise that Pearl's death should be recycled as page-turning literature. The circumstances of his assassination remain as compelling as they are mysterious. His kidnap during an investigative assignment for his newspaper, the Wall Street Journal, the shackled video plea for help, the antisemitism of the killers, the desperate appeals for mercy made by his pregnant wife, the final shocking images of his execution - all make gripping reading.

More peculiar is the style that Levy, 55, has adopted to retell the story - part fiction, part journalism, part police-work, part thriller. He describes it as a unique literary genre, which he has awarded a new classification - romanquete - half novel, half investigation; he concedes it has its roots in works such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*.

The genre allows him the freedom to present precise accuracy when it is available and to make up the areas where it isn't. The death scene is made up. In *Qui a Tué Daniel Pearl?*, the subject spends his last moments, before his throat is cut, thinking about his life, his first ice-cream, his wife, Marianne, the delicious qualities of a loaf of French bread, his mother's

laughter. "His eyes closed, Pearl feels the motion of the knife as it approaches his throat," Levy writes. "He is sweating and shivering at the same time. He hears a dog barking, far away. A fly buzzing close to him. And then, the squawk of a chicken that gets mixed up with his own cry, astonishment mixed with pain, inhuman."

Levy abandoned his cafe lifestyle to spend a year interviewing everyone involved in the murder, travelling through the most dangerous regions of Pakistan in his subject's footsteps, making several trips to India and America, stopping off in England, Spain, Bosnia and Dubai.

The book is written as a chronological account of his investigations. He searches for clues, he visits the house where Pearl spent several weeks in captivity, he speaks to Pearl's family, wife and childhood friends, solicits information from colleagues, interviews the Pakistani and US investigators, encounters the sinister forces of the Pakistani Intelligence Services, the ISI, talks to diplomats in India and conspiracy theorists around the world. He tracks down the brother of Omar Sheikh, the man convicted of abducting and killing Pearl, in a clothing warehouse in the East End of London, and talks to former classmates at the London School of Economics.

Levy doesn't need to write for money (he inherited a family fortune) or for fame; his writing is driven by personal passions and obsessions. At every step of the investigation, Levy is present - talking about his own Jewishness, his own fears, his developing theories. It is an extreme form of "I-journalism" which has irritated some of his reviewers, but his insights are sharp and the affinity he feels with Pearl is often moving.

Levy sees the book as more than just the history of one man's tragic death. He uses the murder to remind readers that the current obsession with the threat of Iraq is misguided, and argues that the growth of anti-Americanism and antisemitism in Pakistan and across the Islamic world presents a much greater threat to global security.

"I know that the success or failure of a book is never an accident. Perhaps people understood that Pakistan was more important than Iraq and that in many ways the death of Daniel Pearl was a more important issue to highlight than the search for Saddam Hussein," he says.

In the current climate of French anti-Americanism, Levy describes himself as a champion of the anti-anti-American cause. "The book says that hatred of America is becoming an

issue of global importance. Second, it says that antisemitism is experiencing, alongside this anti-Americanism, an expansion which hasn't been seen since the second world war. We all have our eyes fixed on the Arab nations, when in fact the really important scene is the Islamic world. Things happen less in Palestine, Jordan in Syria and in Iraq, than in Afghanistan, in Indonesia, in the Philippines, or Pakistan."

Levy has no doubt that the plot's author was Omar Sheikh, who remains in a Pakistani jail waiting to appeal against his death sentence. But he is intrigued by what compelled Sheikh and his al-Qaida associates to choose Pearl. The theory he selects finally is that Pearl was killed with the assistance of the ISI because he knew too much about the exchange of nuclear intelligence between Pakistan (which at that time was already working as a close ally to the US) and al-Qaida. "Pearl was not merely any American or any Jew, he was a journalist who worked on these very specific subjects. My thesis is that his death was connected to the issues that he was investigating," Levy says.

It is not a thesis subscribed to by the Wall Street Journal, which points out that if Pearl had been making progress on such a sensational theme he would probably have discussed it with his editors. His father, Judea Pearl, is also sceptical. "This was a propaganda exercise," he says. "The motive, I believe, was the fact that for four months since 9/11 the US had been bombarding Afghanistan and there had been no reaction from al-Qaida. They felt the need to strike back and the easiest way to do this was to pick up an innocent US reporter. Especially given that he was Jewish."

Nevertheless, he is delighted at the book's appearance. "I appreciate the efforts of BHL in bringing this crime to the attention of the world and emphasising its importance," he says. He is also grateful at Levy's decision to donate half the author's rights in the English editions to Pearl's only child, Adam, who was born a few months after his father's death, and to the Daniel Pearl Foundation - which works to "minimise the hate of which he was a victim".

"I wrote it for the son - wrote it thinking of Adam Pearl," Levy says. "I think that one day or another, this child will discover the details of how his father died, regardless of the family's vigilance, their attempts to keep it secret. I wanted him to have two perspectives - that of the assassins expressed through the videos of the execution, but also, through the book, the point of view of someone who has taken the part of the victim."