

Who Killed Daniel Pearl?

October 25, 2003

In 2001, an American journalist was kidnapped in Pakistan, then cut into pieces. A Frenchman set out to investigate what really happened.

Take one troubled French philosopher, set him on the trail of a doomed American journalist, send both to Pakistan and follow them to the heart of darkness.

In *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy pays homage to Danny Pearl, the 38-year-old Wall Street Journal reporter who was kidnapped and eventually decapitated by Islamic extremists in Karachi in January last year.

In the weeks after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Pearl went to Pakistan, in pursuit of Britain's "Shoe Bomber" Richard Reid, who tried to blow up an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami in December that year.

Reid's orders originated in Pakistan and Pearl was investigating the link. He was abducted on the way to a meeting with a senior Islamic cleric who he thought could shed light on the case.

After 30 books and an effervescent career as a professor, presidential envoy and activist, author Levy is lionised in France. But in the English-speaking West, he is more read about than read, often mocked for his open-to-the-waist shirts, sexy film-star wife and 18th-century palace in Marrakech. He has been dismissed as a dilettante by critics such as Philip Hensher of *The Spectator*, who called his biography of Jean-Paul Sartre "unbelievably stupid, ill-written, completely disorganised and monstrously rambling".

Ramble Levy most certainly does, but to great effect in this book. The style is reminiscent of cinema verite - all rough cuts and real locations - as he investigates the murder of the "posthumous friend" he never met, and profiles another stranger, the man who organised the abduction.

In the house where Pearl's throat was slashed and his body cut into 10 pieces, Levy examines the bloodstained walls within which the killers videotaped their exploit. "I remain there for an hour, letting the silence of the place slowly penetrate me, forever, in this terrible setting of the

ordeal of the 10 times sundered," he writes.

Fuelled by outrage, Levy embarks on his investigation, focusing on the British-born Pakistani militant Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, one of four men convicted of Pearl's murder and the only one sentenced to death. All are appealing their sentences, but Levy believes higher-ups have escaped justice.

Slipping comfortably into the role of global gumshoe, the Frenchman uses an old diplomatic passport to pull strings and gain access to sensitive intelligence in India, Afghanistan and the Middle East, building a detailed portrait of the kidnapper.

Once a student of the prestigious London School of Economics, Sheikh was apparently radicalised by the plight of Bosnian Muslims, and later spent time in an Indian jail for kidnapping foreign tourists. Freed in Afghanistan in return for hostages seized by the hijackers of an Indian Airlines passenger plane in 1999, he became an instructor in the terrorist training camps and was hand-picked by Osama bin Laden to manage al-Qaeda's finances. When the Taliban were ousted from Kabul, he returned to Pakistan, where he lured Pearl to his fate.

Levy is at his best tracing Sheikh's moves, particularly his murky links to Islamists within Pakistan's military and intelligence services, who protected him from the police and for whom he had transferred funds to the September 11 hijackers.

The author spent a year on his investigation (his publisher wanted the book quickly), and it shows in his failure to nail those he believes are the culprits, or even to establish their real motives. Was it because Pearl, like Levy, was Jewish? Or an American? Or a journalist? Levy's feeling is that Pearl was onto something and was killed for it. It was "a journalist's death - dead not only because of what he was, but because of what he was looking for, and perhaps finding, and planning to write about".

Pakistan's President, General Pervez Musharraf, agrees, but blames the victim. Pearl, he says, was "over-inquisitive ... unfortunately, he got involved in intelligence games". Levy does not seriously investigate that claim.

The Wall Street Journal refused to talk to Levy, and rejects his conclusion that their reporter was killed because he knew too much about plans by sympathetic Pakistani spies and scientists to transfer nuclear technology to terrorists. Pearl's widow, Mariane - who has

just published her own book - has not endorsed Levy's findings.

But, while the author misleads the Pakistani authorities about the purpose of his inquiries, he is frank with readers about the speculative nature of much of his book. He calls it a roman-quete, combining the techniques of the roman (novel) and an enquete (investigation). The publishers' catalogue lists the book under fiction/true crime.

Where the facts fail him, Levy invents - for example, "revealing" Pearl's thoughts and feelings just before his murder. It's positively post-Descartes: "I think, therefore I know."

Yet this is a worthwhile and beautifully written book about issues that go to the heart of the so-called war on terrorism. Levy evokes the atmosphere of duplicity and veiled menace that pervades Pakistan's labyrinthine terrorist-state interface. He captures the dangers and frustrations of a correspondent's life. He takes the reader deep into places such as Karachi, Pakistan's benighted port city, "where our next tragedies are hatching". His portrait of the drug lord and post-Taliban governor of Kandahar, Gul Agha - one of our "allies" in the war on terrorism - is priceless.

Levy supported the war in Afghanistan but opposed Iraq as a distraction from the main game. Emerging from his "whirlpool of hypotheses" surrounding Pearl's murder, he asserts that "Pakistan is the biggest rogue state of all the rogue states of today". The diplomat in him would, no doubt, qualify that verdict with the recognition that things could be worse in Pakistan, and sanctioning the country - the usual response to such emotive language - would be the best way to make it so.

But, occasionally, there should be room for a full-throated cri de coeur, and *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* is a cry from the heart that sold 200,000 copies in France.