

Life and death of Daniel Pearl



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On Books

Who Killed Daniel Pearl?

By Bernard-Henri Levy
Melville House. 454 pp. \$25.95

A Mighty Heart

The Brave Life and Death of My Husband Danny Pearl
By Mariane Pearl with Sarah Crichton
Scribner. 288 pp. \$25

Imagine the poignant dinner — an interview now being beside the point — that might take place between Wall Street Journal journalist Danny Pearl and U.N. diplomat Sergio Vieira de Mello.

If, of course, there's an Intercontinental Hotel in heaven. Both cosmopolitan men, men of exquisite ethical sensitivity, whose appreciation of Islamic culture, openness to grievance, and belief in better tomorrows couldn't be snuffed out by the terrorist world's daily gift of ugliness, injustice and senseless mayhem — until it struck the two of them personally.

Both wantonly murdered — Pearl beheaded by his Karachi kidnapers, Vieira de Mello blasted to a slow, excruciatingly painful death by an Iraqi truck bomb — thanks to the vilest among the local Muslims they sought to understand, and, by understanding, perhaps help.

"They got the wrong man," you might imagine each thinking about the other, but not about himself, such self-regard being uncharacteristic of either. Yet isn't that exactly why terrorism's pain cuts so deep? What victims of terrorism — aside from assassinated dictators — deserve to be slaughtered without warning?

The life and death of Daniel Pearl — remembered, explored, interpreted and even imagined in these two complementary, absorbing accounts — touched thousands beyond the journalists first drawn to his fate after he disappeared on Jan. 23, 2002.

The unfairness, the cruelty, of Pearl's treatment, tested one's limits for moral disgust.

Pearl's killers took a Jewish Wall Street Journal reporter known for his concern for Third World peoples and their problems, married to a part-Cuban, part-Dutch, part-Chinese, part-Jewish and Buddhist woman of color (raised in France and a full partner in his generous multicultural spirit), and tricked him into becoming a captive because they knew he'd willingly listen to the "Islamic terrorist side" of the "war on terror."

Ignorant as well as cruel, too simpleminded to read cultural markers outside their brainwashed world, his psychopathic killers abducted an undogmatic young husband awaiting his first-born, trying to do his job by snaring one more interview in Pakistan before leaving the country. They stupidly judged him to be a Mossad spy. So they forced Pearl to mouth political platitudes on videotape before beheading him, then hacked his body into pieces after his death, as if wishing to announce, "Yes, we're even more bestial than you imagine, if that's possible."

Wasn't the overall message of their side that Westerners would all be better off living in a lovely Islamic world with their values? If so, you might say they failed the cross-cultural course in international public relations.

For the courageous French-Jewish philosopher, journalist, and human-rights activist Bernard-Henri Levy, Pearl became, as Levy followed his tragedy, a "brother," "my posthumous friend," an intimate stranger whose adventurous spirit and ecumenical tolerance commanded Levy to write about him.

For Mariane Pearl, married less than three years to the charming reporter she met at a 1998 Paris party and quickly grew to adore, he persists as a brilliant burst of sunshine, competence, goofiness and goodness who should have remained with her, as the marriage "contract" they cowrote promised, "to grow old together, while keeping each other young."

Both Levy and Pearl unfold their tales chronologically. Levy recounts his year-long investigation of Pearl and the convicted organizer of his murder, Pakistani-English terrorist Omar Sheikh, which took Levy to Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, England — and Los Angeles, to meet the victim's parents.

Pearl provides scene after scene from immediately before her husband's kidnapping, the period of five weeks from his failure to return home to the announcement of his killing, through the birth of their son, Adam, meetings with Presidents (Musharraf, Chirac and Bush), and a mailbox filled with baby congratulations, condolences and solidarity from around the world. Along the way, she interweaves vignettes of better times, glimpses of the partner for whom she felt "absolute love."

Both authors present a chilling picture of Pakistan today. They suggest that while President Bush calls for billions for Iraq and Afghanistan, it's Pakistan — our so-called "ally" against terrorism, our "friendly" nuclear peer that shares technology with North Korea — we must fear.

Levy describes Karachi, the sweltering port city of 14 million people where jihadists kidnapped Pearl, as a growing "black hole" full of "virulent anti-Semitism" and al Qaeda sympathizers. He finds it jammed with treacherous members of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI), a kind of CIA and FBI combined, a "state-within-a-state" with many officials still committed to Taliban-like jihadism. It teems with madrassa mullahs who supply recruits to that movement. Mariane Pearl calls it "a capital of blind hatred and violent militancy."

Finally, though, the books diverge, illuminating their subject like equally mesmerizing participants in an intense dinner-party debate. Levy brilliantly combines a sharply observed diary of how it feels to track the terrorist trail, as Danny Pearl attempted, with passionate political and philosophical denunciation of Pakistan, which he labels "the biggest rogue of all the rogue states of today."

Mariane Pearl, true to that "mighty heart" she shares with her deceased spouse, takes pains, even while castigating the ISI as corrupt and culpable in her husband's death, to spotlight brave Pakistani counterterrorist officers and associates who stood by her during her terrible five weeks, and continue to defend civilized values as their nation becomes, in Levy's phrase, "the Devil's own home."

Levy's *J'accuse* abounds with bold judgments. He charges (and adduces evidence) that Sheikh doubled as both ISI agent and "favored son" of Osama bin Laden, embodying a "synthesis" of ISI and al Qaeda: "You look for the ISI, you find al Qaeda; you look for al Qaeda, you run into the ISI."

He speculates Pearl may have been killed because he'd caught on to the connection. He dubs Karachi's Bidori Town madrassa, or religious seminary, an al Qaeda training camp, a "terrorist Vatican." He presents evidence, previously reported elsewhere, that Sheikh may have been financially connected to the 9/11 attacks, and says "the ultimate responsibility of Pakistan in the Sept. 11 attack ... remains part of the great unspoken in the America of George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld."

Mariane Pearl understandably spends more time remembering her husband than prosecuting his killers, though her judgments about Sheikh jibe with Levy's. She shares Danny's loving e-mails, recounts how he'd talk to "Embryo" (their unborn son) in a private language, and always be boyishly "juggling Palm Pilot and pads and documents spilling out of manila folders." Her husband, she asserts proudly, "didn't represent a country or a flag, just the pursuit of truth."

Her portraits of the men and women who kept her whole — among them the U.S. consul, the Journal's foreign editor, and the Pakistani counterterrorist chief she calls "Captain" — mix affection, respect and crisp detail. The moment when all must finally convince her that Danny is dead — the consul must bluntly use the word *beheaded* — breaks your heart.

Yet Pearl's accounts of managing the media beast — fighting off a pushy Connie Chung, savaging CBS president Andrew Heyward over the phone for broadcasting excerpts from the execution video — pack an almost equal punch. And if you don't cry reading some of the letters sent to unborn Adam Pearl on President Bush's urging, you probably can't cry. As a document of the nuts and bolts of seeing one's life break apart in a terrorist kidnapping, *A Mighty Heart* sears the soul.

Little hope emerges from Levy's book. The ray of it in Pearl's comes from Muslims such as former heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali, who issued a statement to the kidnappers: "I appeal to you to show Daniel Pearl compassion and kindness. Treat him as you would wish all Muslims to be treated by others." Former pop singer Cat Stevens called on the terrorists "to show the world the Mercy of Islam."

Both these books notice a clash of civilizations, but not between Islam and the West. It's the battle within Islam itself. Will history record a religion that devolved into hatred and sadism, or one that returned to its better part in tolerance? Only the world's Muslims can decide that jihad.



Associated Press / CNN
Reporter Daniel Pearl in captivity in 2002.

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