

# Did the murder have a meaning?

Christopher Tayler on two accounts of the events surrounding the abduction and killing of the journalist Daniel Pearl

## A Mighty Heart: The Brave Life and Death of My Husband, Daniel Pearl

by Mariane Pearl with Sarah Crichton

Virago, £10.99, 278 pp

£10.99 (£2.25 p&p) 0870 155 7222

## Who Killed Daniel Pearl?

by Bernard-Henri Lévy  
tr by James Mitchell

Duckworth, £20, 454 pp

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DANIEL PEARL, the *Wall Street Journal's* South Asia bureau chief, was kidnapped in Karachi, Pakistan, on January 23, 2002. His abductors posed as middlemen who would take him to a clandestine meeting with Sheikh Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani – a cleric whose apparent connection to Richard Reid, the failed British “shoe bomber”, had recently been reported by the *Boston Globe*. Under this pretext, they drove him to a farmhouse in the outskirts of Karachi, where he was probably kept for just over a week.

Pearl's captors e-mailed the press four days after the kidnapping, demanding the return of Pakistani nationals held in Guantánamo. They also accused him of being an American spy. Three days later a second e-mail claimed that Pearl worked for Mossad, and around this time the “National Movement for the Restoration of Pakistani Sovereignty” abruptly decided to murder their prisoner. Pearl was decapitated, on camera, and buried behind the farmhouse. On February 21, a video of his murder was delivered to the US consulate in Pakistan.

On the video, Pearl delivers some scripted-sounding denunciations of American foreign policy. He also answers questions about his religious background, at one point, notoriously, telling the camera, “My father is Jewish. My mother is Jewish. I'm Jewish.” His killers must have seen this as a humiliating and incriminating confession. (It's worth noting, however, that – as his parents interpret them – these words were a gesture of pride and dignity. A further reference to his great-grandfather was clearly not scripted by the kidnappers, and his family have drawn some com-



Daniel Pearl in captivity. He was decapitated, on camera

the world, his pregnant wife, Mariane, was in Karachi. Mrs Pearl, a French journalist, had been working alongside her husband, with whom she had moved to Bombay after his promotion to bureau chief. Pearl, who had been filling in for a colleague, was abducted towards the end of his assignment in Pakistan: the couple had been due to leave for home the next morning. Instead, Mrs Pearl found herself in the middle of the increasingly desperate search for the kidnappers – an experience she recounts in her new memoir, *A Mighty Heart*.

Co-written with Sarah Crichton, an American journalist, Mrs Pearl's book begins on the day of her husband's disappearance, and ends, months later, with the birth of the Pearls' son Adam. Their personal and professional relationship is sketched in flashback: Pearl, she writes, was a disarmingly thoughtful man who saw his work as contributing to “a dialogue between civilizations”.

But the bulk of the memoir describes in forensic detail her anxious weeks of dealing with the media, organising appeals, and working with the police and counter-terrorism agents who, assisted by the FBI, were trying to save her husband. This part of the story is made all the more painful by the knowledge that, for most of the investigation, the man they were working to rescue was already dead.

audiences back home: this, she felt, would have been a form of capitulation to the kidnapers. Her memoir, though moving, is equally tough-minded. The long work of grieving is not described, but Mrs Pearl, a committed Buddhist, seems a resilient woman. “How come you're not bitter?” she was asked by George W. Bush. “I told him that if I let bitterness overcome me, I would lose my soul, and if I lost my soul, I also would lose Danny's.”

At the same time, she is clearly still angered by some of the murkier aspects of the case – notably the mysterious role played by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency. For instance, Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh – the public-school and LSE-educated British Islamist who masterminded the kidnapping – surrendered to a retired ISI officer and was held for a week before his detention was made known to the investigators who were looking for Pearl.

Factions within the ISI are frequently alleged to sympathise with Islamist causes, and suspicions of some kind of cover-up are hard to avoid. *A Mighty Heart* gives an account of the known facts, but Bernard-Henri Lévy, France's most famous philosopher, goes much further in his search for the meaning in Pearl's murder. In *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, he calls it “a crime of state”, and describes Pakistan as “a black hole

Lévy, who has used his fame in France to publicise human-rights causes around the world, describes his new book as a *romanquête* – a novelistic investigation in the tradition of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Most of it describes his dangerous research in Pakistan, but there are also passages in which Lévy, with questionable taste, imagines Pearl's thoughts in the hours leading up to his murder. The novelistic approach makes for a fast-paced narrative, but it also detracts from the authority of Lévy's conclusions.

He is unwilling to accept that Pearl was killed because he was an American and a Jew whose work as a journalist made him an easy target. Instead, he hypothesises that Pearl knew too much about collusion between al-Qaeda and the ISI, having perhaps found evidence of Pakistan's complicity in the transfer of nuclear technology to terrorist groups.

Lévy paints a frightening picture of Pakistan's Islamist underworld, and he is probably right to warn that, in counter-terrorism terms, the country presents a far more dangerous challenge to Western policymakers than Saddam Hussein's de-fanged Iraq ever did. He's probably right, too, in saying that some ISI officers knew more than they let on about the kidnapping. However, he offers no persuasive evidence that Pearl was on the trail of nuclear terrorists – a claim that Pearl's editors at the *Wall Street Journal* have also rejected.

It would be comforting to be able to give Pearl's death a meaning of the kind attributed to it by Lévy, and to give his killers more practical motivations than anti-Semitism, religious fanaticism, and a feeling of being otherwise powerless to affect world events. Such, however, seems to have been the case. Omar Sheikh, in particular, comes across as a delusional character, his terrorist activities a conduit for an obsession with kidnapping.

Anyone murdered in such terrible circumstances is bound to be given generous obituaries. As these two books make clear, however, Pearl's were entirely deserved. Meanwhile, Omar Sheikh is appealing against a death sentence, still worrying away at what Lévy calls his “*idée fixe*”: during the build-up to the invasion of Iraq, the best this master-terrorist could come up