

**Books**

Clive Sinclair finds some unlikely cultural parallels in a pair of books looking back at last year's horrific slaying of journalist Daniel Pearl. Stefan Bialoguski shares a sceptical writer's enchantment by the practice and personnel of a religious force

# A slaughter in context and in close-up

**CLIVE SINCLAIR**

**WHO KILLED DANIEL PEARL?**

Bernard-Henri Lévy  
(Trans: James X. Mitchell)  
DUCKWORTH, £20

**A MIGHTY HEART**

Mariane Pearl  
VIRAGO, £10.99

**D**aniel Pearl was kidnapped by Pakistani fanatics on January 23, 2002, and murdered approximately eight days later (though his remains were not unearthed until mid-February). In the eyes of his abductors, Pearl was guilty in triplicate; being American, Jewish, and a journalist. What was particularly revolting about the crime was that its climax was filmed.

The fact that the ending is so familiar and so horrible is a technical problem any non-academic book on the subject has to face at the outset. Mariane Pearl, Daniel's wife, deals with it by dispensing with hind-

residence in Karachi, thereby limiting her perspective. She praises her late husband for his willingness to extend sympathy to such alien minds as Omar Sheikh's, a sympathy she understandably withholds. BHL, however, valiantly goes where that angel declines to tread. Using the mind-meld techniques first developed by the Vulcans, he is able to enter Daniel Pearl's consciousness during its last moments, and (more interestingly) to create a plausible personality for the enigmatic Omar Sheikh. There is but one joke in BHL's 450 pages, when he says that he intends to keep a "low profile." To be fair to this philosopher of action, this André Malraux *de nos jours*, he does sustain the role of modest detective for quite long periods, even on occasion admitting to bafflement.

His method is dogged; he revisits every location connected with his two protagonists and questions everyone

But let us forgive BHL these slips (he is not a professional detective, after all) and instead thank him for scaring us half to death with some of the other facts he has uncovered, knowledge of which, he implies, may have cost Pearl his life. These concern the ISI — a hotbed of Muslim fanaticism — and its symbiotic relationship to al-Qaeda. But there is worse, relating to the way Pakistan's nuclear secrets skip easily from the lab to the Taliban, and on to the dark recesses of al-Qaeda.

Thank God for Steven Seagal. Where did he spring from? Well, when Mariane Pearl first introduced Randall Bennett, regional security officer at the US Consulate in Karachi, with his golden earring, slicked-back, shoulder-length hair, and martial arts expertise, I immediately thought of the Hollywood hero.

It turns out my casting was spot on. When most of the kidnappers have been arrested and it still seems Daniel will be rescued, Mariane writes: "Sensing an imminent happy ending we are indulging in silly speculation. Our adventure has turned into a Hollywood movie." In which Asra, her best friend, will be played by Winona Ryder, and Randall... by Steven Seagal. Mariane is too modest to cast herself. I'd suggest Selma Hayek.

These are distracting responses to a book that should be able to move the reader with simplicity rather than knowingness. But even if the egos of the tellers are sometimes too appar-



**Daniel Pearl (inset) and his widow, Mariane, with artist John Corcoran at the January 2003 dedication of a memorial statue in New York** **AP**



memoir on January 23 2002, and relives experiences as they happened, so that the shock of her husband's death hits her (and the reader) anew. Bernard-Henri Levy (BHL hereafter), France's philosopher-king, creates suspense by reopening the investigation, with himself as chief investigator. He fearlessly follows the trail of the tale's two protagonists — Daniel Pearl and his kidnapper, Omar Sheikh — and reports his findings (red herrings *et al*) in real time. As it happens, both Mariane Pearl and BHL come to the same conclusion; that Omar Sheikh was not a

those sentiments in Mariane's initial benediction upon those noble souls who had sustained her while trying so desperately to save her husband. "You are the bravest men I have ever met. You went straight to hell, where darkness is the deepest, because you hate injustice, and racism, and tyranny." The comparison is not as far-fetched as it sounds; after all Bram Stoker feared an atavistic cult from the east, and looked to America for salvation.

Being pregnant and possibly endangered herself, Mariane is necessarily confined to her temporary

ent, the tale they tell breaks through in all its heartbreak and terror. Nor do the books cancel each other out; they are complementary. Mariane Pearl provides a compelling insider's account of the kidnapping, while BHL is able to provide a clearer picture of the land and the culture that can spawn such life-denying fanaticism. Now we need the cure — something more progressive than cutting off heads and driving stakes through hearts.

*Clive Sinclair's latest novel is "Meet the Wife" (Picador).*

# Astonishing wealth of naivety

STEFAN BIALOGUSKI

THE REBBE'S ARMY: INSIDE THE WORLD OF CHABAD-LUBAVITCH  
Sue Fishkoff

SHOCKEN/ORCA, £17.99

Everyone has limits. For me, it was sitting on the Tube sandwiched between a couple of missionaries sporting "Jews for Jesus" T-shirts. Concerned that other passengers could mistake my kipah as a sign that we formed a trinity, I moved to another part of the carriage.

For others, the limit can be when Chabad rolls into town. The suspicion and hostility directed Lubavitchers' way spans the range of Jewish observance and affiliation, as Fishkoff shows in this thought-provoking account. They are criticised within Orthodox circles for drinking too much and for their Messianism as well as for lack of — or, ironically, over-abundance of — religious learning.

Non-Orthodox streams resent them for the usual range of theological and political reasons, not least their right-wing political activism in Israel. And the secular resent their proselytising (see Howard Jacobson's reference to them in his TV version of "Roots Schmoots") and "too

Jewish" appearance. But, reading "The Rebbe's Army," it is hard not to conclude that, no matter how legitimate various criticisms of Lubavitch may be, much of the negativity stems from nothing more sophisticated than old-fashioned sour grapes.

As Fishkoff takes us through the experiences of *shlichim* struggling to keep body and soul together and ultimately succeeding in injecting new life into fading Jewish communities, it is disheartening to see their lofty-neighbour idealism targeted by people who have been unable to deliver similar results.

Complacent community institutions suddenly find themselves losing members and donors to energetic and charmingly naive newlyweds from Brooklyn. But the assumption of importance made by many such organisations is shown to be as empty as an ornate mezuzah case when compared to the *haimishe* humanity of the "Rebbe's salesmen" who, for all their faults, tend to give fundamentalism a good name.

Fishkoff explores Chabad's astonishing post-war growth into a multinational organisation with a annual turnover of \$1 billion, examining its American operations in particular. In doing so, she also takes us on a notably especially-profound, but undeniably fascinating, tour of American Jewry. As a liberal journalist, Fishkoff could easily have been tempted to try to produce an exposé of the sect. On

the other hand, having little religious background, she shares the wonder of many at how the sincerity, humility and love displayed by people with whom she initially felt she had next to nothing in common managed to make her feel "deeply connected."

She does tackle the biggest fly in the Chabad ointment: the veneration of the late Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, which has spilled over into outright proclamation of him as "King Messiah." Fishkoff is at pains to push the official line that such Messianists have been marginalised; but the uncomfortably Christian-sounding comments made by some of the *shlichim* she interviewed are enough to show why many people fear that these Chasidim are on the way to forming a variant on the "Yiddish for *Joschika*" theme.

Overall, the book offers a tantalising, and occasionally inspiring, look at the human beings behind Lubavitch's success; flashes of colour amid the black-and-white of the uniform. There are nearly 4,000 husband-and-wife *shlichut* teams spread across 61 countries — though it was more astonishing to read that there are five American states that do not have a Chabad House. These *shlichim* lead congregations, set up schools, run drug-rehabilitation centres, build *mikvaot*, sponsor Pesach Seders, and visit Jewish prison inmates.

Fishkoff is compassionate in her descriptions of the experiences of



The late Lubavitcher Rebbe, pictured in 1992, in one of his regular weekly encounters with community members in Brooklyn. FILEPHOTO: AP

Fishkoff's writing, but who could fail to be moved by the marvel of Rabbi Shlomo Cumin's *chutzpah* in founding Los Angeles' Chabad House, or the awe-inspiring commitment of Detroit's Levi Shemtov to save drug addicts?

The basic message, in Fishkoff's words is that "Jews are members of the same family, and we need to be more tolerant of one another's practices and lifestyle."

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