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Books of The Times | 'American Vertigo'

A Modern-Day Tocqueville Finds an Uncertain America

By WILLIAM GRIMES

Bernard-Henri Lévy landed a juicy assignment when The Atlantic Monthly, in an inspired move, asked him to hit the road and observe the United States, just as his fellow countryman Alexis de Tocqueville did 173 years ago. Tocqueville's wanderings led to "Democracy in America," perhaps the most penetrating work on American society and politics ever written. Mr. Lévy, after covering 15,000 miles of highway and taking a few shortcuts by air, comes up with "American Vertigo," a messy, self-indulgent logbook with just enough insightful commentary to suggest the book that might have been.

Mr. Lévy, France's leading critic of reflexive anti-Americanism, is the French intellectual most likely to give the United States a sympathetic read. He is also, and has been for a long time, a cosseted darling of the press and television, a figure famous enough to be known simply by his initials, B.H.L. "American Vertigo" feels like the kind of book a star might write: a disjointed collection of random observations, facile generalizations and MTV-style fast-cut takes on American popular culture, expressed in a high-flying rhetorical style that goes down well in France, but translates badly into English.

Give Mr. Lévy credit for pluck. He dives right into Rikers Island, New York City's main jail, where he watches, aghast, as a male prisoner masturbates furiously in front of an impassive female guard. He attends services at a megachurch in suburban Chicago and, presenting a book to Lee Strobel, a celebrity minister, declares himself an atheist. (Mr. Strobel signs the book "Hi, Bernie!" and recommends that Mr. Lévy say the atheist's prayer: "God, if you are there, show yourself.") He stares deep into the eyes of Sharon Stone while discussing the present state of the Democratic Party; watches a stock-car race in Knoxville, Iowa; goes quail hunting in Georgia; and, for unfathomable reasons, follows Charlie Rose around the streets of his hometown, Henderson, N.C.

From time to time, at widely spaced intervals, these encounters and side trips elicit an illuminating thought, or simply a sharp observation, like his annoyed reaction to the ever-present, have-a-nice-day smiles on American faces, "those affectless, emotionless smiles, smiles that seem to be there only to signify the pure will to smile." It is illuminating to see, through shocked French eyes, American poverty and urban decay, and to hear that the most distressing aspect of the American penal system (after the death penalty) is the sense that prisoners have been banished, sent to another world from which no one expects them, in any meaningful sense, to return.

Mr. Lévy is, in some ways, a good traveling companion. He takes a keen interest in American politics, and he loves American literature. His voyage of discovery owes as much to Jack Kerouac or Walt Whitman as it does to Tocqueville, a writer whom, he notes in his preface, he barely knew before setting out. But because he lives almost entirely inside his head, he does a remarkably poor job at communicating the sights, sounds and smells of American life. There are many moments, riding in the car with him, that you want to tell him to shut up for five minutes and take a good look at what's out the window.

He is lazy. Tocqueville, faced with the bewildering logic of American politics and American habits, rolled up his sleeves and tried to account for what he saw. Mr. Lévy dashes off a few lines, shrugs his shoulders and tosses out

rhetorical questions. Some are long and involved, others quite brief, like the "Who knows?" that caps his musings on the inner life of President Bush. At least half of the provocative questions that make up "American Vertigo" should have been written down as homework assignments for the author rather than lobbed in the face of the reader. He does not bother to chase down elusive facts, like who finances Medicaid. Instead, he wraps them in an "I'm told," or "it's said that."

Mr. Lévy is perceptive about American politics, although much of what he has to say seems more pertinent for a French audience reflexively hostile to current American policies. Admirably, in a final chapter called "Reflections," he holds up some of the reigning anti-American assumptions and picks them apart. Although an opponent of the Iraq war, he reminds his French audience that the behavior of the American government and the American press during the Abu Ghraib scandal looks like a model of responsiveness and transparency compared to the French response to the torture of Algerians.

On the philosophical plane, in other words, Mr. Lévy performs better than he does as a reporter. He delivers news that may strike Americans as not all that remarkable — the Rockies are very high, and you can find liberals in Austin, even though it's in Bush's home state — or remarkable for the wrong reasons. He gazes enraptured at the stadium near the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, "where, they say, some of the finest games in the country are played."

Soaring high on the hot thermal currents of his own rhetoric, he loses track of what words actually mean. When he drops a phrase like "the mythic cities of Tennessee," where are we exactly? Chattanooga?

America left Mr. Lévy dizzy. And he returns the favor, musing madly about "this magnificent, mad country, laboratory of the best and the worst, greedy and modest, at home in the world and self-obsessed, puritan and outrageous, facing toward the future and yet obsessed with its memories." That sounds fine. But Tocqueville's shoes, and his footsteps, still look very large.