

THE GOOD EUROPEAN

Michael Roth

AMERICAN VERTIGO: TRAVELING AMERICA IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF TOCQUEVILLE

BY BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY

NEW YORK: RANDOM HOUSE. 320 PAGES. \$25.

Bernard-Henri Lévy is famous for being famous. How can he be taken seriously, the journalists ask, when so much attention is given to his gorgeous, movie-star wife, his sumptuous estate, and the number of buttons he always leaves open on his white shirt framed by a chic black suit? And then they ask again. BHL (as he is known in France) combats his celebrity while adding to it with every book he writes, which he has lately done at impressive speed. His intellectual biography of Sartre appeared in English in 2003, as did his *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* and *War, Evil, and the End of History* was published in 2004. In 2005, to mark the 170th anniversary of the publication of Alexis de Tocqueville's

equality? Would the thirst for equality result in the destruction of freedom? Would participation in public life be subverted by the pursuit of private pleasure under the guise of individual liberty? Tocqueville's discussions of these themes helped to create the political language that is still in use today to understand the competing virtues within American political culture.

Lévy is an interesting choice to update the European consideration of the United States, because he has been a compelling opponent of the inanities of anti-Americanism while remaining highly critical of specific aspects of US domestic and foreign policy. Since he has focused on the problem of violence in the contemporary

inability to be more European.

Although Lévy travels across the country, his lack of curiosity is astonishing. He is quick to criticize behavior that wouldn't go down well in Paris, but he rarely considers either the historical antecedents of the behavior or its current cultural function. He is not trying to learn about American democracy or American culture; he is trying to learn about the American destiny of European ideals—i.e., BHL's ideals. So there are all-too-predictable comments on erotic life, on religion, on entertainment. And although there is no consideration of science or technology, Lévy does spend time talking to Warren Beatty and Sharon Stone, two figures who continue to fascinate French film fans.

If Lévy sees little to admire in Las Vegas or San Francisco, he enjoys himself in Seattle and Savannah. The last is an interesting choice. He falls for historical reconstruction and the effort to preserve southern charm. But the great event in Savannah for Lévy occurs when he discovers his own namesake. He is told that one of the store owners from some time ago was an Alsatian named Lévy. And our would-be Tocqueville can't contain his delight in finding that this man's initials were also BHL! He is delighted to find *himself* in Savannah. In much of his travels across the country, that's all that he is looking for.

Despite a penchant for self-confirmation, Lévy does have interesting things to say about democracy in America. He is eager to defend the United States as a land of the idea of freedom, and he cautiously observes that Europeans may see the future of what is best about their culture embodied in a country they love to hate. Lévy notes that many around the globe view Americans as de Gaulle once described the Jews: a people sure of itself and domineering. But Lévy sees the United States as radically uncertain of its own destiny in the world and doubtful about its capacities to build a more just society at home. He worries about this lack of confidence because he wants the United States to remind the rest of the West why it is important to defend human rights and democracy. Although scathing in his criticism of US lawlessness in fighting terrorism and in pursuing the war in Iraq, Lévy is sympathetic to those aspects of neoconservative idealism that *should* lead the United States to struggle against genocide and promote the possibility of prosperity and equality.

Lévy traveled the United States to understand how modern European values—his values—were faring. Although he sees dizzying confusion across the land, he hopes that the United States can regain confidence in its capacity to promote equality without enforcing uniformity; that it can regain confidence in the ideals of freedom and participation—not only for Americans or Europeans but as values that can inspire progressive change around the world. Despite its many faults, this book's very serious hope for American renewal does offer an alternative to the sophisticated cynicism of those who have given up on the possibility of making meaning in the world by struggling for democracy in America. □

Michael Roth is a writer based in Oakland, California.



Left: Nineteenth-century engraving of Alexis de Tocqueville. Right: Bernard-Henri Lévy, New York, 2005.

Democracy in America, the *Atlantic Monthly* asked Lévy to travel around the United States gathering his impressions of American society and politics. Now these articles form the basis of a new book, *American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville*.

Lévy is that rare intellectual who takes ideas very seriously, yet for all that is no less interested in what is going on in the world right now. He has crossed the globe not only to give interviews and to appear at conferences, but also to explore some of the darkest and dirtiest conflicts in order to gain a clearer understanding of what meaning history might still have and of how that meaning might be related to the progressive values in which he continues to believe. He knows that seemingly random violence is the great tool for undermining the values of the Enlightenment and modernity. Fascism used violence to attack these values in the middle of the twentieth century. Fundamentalist terrorism is the fascism of our time, its violence aimed at destroying the meaning built through history.

Tocqueville himself came to American shores in the 1830s to reflect on the intersection of modernity and democracy. In the wake of the late-eighteenth-century revolutions, how could a society incorporate the ideals of participation, freedom, and

world, he is able to provide a philosophical context for considering our current confrontation with terrorism. Lévy values the ideal of freedom that he sees at the center of American culture, but he also considers the forces at work that block that ideal. In his extension of Tocqueville, Lévy emphasizes the tyranny of public opinion in the United States. He, too, notices that the effort of Americans to *be thought well of* can engender a despotic form of homogeneity. By adding a Foucauldian spice to the Tocquevillian meal, Lévy underlines how the urge to be healthy, to be *normal*, produces pernicious pressure on the American spirit.

Lévy's study seems very much geared toward a French audience. His Gallic compatriots have always had a hard time understanding the American obsession with private morality. Lévy returns often to the Puritan legacy in the United States in this volume (especially when visiting a lap dancer, a brothel, or a sex club), and he still can't believe that even people on the left were disturbed that Clinton had an affair with an intern. He sees their concern as a symptom of the absolute rule of public opinion and a rigid moralism that obscures much more important aspects of political life. (This is so different from France!) But rather than ask why Americans have these concerns, he just rails against America's

192 BOOKS

One Ninety Two Tenth Avenue
New York, New York 10011
Telephone: 212.255.4022

JULIAN BARNES
Arthur & George
January 27th, 7pm

Julian Barnes will be reading from his newest novel, *Arthur & George*, which was shortlisted for last year's Man Booker Prize. Based on a true encounter in the life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, this wonderful and inventive novel describes the only time in his estimable life that Conan Doyle agreed to act the part of detective for real.

An elegant and gripping novel, and a rare opportunity to hear one of England's finest living writers.

This latest reading continues 192 Books' commitment to presenting significant writers from around the world, reading from their most recent and important works.

People who have appeared over the past months include:

PAUL AUSTER
ALICE MUNRO
JOAN DIDION
JOHN ASHBURY
SALMAN RUSHDIE
HARRY MATHEWS
JAMES SALTER
HILARY SPURLING
FRANCINE DU PLESSIX GRAY
ORHAN PAMUK

Watch for our list of Spring readings soon. Please call to make reservations. 212.255.4022.