

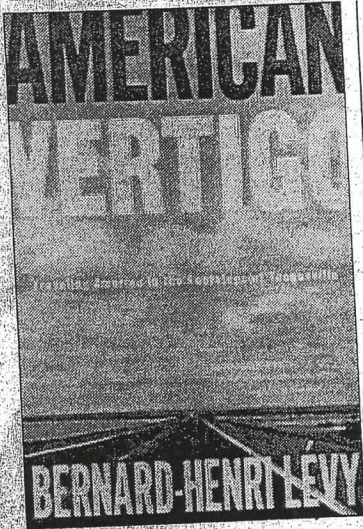
Camelot

► "VERTIGO"
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next to a pathetic memorial at nearby Wounded Knee. After visiting Cooperstown, N.Y., he contemplates Americans' strange compulsion to memorialize everything in museums, and is refreshed by the living history — preserved in that most European of foundations, the city — that he finds in Savannah, Ga. He also sensitively confronts our willful blindness, as when we cling to Camelot despite knowing that Kennedy was a physically broken womanizer.

Lévy can be a writer of enormous power and vitality, and more than a few times he perfectly captures a piece of American life. He writes that black delegates to an evangelical convention in Memphis were "formal, deadly serious, walking as if in a procession, at once rivals and accomplices in their admirable wish to offer the Almighty the spectacle of their gold and finery." Of the Mayo Clinic he writes, "given that here lies one of the core issues of the country, one of its bleeding wounds, given that reform of the public-health system is the most difficult challenge America will have to meet over the next few years — given all that, I choose . . . to buy into the medical legend. Long live the Mayo Clinic. Long live its consulting physicians. Long live its philosophy of recruiting from within and its so proudly nonlucrative aims. Long live its culture of excellence and its practice of achievement." And Los Angeles is a "burgeoning city that goes on indefinitely, interminably stammering, a huge slow animal, lazy but silently out of control."

The precision with which Lévy frequently hits the mark makes all the more frustrating those instances where he misses it. He neglects the culture of business and enterprise that is such a fundamental part of American identity. He strays too often into scoring points against rival thinkers. And why any writer today would spill so much ink on



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Monica Lewinsky is utterly beyond this reviewer. This last point is symptomatic. In too many ways Lévy's discussion centers on headlines (Hillary Clinton's chances in 2008, Darwin versus the "intelligent design" creationists) rather than the broader, structural questions that have made Tocqueville's work endure. The epilogue's spirited defense of the country from America bashers in Europe is an exception, but he has already made many of these points elsewhere. The result is a book that is alternately exasperating and thrilling, turn-off and spot-on. Not unlike its subject. ■

Michael O'Donnell is a writer and lawyer in Chicago.