

ARTS & BOOKS

Bernard-Henri Lévy: a French writer face to face with the American press

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***American Vertigo: travelling America in the footsteps of Tocqueville*, by French “philosopher” Bernard-Henri Lévy stirred up a lively polemic in the American press.**

In this book, Bernard-Henri Lévy, a.k.a. BHL, purports to describe and analyse American society. *American Vertigo* originated from a set of articles commissioned from BHL by the *Atlantic Monthly*, which wanted to recreate Tocqueville’s journey. After the September 2001 attacks and the resulting identity crisis, *Atlantic* director Cullen Murphy was looking for a new and fresh vision of the USA. He chose BHL for his audacious style. His commission was not disclosed, but according to *The Economist*, it was extremely generous.

BHL followed Alexis de Tocqueville’s footsteps and tried to use the same methods as his predecessor. He travelled 25000 km all over the US; he visited jails such as Alcatraz or Guantanamo Bay; he met a vast range of Americans, superstars such as Sharon Stone, John Kerry and Woody Allen, but also countless ordinary citizens. The result of this long trip (July 2004 - September 2005) is a compilation of notes, spelling out a French intellectual’s take on the USA.

Even before its publication in New York, the book benefited from an imposing promotional campaign organised by its editor, Random House (who also declined to disclose the cost). The campaign included an American book tour with invitations to famous talk shows like *The Daily Show*, hosted by Jon Stewart and 30 interviews with various media groups like *Fox News*, *CNN*, and *Vanity Fair*.

However, despite this carefully crafted advertising campaign, the reception of the book was lukewarm. *American Vertigo* raised numerous uncomfortable questions and touched upon sensitive topics, thereby giving rise to mixed reactions in the press. Some reviewers openly approved of this “foolhardy and courageous project”*, and stood up for BHL. The *New Republic* praised him for his “acute eyes.”**

But many wrote rather virulent criticisms. Most of the time BHL’s stance was not taken seriously: “as always with French writers, Lévy is short on the facts and long on conclusions”***. BHL was also pinned as a narcissist and pretentious dandy: “BHL is not a man particularly encumbered by modesty”****. He was often compared to a “glamorous rock star”*****

Several journalists also seemed to echo the anti-French feeling of the US. Some used the book in order to fuel this ongoing polemic and to denigrate France’s quirky, irksome and pedantic “intellectuals”. BHL was accused of spending “far too much time telling us things that we already know”*****.

BHL’s aim “was to consider whether the many European perceptions about America were accurate or not”***** so as to encourage debate and discussion. In that sense the book was a success. Publishing-wise, the mixed reactions helped to foster interest in the book. *Random House* has already printed 75.000 copies of it. BHL’s photograph was on the front page of *the New York Times*. And on February 12th, *American Vertigo* entered the bestseller list at 15th place.

Sources: * Marianne Wiggins, “The accidental tourist,” *The Los Angeles Times* 22 January 2006.

** Martin Peretz, “BHL USA,” *The New Republic* 02 February 2006.

*** Garisson Kaillor, “On The Road With M. Lévy,” *The New York Times* 29 January 2006.

**** Carl Swanson, “American Psychoanalyst,” *New York Magazine* 23 January 2006.

***** Dylan Foley, “Following In Tocqueville’s path,” *The Denver Post* 29 January 2006.

***** BHL, “On The Road Again,” *The New York Times* 19 February 2006.

***** Brian Miller, “On The Road,” *Seattle Weekly* 8 February 2006.