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BOOKS

Daniel Pearl's life and death told with facts and fiction

By Kristin Hohenadel, Special to The Times

PARIS --When French writer Bernard-Henri Lévy saw the gruesome video of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl's murder last year, he was struck by the suspicion that it didn't tell the whole story. To pursue his hunch, he undertook a risky yearlong, around-the-world investigation that took him to London, Dubai, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Pearl's parents' home in Encino, even to the room in Karachi, Pakistan, where Pearl was killed.

He retraced Pearl's steps and attempted to re-create the twisted rise of one of his killers, the British-born "perfect Englishman" turned extremist Ahmad Omar Saeed Sheikh.



Daniel Pearl was killed in early 2002 (Agence France-Presse)

Lévy's 500-page book "Who Killed Daniel Pearl?" — to be released in the U.S. on Tuesday — is based on the theory that Pearl was killed not only for being an American and a Jew, but because he was a journalist on the brink of exposing a big story. The author believes that Pearl's killers were not random fundamentalist madmen but officials of the Pakistani secret service with ties to Al Qaeda, an explosive notion that would indicate that a country with which the U.S. has diplomatic ties might, in fact, be a danger.

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The book was No. 1 on the French bestseller list when it was published here in April. It was the book people were reading on the Metro and the hot topic at Parisian dinner parties: Those who had read it had opinions; those who hadn't made apologies or judged it based on the reputation of its author.

BHL, as his compatriots call him, has written 30 books and is a high-profile essayist, novelist, cultural commentator, journalist and Middle East expert. He is also a diplomat whose most recent assignment was as a special envoy appointed by President Jacques Chirac last year for a fact-finding mission to Afghanistan.

Lévy, 54, began his career covering the war between Pakistan and India over Bangladesh for the underground newspaper Combat, founded by Albert Camus during the Nazi occupation of France. He rose to fame as a result of his 1977 book "Barbarism With a Human Face," which attacked French intellectuals still loyal to Marxism. He is now a tele-philosopher in a country where philosophers still have a place in the national debate. He is also a pro-Israeli, Jewish atheist and an outspoken advocate for what he calls "anti anti-Americanism."

That his embarrassment of riches includes dashing looks, wealth and glamorous actress-singer Arielle Dombasle as a wife makes him, depending on whom you talk to, a national hero or a shamelessly self-promoting celebrity.

'Investigative novel'

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A butler answers the door to Lévy's sumptuous apartment on the Boulevard St.-Germain and leads a guest to wait in a cathedral-ceilinged salon filled with faded velvet antique furniture, porcelain egg collections, stuffed cockatiels and elaborate gilded and crystal-hung wall sconces.

Lévy sashays in a few minutes late for his 11:30 a.m. rendezvous, tall, elegant and slim-hipped in a dark suit and one of the signature white unbuttoned shirts that has long been his much-maligned uniform. His famous hair, which has also earned its fair share of ink, is swirled about his handsome face.

"Sorry I'm late," he says, taking off his dark glasses and leading the way to his spacious study. He is in Paris for the day from his house in St. Paul de Vence in the south of France where he prefers to spend his time these days. He's late, he says, because he was meeting with movie producer Mike Medavoy, who is interested in the rights to his book.

"Who Killed Daniel Pearl?" is what Lévy calls an "investigative novel," meaning that his book is based in fact but embellished with the imagination of the writer — it reads something like a thriller. Lévy wrote as his investigation unfolded in longhand, on the road and at home during a year of constant motion.

He says he used "known facts" whenever possible to reconstruct the crime. And, he writes, "when the tracks were missing, when the witnesses fled, or when there was no actual information because I was dealing with his inner existence or scenes in which he was the sole actor," he filled in the story himself.

"Never give in to the imagination when reality is there and direct investigation should be able to find it," he writes. "But give it a role when reality eludes you and circumstances are such that you are compelled to speculation."

This is a method, he points out, that writers such as Norman Mailer and Truman Capote have used.

"Who Killed Daniel Pearl?" can veer extravagantly from sober description to melodramatic rhetoric, and in translation can read like an even stronger version of itself, like an unpasteurized cheese on an American dinner table. Publishers Weekly, the industry's news magazine, gave the book a starred review and called it a gripping read, but noted that Lévy's conclusions are "far from an open-and-shut case."

The book raises questions and tests possible theories that tell us as much about the mind of the writer as of his subject. He hypothetically re-creates the murder scene in novelistic detail, and includes asides about the suppleness of Pearl's wife's neck and the thoughts Pearl might have had as a boy. He is fond of one-sentence paragraphs.

Like this.

What will Americans think of his style? "It interests me to find out," he says, sipping smoky Lapsang souchong — the house drink — that a quiet woman has brought in.

Using novelistic conventions to round out the story, he says, provides "a supplemental truth, not a superior one. The novel doesn't replace the investigation, it serves it by allowing me to go further."

Lévy's American publisher, Dennis Loy Johnson of the upstart Hoboken, N.J.-based Melville House Books, said by telephone that he was a little apprehensive about selling the ideas of a Frenchman in an era when French-bashing has become fashionable.

"I hope it won't be a problem," Lévy says. "I like America so much. I don't believe in the depth of this Franco-American disaccord. I've been to New York several times recently and I have yet to meet a Francophobe."

But at least one American isn't so sure about the larger theory of Lévy's book: Daniel Pearl's father, Judea.

"The book makes some good points," Pearl said in a telephone interview, "but his major conclusion is wrong — the idea that Danny was killed because he knew too much. It doesn't gel with the facts."

For one thing, Pearl said, it was never mentioned on the video that his son was a journalist. "My theory is that the motive was propaganda, to score a point against the United States and appeal to anti-American and anti-Semitic sentiment. To get back at America's heart. He was not killed for knowing too much."

Did he find it curious that a French journalist, not an American, had taken on the assignment? "That was a puzzle," said Pearl, who expects to release his own book, "I Am Jewish: Reflections Inspired by the Words of Daniel Pearl," (Jewish Light), in January. "I'm full of admiration for him for taking a year from his career — or building his career, maybe," he said with a wry laugh, "but of taking the risk."

Lévy insists that above all, his book is a tribute to Daniel Pearl, whom he paints in an unabashedly heroic light. In one passage, Lévy imagines what might have gone through Pearl's mind during his capture: "A hundred times over the past eight days he has told them that if there were but one American and one Jew left in the world to

extend a hand to Muslims in general, and those of Pakistan in particular, to reject the absurd theme of the clash of civilizations, and to believe in peace with Islam, he would be that man. Daniel Pearl, Jew, liberal, hostile — as his entire career has demonstrated — to everything stupid and arrogant about America, friend of the neglected, of the downtrodden, of the disinherited."

"I didn't treat him like a universal hero, but like an American hero," Lévy says of Pearl, whom he has called a "posthumous friend."

"Obviously, I feel solidarity with him. But I'm not stupidly pro-American. I have disagreements, notably on Iraq, and I am one of the people very shocked today by the lies of the government. But in France I'm considered pro-American — and I'm attacked because of that."

Lévy does not have the cynical air of a war reporter, he says, because he isn't one. Being a journalist is something he does when he feels like it, and he knows he can always come home to Paris, or St. Paul de Vence, or the palace in Marrakesh that he and Dombasle bought from the actor Alain Delon. But Lévy tends to downplay the risks he encountered as a Jew asking pointed questions in the Middle East.

"I think that for me to write, I need to be engaged, to be active," Lévy says. "When you engage yourself, it's important to know what you're talking about. And to know that, you have to go and see.... One is afraid on the plane — 'What's going to happen? Into which hell will I fall?' But life soon organizes itself. I've lived with my fear for a long time. I know how to control it."

"I have the luck to do what I want, the luck that my books sell, and I think I have the obligation to take advantage of that luck," he continues. "I decided from the beginning really to go in search of things that other people aren't covering, and now I have the luck to be able to attract attention to things that nobody else is paying attention to, to talk about things people don't want to hear."

His version of the Daniel Pearl murder is a story that Americans might not want to hear, challenging as it does President Bush's war on Iraq as "historical miscalculation" and suggesting that those elusive weapons of mass destruction are hiding elsewhere. And it will be interesting to see how American readers will react to Lévy's attempt to demystify Pearl's killer, to humanize one figurehead of the "evil" that has become the rhetoric of war.

"'Evil' is a word used by Hegel and Sartre and Bush," Levy says. "I'm not going to renounce this old philosophical word because of George W. Bush. But I don't use it in the same manner. When I talk about evil, for me it's not an exterior evil, it's an evil that is a mirror of ourselves. I don't divide the world up into good and evil."

This might make it hard for Hollywood, with its black-and-white ideas about who the good guys are, to make a faithful film adaptation of Lévy's book.

"It's a compelling story," Medavoy said in a phone interview, pointing out that he and Levy had yet to shake hands on the deal. "It's a difficult story to tell for Americans — you're dealing with a guy who's dead." Transferring the book, much of which takes place in the mind of the narrator, to the screen is another challenge.

"I want to make sure that I know how to make this movie," Medavoy said, "and not embarrass him or myself."

Lévy suffered one big cinematic embarrassment — when his 1997 film "Le Jour et la Nuit," starring his wife and Delon was universally panned. He responded by writing a book about it.

"I don't have a big interest in my books becoming films," Lévy says. "But it's true that I would like there to be a film on Daniel Pearl, whether it's my book or not. For the memory of this boy."

He looks sad when he says this. Lévy continues to collect every scrap of information written about Pearl, and he stays in contact with Pearl's parents and his widow, Mariane, who also is publishing a book about her husband, "A Mighty Heart" (Scribner), at the end of the month. His book is done, Lévy says, and by the end of his investigation he was having a hard time keeping his cover in Karachi. It's time for another reporter to follow up. Why not an American reporter?

"Yes, why not?" he asks, rhetorically.

Lévy is already at work on another book, a philosophy text. But it does not seem a stretch to say that he is haunted by Pearl. "I can say simply that this character has stayed with me more than I thought was possible," he says. "I'm not complaining."

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