



Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
Interview

Pearl case captivates French philosopher

Bookmarks

Geeta Sharma-Jensen

Flamboyant, outspoken French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy was in Afghan President Hamid Karzai's office, on a mission for the French government, when he learned that Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl had been killed.

The story gripped him immediately.

"I was completely struck, completely moved, completely shocked by the imagery of this murder," he says. "When I first saw these images in Kabul, I just felt it was my duty to try to search for the truth, my duty to resume the thread of the investigation that Daniel Pearl was doing. And also my duty to try to praise the values that he embodied, that he fought for."

He went off, then, to retrace Pearl's steps, to find out why a man he consistently calls an "American hero" or "this marvelous boy" was killed in Pakistan, a chilling death captured on video. And as he researched, as he traveled the cities and roads that Pearl traveled, ending up at last in the shabby two-room concrete building outside Karachi, where Pearl was held and eventually killed, he kept writing, putting his thoughts down in an emotional, stream-of-consciousness style.

The result is "Who Killed Daniel Pearl?" just published in translation by Melville House. (This is the same publishing house that capitalized on a stir last year by publishing "A Reader's Manifesto," B.R. Myer's damning critique of the state of American literature.)

It took Levy a year to write his book.

"I did not investigate first and write then," he explained in a phone interview last week as he began his U.S. book tour. "It's a book which is written on the very rhythm of

the research."

Levy's book, a bestseller in France last year, combines fact, imaginative details and deductions to make a case that Pearl was killed not because he was a Jew or an American, but because he got too close to the truth about the cozy connections between certain Pakistani officials, its nuclear scientists and al-Qaida.

Levy is not new to the politics of that region. He first went there in 1971 as a war correspondent covering the Indo-Pakistan conflict over Bangladesh. That brought "Red India," the first of his 30 books. Since then, he's written about other wars as well as Sartre among other topics and gained a reputation as France's unorthodox philosopher, a GQ-style looker who owns a palace in Marrakech and is married to the actress Arielle Dombasle.

On the phone from his New York City hotel last week, he was hand-kissingly polite and charming, easily pouring out his thoughts in streams of accented English. He said he was happy to return once more to New York, a city that "built my imagination when I was a young man," and he was happy to bring his book to America, "because the story of Daniel Pearl belongs, of course, to all mankind but especially to the people of here."

"This is a book about the sort of hate which America can inspire without provoking it," he said. "I think that America is hated not because of its bad side but because of its good side . . . which is man on the moon, which is democracy, freedom of women, liberty of the press, freedom of the speech.

"Sometimes I read America was too arrogant, was too indifferent to the fate of the world and to the poor and that's why she inspires so much hate. This is completely stupid. I hate this sort of rhetoric - that the victim deserves, or the victim that is Daniel Pearl deserves what happened to him. Also, it is false. America is hated for what is good in her, in her message, in her way of living and in her way of being."

Levy still is horrified at the thought that the 21st century began with the image of Pearl, a Jew, being compelled to say in front of a video camera that his father was Jewish, and for that he deserved to die.

"I had the impression that the nightmare was not only continuing but continuing in other forms . . . and somewhere I had this intuition, which was to be confirmed later, that this death of Daniel Pearl was as

symbolic as was the death of the 3,000 and something men and women" on Sept. 11.

He described Pearl as "an average man, a reporter, a great American, a symbol of the 21st century that was just beginning."

Pearl's killing and the Sept. 11 attacks in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania are similar to the pistol shot in Sarajevo in 1914 that began World War I and signaled the start of the 20th century, he said. In the attacks that began the 21st century, "you have here the grand embodiment of the very conflict of the time coming, the conflict between democracy and fanaticism and between open-minded people, as Daniel Pearl was, and satanism, the hater of freedom, the madness of the radical."

In the style of Truman Capote and Norman Mailer, Levy has used details and his imagination to capture Pearl's last days and thoughts. Still, how does he know such things as the way Pearl tried to put on his shoes just hours before he was murdered?

Levy says he used his imagination, but he also had a close source he cannot name. And as he reconstituted Pearl's last days, met with some of the same people Pearl had met with, learned more about Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, the educated Pakistani convicted of Pearl's murder, he couldn't help but come to certain conclusions.

Sometimes, Levy, an atheist, was fearful, too, as he was when he entered a madrasa (school) for an interview.

"I was one of the very few foreigners and surely the only Jew who ever entered this place. Of course I was a little nervous," Levy said, chuckling. "When at every stage of your trip people ask you 'What is your religion?' and you know you have not to say that you are Jewish and better not say you are an atheist, an unbeliever, you can get nervous. But I tried to be careful."