

US presidents have always come to us for an overview of world affairs.



guardian.co.uk

## Odd couple's book of letters gets French literary world buzzing

Angelique Chrisafis and Lizzy Davies in Paris  
The Guardian, Monday September 22 2008



Public Enemies: Bernard Henri Lévy and Michel Houellebecq. Photographs: AFP/Corbis

As critics bemoan the navel-gazing and sexual confessions that continue to dominate the French book scene, nothing generates excitement like a literary stunt. So a leading French publisher spread a rumour that a secret book by a mystery pairing of two of the country's most famous writers was to be released next month, and would reaffirm the literary worth of the nation, setting the bestseller lists on fire.

After months of speculation, the duo was revealed yesterday as Michel Houellebecq, France's award-winning enfant terrible, and Bernard-Henri Lévy, the dapper, leftwing philosopher.

The odd couple, who embody France's love-hate relationship with its celebrity writers, have produced a book of letters to each other in which they lay themselves bare, about their reputations, politics, loves and parents - key for Houellebecq after his mother recently published a memoir calling him a sex-crazed idiot and manipulative fake.

The book could provide a boost for Houellebecq, who despite being hailed as France's most successful living novelist, was lampooned for his recent film-director debut in which he adapted his novel *The Possibility of an Island*, into what French critics said was one of the most boring and ludicrous films ever to grace a cinema screen.

The book *Public Enemies*, to be published next month, was hailed on the front page of *Le Journal du Dimanche* as creating "the biggest literary buzz" ever seen in France.

The publishers Flammarion perhaps hope it will make up for the disappointment surrounding their latest buzz release, the true-story of the very private French football legend Zinedine Zidane.

Despite months of media fanfare and lurid headlines predicting revelations of love children, drug use and match fixing, even the keenest of pundits have been forced to admit that the unauthorised *Zidane: A Secret Life* contains very little new about the former French football captain.

In March this year the publisher dealing with the biography was burgled and a computer containing a draft of the book was stolen. Five days later, the apartment of the manuscript's proof-reader was also broken into - and her computer taken. Police investigating the incidents never found those responsible.