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## Levy Puts a Personal Spin on the USA in 'Vertigo'

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After 1,500 miles of "slow travel" across America, the French writer Bernard-Henri Levy struggles with his conclusions about "this magnificent, mad country, laboratory of the best and worst, greedy and modest, at home in the world and self-obsessed, puritan and outrageous, facing toward the future and yet obsessed with its memories."

Levy's American Vertigo is blessed and cursed by its own dizzy complexity. At turns, it's obvious, obtuse and insightful.

It grew out of Levy's assignment for The Atlantic Monthly during the 2004 presidential campaign to follow in the footsteps (figuratively, not literally) of another well-read French visitor, Alexis de Tocqueville, who in 1831 wrote the classic political travelogue, Democracy in America.

Like Tocqueville, Levy visits prisons and churches, but also a partner-swapping club in San Francisco, a bordello in Nevada and a gun show in Dallas.

He celebrates Seattle and Savannah, mourns the memory of New Orleans and the slow death of Buffalo and Detroit: "That a city could die: for a European, that is unthinkable."

He warns about a "tyranny of the minorities," reversing Tocqueville's famous words about a tyranny of the majority. He finds that Native American activist Russell Means is anti-Semitic, prompting a question: "Does the status of being a victim, or a spokesperson for victims, entitle you to every right?"

He finds symbols everywhere. A visit with TV's Charlie Rose -- "one of the kings of New York " -- back home in Henderson, N.C., restoring the childhood home of his dreams, turns into a lesson on how "America is the place both of the most extreme uprooting and of the most single-minded territoriality."

For a reader not as conversant with Foucault or Nietzsche as Levy, it's an easy book to mock. It's as convenient a target as American culture is for what Levy calls "the thick ignorance of European anti-Americans."

He's not one of them, but he asks hard questions.

After touring the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, Levy writes, "All these men that Bush and Rumsfeld claim are either terrorists (why, in that case, are they not tried?) or prisoners of war (but then why not apply the Geneva Conventions?)"

The book, like its author, defies a simple label. The book jacket says Levy is a "philosopher, journalist, activist and filmmaker," who's been hailed by Vanity Fair as "Superman and prophet: we have no equivalent in the United States."

What we do have is what Levy sees as a tendency to exaggerate and supersize everything. The French Superman targets American obesity, not of bodies, but the obesity of malls, mega-churches, SUVs, election campaign budgets, and public deficits.

If scale is a problem, how about the size of some of Levy's sentences? They're constructed as if ideas and words were colliding bumper-cars.

Here's Levy at his worst:

"America is skyscrapers, but it is also wide-open spaces and deserts; it is scenes of future life but also (I've seen so many of them!) landscapes of the dawn of the world that are certainly not (see the preceding point) 'our' European dawn but that, from Audubon to Baudrillard (along with all those movie Westerns), are a kind of reminiscence of it, or a reminder."

Near the end, Levy interrupts himself to add, "Let me make myself clear."

If only he had.

*American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville*  
By Bernard-Henri Levy  
Random House, 308 pp., \$24.95