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*Bernard-Henri Lévy*, Charlotte Mandell (Translator)

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What does it mean to be an American, and what can America be today? To answer these questions, celebrated philosopher and journalist Bernard-Henri Lévy spent a year traveling throughout the country in the footsteps of another great Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, whose *Democracy in America* remains the most influential book ever written about our country.

The result is *American Vertigo*, a fascinating, wholly fresh look at a country we sometimes only think we know. From Rikers Island to Chicago mega-churches, from Muslim communities in Detroit to an Amish enclave in Iowa, Lévy investigates issues at the heart of our democracy: the special nature of American patriotism, the coexistence of freedom and religion (including the religion of baseball), the prison system, the “return of ideology” and the health of our political institutions, and much more. He revisits and updates Tocqueville’s most important beliefs, such as the dangers posed by “the tyranny of the majority,” explores what Europe and America have to learn from each other, and interprets what he sees with a novelist’s eye and a philosopher’s depth.

Through powerful interview-based portraits across the spectrum of the American people, from prison guards to clergymen, from Norman Mailer to Barack Obama, from Sharon Stone to Richard Holbrooke, Lévy fills his book with a tapestry of American voices—some wise, some shocking. Both the grandeur and the hellish dimensions of American life are unflinchingly explored. And big themes emerge throughout, from the crucial choices America

faces today to the underlying reality that, unlike the “Old World,” America remains the fulfillment of the world’s desire to worship, earn, and live as one wishes—a place, despite all, where inclusion remains not just an ideal but an actual practice.

At a time when Americans are anxious about how the world perceives them and, indeed, keen to make sense of themselves, a brilliant and sympathetic foreign observer has arrived to help us begin a new conversation about the meaning of America.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

## American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville Details

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## From Reader Review American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville for online ebook

### Psychonaut says

I lost steam for this book when I got to the "reflections" section, and it took me forever to finish it. That's the only reason for the 3 stars vs. 4. Up until then, it was interesting- a Frenchman travels through the U.S. and reports on what he sees- focusing mostly on politics and the prison system. His travels took place during Bush's reelection, so a large part of the book is heavily focused in that direction. (And he is clearly left-leaning). The last fourth of the book was spent summarizing and discussing political philosophy in pretty serious depth. That's where he lost my interest. He's obviously very intelligent and educated and the book is well-written (although it could have used fewer run-on sentences). To be fair, he definitely accomplished his goal of recreating Tocqueville's famous travels to America, with an updated critique on the politics and penal system. But this part of the book seemed more geared toward people who study politics on an academic level. To me, the book was most interesting when he was focused on the little things- the people living every day lives in small towns and big cities. I liked his observations and his occasional comparisons to the French and Europeans. Sometimes it's hard to see ourselves objectively and he was good at pointing out the differences that we probably don't think about or notice. For example, how museum-crazy we are. We really do have museums for everything here, I just never thought much about it before. He knows his American history inside and out, and I learned a lot of historical facts as well. He found America equal parts charming and annoying, I think. And at times I found myself feeling defensive, and, could it be... patriotic? But he was pretty accurate and fair in identifying our shortcomings. He never spent very long on one topic (except politics) or one place, so the book is very accurately named. He also named 2 "perfect" cities in America that he could find no fault with and absolutely fell in love with. But I'll leave that for you to discover.

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### Rebecca says

I love the way this author pronounces his name. Bernard Henri Levy. Say it with a french accent now. LOVE IT! He was on a travel podcast I listen to a few months ago and his accent made me swoon. And so smart! I am not a fan of the french, but agh, I love it when it's good. Plus jewish, always a plus.

Anyhoodle. What was this book about? Dude driving around America, seeing what it's all about in the 21stC, following an old French philosopher's trail. Kind of interesting. More political than I was expecting, but politics I agree with, so it wasn't too much of a disappointment. A very recent read, takes place during the 2004 election. A lot of "I remember where I was when..." was going on in my head, which I love!

The last 100 pages went on for a while, reflection. Blah. There was an update on the New Orleans part, which I appreciated. Philosophy always goes over my head too much and this book had a bit much, but after the crap I have been reading lately, this book was kind of nice.

Grade: C

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### David Jedeikin says

Edifying, occasionally rambling account of a modern-day Ameriphile French author-philosopher re-enacting

Alexis de Tocqueville's visit to America in the 19th Century. A mite dated, as it's set during the terrorism-centric Bush years, but nonetheless a fascinating look at America from a European outsider.

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### **Evan Rocher says**

Just a brutal read. Levy's visit to America misses the boat and defines the country through a series of strange tropes that don't reflect much on us: we do not all attend megachurches, go to sex clubs, have a reverence for baseball and flag, weigh more than we should, etc. It's sort of interesting in a few ways, though. First, it gives you a sense of someone who looks for meaning where none appears to the actual citizen--rather than finding something insightful, it finds nothing and puffs it up. Second, you get a sense of what he was looking to find when he visited; he dearly wants America to be, in many ways, better than Europe because it has not yet given up on his political vision of exporting democracy and ending human rights abuses. Finally, some quirks of his timing are amusing--for example, he writes shortly after Katrina that he is confident that now that Americans have seen poverty, they will seriously confront it. He also sees the future of the left as Eliot Spitzer, Sidney Blumenthal, and Warren Beatty. Could you imagine?

He's also, of course, subject to silly political ideas that simply aren't worth discussion. Witness, for example, his confidence that the media must simply reject the 24-hour news cycle and constant spin, and it will go away. His access proves frustrating: he can speak to basically anyone he wants, offering him a strangely tinted view of America (of course, he fails to ask any interesting questions.) Finally, his conclusory essays are borderline unreadable and not worth terribly much. A slog to be avoided.

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### **Matthew Mann says**

Lot's of poignant run-on sentences about Americanness, but I ultimately lost patience.

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### **Asher Gabbay says**

This is a book I've been meaning to read for a long time but it took me a while to get my hands on the original French version. I thought that a book written by a French intellectual and philosopher offering ruminations about America deserved to be read in French... A friend finally got me a copy in France last month and I took it with me on my around-the-world trip this month.[return][return]Bernard-Henry Levy (henceforth, BHL) is somewhat of a celebrity in France (perhaps the only country in the world where a philosopher can become a celebrity). In recent years, he has moved away from writing "pure" philosophical works towards a more journalistic role. In 2002 he spent almost a year, travelling to Pakistan several times to investigate the murder of Daniel Pearl, the Wall Street Journal reporter that was beheaded by Muslim fanatics. He summarised his findings in a book (Who Killed Daniel Pearl?) in which he minces no words when describing the lawlessness of the Pakistani

regime. I vividly recall one sentence from that book (and I'm quoting from memory): "of all the delinquent countries in the world, Pakistan is the most delinquent of all". This was written, mind you, at a time when Pakistan was the US's primary ally in the fight against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.[return][return]BHL embarked on a year-long journey around the US and wrote his observations in American Vertigo. The project was financed by the Atlantic Monthly journal, which asked BHL to follow the footsteps of Alexis De Tocqueville, the French historian who travelled to America in the early 19th century and wrote an analysis of

American civic life in the monumental work Democracy in America, considered one of the classic books in political thought. The idea was for BHL to retrace Tocqueville's journey and provide observations about life in America almost 200 years later. (On a side note: why don't I get offers to travel the world for free for a year? I guess my ruminations are

not, sadly, as in demand as BHL's...)[return][return]The book turned out to be very different from what I thought it would be like. Instead of a long philosophical treatise about the US, the book is a collection of short vignettes, each 2-3 pages long, about the various encounters BHL had during his journey. Having said that, the last third of the book is a heavy-going "summary" of the journey, more typical to BHL's previous writings.[return][return]The journey took place around election time in 2004. BHL covered many walks of American life: politics (he met, among others, Obama, Clinton and Kerry), Hollywood (Sharon Stone, Warren Beatty), prisons (the original aim of Tocqueville was to study the American penitentiary system), entertainment (Vegas, a brothel in Nevada), sports (Baseball Hall of Fame), religion (from born-again evangelists to Brooklyn Jews to Mormons), US history (Mount Rushmore) and much much more. Each vignette describes shortly what he experienced and

then expands on the subject by putting it into context. "The big picture" is a motive that runs throughout the book, with BHL trying to frame each experience within the theory he builds for the American experience.[return][return]And the theory is as follows: America is indeed an empire, but not of the sort Rome was. Its fierce protection of individualism, coupled with a deep sense of integrity and accountability, make it a power to be reckoned with despite the predictions of its decline. It is a land of contradictions: puritanism coupled with promiscuity, religious fervour coupled with materialism of the lowest kind, isolationism coupled with a sense of global duty. As dysfunctional as America is, BHL believes it will endure. He is an "anti anti-American" and repeatedly berates his compatriots for being so automatically against anything American and for falsely predicting the failure of the American model.[return][return]As impartial as BHL tries to be, his love for Ame

rica is apparent throughout the book (although I think he will refuse to admit "love" is the appropriate word). He writes lovingly about Seattle, calling it the one place he would choose to live in if he were to move to the US, only to trade it later in the book with Savannah, Georgia. All in all, I don't think he was successful in "retracing the footsteps" of Tocqueville, but nevertheless this is still an interesting and stimulating book.

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## Michelle says

Following in the footsteps of Tocqueville, Levy's goal was to provide us with an update on "Democracy in America". While he does provide us with an ability to see our political system and our prison system (among other things) from the point of view of an outsider, his Eurocentric and liberal bias really gets in the way of any true revelations. In the end, his inability to clearly present an unbiased view of America left me more annoyed than enlightened.

No, it's not just that American Vertigo presents Americans in a less than perfect light. I can deal with that. After all, I picked this book up precisely because I was interested in how America really appears to the outside world. What I cannot abide, however, is authors who string together multiple questions as if they are attempting some type of rhetorical dialogue...

Really? Doesn't that seem like lazy writing? Aren't we reading your book to gain your perspective and insight? Shouldn't you give us some, rather than bombarding us with questions?

Yeah, like that. At one point, I believe there are no less than five questions lined up end to end.

What is far worse, however, is that his questions are really the only direct form of prose he has. The rest of his writing is vague, obscure, and I hate to say - a bit sloppy. His vocabulary is huge, which doesn't help, but it is more his style of writing that is the problem. He writes episodically - short, choppy passages describing a place or an event. He'll recount discussions with people without really introducing them - as if he assumes you'll automatically know who it is. Maybe we should - many of them are famous politicians, after all. But, his loose descriptions of people make it hard to discern even when he shifts to another person. If I had read this book in 2007, perhaps it would have been easier - with these events and people fresh in my mind. Somehow, I doubt it.

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## Charles Matthews says

French intellectual. Now there's a label bound to raise hackles or elicit sneers in America these days, especially when a French intellectual is writing about his tour of the United States. But Bernard-Henri Lévy didn't come to bury us – or to praise us, for that matter. He came because the Atlantic Monthly invited him to travel around the country during the election year of 2004 and to reflect on what he saw, in the manner of Alexis de Tocqueville's 1835 classic "Democracy in America."

Lévy is a celebrity in France, where he's so famous that he's often referred to by his initials: BHL. He's an activist who founded organizations to combat racism in France and hunger in the Third World, a philosopher who attacked the Marxism that was the dominant strain in French thought, and a journalist whose book "Who Killed Daniel Pearl?" was the subject of both praise and controversy in the United States. He's also well-known for his attacks on what he calls "the thick ignorance of European anti-Americanism." Lévy's own stance is "anti-anti-American," but those two negatives don't neatly add up to a positive.

The first two-thirds of "American Vertigo" is a travelogue that moves east to west and back again, zigzagging along the way, inspired not only by Tocqueville but also by Jack Kerouac and "those road movies that ... have shaped my imagination of America." As an atheist, he feels duty-bound to try to understand American religiosity, to comprehend "the mystery of a people who are at once the most materialistic and the most spiritual," so he visits churches. Though disturbed by the triumphalism of the Christian right, he concludes that America is what it has always been, a secular nation. Like Tocqueville, whose original mission was to study the American prison system, he tours prisons – including Rikers Island, Angola and Guantánamo – and is distressed by what he finds there, and by what he sees as its implications for the American future.

He chats with Americans of all sorts: John Kerry, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama; delegates to the Republican National Convention; neoconservatives Richard Perle, Bill Kristol and Francis Fukuyama; tycoons Henry Kravis, Barry Diller and George Soros; writers Jim Harrison, James Ellroy and Norman Mailer; actors Sharon Stone, Warren Beatty and Woody Allen; American Indian activist Russell Means; Morris Dees of the Southern Poverty Law Center; a Mexican-American officer in the Border Patrol; students in a class on Tocqueville at the University of Texas at Austin; cadets at the Air Force Academy; Cuban exiles in Miami; a Vegas lap-dancer; a dealer at a Fort Worth gun show; a female inmate on death row in Nevada.

He finds only a "little cluster of cities" in the United States where he "could spend three weeks or more": Seattle, Boston, Savannah and New Orleans. But his visit to the last was made before Katrina, which provokes him to a postscript on what that disaster revealed about contemporary America's failures: the continuing problems of poverty, racism and violence, and "the methodical weakening of government that the

neoconservatives have sought for twenty years, and which has now, perhaps, after Katrina, run into its first check."

All of these failings are dealt with at length in the book's concluding third, in which Lévy reveals that whatever reservations he has about the actuality of America – and he has plenty, especially in a time of a war he opposes and a president he regards as "something of a child," albeit "a cunning child" – he retains an admiration for the ideals of America. He warns against "those jihadists about whom you can't say enough times that they aim to destroy what is best about the United States: freedom of speech and thought, equality, women's rights, democracy." But he also asserts that "no large modern nation today is as uncertain as this one, less sure of what it is becoming, less confident of the very values, that is to say, the myths, that founded it." Hence the "vertigo" of the book's title, the symptoms of which include Americans' sentimental and sometimes indiscriminate veneration of their country's past; the worship of bigness; the "Balkanization" of the country's social, ethnic and cultural groups, which threatens an "implosion of national identity"; and the failure to confront such problems as poverty, the decay of cities and "the sorry state of the American health-care system."

The opportunity to see ourselves as others see us is always welcome, but the premise of updating Tocqueville is tired, and it presents Lévy with too large a task, as he admits when he describes America as "mind-boggling" and "multifarious." The tour of the country is like a slide show that needed a good edit – sometimes revealing, sometimes entertaining, sometimes banal. The visits with writers and politicians and intellectuals, which have the potential of stimulating dialogue, are frustratingly brief and often superficial. And Lévy's meandering prose, with its sentences that trail on forever, frequently suggests someone trying out ideas to see if they stick. When he focuses on particulars, whether he's writing about a city or a person or a social problem, he can be provocative. But when he draws back for a take on the big picture, Lévy doesn't do much more than reiterate the liberal consensus.

"American Vertigo" is a swamp of a book: trackless and confusing and often squishy where you expect it to be solid. But as with any swamp, if you're careful where you step and attentive to the surroundings, you may find things in it that are startling and useful.

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## **BlackOxford says**

### **Political Dark Matter**

Recent elections in the United States and Britain produced results that were surprising to the pundits, manna to publishers and embarrassing for the pollsters. Unexpected forces which are still not entirely understood were at work in the electorate. We know these forces exist only because they are necessary to understand what is otherwise unexplainable.

This political situation is identical to the current scientific state of cosmology, the study of the universe. In cosmology, the way the universe behaves is unexplainable without the existence of forces and substances that we have never directly experienced, or even named. The scientific designations for these are the intentionally unilluminating terms of dark energy and dark matter.

Scientists know dark energy and dark matter exist, even if they don't know anything more about them, because when they look at astronomical history, the light from distant stars which could be millions of years old, it isn't what they expect it to be. Or rather, in this ancient light are clues about what is really going on now that we find difficult to grasp.

Reading Bernard-Henri Levy's *American Vertigo* is much like reading the astronomers analysis of the light from distant stars. Written in 2004, it is a well-observed and equally well-written snapshot of the now-distant cultural and political star that was the United States. Levy's unique astuteness, his European sensitivities, and his access to many of the 'players' - the Clintons, Obama, the Bushes, Jesse Jackson, and Michael Moore, among many others, but not Trump - across the American spectrum of politics, race, the arts, and economics interests can be appreciated perhaps only now in the light of current political events. Levy spotted the dark matter in America before many others were aware it even existed.

Levy's overarching cultural conclusion about America in 2004 is not very different from that of Umberto Eco's 1990 *Travels in Hyper Reality*. To put that conclusion briefly, if also bluntly, America is a fake country. It prefers imitation to authenticity. It reveres counterfeit as if it were real. It wants the New to only simulate the Old and then only to give an impression of continuity. Americans may not like the description but Levy gives plentiful evidence to support it.

Levy's visits to places like Cooperstown in New York State, the entirely fictional home of baseball, and the mid-Western faux-pioneer Amana communities, now mere tourist stage sets, are the equivalent of Eco's Disneyland and imitation Pieta exhibitions. The artificiality of these places is precisely why they are preferred. America is a country founded as a non-existent ideal. The ideal is what holds the place together no matter how Reality tries to divide it. These places of American icons are literally fake, but nonetheless more expressive of and closer to the ideal than any original or non-fiction narrative could possibly be.

This preference for the new/old roots, the purpose-built history, the fictional reality, the re-created simulacrum extends well beyond domestic tourism. The American capacity for forgetting its inconvenient past, for example, is likely only exceeded by the Chinese. The Mount Rushmore presidential monument, made famous worldwide by Alfred Hitchcock's film *North by Northwest*, was built by a member of the Ku Klux Klan, on a site sacred to the local Indians, in an intentional act of racial humiliation. There is hardly the dimmest cultural memory that during the series of massive strikes after WWI in the Pacific Northwest, the equivalent of the Jarrow March in England, the working people of Seattle proudly boasted of the United States as "forty-seven states and the Soviet republic of Washington." Like so much else in America, the past is irrelevant, except as edifying fiction.

America also shares far more with China: an ability not to see what is contrary to the national-line, as it were. In China, no one was aware of the famine which killed 45 million people during the Great Leap Forward. Even as family members died of starvation, the devastation was perceived as only local, random, and temporary. Levy's visits to the string of failed Northern cities from Buffalo through Cleveland and on to Detroit leave his European sensibilities reeling. He is incredulous, not because of some temporary economic downturn but because these cities were allowed to dramatically de-populate as a matter of national trade policy over a period of half a century. This destruction was certainly less intense but no less systematic than the Chinese experience, and certainly, as in China, brought about by deliberate government policies. Compared to such wilful ignorance, the necessity to give equal credence in guided tours of the Grand Canyon to both instantaneous creationism and erosion over millennia is trivial.

As many other cultural commentators, including Alexis de Tocqueville and Simon Weil have noted (see GR review of Weil's *On the Abolition of All Political Parties*), the political party structure of the United States is non-ideological. There is no political 'home' for socialist (much less Marxist) or capitalist (say liberal economic) theories. Party debates are notably un-intellectual and are dominated by 'personalities'. There are conservatives and liberals scattered through both parties. Consequently, both major parties are inherently "contentless" and their cut and paste policies are frequently internally inconsistent - liberal gun laws, say, with highly conservative views on marriage, and draconian immigration policies coupled with free trade commitments - so that rational political debate is almost impossible.

A little discussed consequence of the non-ideological character of American politics is the great difficulty it

takes to establish the political presence of an issue if there is no existing conflict between the parties. New issues, even on relatively minor topics, disturb the artificial equilibrium of established party politics (so do old issues that have passed their sell-by dates whose change or removal would be disruptive to party power, like Cuban policy). Without an ideological conduit to facilitate a rationale for such a new issue and its integration into a 'platform', it may be left orphaned, much like the issues of Native American rights, election district gerrymandering, Black voter suppression, a racially biased police and judiciary, globalisation, to name just a few. Or, indeed, as Levy notes explicitly, a continuous Mexican border fence, which wasn't possible to get on either party's agenda in 2004, yet appeared at least reasonable to consider given the level of manpower used to police the border at the time. Any 'end-run' with these issues outside the party machines is both difficult and dangerous, in fact difficult precisely because it is dangerous to party power structures.

Inauthenticity may be the mark of at least many politicians in all democratic countries. However, in his interview with the poet and writer Jim Harrison in the rather remote Montana town of Livingstone, Levy gets some prescient criticism that would have shocked most contemporary Americans. "The problem with America," Harrison says, "is Yale...Both Bush and Kerry are Yale... This represents the triumph of the greedy pigs over the progressives, that's the absolute truth of America." Harrison's take in other words: having the best and the brightest running the country means that the country is run for the best and the brightest. This is echoed in a number of venues around the country but undoubtedly sounded vaguely anti-democratic and unpatriotic at the time.

Politically as well as aesthetically, therefore, American popular culture represents a triumph of Kitsch, an ever forming and reforming, amoebic pastiche of sentimentality, nostalgic myth, and a pinch of irony. This latter ensuring that no one takes anything all too seriously, a variant on the American politicians' plausible deniability. The People may rule but that doesn't mean that they have to take responsibility. Political kitsch is perhaps best summarised by the recent introduction of the concept of 'alternative facts' by the White House Press Secretary. Such a concept may provoke guffaws among the educated classes but it is implicitly understood by the bulk of the electorate.

Political attitudes generally are highly unstable - as in fashion, or the latest music, and hip vocabulary - even when party loyalties persist (they are also lied about as a matter of course, especially to pollsters, the tongue rarely leaving the cheek). The parties have an inherent tendency to avoid emerging political interests. So the political system in its entirety, run by the best educated and almost solely politically experienced segment of the population, can maintain its mythical claim to democratic integrity. To question the legitimacy of this 'elite' verges on the traitorous and could never find its way into mainstream discourse.

Until of course a demagogue like the forty-fifth president comes along and blows the gaff. It was the astronomer, Vera Rubin, who discovered the existence of dark matter in the 1970's. She has never received any accolades for her pioneering work in cosmic physics. It is now estimated that dark matter constitutes by far the majority of the 'stuff' of the universe. Neither did Levy get a prize for his discoveries in 2004 of what also turned out to be the majority of electoral stuff in American politics. Neither in physics, nor in political science do we know what this stuff is. But knowledge of its existence has changed the world we live in decisively. Who can deny that it is definitely more vertiginous?

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## Brooks says

I saw this guy on The daily show and then saw the book in the library. Very different but interesting. This Frenchman spends a year traveling around the USA to re-create the travels and observations of Tocqueville. Tocqueville is still a vague concept and I have never read his writings. The book is a series of columns – two to three pages each. So are very good and bring a new perspective on the USA that only an outsider can

bring. However, the author has their own biases. He does the US as a beacon of hope and a functioning democracy. In many ways it is refereshing to hear an outside talk of the items that are good in the USA in our political process (how can the USA be a better political process than France?). Some good observations – The whole ‘big looser’ television show and the idea of obese Americans – his point that the weight lose industry is just as big as the big snack and fast food companies.

Border Fencing – The issue is not expense. The issue is really perception. Big fences like the Iron curtain.

The whole intelligent design theory was created by Jonathan Wells (PHDs from Berkley and Yale) but with the Moonies developed intelligent design – same liberal argument that journalist give each side equal time even if one has 10 scientists and the other thousands.

Levy attended a workshop for the democrats. He was disappointed as all the talk was fundraising and not issues. “...I yearned for one voice, just one, to articulate the three or four major issues that, give the current political agenda. A defense of the Enlightenment against the creationist offensive. ... A new New Deal for the poorest of the poor. An uncompromising defense of human rights and a rejection of the ‘exceptional’ status of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo.

He also repeats many times about the American way to set up a museum over nothing and the continue over acceptance of fake items (fake tits, fake myths, fake Venice in Vegas) over the real things in life.

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## Armelle says

I'm always interested in both road trip books, and books about how others see us (America). American Vertigo gives us a lot of food for thought if we let it, even though I'm not convinced Mr. Levy always puts the correct interpretation on what he's seen.

Most of the book is a series of short sketches, each describing something the author encountered during his American tour in 2004.

The last section, Reflections, is a summing up of the author's experience. I could barely get through this section. I'm not familiar with many of the dozens and dozens (and dozens) of philosophers, intellectuals, or political analysts referenced in this section. With the exception of the postscript about Hurricane Katrina, my eyes glazed over during this section and it was a chore for me to read.

Lots of food for thought. Not much fun.

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## Steve says

With no further blithering on my part, here are some quotes which I found notable. Doesn't mean I agree with them, only that I found them notable...

On the American view of nature

For a European, one of the most enigmatic characteristics of the American ethos is its relationship with nature.

The Floridians don't tame nature; they push it back. Instead of subjugating it, they drive it away. Florida is

vast, and space is of so much less importance than in Europe, that there's room for both city and nature. There are the remains of a pioneering spirit that for centuries has accommodated itself to a sense of temporary habitat, perched, as it were, on the side of the road, pressing forward with the frontier, and by definition precarious.

But there is also, anchored deep in the mentality of the country, a slightly supernatural, almost superstitious relationship to what Americans, even the secular ones, are prone to call Mother Nature. As if omnipotence found its limits there, reached its rational confines.

No pity for our enemies, the American of the twenty-first century seems to be saying; no mercy for terrorist, certainly, or even for opponents of the country's economic supremacy. But let Nature take her best shot.

On a Colorado ghost town and 'rooted-ness'

Poetry of these ruins. Beauty of these stranded wrecks from the past.

And beauty, especially, of this people so faintly attached to their roots – beauty, once again, of the prodigious freedom with which they treat their places.

America is the place both of the most extreme uprooting and of the most single-minded territoriality; that it's the one country in the world where you move, change places, change your home most often, and the one where, at the same time, you remain the most strongly attached to your point of origin and childhood.

On Guantánamo

There are two possibilities. Either we believe that America is at war – in which case these detainees must benefit from prisoner-of-war status and from the protections accorded by the Geneva Convention. Or we subscribe to the End of History, to police treatment – and then all the rights normally granted to prisoners by common law need to be recognized. But this intermediate condition, the fact that Guantánamo's prisoners, having neither the rights of combatants nor the rights of criminals, finally have no rights at all ... I have not heard it denounced clearly enough.

On 'American Empire'

One is confronted, then, with the extreme unconventionality of a model that gathers its sturdiness both from the conviction among the dominated – including China and India – that it's in the U.S. banks, the U.S. financial system, and the dollar that the best return on their assets lies, and from the other, linked conviction that the rest of the world must continue to send its elite, its researchers, its future executives, its businessmen, to be trained, until further notice, in American universities, scientific institutions, and companies; in short, this paradoxical system, unique in history and, in reality, extraordinarily fragile, that makes America's strength dependant on the strength of the confidence that is daily invested in it.

On privatization of the prison system, and the death penalty.

"For me, there's a before and an after; before I was living like a dog, no one cared about me, but the advantage was that they no longer thought about executing me; today the food is better, the cell is cleaner, but I think they're going to come looking for me."

The negative side: the abandonment, when the state resigns and the law of profit reigns, of any kind of reform project. These outcast men – or in this case, women – whom the body politic, and thus the community of citizens, may forget to punish but with whom, at the same time, they have utterly lost contact. This is the height of abandonment.

On the Amish, from Iowa incidentally, not where I come from

The real and final pioneers. The only ones who haven't given in, haven't summed up their religion as the "In God We Trust" of banknotes.

The silent witnesses (truly silent, since, unlike the Indians or the blacks, they don't say anything, don't demand anything, and, above all, don't reproach others for anything) – the silent witnesses, then, to the values that were those of America but on which America has turned its back since it sold itself to the religion of commodity.

America's living bad conscience but, once again, silent.

Just here. We don't criticize anything. But we are Amish. The profound, hidden, forgotten, denied truth of America is alive in us.

#### On creationism

There are two theories, and you have a choice: that's the formula of an enlightened obscurantism; that's the principle of revisionism with a liberal and tolerant face; that's the act of faith of a dogmatism reconciled with freedom of speech and thought; that's the subtlest, most underhanded, most cunning, and at bottom most dangerous ideological maneuver of the American right in years.

#### On religious fundamentalism and secularism

What I reproach these churches for is their banality. It's their propensity for turning God into some kind of "good guy," friendly and reassuring, free of problems, watching over a sterile universe, bereft of anguish or negativity. It's the idea of an insipid God, devoid of mystery, whose aims, although previously impenetrable, are now becoming as familiar as those of a near neighbor or friend.

What, after all, is secularism? It is not, as we know, agnosticism. Nor is it atheism. It is the command given to every state not to favor one faith over another.

France has fought for secularism. It has won its secularism after centuries of confusion and wars of religion. The Americans did not need to separate from anything. The wall of separation, to speak like Jefferson, was raised from the beginning. They were born secular, whereas we French had to become it.

... the compromise negotiated by the Founding Fathers is resisting the slings and arrows of time fairly well – never forget that the God mentioned in the Republican and Democratic conventions, the inaugural speeches, the houses of Congress, is a purposefully abstract God, almost deistic, and at core, consensual, recognized by all American faiths, Christian or not.

#### Signs of vertigo - Obesity

Another sign: obesity. Not the obesity of bodies, obviously

A social obesity. An economic, financial and political obesity. Obesity of cities. Obesity of malls, as in Minneapolis. Obesity of churches, as in Willow Creek. Obesity of parking lots that, in these malls and churches, sometimes grow so enormous that they generate a full-fledged miniature society, an entire way of life with its own rhythms, spaces, distraction and rest areas, cafeterias, shuttles, even – and this takes the cake – specially organized shuttles so that, once your car is parked, shoppers or worshippers can be loaded into yet another vehicle, thus saving them the trouble of walking.

The obesity of enterprises subject to the law of forced growth ... "Greed is good; greed is right; greed works; greed clarifies."

The bigger it is, the better it is, says America today. Large is beautiful, it repeats over and over in a kind of hysterical reversal of the 1960's slogan.

#### A synopsis

...this magnificent, mad country, laboratory of the best and the worst, greedy and modest, at home in the world and self-possessed, puritan and outrageous, facing the future and yet obsessed with its memories...

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## **Matt says**

I found this book to be a paradox in a way - I didn't like it, wouldn't recommend that any of my friends go out and read it, yet still very much want to talk with someone who's also read it to see what they thought.

Why? Well, the book has an incredibly interesting topic - the narrative of a French journalist's multiple treks across the US in 2004, inspired by Alexis de Toqueville's Democracy in America. He uses his journalistic credentials to interview an array of American leaders and politicians left, right and center - just about everyone who's since run for president, cable TV talking heads, what's left of the intellectual political philosophers (apparently not much), mayors, governors, and miscellaneous politicians. Just as often as not though, his interactions are drawn from everyday Joes from parts of the country like Arab Detroit, Cuban Miami, patrols along the Mexican border, Sun Belt retirement communities excluding anyone under 55 years, mega-churches, mega-malls, mega-prisons - even Guantanamo - and plain vanilla suburbs, getting insights along the way to which the bulk of Americans, myself included, are largely oblivious.

Unfortunately, Lévy sacrifices depth for breadth with his innumerable 2-3 page recantations of these interviews and wanderings, even if many of these would be fascinating as stand-alone commentaries given a bit more substance and a lot less of the author's own narrative behind them. The question I keep coming back to - and this is the part that makes me want to find someone else with an opinion of this book - is this: how representative are Lévy's random and disjointed experiences and commentaries of America as a whole? Is one coherent viewpoint even possible? And if not Lévy's picture(s), what or whose contemporary equivalent would be better?

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## **Peter Korchnak says**

The title of Bertrand-Henri Lévy's "American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of de Tocqueville" is both accurate and deceiving. Lévy's prison tours are a thin pretext for his travels through the United States in 2004, an afterthought in the dizzy-inducing whirlwind of a trip.

Whereas Jean Beaudrillard spun, in "America," his account in terms of space (the desert), Lévy narrates the country as movement (the road). The result reflects the approach: Lévy breezes through the land in fragments and enumerations. Similar to any lengthy road trip, as soon as I settled into the book I found myself paying attention only intermittently, skipping passages, skimming through the snapshots of what could also easily have been bullet points. Lévy occasionally does venture into analysis, as when he discusses the Americans' inclination to create history out of everything ("a country where everything ends up as a memorial"). But soon, he's off to the next stop, and the thought is gone.

Similarly, Beaudrillard's musings may have been over-philosophized, but that's perhaps because he's a superior, more original philosopher. When a list of observations becomes too long for Lévy to handle (cue the vertigo), he sweeps into a conclusion that sounds pre-conceived, as if he were superimposing on reality his idea of America as he knows it from movies and television. For Lévy the simulacrum comes first and when reality's complexity intervenes, he resorts to the simplified version.

Worse, as he criss-crosses the country, on what Garrison Keillor named the "Freaks, Fatties, Fanatics & Faux

Culture Excursion," Lévy carries with him an air of condescension. He tries to mask it with attempts at eloquence and what he passes for analysis, but he simply cannot shake it. Perhaps it's because he visited the States in a presidential election year, when the country does become a circus of sorts. Or it's because W was still President, and the French had only disdain for him and the Iraq war. Regardless of his motive, the quelle-horreur view of America's collapse persists throughout.

As another afterthought, indignation seeping from the first 240 pages takes, in the concluding chapter "Reflections," a sharp U-turn. It turns out America's paradoxes and contradictions make it a stronger, more resilient place than it appears to a casual traveler. Yes, the evidence presented spurs a curiously opposite conclusion.

Being a naturalized American, my irritation with the book never reached the heights of Keillor's; my scorn reflects my European sensitivity. If learning how to do things entails also learning how not to do them, Lévy's "American Vertigo" provides an excellent tool for every travel writer.

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## Erik says

Fresh off my interest in Even Wright's Hella Nation and Louis Theroux's The Call of the Weird, I'm back at it again, following alongside two other intrepid narrative journalist, hitting the pavement and dirt roads of America in search of the weird and idiosyncratic in this great land of ours. From sea to shining sea, quite literally.

But while Wright and Theroux spent the pages of their respective books delivering detailed insights into the inner minds of the folks from the various extremes of fringe society, Levy – a Frenchman -- is much more egalitarian in the way he captures a much wider array of Americans from all walks of life; including many from the mainstream.

One of Levy's earliest words of praise happens when he arrives in Seattle after already seeing much of the East, South, and Midwest. His sings accolades about our fair city when he unflinchingly proclaims,

If I had to choose an American city to live in – if I had to pick a place, and only one, where I had the feeling in America of rediscovering my lost bearings – it would be Seattle. But all in all...If I had to choose one moment in this discovery – if I had to say at what instant everything was settled and, in the blink of an eye, the genius of the place was revealed to me – it would be the moment when, arriving from Spokane on Highway 90 [an Interstate, actually:], having stopped at a motel in Moses Lake for a late-afternoon sandwich, having crossed the orchards of Wenatchee, having passed Mercer Island and then the Homer M. Hadley Bridge, I saw, floating like a torch between two motionless clouds, in a dark-pick sky entirely new to me, the tip of a skyscraper, the Space Needle, already completely lit up, which in my imagination suddenly condensed everything that America has always made me dream of: poetry and modernity, precariousness and technical challenge, lightness of form meshed with a Babel syndrome, city lights, the haunting quality of darkness, tall trees of steel.

Truer words of my city have never been written until this.

Levy has other brilliant moments. Like his fascinating interview with true crime novelist James Ellroy, with his gruesome interest in the most depraved crimes of passion. And also Levy's rather lengthy reflection at book's end (a tad too much intellectual posturing if you ask me ) in which he reminds us of our country's founding fathers and their clear, but oft-ignored (or is that purposely forgotten?) edict separating church from state. That is, freedom of religion goes hand-in-hand with freedom from religion.

Despite the frequent and popularly-held Gallic distaste for all things America and American in recent years, it is certainly refreshing to find a Frenchman who loves this wonderfully diverse country of ours. To him, I raise a glass of the finest Burgundian red. A votre santé, mon ami!

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