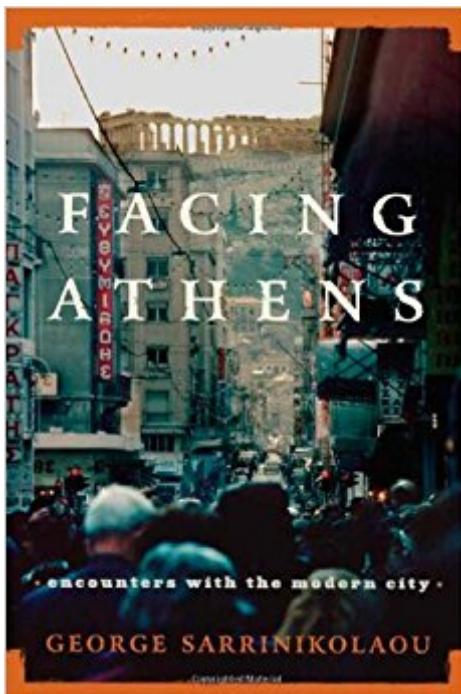


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# Facing Athens: Encounters With The Modern City



## **Synopsis**

A legendary city seen afresh from an expatriate's point of viewIn this original and radiant book, George Sarrinikolaou, a native Athenian expatriated to America, strips Athens of its clichÃ©s to reveal a city straining under the passions and burdens of early-twenty-first-century life. Modern Athens exists in the shadow of its ancient past: cradle of civilization, birthplace of democracy, inspiration for the Olympic Games. But as the city prepares to host the 2004 Summer Olympics, it faces challenges quite unlike those depicted in mythology and epic poetry. As Sarrinikolaou walks through the city, striving to face the Athens of his childhood head-on, he encounters people who reveal the demythologized city: newly wealthy Greeks at a Las Vegas-style nightclub; Gypsies building a middle-class house amid their squalid encampment; Kurdish and Eastern European immigrants seeking day labor in Omonia Square; aged Athenians wistfully recalling the past as their neighborhood crumbles around them. In their stories, Sarrinikolaou sees the economic, social, and historical forces that are shaping Athens today. This is the Athens that even many Athenians see only in passing, and in *Facing Athens* Sarrinikolaou claims it for himself, a perennial visitor, and also for the reader, who, in effect, visits the city through his gritty, lyrical, unstinting, yet finally affectionate portrait of the place.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

In this slender, frank memoir, journalist Sarrinikolaou revisits his native Athens, Greece, blending present and past narratives of a place once beloved and now wracked with greed, racism and violence. For Sarrinikolaou, it's his first extended stay since his family emigrated to New York when

he was 10. He senses the city's golden age is gone: "I became a perennial visitor, neither an insider nor an outsider, but one who stares at one's life through glass." Although modern Athens may possess some of the Parthenon's ageless endurance, much of its formerly solid foundation is crumbling through neglect because of the working class's flight to the suburbs, leaving the poor and immigrants to unsuccessfully deal with the inner city's decay. The prevailing Greek mood, Sarrinikolaou counters, is racist, not xenophobic, as his countrymen march refugee Albanians home across the border. In suburban bastions of old money, he contrasts the Athenian aristocracy, villas and privilege, all at a secure, safe distance from the city, with buses packed with sweaty servants and gardeners at quitting time. Sarrinikolaou's snapshot observations are significant, as he touches on frenzied soccer games, gypsies' homes, the ritual of a lamb feast, student politics and the Archbishop Christodoulos Paraskevaides's protest against government exclusion of religion on new state identity cards. His writing seems conflicted, troubled, as if he didn't want to cast his childhood recollections against the myth of Athens. Nevertheless, he tries to play fair in a somber overview of the city, regardless of its defects. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Born in Athens in 1970, Sarrinikolaou came to America at the age of ten; more than two decades later, as Greece prepares for the Olympics, he returns as a journalist. Trawling the ancient streets, he finds that in Athens life itself has become a competition, with almost half the national population crowded into the small capital, vying for "money, space, sex, even air." Corruption is the city's tragic flaw, as the author learns firsthand when his grandfather falls ill: a surgeon stops mid-operation and appears, bloodstained, before the family to demand more money. Writing with lucidity and restraint, Sarrinikolaou allows images to quietly resonate: in a night club, nouveau-riche Greeks shower singers with hundreds of euros' worth of carnations; it is carnations, too, which are later tossed after his grandfather's coffin into a concrete grave. Copyright © 2005 The New Yorker

While it might seem that the book could be a bit dated in light of the 8+ years that have passed since the 2004 Olympics, this book speaks volumes about the Athens of today with its sprawling landscape, political corruption, and undercurrent of racism toward the rapidly inflicting illegal immigrants. But being one who calls Athens "home", the author speaks with a sensitivity that no mere travel writer can replicate. He is not harsh in his criticism, only honest - as one might be with one's own family. Insightful & a quick, enjoyable & thought-provoking read!

When you travel to Cairo, or Beijing, or Athens, you can focus your tourist eyes and attention on Pyramids, the Forbidden City, the Parthenon, and the people of the past. Or you can open your eyes and mind wider and also attempt to understand the cities and the people who live today in the shadows of antiquity. "Facing Athens" is for the latter group of travelers. George Sarrinikolaou faces Athens with eyes and mind wide open, with the memories of an Athenian child, and with a transplanted heart and soul that he also must open wider to accomplish his search for discovery and rediscovery. What results is a not only deft portrait of today's realities in a great and changing city, but a study that often can be applied, at least in part, to other cities (and countries). From it, a reader's own mind can formulate glimpses of what the future may hold for Athens and the world. "Facing Athens" is must-read for any thoughtful traveler who believes she/he is, or wishes to be, a true world citizen...and any armchair traveler who enjoys seeing through the eyes of the beholder.

really painted a vivid picture of life in the city of Athens

A flowing narrative with a keen, sharp, almost prophetic insight of modern Athens.

For a book that I was required to read for class I was expecting a book much more boring. This book was pleasantly surprising and I enjoyed it ;) it was a good view of Greece and finding oneself

This is mostly a book about urban decay and the flight to the suburbs. While the specific examples are from Athens, the same words could describe the Bronx or the French banlieus. Because ownership of cars spread in Greece later than in the United States its effects start appearing in the 1970s, later than in the US. I lived in Athens between 1940 and 1961 and when I visited the country in the late 1970's what struck me was that the Greeks were repeating all the errors that led to American (and Western European) urban problems. However few people ever learn from the errors of others. Other parts of the book deal with the superficial Greek church attendance, common in any country where there is an established church, and corruption, also common in several countries and certainly in the Middle East. (The heritage of the Ottoman empire of which the Balkans and the Middle East used to be part of.) He describes the contrast between affluent Greeks and the illegal Albanian immigrants who tend their gardens but, again, the same words could also describe American suburbanites and the illegal Latin American immigrants who tend their gardens. Because the author left Greece when he was only 10 years old, he may have had an idealized image of the

place and was disappointed by the reality. I left Greece as an adult (after college and military service) and any time I go back I enjoy the place. Overall it has changed for the better. (I stay away from the blighted urban areas for the same reason I stay away from blighted urban areas anywhere else.) The best thing I can say about the book is that it short, only 144 pages, so I did not waste too much time reading it.

Perhaps better named Confronting Athens, this is the author's highly personal exploration of his native city 20 years after his emigration to the US. The book is charged with subdued emotions which find their outlet in a critical look at the many less-than-rosy aspects of Greece's capitol city: corruption, unchecked development, pollution, discrimination... all of which are interspersed with short remembrances from the author's modest childhood. If you want a glossy description of Athens' amazing historical legacy and tourist destinations, look elsewhere.

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