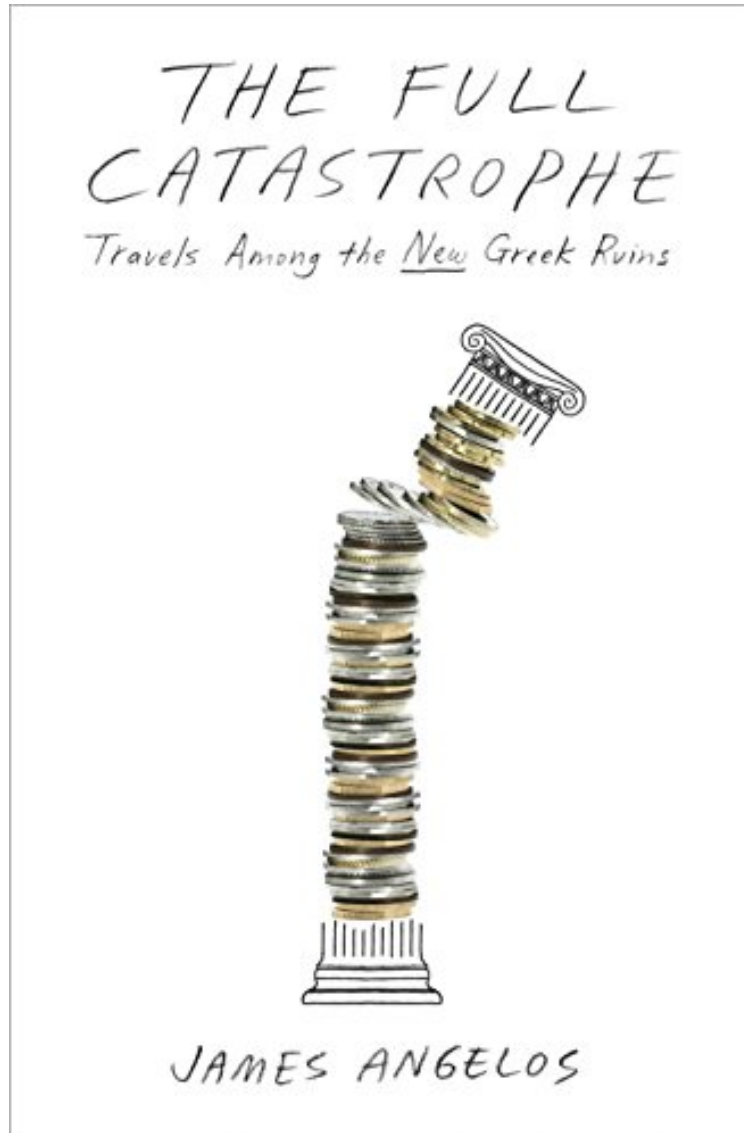


The Full Catastrophe: Travels Among the New Greek Ruins

James Angelos

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James Angelos : The Full Catastrophe: Travels Among the New Greek Ruins before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Full Catastrophe: Travels Among the New Greek Ruins:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A decent book but likely of interest only to people who have, like I have, lived in Greece By A_2007_reader As reviewer D. Alcotton June 22, 2016 says "Started off strong and informative, then took a hard turn left". The writer Angelos is an Albanian Greek of apparently leftist sympathy married to a German wife. It seems his narrative, especially in the second half, is colored by this experience (BTW,

I've lived in Greece and share most of Angelos' prejudices, but the second half of his book treads the first half, which is more objective. The second half of his book explains, blow by blow, the rise of the far-right "Golden Dawn" party, which I did not care to read. Angelos also does not give much thought to debt relief (for every bad debtor who wasted money, there's a bad creditor who gave the money in the first place). Anecdotes about waste are fun to read however, but Angelos has a plodding writing style where he tries to pack too much information into each paragraph, and tries to color the paragraphs with subjective and likely inaccurate summaries of the state of mind of the people he meets. Book could have been shorter. All in all, just a decent book but likely of interest only to people who have, like I have, lived in Greece and can identify the places visited. Otherwise it's likely "Greek to you" and a bit of a jumbled mess.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. An insightful book
By Frequent Reader
The book is an account of the pathologies of the Greek state (and society) that are at the root of the financial crisis. The author is the son of Greek immigrants in the U.S. and not only he speaks Greek, he is also quite knowledgeable of Greek culture and history. The book consists mostly of interviews with ordinary people and that makes for lively reading. In essence, it is a sequence of case studies that provide an insight into the way Greeks think and act. One of the cases deals with the large number of supposedly blind people in the island of Zakynthos. It turns out that the local ophthalmologist (the only one on the island) certified healthy people as blind (so they could receive disability benefits) in exchange for bribes. Sadly, visually impaired people who could not afford to pay bribes were ignored (story on p. 49). I found the observations quite accurate (I was born and lived in Greece during the first 26 years of my life). My favorite quote (p. 145) is one expressed by a person who had just lost his job: "It is a communistic capitalism which gives people a small slice of state money so they will shut up and continue to bear the stealing" (of state money by those in power). While Greece emerged from Ottoman rule more than 150 years ago, Ottoman traditions still influence attitudes. Those in power do not care for those governed and, in turn, the latter view the state as the enemy. Hence the widespread tax evasion, etc. (Story on p. 35 and elsewhere.)

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Interesting book for current events in Greece
By M. Zaleski
This book gives an interesting set of viewpoints into the ongoing Greek "tragedy". I bought the book because I was strongly against the Greek bailouts; A lot of people rang up huge debts and now didn't want to pay their creditors. Greece needed to leave the Euro. I felt going in that the author, being a Greek-American and having spent copious time in Greece, would provide counterpoints to my initial hostility towards Greece. I came away with the same conclusion I had entered with: Greece needed to leave the Euro. However, my reasons became more nuanced than simple creditor/debtor issues. They needed to leave, not just do to lack of payback of debts. They needed time, as a people and as a country, to learn to live without the constant oversight (or overbearing) of others. Though painful I think this will forge a country worthy of its out-sized historical place in western civilization. Through the author's eyes, I saw a country that had its share of self-delusions (we all do) and behaviors born of their history over the past hundreds of years. The current tax dodging and corruption are a product of nearly constant outsider control of their governments. The author does a great job of demonstrating the the current nature of Greece without either denigrating Greeks or absolving them of guilt for the current situation. You get to see the viewpoints of government officials, average citizens, as well as high level political fights being waged for the future direction of the country. While an fascinating book to read, at times it felt a just a bit disjointed. The jumps in areas covered could be jarring. Given the complexity of what Mr. Angelos was trying to cover I doubt I could have done better.

A transporting, good-humored, and revealing account of Greece's dire troubles, reported from the mountain villages, idyllic islands, and hardscrabble streets that define the country today
In recent years, small Greece, often associated with ancient philosophers and marble ruins, whitewashed villages and cerulean seas, has been at the center of a debt crisis that has sown economic and social ruin, spurred panic in international markets, and tested Europe's decades-old project of forging a closer union. In *The Full Catastrophe*, James Angelos makes sense of contrasting images of Greece, a nation both romanticized for its classical past and castigated for its dysfunctional present. With vivid character-driven narratives and engaging reporting that offers an immersive sense of place, he brings to life some of the causes of the country's financial collapse, and examines the changes, some hopeful and others deeply worrisome, emerging in its aftermath. A small rebellion against tax authorities breaks out on a normally serene Aegean island. A mayor from a bucolic, northern Greek village is gunned down by the municipal treasurer. An aging, leftist hero of the Second World War fights to win compensation from Germany for the wartime occupation. A once marginal group of neo-Nazis rises to political prominence out of a ramshackle Athens neighborhood. *The Full Catastrophe* goes beyond the transient coverage in the daily headlines to deliver an enduring and absorbing portrait of modern Greece.
From the Hardcover edition.

"Angelos dismantles the facile narrative accepted by many in the eurozone, in which hardworking Germans must clean up a mess made by their lazy and 'Oriental' southern neighbors. But he is equally tenacious when it comes to exposing the misconduct of Greek politicians, not to mention the country's corrupt system of career tenure and its, well, truly Byzantine bureaucracy...The book is saved from being a withering catalog of absurdity by Mr. Angelos's subtle, often loving analysis of modern Greek culture." —*The Wall Street Journal*
Angelos, who has traveled

from Athens to Thessaloniki, from mountain villages to outlying islands, describes with an engaging mix of disgust and brio the scams Greeks have perpetrated for decades, with the frequent complicity of their government, and the devastating consequences now that the con has unraveled." mdash;The New York Times Book , Editor's Choice"Angelos is a superb guide to the cultural history of modern Greece, and his analysis gives a nuanced background to the screaming headlines that keep Greece in the news." mdash;The Daily Beast"Reporter James Angelos is an excellent tour guide to the fascinating and frustrating paradoxes of modern Greece, as he examines the entrenched cultural habits, historical wounds, prejudices and civic scandals that have helped make his proud ancestral homeland the reluctant charity case of modern Europe. The Full Catastrophe sheds light not only on how Greek society got to where it is today, but also on the enormous diversity of experiences and assumptions bundled together in the European project. But reader beware: after you follow Angelos into the heart of the Greek crisis, those postcard-perfect islands will never look quite the same again." mdash;Meline Toumani, author of There Was and There Was Not"ln seven vignettes of daily life and stories from the news, interspersed with brief historical asides, The Full Catastrophe vividly captures the grim consequences of the Greek financial collapse. A sympathetic and insightful journalist with an eye for the telling detail, Angelos (a second-generation Greek-American himself) subtly exposes long-held contradictions and prejudices rekindled by a brutal austerity. As he navigates a country coming apart, where farce and disaster go hand in hand, a sense of wry humor saves himmdash;and the readermdash;from utter resentment or despair. By turns entertained and dismayed, we come away with the nagging impression that the greatest tragedy of Greece today may not be the dire situation it has found itself in, but the fact that no one really seems to know what to do about it. The Full Catastrophe is a notable achievement." mdash;Panos Karnezis, author of The Convent"Greek-American journalist James Angelos has taken the full measure of contemporary Greece's economic, political, and, not least, social meltdown. But this is not only a lament. The vigorously written narrative also contains several bright spotsmdash;such as the firsthand testimonies drawn from veteran antifascist Manolis Glezos, Thessaloniki mayor Yannis Boutaris, and unconventional prelate Bishop Prokopiosmdash;that add nuance and balance to a picture that overall remains quite stubbornly dark." mdash;Paul Cartledge, A.G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture emeritus, University of Cambridge"James Angelos's;nbsp;vivid,nbsp;insightfulnbsp;tour of Greece is a grippingnbsp;portrait of a nation in disarray andnbsp;despair. The depictions of corrupt politicians, the dismal impacts of a profound economic collapse, and the rise of violent xenophobia suggest a ticking time bomb. Yet Angelos's; affectionate portraits of indelible charactersmdash;from the sly widow who befriended her young robbers to the World War II resistance hero now inspiring Grecers; rising far leftmdash;add a deep human dimension." mdash;Anya von Bremzen, author of Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking;nbsp; "A riveting, entertaining, and sometimes chilling in-depth look at the chaos engulfing Greece today, one made all the more poignant by the beautifully drawn cast of characters, including poor islanders, wealthy ship owners, conniving politicians, wily Orthodox priests, and the often rabid and deeply divided electorate. There is a lesson for us all in James Angelos's; vivid portrait of what is happening in the land we cherish as the birthplace of our democracy." mdash;Tom Stone, author of The Summer of My Greek Taverna"Revealing and well-informed...Angelos follows [his] many threads with aplomb. A candid, unsparing look at the challenges Greece has yet to overcome."nbsp;mdash;Kirkus s"A fast-paced, gripping survey of the problems leading to and resulting from Grecers; debt crisis...Angelos's; often amusing, occasionally dismaying stories form a necessary and compelling read for anyone interested in the current crisis and its possible remedies."nbsp;mdash;Publishers WeeklyAbout the AuthorJames Angelos is a freelance journalist and former correspondent for the Wall Street Journal. Prior to reporting from Europe, he wrote for the New York Times city section. He lives in Berlin.Pete Cross holds a BA in Theatre from the University of Toledo and an MFA in Acting from the California Institute of the Arts. Stage experience includes Alexander in "Every Good Boy Deserves Favour," at Carnegie Hall. He has also acted in film, and served on faculty at Cal Arts and with Aquila Morong Studio in Hollywood. Pete has coached for film and theatrical productions, and continues to work with private clients all over the world.Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.1Island of the BlindWealth I would have, but wealth by wrong procure I would not; justice, even if slow, is sure.--SolonOn the island of Zakynthos, in a square by the main harbor, stands a statue of Dionysios Solomos overlooking the cerulean sea. Born on the island at the end of the eighteenth century, Solomos is often referred to as Greece's national poet, having written the Hymn to Liberty, the first two stanzas of which are now used in the Greek national anthem. "From the sacred bones of the Hellenes arisen, and valiant again as you once were, hail, o hail, Liberty," goes one verse. The words were written in 1823, during the revolution, when the Greek intelligentsia looked to an over two-millennia-long history for the ideological adhesive needed to pull together a new nation. Solomos is revered for his lyrical role in the effort, and his likeness stands on Zakynthos with an outstretched right arm in the classical orator's pose, though in reality he probably wasn't much of a public speaker. The poet was an endless reviser and perfectionist, and the hymn is among the very few poems he ever completed.On a December afternoon in 2011, as I stood in front of the statue of Dionysios Solomos, European leaders and the IMF had recently offered Greece its second bailout, and in return they demanded that Greek politicians change almost every aspect of the way they governed the country. The Greek government, eager to appear like it was obediently embracing a reform agenda,

began efforts to root out some of the corruption that pervaded Greek life, and had by this point captivated the international press. During this time, people reading their newspapers in Europe and the United States learned Greek words such as fakelaki ("small envelope"), the Greek slang for a bribe handed over in order to, as Greeks often put it, "oil" the government machinery and make it work a bit faster. In Greece, if you twisted your ankle and had to go to a public hospital, you handed over a fakelaki to avoid a long wait to see a doctor. If your electricity went out, and the power company workers who arrived said they would have to come back tomorrow to fix it, you handed over a fakelaki to inspire a more immediate solution. ("If you don't oil a bit, nothing gets done," a homeowner once told me after I witnessed the latter take place in front of his house.) People abroad also learned about the rouspheti, a word that has Turkish origins and means a special, reciprocated favor. A rouspheti often involved a politician and a voter, and often an unwarranted government benefit and a vote, one in exchange for the other. The fakelaki and the rouspheti were mundane facts of Greek life, long before Greece joined the European Union, and long before it joined the eurozone. Now, though, as Greece was being thoroughly scrutinized by its creditors, the rest of the world was learning about them. So was I, for that matter. I'd come to Zakynthos to report about an alleged scandal involving both the rouspheti and the fakelaki that had drawn particular consternation and fascination in Greece--and in Germany, where I first heard about it. I was in Berlin at a dinner gathering when the subject of Greece came up and the middle-aged man sitting next to me, who worked for the German justice ministry, asked me whether I had heard about "The Island of the Blind." He then told everyone about an article he had read about a ridiculously high number of Greeks on Zakynthos claiming to be blind in order to collect a government disability check. He and others at the table were clearly amused and perhaps a bit disgusted. This was the kind of news that made Germans question whether they should be the guarantors of the massive bailout loan package Greece was about to receive. As he told the story, I was surprised to find myself, owing to my Greek heritage, quietly stewing. These Germans! Picking on the Greeks even as Athens is burning! Around that time, Greece was making deep cuts in wages, pensions, and social spending, and, despite rising opposition, was about to push through more cuts in order to secure the second bailout. Athens was witnessing massive protests, and Greece, it seemed, was fraying. Perhaps sensing my sensitivity, everyone moved on to other topics, but after I got home, I read Greek and German press reports about Zakynthos. The Greek health ministry, suspecting fraud, was apparently looking into unusually frequent instances of blindness on the island. As they were doing so, the preponderance of fraudulent disability benefits--what the Greek media call "monkey benefits"--had become a big story in Greece. A few days later, I called the Greek health ministry and spoke to an assistant to the then deputy minister. My original idea was to report a story about how such scandals attract a great deal of attention, but say little about the average, honest Greek. However, the conversation with the aide did not lend support to this angle. The previous year, the aide said, nearly 700 of the island's population of 39,000, about 1.8 percent of the island's residents, had claimed the blindness benefit--a check of up to 724 euros every two months and perks such as discounted utilities. This ostensible prevalence of blindness, I later found, was about nine times the rate estimated for many European countries, according to a 2004 study published in a World Health Organization journal. "We have very extensive instances of fraud," the aide told me, not just on Zakynthos and not just people pretending to be blind, but all kinds of feigned disabilities in every prefecture of Greece. There is evidence of a huge increase in the number of disability benefits handed out just before election periods, he added. I asked if the ministry was planning on pursuing criminal charges against such disability fakers. The priority, he said, was to put an end to the practice rather than punish those who'd engaged in it. "If you start putting people in jail, maybe you'll have to put half of Greece in jail." After this conversation, I took a flight to Athens and caught a bus to the western coast of the Peloponnese, where I boarded a nighttime ferry to Zakynthos. On the boat, I sat in a movie theater-like seating area with reclining seats and cup holders while the television in front of me broadcast images of the protests I'd seen that morning in front of the Greek parliament building in Athens. A newscaster noted that Greece ranked at the bottom of Europe, and near Peru and Morocco, on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. When we reached the port, I took a taxi toward my hotel in the main population center, Zakynthos Town. On the way, I asked the driver if he had heard about the blindness scandal. Yes, he had, and it was a good thing, he added, that they were finally doing something about this kind of corruption. Then he overcharged me by a few euros and gave me an old receipt that was in the ballpark of what he'd asked me to pay. I was too tired to protest. The next morning, I awoke to the sound of church bells and happy shrieks of playing children and stepped out onto my balcony. It was sunny, and the Ionian Sea, which had been invisible under the moonless darkness when I arrived, was as azure as it appears on postcards. Below, an elementary school next to the hotel was coming into session. Children ran around a courtyard until a school official in faded jeans emerged and stood on the steps. The children formed a series of haphazard lines in front of him and grew quiet. The man then crossed himself, and the children dutifully followed. This was a public school, but separation of church and state remains a somewhat foreign concept in Greece. The island has a significant Albanian migrant worker population, and the Albanian kids, likely Muslims, lingered in the back of the lines and did not participate. The rest of the children uttered a prayer while crossing themselves to its cadence: "Through the prayers of our holy fathers, oh Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy on us and save us. Amen." The children added a "Good day!" before hurrying into their classrooms. I'd obtained the name and number of a woman working in "welfare," slang for the local office otherwise

known as the Directorate General of Public Health and Social Solidarity, which administered the blindness benefits. When I walked into the office, my contact, Maria, greeted me at her desk. She wore knee-high leather boots, and her red-colored hair was pulled back tightly. She, being among the younger employees, was the only one in the office whose computer was turned on. Though someone had made the decision to modernize the island's public administration by purchasing computers, it seemed that no one had digitized most of the procedures or instructed the older employees to make use of them. Either my presence made Maria nervous, or she enjoyed playing up the intrigue. We'd have to keep our voices down, she said, or the other workers in the office would know she was helping me. She lit an ultra-thin cigarette. "So you want to know about the blind," she said quietly. She would take me across the street to the mayor, who would give me more details. I was lucky they were open on this day, she added. Everyone had been on strike the day before to protest salary cuts. She later showed me one of her monthly paychecks. She had cleared about 800 euros, a few hundred euros fewer than what it used to be, she said. The office of the mayor, Stelios Bozikis, was housed in a large, columned building with arches in Venetian Gothic style. The island had for centuries been under Venetian rule, and though the old buildings were nearly all destroyed in a 1953 earthquake, the town hall had been reconstructed to resemble the original. The mayor saw me right away. Bozikis had a large nose and a thick, graying beard. He'd formerly been associated with the communist party, but won the mayoral race a year earlier with support from center-left PASOK. He sipped from his coffee, lit a cigarette, leaned back in his office chair, and ran through his fingers a komboloi, a string of beads that men in Greece often flick around to pass the time. I turned on my voice recorder, and he began speaking before I could ask any questions. He told me that when he became mayor, he ascertained that a suspiciously high number of Zakynthos residents were taking a blindness benefit at an annual cost to the government of a few million euros. The majority of them were fakes, he said. "I will personally take them all to the district attorney and I will ask for all the money that they took back," he said. "I'm not retreating. This corruption in Greece can't continue." Everything will be "brought to light," he added, because the path of justice was an obligation. For a Greek politician, he struck me as suspiciously noble. He singled out the former prefect, a member of the center-right New Democracy party, and the local ophthalmologist as the main players in the scheme. The ophthalmologist, he told me, I could find at the hospital. As for the prefect, he'd "gotten lost." That turned out not to be true. Later that afternoon I found Dionysios Gasparos, the former prefect, a urologist, in his nearby office on the ground floor of a pink, three-story building with several balconies. Gasparos had been in office for twelve years until 2010, when prefectures were abolished as part of a whittling down of Greece's multilayered system of regional governance. I rang the bell and Gasparos came to the door. He was a short man with a shock of gray hair slicked back. After I introduced myself, Gasparos responded in a raspy voice, "I don't put you down as blind. The ophthalmologist does." He then stopped and looked around to see if any neighbors were listening. A few dogs barked in the street. He invited me inside. His office was cluttered with papers and various medical certificates hung on the yellowed walls. It looked like not many patients had been visiting of late. He said he had long called for investigations about the number of blind, and blamed the national health ministry for not responding. "Simply, they are playing political games," he said of the health ministry. "That's what you're going to write." I dutifully wrote "political games" in my notebook. Gasparos's signature authorized the benefits, but as he would have me understand it, his signature was only a bureaucratic technicality, one that enabled the money transfers to the beneficiaries, who had already been identified and confirmed as being blind by someone else. "The doctor!" Gasparos said. "Only he has responsibility. The doctor puts you down as blind. Not the prefect." "They say that you gave out the blindness benefits in order to get votes," I said. "That's a lie!" Gasparos snapped. "They also say the doctor took money to write people as blind," I said. He paused. "He took money?" the former prefect said in a much calmer voice. "How would I know? I don't even know him." Gasparos reclined in his chair and tossed his komboloi. "The others are criticizing him, saying he took money?" he added, as if the possibility of something so devious had not crossed his mind, which would have made him the only person on the island who had not heard about or entertained the accusation. I had heard by this point that Gasparos had aspirations to run for parliament in the next election. On my way out, I asked him if that was true. "Yes," he told me, with a bit of hesitation, as if he were weighing whether it would be a good idea to reveal this information. "I'm considering it." The headquarters of the Greek health ministry in Athens is located in a shabby seven-floor concrete building in an area frequented by prostitutes and junkies. When I visited the place around the same time as my trip to Zakynthos, banners and graffiti tags on the wall near the entrance read: our money, you all ate it!!!, thieves, and five months unpaid. Like many government ministries during this time, its workers were very frequently on strike, underscoring one of the great difficulties Greece had in fulfilling its reform promises. European policy makers were increasingly complaining that the Greeks were not implementing the reforms they had agreed to in exchange for the bailouts. But how could a government institute reforms when its own workers struck in rebellion against them, and then graffiti-tagged their workplace?