



North of Ithaka

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In *North of Ithaka*, Eleni Gage returns to the remote Greek village of Lia, where her father was born and her grandmother murdered, to rebuild the ruins of her namesake's home and come to terms with her family's tragic history. In doing so, she leaves behind a sparkling social life and successful career to continue the tale of a family and a place which her father, Nicholas Gage, made famous over twenty years ago with his international bestseller, *Eleni*. Along the way she survives humorous misadventures, absorbs fascinating folklore, and comes to understand that memories of the dead can bring new life to the present. Part travel memoir and part family saga, *North of Ithaka* is, above all, a journey home.

North of Ithaka Details

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From Reader Review North of Ithaka for online ebook

Sandy says

A great read especially before and during my trip to Greece. I only wish I could have arranged s trip to the village the book took place!

Anne says

Eleni Gage is the daughter of writer Nicholas Gage. His most famous book; Eleni is the story of his mother who was murdered during the Greek Civil War. Eleni was adapted for film in 1985 - John Malkovitch played the role of Nick Gage

Eleni Gage returned to the small village of Lia in Northern Greece with the intention of rebuilding her murdered Grandmother's house. This is the house in which she was keep prisoner and the house from which she made her final journey. Eleni's father and his sisters have all since settled in America and the house is now inhabitable. Eleni was determined that she would restore it to its former glory - much to the dismay of her aunts who were convinced that something evil would happen to her if she dared to disturb the house with such sad memories.

North Of Ithaka is Eleni's story, and it is wonderfully written. It's part memoir and part history and makes compelling and fascinating reading. Eleni was welcomed into the bosom of village life, probably because her family was well-known in the area, but the warmth and kindness of her neighbours is overwhelming - as is the frustration and irritation that Eleni felt as she encountered some of the difficulties in getting anyone in Greece to work quickly or to a timescale.

This story is so much more than the account of how the house was rebuilt. Such insight into the lives of the villagers, their customs and their beliefs add so much to the whole reading experience.

I read Nicholas Gage's Eleni some years ago, but have never seen the film. I intend to change that very soon. Anyone who loves Greece, is interested in recent history and enjoys travel and food will love this book.

Catherine says

This book is about the author returning to the small village in Greece where her grandmother had a home. She decides to restore this home where her grandmother was imprisoned and executed. I really tried to like this book, but I found it tedious, boring and meandering. I did finish the book hoping that I would find an appreciation for this writer's voice, but it just never happened. I can't recommend this book.

Trunatschild says

I got this book from a recommendation from the Folklore Society, based on the fact that the author has a degree in Folklore and went back to Greece to finish a family saga, and it's a secondary book to her father's book "Eleni".

Unfortunately, this is probably her first book. It's very self conscious and the dialogue is very mundane. I was hoping for a lot more folklore, but I think that the author was trying more for 'atmosphere'. I think that

the book has potential, but as is, it's very boring. I think if the author was more experienced, it might have been a better book, the idea is very good. I've spent some time in Greece and Turkey and I know that there was so much more that she could have said, but was probably vetting it for an American audience, whereas if she hadn't, it might have been more interesting. For example, she described several perilous driving incidences, leaving it up to us to imagine driving conditions in Greece, instead of explaining that a lot of Greece is vertical and the roads very very narrow. She has a stone house built, but doesn't explain that most houses are stone in the country as Greece has a plethora of stones.

I think that if she'd explained more of Greece and just wove her story into it, it would have been more interesting, instead the story came out as very mundane. The most explaining she did that I notice was when she visited Albania and compared Greece to Albania, calling Albania a dump is leaving out so much, like what post Communist poverty has done to the country.

Anyway, it is very difficult to finish the book, even though I think it has a lot of potential.

Becki Basley says

I actually did something that I rarely do with books while I was waiting to get this book as an interlibrary loan.. I read the reviews and was fully prepared.. to freaking hate it.

The story of her grandmother Eleni was first introduced to me by my own mother and I remember it as being one of the first adult books I read recommended by my mother. I also read Eleni's father's second book very recently and that led me to this one.

I did not hate this book, I felt it was an honest account of a woman's experience coming to terms with her family's tragic past and trying to change the memories of a place from bitterness to nostalgic. I think she succeeded in bringing peace to her own life and to her father and his sisters.

Anne says

The big topic of this book: Homecoming! No definition is more accurate than that home is where you are missed if you are not around. And Eleni has a talent to take you in what she finds to be her home - inherited and full of lovely people and details! Adorable!

Jodie Pine says

I thought this was a well-written humorous account of the author's return to her roots to rebuild her grandmother's house and reconnect with her Greek heritage. A fascinating look at Greek Orthodox traditions and practices. We discussed this book in my Daughters of Abraham interfaith book club and it added to the richness of the book, to hear Muslim and Jewish friends' perspectives on it.

HeavyReader says

This is the true story of Eleni Gage, a young American woman who spends almost a year in the Greek village where her father was born, overseeing the restoration of her ancestral home. The home had been abandoned for decades after communists used it as a headquarters and a jail in the late 1940s during the Greek civil war. Those same communists executed Gage's grandmother for helping her children escape the village and for (allegedly) hiding treasure.

Despite these unhappy circumstances, Gage keeps this memoir fairly upbeat. This book is not a downer. It didn't make me cry. It didn't make me sad.

I did get a little tired of Gage's self-doubt. There was more waffling here than in an Eggo factory. She wondered a lot if renovating the house was the right thing to do. Members of her dad's family were upset by her decision to remodel the place of so much pain. But what were the neighbors thinking? Were they upset by her actions too? Of course, Gage never asked because she was afraid of the answer. I'm all for questioning motives and actions, but it just kept going on and on in every chapter. *Am I doing the right thing? Am I upsetting people? Should I just quit?* If Gage were truly concerned about the feelings of her fellow villagers, perhaps she should have actually discussed those feelings with them and explained her motivation. Instead, she did what she wanted to do without soliciting input, but tried to look good in the eyes of her readers by letting them know she *really did* (constantly) question whether or not she was doing the right thing.

I found two aspects of the book very strange.

#1 Gage got the idea to go to Greece and restore the ancestral home "the weekend after Thanksgiving 2001." (For those who may have forgotten, that was less than three months after the September 11 attack on New York City.) At the time, Gage was living in New York City, yet there is not one single mention in this entire book about the September 11th attack. Gage does not mention how the attack influences her decision to leave the U.S. She doesn't mention how the aftermath of the attack made getting her paperwork in order or her actual traveling more more difficult. One could read this book and think the attack of NYC on September 11, 2001 never happened.

I lived in the Midwest at the time of the September 11th attack, and folks there couldn't put the attack and related events out of mind for a long time. To New Yorkers, the attack was (understandably) a HUGE deal. It seems strange for a New Yorker to fail to even acknowledge the attack and related events in a book covering the time period from late 2001 through December 2002.

#2 Where's the money coming from? Gage mentions (at least twice) that her father (the author Nicholas Gage) is paying for the renovation of the family home. Fair enough. But Eleni Gage has quit her job in NYC to spend almost a year in a tiny Greek village where she never references a paying job. Who bought her plane ticket? Who's paying for her rental car (and its fuel), her Greek cell phone, and the internet access on the new computer she bought in the city? Who's paying for her to eat? Who's paying the expenses for the several side trips she writes about? Is she living off her savings? Is she getting paid for free lance writing she'd doing about her time in Greece? Is she living off the advance she received on the deal for this book? When a twenty-seven-year-old woman spends a year abroad and doesn't mention gainful employment, I think the reader deserves to know how such a thing is possible.

The parts of this book I enjoyed most were the ones where Gage explained the cultures of her region of Greece. Although I'm not religious myself, I enjoyed reading about the villagers' Easter preparations. I liked

reading about the "Gypsy" wedding. (Isn't the proper term "Roma"? If so, someone should mention that to Gage.) I liked reading about festivals and dancing and name day celebrations.

Gage does a great job of weaving Greek history (ancient and more modern) in with her own experiences. I like having context for why people do what they do. Gage knows how to give that context.

The book ends with six recipes and a bibliography. A glossary of Greek terms would have been nice. (Greek words were defined in the text, but I certainly don't remember every new word I encountered while reading this book. A glossary would have been a handy reference tool.)

All in all, I did enjoy reading this book, but I have no desire to read it again.

Elizabeth says

I didn't actually finish this. I found it getting too self-conscious, and including pretty boring dialogue, ordinary conversation between family members. But I did think it an interesting look at a Greek-American going back to the village of her family, where her grandmother was murdered and trying to find her roots and establish herself in a village where single women were not supposed to be so autonomous.

Jessica says

I really enjoyed this memoir/travelogue. I had read Nicholas Gage's "Eleni" so I knew the history of this family going in to the book. I think it's great that Eleni's granddaughter - also named Eleni - decided to rebuild the family home and with that, hopefully restore a place for herself in her ancestral village. This book follows the reconstruction of that house, and shares a lot of specific cultural moments in the village - saints days, Easter, festivals - as well as more mundane day-to-day life stories. I liked that Eleni embraced Greek superstitions with enthusiasm and had her coffee grounds read, had an egg white reading predict her future, sacrificed a rooster so she could bury the head in the foundation of the house (and fed the workers the meat), and received various blessings from priests and villagers, etc.

More broadly, this is the first travelogue/memoir about Greece that I have read - and I have read many - that was written by a Greek-American woman. (For whatever reason, there are a lot of books on Greece written by British men, who might be able to speak the language but don't seem to understand or fully respect the culture at all.) I could relate to a lot of the conflict she faced about living in to different worlds, and having to meet the expectations of each. It is really great to read about someone eager to preserve her cultural heritage in a modern way.

Finally, I appreciate that this book is about a village in Epiros, which is the region where my family is from and I have been lucky enough to visit.

Jill Randolph says

Fascinating book! Very well written and you get pulled into the story right away. I felt like I was with Eleni in the small village in Greece.

Rsweber says

A very interesting read and a great story.

Marcie says

After reading Ms. Gage's novel, *The Ladies of Managua*, I decided to read her memoir *North of Ithaka*. I enjoyed reading about Ms. Gage's return to her ancestral homeland, but I enjoyed her fictional work that took place mostly in Nicaragua much more.

North of Ithaka traces Eleni Gage's journey from New York City to the remote Greek village Lia. While in Lia, she rebuilds her grandmother's home that has been left abandoned since the Greek Civil War. The time spent in Lia allows Eleni to learn more about her grandmother's execution by Communist guerillas who were occupying Lia.

In addition to following the ups and downs of home reconstruction, Ms. Gage's book examines Greek culture and traditions. In doing so, her tale is both personal and informative.

Adam says

I have read the first 125 pages of this book and I am disappointed. I will not read any more of it. It is not a patch on her father's excellent book "Eleni".

The author sets out for northern Greece, near to the Albanian border, to reconstruct her family's home that had been destroyed in the Greek Civil War. Her account of this, as far as I managed to read, resembled a Greek version of "A year in Provence" by Peter Mayle, only it was not nearly as well-written. I did not like Ms Gage's writing style, which tried, unsuccessfully in my opinion, to combine jauntiness with watered down anthropological observations. Enough said...

Fernanda says

A thoroughly enjoyable read. I laughed out loud as she described living with the older generation while rebuilding her grandparents home. I am glad our book club chose this book.
