

The Reading Guide

Reading Group Questions

1. How does *The Island* deal with the concept of outcasts? In what ways were the Spinalonga islanders prisoners, and were they ever, in any sense, more free than those on the mainland?

2. Eleni's departure for Spinalonga is an incredibly moving passage. How do the characters survive leaving their families knowing they will never see them again? How would you cope? Did you feel any sympathy for Anna?

3. Secrecy is a recurring theme throughout *The Island*. Were Sofia's adoptive parents right to keep her family history from her, and was Sofia right to keep it from Alexis?

How has reading *The Island* informed or changed your view of leprosy?

Suggested Further Reading

Non fiction:

Ill Met by Moonlight by W Stanley Moss

Crete: The Battle and the Resistance by Antony Beevor

The Cretan Runner by George Psychoundakis

Don't Fence Me In: A History of Leprosy in Modern Times by Tony Gould

Alone No Longer by Stanley Stein

Fiction:

Captain Corelli's Mandolin by Louis de Bernieres

The Dark Labyrinth by Lawrence Durrell

Zorba the Greek by Nikos Kazantzakis

A Burnt Out Case by Graham Greene

A Note From the Author

The Island is a story about love and separation. It is also the story of an island. Though the characters are all entirely fictional, the island of Spinalonga is a real place and people like those I have created for the novel once lived, loved and survived there.

Spinalonga is a mere pinprick on the map (no more than a few hundred metres each way) and is situated off the north coast of Crete. The island has been a fortress, a smuggler's retreat and from 1903 until 1957 a leper colony. This story takes place during its final years as a leper colony and weaves together fictional characters and events along with documented facts about the history and daily life of Spinalonga.

Just opposite the island and almost within swimming distance, lies the fishing village of Plaka. For the 50 years during which Spinalonga was a leper colony, the two places

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relied heavily on each other. The people of Spinalonga desperately needed supplies and the inhabitants of Plaka, although repelled by the colony, depended on the income the leper colony guaranteed them. It was a strange, unusual and dangerous symbiosis.

Until the 1950's when effective treatment was discovered, leprosy was one of the most feared and loathed of all diseases. Although we associate it, thanks to films such as Ben Hur, with hideously deformed faces and gnarled limbs, it can in fact take years for signs to manifest themselves. Until the signs actually appear, a sufferer may not even know that they have been affected and the initial indications may be scarcely noticeable – a slight numbness in some areas of the body, for example, or an almost imperceptible change of pigmentation on an area of skin. In the past people did everything they could to hide leprosy because it could mean lifelong separation from their families and often incarceration in a leper colony where they would languish and eventually die. Encouraged by the Bible to treat lepers as “unclean”, communities were very afraid of having them in their midst. Before the discovery in the 19th century that leprosy, just like other diseases, was caused by a bacteria, it was considered a curse. People thought that if you had leprosy, you were being punished by God for your sins and hence shame was brought to your family too.

On my very first visit to Spinalonga in 2001, what struck me about the place was that it was just like many other villages in rural Greece. There were little houses with wooden balconies, a church, stray cats and urns filled with basil or geraniums. There was, however, one vital ingredient missing. People. Both the silence and the atmosphere were uncanny, but the people who had once lived there had certainly left something of themselves behind.

From this strong sense of what their lives might have been like grew the story of The Island.

Leprosy – a Continuing Problem in the 21st Century

Although leprosy has been eradicated in Europe, it is still a major health problem in developing countries. In 2005 nearly half a million new cases were diagnosed, around 70% of these in India. Leprosy (also known as Hansen's disease) is caused by a germ similar to that, which causes tuberculosis. It attacks the nerves of the hands, feet and face and, if left untreated, can take away the ability to move fingers, toes and eyelids. It can also destroy the ability to feel pain so that those affected are prone to injuries and burns which can result in serious infections and ultimately the loss of fingers, toes and sight. The longer the disease is left undetected, the more likely it is that the deformities, so often associated with leprosy, will occur. Coupled with the social stigma born out of fear and misunderstanding, those affected are often rejected by family and community. This means that many are afraid to come forward to seek treatment in the early stages of the disease.

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The Work of LEPRA

With their trained teams of paramedics and health workers, LEPRA (The Leprosy Relief Association) seeks out and treats those affected, enabling them to care and provide for themselves. A course of pills, Multi-Drug Therapy, cures most patients in six months and the more infectious patients within one year. If treatment is started early, deformities and disabilities can be prevented and social stigmatisation avoided. For those already disabled by leprosy, LEPRA's staff teach how to prevent the worsening of these disabilities and reconstructive surgery is becoming more widely available. Hands that have become clawed can be straightened and a simple operation can save a person's sight. It costs £21 to help cure one person of leprosy.

Further information can be found online: www.lepra.org.uk
or from LEPRA, 28 Middlesborough, Colchester, Essex CO1 1TG
08451 212121

Reviews for The Island

'At last, a beach book with heart... packed with family sagas, doomed love affairs and devastating secrets' **Observer**

'A page turning family epic... Hislop's deep research, imagination and patent love of Crete creates a convincing portrait of times on the island... a moving and absorbing holiday read that pulls at the heart strings' **Evening Standard**

'War, tragedy and passion unfurl against a Mediterranean backdrop in this engrossing debut novel' **You magazine**

'Wonderful descriptions, strong characters and an intimate portrait of island existence' **Woman & Home**

'A page turning tale that reminds us that love and life continue in even the most extraordinary of circumstances' **Sunday Express**

'Passionately engaged with its subject...the author has meticulously researched her fascinating background and medical facts' **The Sunday Times**

About the author

Victoria Hislop is a writer and journalist. She writes travel features for the Sunday Telegraph, the Mail on Sunday and a number of magazines. She also writes regular features on education for the Daily Telegraph, and celebrity profiles for Woman & Home. Victoria lives in Kent with her husband and their two children.