



Victoria Hislop

The Island
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Q: How did you become interested in the history of Spinalonga where *The Island* is set?

A: I was on holiday in Crete with my family in the summer of 2001 and the almost insignificant entry in the guidebook for Spinalonga intrigued me. "Abandoned leper colony on a small island off the coast. Boats every half an hour." We had already visited lots of classical sites and the idea of visiting somewhere with a more contemporary history really appealed to me. As soon as we landed on the island, I found the whole atmosphere absolutely electrifying and knew I had to write a story about it.

Q: Why did you set the main narrative of *The Island* in the era of World War II?

A: I wanted to maintain the true life chronology of when the cure was first used and when the patients actually left Spinalonga. With these historical landmarks as fixed points, I needed to work backwards—and found myself in the 1930's. It actually suited the plot and the themes of the book well to have this period of the war, which was a terrible time for the people of Crete, and to show that at

times the patients on the island were in some strange way better off than those on the mainland.

Q: What were some of the challenges you faced in writing a family saga that follows characters from one generation to the next?

A: As far as I was able, I tried to make sure that characters maintained their consistency. For example, to imagine what sort of person Sofia might have become, given her rather difficult start in life. Also, I think that there is a strong family trait that runs through my fictional characters, uniting the different generations of this family—their resilience. At least that's what I hoped to convey.

Q: How difficult was it for you as a writer to kill off the character of Eleni Petrakis?

A: It was very difficult—but it would have been unrealistic to portray a leper colony without showing that this disease does actually kill people (or certainly did before the treatment was discovered). Just as I had reached this moment in the plot, a very loved and precious friend died of breast cancer. She had been married for only three months and was a very precious and beautiful person—I think that my feelings about the unfairness and untimeliness of her death all came out when I wrote about Eleni dying. To me, it seemed a very natural event in the book.

Q: Why does leprosy continue to be so misunderstood as a disease by our society?

A: Every bible in every church contains the book of Leviticus in which lepers are described as unclean and to be shunned by society. I'm not sure this helps. Also, many people's impression of what it is to be a leprosy sufferer comes from the film of Ben Hur, where sufferers are portrayed as being hideously deformed. People still use the expression "I was treated like a leper" even to this day—implying that they were treated as though unclean and shunned. The irony of course is that leprosy is more curable than the common cold!

As soon as the leprosy bacillus was identified in the 19th century by a Norwegian scientist, people realized that leprosy was not a curse, or a stigma—it was simply a disease like any other and one that could be contracted, like tuberculosis. Sadly, the deformities which can be caused by leprosy (but only if the disease is left untreated) can be very unsightly, and I think that it's this combination of fear, ignorance and revulsion that means leprosy is so misunderstood.