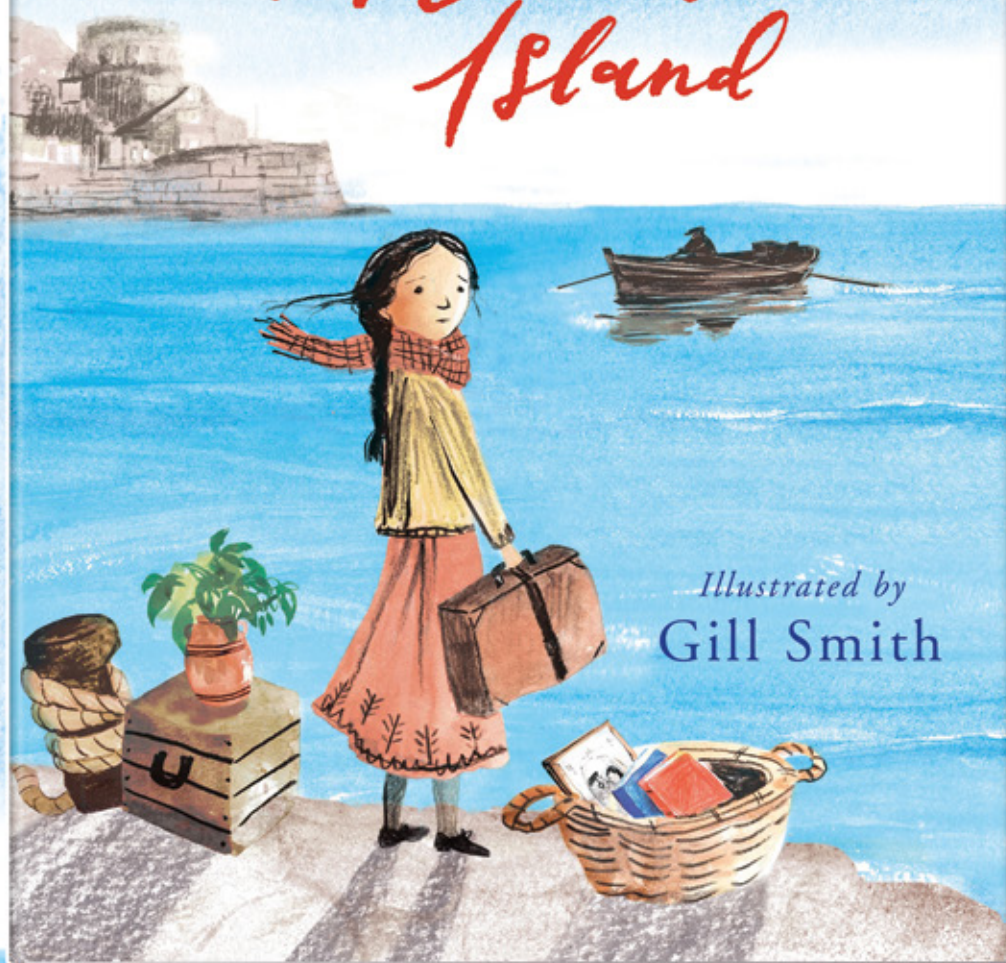


Victoria Hislop

Maria's Island



Illustrated by
Gill Smith

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

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BOOKS

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ABOUT THE BOOK

A dramatic and moving story set in the same world as the international bestseller *The Island* from the celebrated novelist Victoria Hislop.

The absorbing story of the Cretan village of Plaka and the tiny, deserted island of Spinalonga – Greece's former leper colony – is told to us by Maria Petrakis, one of the children in the original version of *The Island*. She tells us of the ancient and misunderstood disease of leprosy, exploring the themes of stigma, shame and the treatment of those who are different, which are as relevant for children as adults. Gill Smith's rich, full-colour illustrations will transport the reader to the timeless and beautiful Greek landscape and Mediterranean seascape.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victoria Hislop worked in publishing, PR and as a journalist before becoming a novelist. Her adult fiction books include *The Island*, *The Return* and, most recently, *Those Who Are Loved*, all of which have been bestsellers. She divides her time between Kent and Greece, and this is her first book for children.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Whilst working initially as a primary teacher, then within community arts and theatre, **Gill Smith** pursued illustration and achieved an MA with distinction in Children's Book Illustration at the Cambridge School of Art. She was shortlisted for the Batsford Illustration prize and a winner of international competition, "Picture This". Gill lives in Liverpool.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Within *Maria's Island* there are many themes, threads and topics for discussion and exploration. As well as the interest of discovering the specific circumstances of Spinalonga, there are a great many ideas that will resonate deeply with readers in other ways – the novel is full of family, love, loss, stigma and prejudice, friendship and hope. It is a bittersweet book, beautifully depicted, but care should be taken that support is in place for any group members who may have experienced – or be experiencing – familial loss, separation or discrimination.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Getting started

Begin by asking what members of the group thought of the book. What did anyone enjoy? What did anyone learn from the book? Was it a part of history anyone knew about before they read the book? How did the book make members feel?

1. Family

'...I was determined to be brave.' - p.55

This is a book about family, amongst other things. What did members think of the way family is portrayed? Discuss how Maria, her mother and her father cope with the tragic events in the novel, caring for one another. What might it be like to know you could never make physical contact with your family again? How did these passages in the book make group members feel?

2. Friendship

'We still write letters every month.' - p.123

Maria maintains her friendship with Dimitris throughout her life. Discuss all the difficulties they overcome to stay friends – separation, limited communication, disease and illness, etc. What makes them such good friends? What would it be like trying to stay friends with someone in such difficult circumstances? How do members of the group think they would manage if they could never see their friends and only communicate with them once a week, by post?

3. Stigma

'I had heard the word "stigma" used by grown-ups but now I really knew what it meant.' - p.64

What does the word 'stigma' mean? How are characters in the book who contract leprosy, and their families, stigmatised? What about Maria's sister, Anna, and her response to her family members? How did members of the group feel when reading about this? Can anyone think of other examples of stigma, from other stories or in real life? Discuss how the characters might feel experiencing this.

4. Spinalonga

'What the island was used for now was something that the grown-ups did not talk about in front of us...' - p.23

Read the description of Spinalonga from page 84 again, all together. What might it have been like, living on the island? Was it all bad? What sort of lives do members think the inhabitants might have led? You might like to look at the illustration on pages 86-87, too, alongside the next question.

5. Illustrations

'It was very silent and I concentrated hard to create the image I wanted.' - p.54

What do the illustrations add to the novel? Choose one of the full-page spreads within the novel and hold it up to the group. How does the image make anyone feel? What does it make members think of? Does it change the way anyone felt while reading the story? Choose another image or two and discuss the effect of illustrations in the book.

6. Rita

'My name is Rita. I live in London but I am half-Greek.' - p.7

Why does the novel start and end with Rita telling the story of visiting her grandmother? What effect does it have on the reader, starting in the present and going back in time to Maria's own childhood? Depending on the group, you might want to consider introducing the concept of a 'framing device' or comparing with other stories they might know that begin in a different time, and revisit a character's earlier life.

7. Disease and exile

'His name was Mr Lidakis. Everyone else was afraid to go...' - p.24

What do the group think of the existence of colonies like Spinalonga, where people with diseases were exiled? You might like to look up some facts and figures about this and other colonies in advance. The links to Leprosy in the back of the book may be useful. Do group members think it is a fair thing to do? If not, what could they have done instead? Do members know that leprosy still exists today? What do they think about this?

8. Memories

'I take it from her hands, remembering what she and her mother promised each other all those years before.' - p.127

The story of Maria and her family is set in motion by memories stirred up by photos and objects. What do these objects mean to the characters? Consider the meaning of everything Maria's mother takes to the island, and the stone that Maria paints for her, and still has. What about the photos that have travelled with Maria's mother and then Maria? Why do we keep these objects close to us?

