

[“Story of Courage, Betrayal and Hope.”](#) By Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D.

Review of *The Island*, by Victoria Hislop. *The National Herald*, February 23 (2008): 16ff.

Leprosy. The very word conjures up images of hideous creatures whose open wounds and disfigured bodies are so repellant all we want to do is flee. Yet “The Island,” Victoria Hislop’s sorrowful yet inspiring look at leprosy’s effects on a Cretan family, has made the best seller lists in the United Kingdom, Greece, Israel and Portugal. The book is currently being translated into 22 other languages.

Spinalonga, the island of the book, is located off the northern coast of Crete. A former fortress and smuggler’s retreat, the tiny island was the main leper colony in Greece from 1903 to 1957, when a cure for leprosy was found, and the lepers no longer needed to be segregated from others.

“The Island” is a multi-generational story about the love and courage of the Petrakis family as first one, then another, family member develops the dreaded illness. It is also a story about romance, infidelity, jealousy and war, infused with the passionate temperament of the people of Crete. Although the book’s English-born author has no Greek roots, she writes as if as if her “yiayia” and “papou” were Cretan villagers themselves.

The books begins with 25-year-old Alexis Fielding, who in her struggle to make a decision about marriage, realizes she needs to find out more about her roots. Alexis is familiar about the history of her English-born father, but her mother, Sofia, never speaks of her Cretan past.

A Cretan family friend explains to Alexis: “Your mother’s story is your grandmother’s story, and it is also your great grandmother’s story. Their lives were intertwined, and that’s what we really mean when we talk about fate in Greece. Our so-called fate is largely ordained by our ancestors, not by the stars. Of course events seem to take place out of the blue that change the course of our lives, but what really determines what happens to us are the actions of those around us now and those who came before us.” (43)

Alexis’ mother Sofia holds tight to her family’s secrets, lest she shatter. One secret involves a deadly love triangle, another that her grandmother, Eleni Petrakis, was a leper. The disclosure of these intertwining secrets is the basis for a plot, which is highly believable, yet full of unexpected twists and turns.

The story of the Petrakis family begins in Plaka, a small coastal village in Crete that faces Spinalonga. Eleni Petrakis, Sofia’s grandmother, is a pure hearted vibrant Cretan woman, beloved to her husband, Giorgis, and her two daughters, Anna and Maria. She is also Plaka’s

favorite teacher. "Eleni had a magnetism that attracted children and adults alike to her and was admired and respected by all." (52)

When Eleni develops leprosy and must depart to Spinalonga, her family is devastated. But the author neither over simplifies nor over dramatizes their grief. Instead she artfully draws us into the soul of each family member as they struggle with loss, anger and fear.

Contrary to popular misconceptions, symptoms of leprosy often develop quite slowly and the grotesque images we have of lepers belong to the last stages of the illness. Also, there are two types of leprosy, one type being far less lethal and disfiguring than the other. Eleni suffers from the more serious type, yet she lives for several years, during which time she writes to her daughters regularly and is visited weekly by her husband, who is careful not to come too close.

Hence Eleni's family suffers the torture known to anyone who has or has had a family member suffering from a long-term fatal illness. Death is inevitable, but not mercifully short. Instead the beloved lingers and hopes for a cure rise and fall alongside fears and uncertainties about how much and how long the beloved will suffer. As long as Eleni lives, Giorgis cannot bury her and hope to find any closure. Instead, he must watch his wife deteriorate and lose her, a little at a time, which causes him immense suffering.

"Giorgis was not even forty when Eleni left, but he was already stooped with anxiety, and over the next few months he was to age beyond recognition. His hair turned from olive black to the silvery grey of the eucalyptus, and people seemed always to refer to him as 'Poor Giorgis.' It became his name." (92)

Although both of Eleni's daughters are shattered by the departure and ultimate death of their mother, their reactions couldn't be more different. Anna becomes explosive and even more determined to escape the mundane household chores and the many family and social duties associated with being a traditional Cretan woman. Anna wants riches, romance and excitement instead. Like Scarlet O'Hara in "Gone with the Wind."

Anna is self-centered, impulsive and often utterly insensitive to the feelings and needs of others. In contrast, Anna's sister Maria is more like the saint-like Melanie in "Gone with the Wind." Maria, as pure-hearted as her mother, finds fulfillment in the traditional female role and when Eleni departs for Spinalonga, silently commits herself to taking care of her father. In contrast Anna thinks only of her own pain and gain and after marrying a wealthy man, rarely bothers to visit, much less help, her bereft father.

To reveal more of story would be a disservice to those who will read this unforgettable book. Suffice it to say that the disclosure of the family secrets transforms Sofia (Anna's daughter) and Alexis. Both mother and daughter become more emotionally honest and expressive and form a more meaningful connection, not only with their Greek roots, but with one another.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this book, as well as the source of several intriguing sub-plots, is life on Spinalonga where most of the inhabitants look and function like ordinary people. Instead of moaning on dirt floors in dark hovels or trying to escape their plight with ouzo or unrestrained sex, these social outcasts valiantly try to recreate their former village life. Alongside the hospital and special quarters for those in the last stages of the disease, the residents have a church, town hall, kafenio, various shops and, like most Greek villages, gossip and political and personal rivalries.

While some inhabitants cannot overcome their justifiable despair and the loneliness caused by their separation from their families, others marry and have children. Many decorate their homes or apartments, make friendships and find a new sense of purpose in helping one another. For example, Eleni, bereft of her own children, showers her maternal affections on a frightened young leper boy bereft of his parents. She also resumes her role as schoolteacher, infusing Spinalonga's students with a love for learning and hope for the future.

Book Origins The author first visited Spinalonga in 2001, even though she had made annual visits to Crete since 1981. At the time, she had no personal connection with or interest in leprosy and no thoughts whatsoever about writing a novel. She simply wanted a break from the beach-lunch-beach routine. "Going to Spinalonga was a fluke," the author states.

At first glance Hislop thought that Spinalonga was like "any rural Greek village, with a church, stray cats and urns filled with basil and geraniums." Yet there were "strange, haunting aspects of it" that captured her imagination. "Here was somewhere that had effectively been a prison, a place for a life sentence, but where the 'prisoners' were innocent of any crime and indeed might be living close enough to their loved ones to be able to see them just across the water. It was profoundly terrible and yet there was evidence from the infrastructure (a communal laundry, two churches, pretty homes, shops) that these people had not lived entirely miserable lives. They had dignity, and they had enjoyed a certain quality of life."

She found the atmosphere on Spinalonga so "electrifying," she knew she had to write a story about it. "The inspiration to write this novel came completely out of the blue. As a travel journalist, my very first thought was to write a feature about it, but I realized immediately that ... there was much more of a story to be told – one that couldn't be contained in so few words and one that had to be inspired by my emotional reaction to it, rather than pure fact," she states.

The main narrative is set in the era of World War II because Hislop wanted "to maintain the true life chronology of when the cure was first used and when the patients actually left Spinalonga." Working backwards, she found herself in the 1930s. "It actually suited the plot and the themes of the book well to have this period of the war ... 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."

With its authentic, historically accurate and vivid portrayal of village life and wartime

Greece, “The Island “ has been well received in Greece, It has been in Ta Nea’s top ten for 16 weeks. This has made Hislop “incredibly happy.” She says, “I wouldn’t have dreamt in a million years that it would ever be translated into Greek ... “So for the Greek press not to say, ‘Who does this woman think she is writing about us, what does she know?’ has been immensely gratifying.”

Both critics and readers alike describe “The Island” as “a real page turner” and so it is. The book has suspense. Who will develop the disease and will they live or die? What will be the outcome of the various romances?

More importantly, the book has heart. Despite the enormity of their pain, a group of broken-hearted lepers and their families had the courage to find love and purpose in their lives, while at the same time contending with the heartlessness of the outside world. Even today, few are aware that leprosy is not only less contagious, but more curable than the common cold.

Victoria Hislop, an Oxford-educated journalist, lives in Kent, England with her husband, journalist and TV personality Ian Hislop, and their two daughters. She writes travel features for The Sunday Telegraph and The Mail on Sunday, as well as celebrity profiles for Woman and the Home. “The Island” is her first novel. Her second novel, scheduled for completion by the end of the year, is set in Spain, some of it during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). She hopes to write another novel set in Greece.

Hislop describes her first visit to Greece during her teens as “‘agape’ at first sight.” She was particular drawn to Crete and spent many hours sitting quietly in kafenions in tiny villages there. “I would watch the way people in Crete interact with one another – with passion and involvement – rather than the slightly cool indifference which we English are so practiced at. It’s amazing to watch their friendships, the rapport between them.” “Since writing ‘The Island,’” Hislop says, “I have met many many wonderful people in Athens and in Crete. I have been so warmly embraced by the local community that I feel I have discovered the true and overwhelming nature of ‘filoxenia.’ It’s something very special.”

When asked how this book changed her life, the author noted her involvement in LEPRO, the U.K.’s lead leprosy charity. She helps raise funds for LEPRO by speaking about leprosy. Last year she traveled to India to see LEPRO’s efforts in rural communities and plans to return next year. She also values having met and become a close friend of a former leper, Manoli Foundoulakis, 84, who lives in Elouda, the village next to Plaka.

“He is now cured,” states Hislop, “but not before the disease had done considerable damage to him. How do I explain why Manoli is so important to me? In some rather hard to define way, he is the reason I wrote ‘The Island.’ Even though I didn’t know of his existence while I was writing the book, Manoli is very close the nature of people I imaged there (dignified, clever, funny, warm and loving). He tells me that the book has helped to remove the stigma of the disease, and if I have done that purely for him, that matters more than anything else.”

For additional information about leprosy, which is now called Hansen's disease, after the 19th century Norwegian physician who discovered that leprosy was caused by bacteria, visit www.leprosy.org; about "The Island," visit www.victoriahislop.com