

THE BODECIA BOOK CLUB REVIEW

The Island by Victoria Hislop

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Alexis Fielding, a Londoner, is holidaying on Crete and is in a turmoil of indecisiveness. She has known there are deep dark family secrets on the side of her mother, Sophia, who came from Crete but has always refused to mention anything about her past. She also doesn't think she loves her long-term boyfriend, Ed, but she doesn't really understand love and passion. So she is astounded when her mother agrees that she should visit Sophia's home town, and some of her friends, to finally discover the secrets in her mother's past.

Alexis leaves Ed sulking in Hania while she makes the long journey to the tiny fishing village of Plaka; her mother's home town. She is surprised to find that just out to sea from Plaka sits Spinalonga—once the enforced colony for all of Crete's lepers. Alexis seeks out Fontini, the woman to whom her mother has entrusted with telling their family history. Alexis not only discovers her deep connection to Plaka, but also her equally deep connection to Spinalonga. As Fontini's tale unfolds, Alexis is drawn into the story of her family, and the passionate loves, hates, and lives of the villagers. And of course, their silent neighbours across the water.

The Island is certainly a quality book but without being heavy like an old classic. It is well-researched and contains powerful imagery and detailed descriptions of Crete. It makes you want to go and look up the places on the internet so you can see exactly where the novel is set. It is tragic without being upsetting, although half the group did admit to shedding a few tears!

The book paints an intimate picture of what life was like for the lepers living on the island. Life there may have been hard, but the residents never gave up and worked very hard to forge a normal existence. An island newspaper was regularly published, people fell in love and got married, partied, gossiped, had hobbies and petty quarrels, gardened, campaigned for more funding from the Greek government and bartered with each other. They did anything, but still their lives out in total misery just waiting for to succumb to the disease and die. For many this optimism paid off as a cure was eventually found and many survivors left the island when it was closed in 1957.

This novel makes you think about how we treat people today with certain illnesses and explores class, prejudice and discrimination wonderfully. The disease can only be spread by direct contact with an open wound, but much like AIDS victims in the 1980s, sufferers were avoided and feared as people often thought they could catch it from them just by being in the same room. Same prejudices, just a different disease. Also, like AIDS, at least in the beginning, the view was that the sufferer only had themselves to blame and little compassion was granted. It also makes you consider those who put themselves at risk for the sake of others and humbles the reader.

The story is well structured and we were not able to guess what was going to happen in the end, but the book was so enjoyable throughout that we certainly weren't hankering to see what would happen at the end. This is one of those books we were sad to finish and will be pushed to find one so good to read next.

Victoria's next book is set alongside the Spanish Civil War and I am sure will enable the reader to escape abroad in your own home but with a bit of substance and I am sure will be included in our book club soon.

We gave The Island **7.7 / 10**, which currently stands joint second on our books reading list.

The book we are now reading is **When Will There Be Good News by Kate Atkinson**.

Don't forget the first rule of Book Club!

Bodecia Blog -

We were very excited to have talked to our “international” member Emmeline via video Skype and very glad to hear that everything is going well for her in Brisbane, Australia, where she has been for just a week after emigrating with her husband and two young children. We could not believe the clear video we were able to talk to her over it seemed she had been just down the road!

We also had two members show round their holiday snaps of her trip to Spinalonga which really brought the book alive with the images and also had fond memories for our two members.

As we talked we ate Greek salad, kebabs and Greek yoghurt and drank Ouzo (watered down with lemonade).