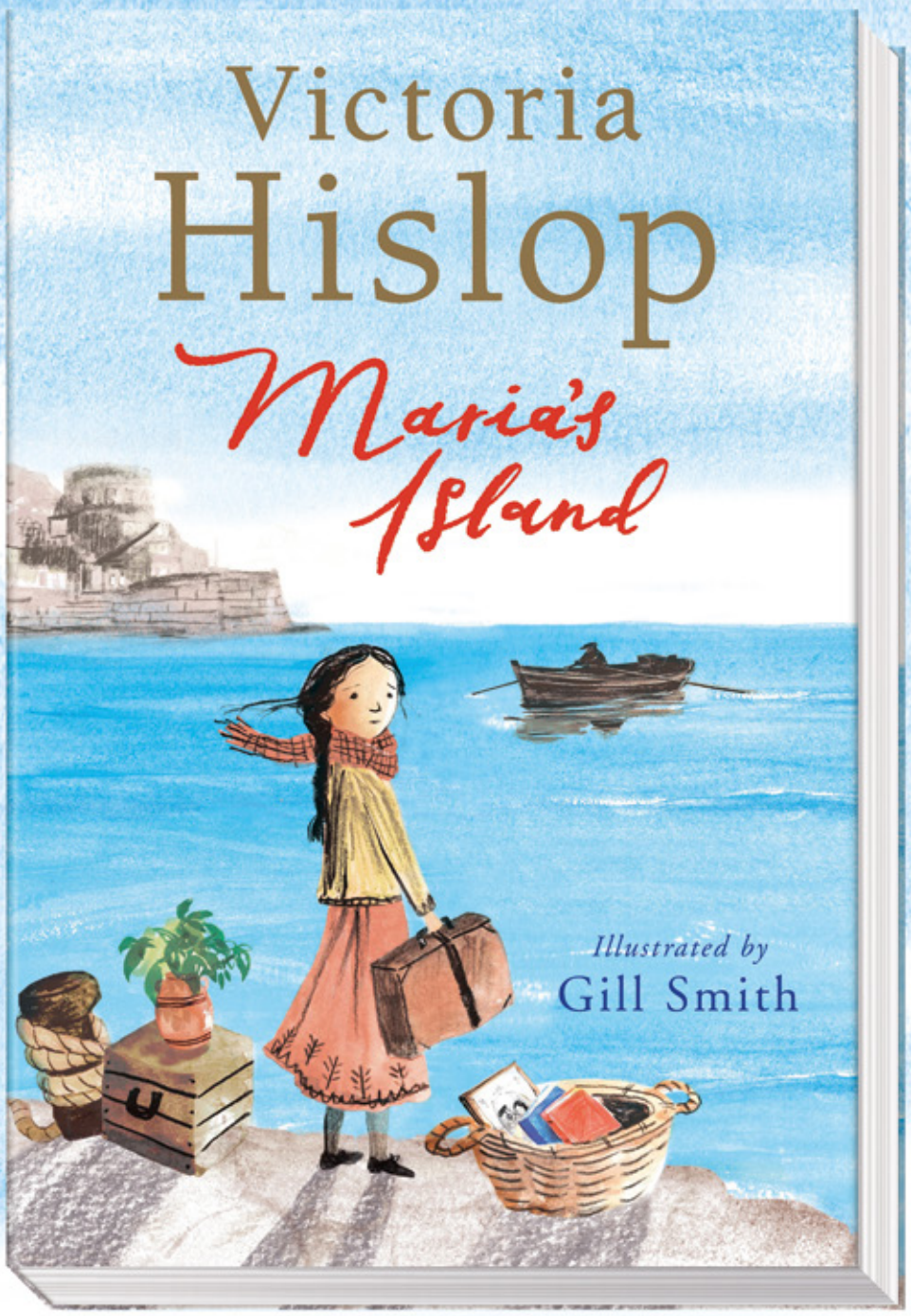
TEACHERS' NOTES



ISBN 9781406399073 • £10.99 • Hardback • 8 years +

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.

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#MariasIsland

WALKER BOOKS

These notes have been written by the teachers at the CLPE to provide schools with ideas to develop comprehension and cross-curricular activities around this text. They build on our work supporting teachers to use quality texts throughout the reading curriculum. They encourage a deep reading of and reflection on the text, which may happen over a series of reading sessions, rather than in just one sitting. We hope you find them useful.

Before You Start:

- As you read through the book it would be helpful to use a group journal or give children individual reading journals to record and organise discussions and responses to the text. The children could also be asked to consider the author's use of language and how she creates a particular effect or image at key points throughout the text.
- Teachers should be aware that *Maria's Island* addresses a child's experience of an infectious disease, as well as her response to the illness and death of a parent from that same illness. Leprosy, the illness in question, is a contagious disease that has huge impact on those infected, and children may see parallels with the coronavirus pandemic. Understanding would need to be shown when introducing the book to a child who has experienced bereavement, especially that of a close family member.

Cover and page 1 to page 16

- Begin by sharing the cover, drawing the children's attention to the cover illustration. *What can you see here? Who do you think this character might be? What do you think she is doing and why? How do you think she is feeling? What clues do you get from her body language and facial expression, her clothing, what she is carrying, and the things around her?*
- *What else do you notice in the illustration? What might the rowing boat and buildings in the background suggest? Where and when do you think the story might be set? What leads you to think this?* Record the children's responses around a photocopy of the cover and return to these as you read the book, comparing the children's initial thoughts to how the story actually unfolds.
- Now, read aloud and consider the handwritten title of the book, ***'Maria's Island'***. *What might be special about a story set on an island? Who do you think Maria might be, why might it be her island?*
- *What do the cover illustration and title make you think about the story that lies ahead? Does anything remind you of any other stories you have read or heard, in books, films, TV or real life? Does the cover make you want to read the story? Why? Why not?*
- Read on to the dedication (page 5), pausing to share the page borders and decoration, the olives on the title page, and scrutinising the dedication page.
- *Do the page borders and decorations give you any further clues about the story? Do you recognise the plant on the title page? Do you know where it grows?*
- *What do you notice on the dedication page? Does your family display photos? Who is in them? Who do you think the various people in the photograph frames might be? How might they relate to the girl on the cover, and to the story you are about to read?* The children might recognise the family portrait as the one which was poking from the basket on the cover.

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- *What do you think the object might be that says **'KATHE MERA'** on it? What language do you think this might be, and what might it mean? What do you think the word **'vaftistira'** in the dedication means? What language do you think this word might be from? What clues do these things give you about the setting of the story?*

- Read aloud the prologue to the story, from pages 6 to 16, sharing the accompanying illustrations with the children. Give the children time and space to reflect on and discuss what they have heard and seen and consider:

- *What do you think is happening in these pages? Who are the main characters and what do you learn about them? What do you learn about the characters of Rita and her **'yiayia'** or grandma? Do they remind you of other characters you have met in books, films, on TV or in people you know in real life?*

- *How do you think it makes Rita feel to think of herself as half-Greek? What benefits does her dual heritage have? What do you think Rita is gaining from her trip to Greece? What connections does she have with life there?* You may have children in the group who are of dual heritage, or who have experienced life in another country and have connections with the culture and experience of speaking languages other than English. This book could be a springboard for discussion in school and at home about themselves, their family, history and cultural identity.

- *What do you learn about Yiayia and her connection to Crete? Why do you think she is reluctant to leave the island to go and live with her family? How do you think the photos in the frames she polishes relate to the pictures you have already seen? How do you think Rita feels to discover Yiayia has a sister? Why do you think Yiayia might be reluctant at first, then enthusiastic, about taking Rita to Plaka?*

- *How do you think Rita feels as they travel to Plaka and arrive there? How do you know? What does the final sentence, **'None of it is what I imagine…'** make you predict about the next part of the story? What do you think Rita might have expected, and how might the truth be different?*

- Discuss the device of using Rita, granddaughter of the unnamed Yiayia to introduce the story.

- *Have you read a book with a prologue – a part of the story that comes before the main events, and might be from a different period – before? What do you think the author aims to do by using it: why not just tell Rita's Yiayia's story?*

- *How does this section fit in the story as a whole, how does it relate to what is to come? When a story is told in flashback, what do you already know about how it ends?*

Page 17 to page 29

- Read aloud from page 17 to page 27, again sharing the illustrations, then allowing time and space for the children to reflect on what they have heard and seen, before discussing.

- *What do think is happening in these pages? What do we find out about Yiayia/Maria's childhood in Plaka, her friendships and family?*

- *What are your initial impressions of Maria's Mum and Dad, and of her sister Anna? How do you think the sisters get on? How might this link to why Rita didn't know Yiayia had a sister in the prologue?*

- *What do you learn about her friendship with Dimitris? What kind of things do they like to do? Which words and phrases capture the nature of their relationship?*

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- Consider the illustration at the top of page 22 to 23, and the text beneath, ***'One warm evening…'*** to ***'We were told less about its present.'***
- *Why do you think Maria's father might be rowing people to the island at dusk? Does anything in the illustration add to what the words tell you?*
- *What do you find out about the island of Spinalonga? Why do you think that,* ***'We were told less about its present'*** *and* ***'What the island was used for now was something that the grown-ups did not talk about in front of us'****?*
- Maria says, ***'Although I knew that Spinalonga was a place for people with leprosy, I didn't know much else'***. Establish what the children know about leprosy, then share the information on page 128 about ***'Leprosy in the 21st Century'*** and discuss.
- *How do you think Mum feels about Dad rowing to Spinalonga? How do you know?*
- *How does Anna react to what Dad is doing? How does this make you feel?*
- *Why do you think* ***'it was more or less banned to talk about leprosy'****? What do you think might happen when people avoid discussing something important like this disease?*
- Consider the final sentence, ***'None of us spoke.'*** *What do you think each of the three around the table might be thinking?* Encourage the children to write their ideas in different thought bubbles, relating to the different character's perspectives. Ask the children to pick one to read aloud and see if the others can guess which character's thoughts these might be.
- Now turn to the double-page illustration on the next page.
- *What does the spread of Dad rowing back from the island make you feel about his mission? Why do you think this has been placed here? What does this space of an illustration without text make us think or feel?*
- *Do you think Dad's visit to the island will have consequences? What do you predict might happen in the story?* Collect the children's predictions on post-it notes and place these around a copy of the illustration to reflect on as you continue reading.

Page 30 to page 49

- Read aloud from page 30 to page 49, sharing the illustrations as before, and allowing time and space for the children to reflect on what they have heard and seen, then discuss:
- *Can you summarise what happens in these pages? What more do we find out about Maria and her family and friends? What happens to move the story onwards?*
- *What do you learn about Dad and his character from the discussion over breakfast? How do you think Anna feels about what Dad has been doing? How do you know?*
- *What more do you learn about attitudes towards leprosy in Plaka? What is the church's teaching about the disease, and how might this influence public opinion?*
- Ask the children to draw on what they have found out about leprosy – from the endnote, what Maria's parents

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tell her, what townsfolk and the church say about it. When re-reading the endnote, refer to the fact that Victoria Hislop, the author, is an ambassador for Lepra, a UK charity fighting leprosy around the world. Find out more about this disease on the charity's website: https://www.lepra.org.uk/what-we-do/leprosy and encourage the children to compose some **referential writing** about the disease to educate others about this disease, addressing some of the misconceptions and attitudes explored in the text so far. *What information might you want to include, and what views might you want to challenge with the information you have learned? What is the purpose of your writing? Who is it for? How might that affect the tone of voice and the language used? What form could your writing take?* When they have had time to draft and compose their writing, ask the children to share their work with others, identifying what works well and what might be improved. Come back to consider why the characters in the text might have the perceptions they do, and how little of this information would have been available to the community at the time in which the story was set. *Where do you think the information we have available to us now about this disease has come from? What benefits does having more knowledge about something unknown have? What are the benefits of being able to share information such as this much more widely in the age of the internet? What do we have to consider when we read and share information we find online? How do we know if information is credible and accurate?*

- Reflect on the character of Maria. Support the children in completing a **Role on the Wall** for her. To do this, have a prepared template of a girl onto which the children can record their ideas – you could copy the image of her from the cover. Ask the children to write words or phrases on the outside of the outline sharing what they know about her outward appearance or other information about her from the story events. Then, use these to begin to infer and deduce her internal feelings and characteristics and note these on the inside of the outline.

- To promote a higher level of thinking, ask the children to consider what we know from what she says and what is said about her by other characters and by the narrator, and what we have to infer from body language, gestures and actions. Support the children in making explicit links between the external and internal. For example, *what does something Maria does – doing her homework on time, hiding the snails in the stew so her mother didn't see she disliked them, her friendship with Dimitris – tell us about her personality?* Or, *how does Maria's personality – her inquisitive nature, her love of science – make a specific action seem most likely?*

- As an added dimension, children could add anything they also know about Maria as an older woman, as Yiayia. Encourage the children to continue to return to the Role on the Wall as you read on in the story, using a different colour each time to highlight the knowledge they gain as they read on.

- Come back to consider Dimitris' diagnosis:

- *How do the scenes in school make you feel? How do you think it would feel to be inspected like this? How do the text and illustrations capture the mood of the episode?*

- *How do Dimitris, Maria and Maria's mum and family feel when he is diagnosed with leprosy? How do you know? How do you think this will affect him, his family and his friendship with Maria?*

- End work on this section of the story by supporting children to write a letter to Dimitris in role as Maria. Encourage them to re-read passages about their friendship (e.g., page 17, page 36, page 42) and to remind themselves what Maria knows about leprosy, including what she learns from the leaflet on page 47, but also

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remembering how the disease is stigmatised by the wider society. *What could Maria say to Dimitris that would help him? How might she encourage Dimitris not to feel ashamed and give up hope?* Ask children to pass the letter they have written as 'Maria' to another child (and to receive one in turn) so that they can then also read in role – and write a reply – as 'Dimitris'. Invite them to identify the letters that are most comforting or supportive and to identify why this is.

Page 50 to page 77

- Begin by scrutinising the illustration on page 50 of Mum marking maths books, inviting children to discuss what they see. *What do you think we are being shown in this illustration? How might it relate to what might happen next in the story?*
- Now read page 51 to page 55. Allow time and space to reflect on what they have heard, then discuss.
- *Was this what you predicted? How do the events of these pages make you feel?*
- *How do you think Mum's diagnosis affects Maria and her family, practically and emotionally?*
- *How might Maria feel as she faces losing both her best friend and her mother? How do different people – Dad, Anna and Dimitris' family, especially his brother – react to news of the disease? What do you think each person's reaction tells you?*
- Consider the closing line **'It was a terrible day, but the next one was worse'**. *How does this line make you feel? What makes you feel this way? What do you think would have made the next day worse? What do you predict will happen next?*
- Read on, from page 56 to page 61. Invite children to consider how the author conveys the emotion of Mum and Dimitris leaving Plaka for Spinalonga, including in the double-page illustration on pages 60 to 61. *Why do you think this moment was chosen to place this illustration? What impact does this have on you here?* Provide copies of the text while you re-read aloud and ask the children to **text-mark**, looking in detail at this section of the text, identifying language, vocabulary and elements of the text that stand out for them and help to convey the emotions of the characters or that evoke particular feelings within them. Invite the children to prepare their own performance reading of this section, thinking about how they might convey the sustained emotion to an audience.
- Now read on from page 62 to page 70.
- *What rituals and routines help the characters deal with separation? Do you think they would comfort you?* Children might mention waving across the water, the regular exchange of letters.
- *Have you, like Maria, heard the word **'stigma'** (page 64)?* Support children in researching its definition and etymology. *What connections do you see between the definition and the condition of leprosy? How does Maria feel to be shunned? Why do you think Maria chooses not to tell her Mum how she and Anna are treated because of the stigma of leprosy?*
- Support the children in considering how and why Maria and Dimitris write to each other, re-reading page 69, ***'Dimitris and I began to write…'*** to page 70, ***'… distant planet in the night sky'***, and revisiting their earlier

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shared experience of shooting stars on page 36, from ***'One night in July…'*** *How does their correspondence support their friendship?* Invite the children to write in role, as Dimitris to Maria or vice versa, about the night sky they can both observe while apart, and their feelings for each other and about the situation. As before, invite them to exchange letters so that they can read then reply in role.

- Read aloud page 71 to page 77, discussing how the years go by and the impact of time passing. Spend time looking closely at the illustrations, and talk about their impact. Ask children to summarise what they have heard, and consider:
- *What do you learn in these pages about how time is passing, how this affects Maria, Mum and Dimitris, and the progression of Mum's leprosy?*
- *How does the departure of Anna affect Maria? How do Anna's responses and reactions compare with Maria and her father's? Why do you think she might have reacted so differently?*
- *How do the two episodes – of Maria noticing changes in her mother's letters, then of her gathering wildflowers – make you feel? Which words or phrases especially stand out for you? How do the illustrations support the mood of these pages?*

Page 78 to page 88

- Read aloud from page 78 to page 83, sharing the illustrations as before, and allowing time and space for the children to reflect on what they have heard and seen, then discuss:
- *What does Maria's determination to become a doctor tell you about her? How does her attitude to the disease compare to Anna's and to society's?*
- *Was Maria's diagnosis a surprise to you? What does this make you think about the rest of the story? How do you think Maria and her father felt? How do you know? How does the illustration of Dad rowing Maria to Spinalonga make you feel?* Invite the children to create a thought bubble to add to this illustration to share what they think Maria or her father might be thinking at this point. *How might their inner thoughts compare to what they might say to each other on the outside?*
- Deepen the children's response to Maria's arrival on Spinalonga with a **visualisation** exercise, looking at the thoughts and feelings the description gives us about this place. Read aloud page 84, ***'Even before the boat…'*** to page 88 ***'as if she knew me'*** without sharing the illustrations. Ask the children to visualise the scene in their mind's eye as you read, closing their eyes and picturing the scene unfolding like a scene in a film. Read the section aloud two or three times, then ask them to describe to a partner what they pictured and give them simple art materials to depict their visualisation.
- Following this, ask the children to share what they imagined and drew and to identify key vocabulary or phrases which support their understanding or interpretation. For example, ***'… long dark tunnel…'*** or ***'… pretty houses with their brightly painted shutters and doors…'*** or ***'… flowering geraniums in big pots…'*** or ***'… bakery with its rows of loaves…'*** or ***'… children skipping down the street…'*** or ***'… older people sitting in their doorways…'*** or ***'… a fully grown cat […] waiting on the doorstep…'*** or ***'… flowery curtains and a cloth on the table…'*** Ask the children why particular words or phrases stood out to them.

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- *What made them so vivid or memorable? What impression is created by the author through the descriptions? How do these descriptions make you feel?*
- Share and consider Gill Smith's illustrations on page 86 to 88. *Have you drawn the same things as the illustrator? What do you think stood out for her in the text, what has she focused on?*
- Ask children to predict how the story will develop now that Maria is on Spinalonga with Dimitris.
- *How do you think the story will progress? How do you think leprosy will continue to affect Maria and Dimitris? How does knowing Maria as Yiayia from the prologue affect your predictions?*

Page 89 to page 103

- Read aloud page 89 to page 98, ***'… I did not know myself'***, sharing the accompanying illustrations, then allowing the children time and space to reflect on what they have heard and seen, and to discuss:
- *What more do we learn about Maria, Dimitris, and life on Spinalonga from these pages?*
- *What could you add to Maria's* ***Role on the Wall*** *about the way she makes the island her home and her desire to nurse and care for others?* Children might observe the empathy she shows toward her patients as well as her scientific, professional attitude to record-keeping and research.
- *How does the arrival of Dr Kyritsis make you feel? If leprosy is not treatable, why do you think he might be visiting? What impression does he make on you, on the islanders, on Maria?*
- *How do you think Maria feels about working alongside Dr Kyritsis? How do you know? How do the illustrations at the foot of page 96 and 97 add to what the text tells us about this time?*
- *Why do you think the doctor leaves so suddenly and without any explanation? How do you think Maria feels about this? How do you know?*
- Read on from page 98, ***'Many people had got sicker…'*** to page 103, where Dr Kyritsis returns and Maria falls ill while participating in a clinical trial.
- *Why do you think Maria is so keen to be part of the drug trial? How would you feel in her position? Would you be willing to take the risk involved?* Children may be aware of trials for the various coronavirus vaccines, and you could discuss the hope that new treatments bring and the risks of participating in drugs trials of this kind.
- *How do you think Maria feels when she gets worse rather than better? What do you think Dimitris and Dr Kyritsis might feel about her participation? Do you think she should withdraw from the trial? Following this discussion, invite the children to write in role as either Maria herself, Dimitris or Dr Kyritsis, sharing their inner thoughts about her condition at this time and feelings about what is happening. When they have written, allow them the opportunity to read their writing aloud to the rest of the group, and see if it is clear which character's perspective they were writing from. What was it that made the identity of the writer apparent?*

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Page 104 to page 127

- Read on from page 104 to page 111, then discuss how Maria then the rest of the island are cured.
- *How did the confusion over which leg was infected add to the drama of Maria's cure?*
- *What do you think will happen now that Maria is healed and a cure has been discovered? Why do you think Dr Kyritsis wants her to stay on the island? What do you think he means when he says,* ***"'This is just the beginning!'"****?*
- *What do you think the mood on the island is like when he returns with the crates of medicine? How do you think he and Maria feel about seeing each other again? How do you know?*
- *What do you think are the issues in treating everyone on Spinalonga? Do you think everyone would want to risk the treatment? Why? Why not?*
- *How do you think people felt about leaving their island to return to their old lives? Why do you think that some might have mixed feelings about leaving?*
- *What mood does the illustration on page 112 and 113 capture for you? What might people be feeling and saying?* Add speech or thought bubbles to a photocopy of the spread to capture these ideas.
- Read on from page 114 to the end of the book. Allow the children time and space to summarise and reflect on what they have read, considering how the resolution of the story has affected them, and how they feel about the book as a whole. Ask the group:
- *How do you feel about the way the story ends? How does the author draw everything together? What thoughts are you left with by how events are tied up? Are any questions unanswered?*
- *Did you expect Dr Kyritsis to propose to Maria? What clues told you they were falling in love?*
- *How does the welcome that Plaka gives the islanders make you feel? How does the illustration on page 120 and 121 capture the mood of the celebration? What details do you notice?*
- *Do you think everyone was pleased to see the islanders cured? What do you learn about Anna on page 123? Why do you think she was one of those who* ***'never changed their views'****?*
- *What do Maria's final revelations about her life after Spinalonga tell you about her? How does the life she went on to lead fit with what you already knew of her? What does her lifelong connection with Dimitris – the fact that* ***'we still write letters every month'*** *– tell you about her, and about their friendship?* Update the role on the wall with any final reflections.
- *Why do you think the author returns to Rita to end the story? What more does this epilogue – the scrapbook of letters, her tending her mother's grave, the paperweight she made for Dimitris but gave to her mother – add to what we have learned about her yiayia?*
- Allow the children to begin to explore their responses to the text as a whole through booktalk, with the help of what Aidan Chambers calls 'the four basic questions'. These questions give children accessible starting points for discussion:

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- Did you enjoy this story? What did you like or dislike?
- What puzzles did it contain?
- What links do you see to other stories you already know, or things that you know about from real-life experience?
- The publisher describes *Maria's Island* as **'a dramatic and moving story […] exploring the themes of stigma, shame and the treatment of those who are different.'** *Do you think this is an accurate description? If you had to summarise the book succinctly in this way, what would you say about it?* Collect the children's ideas on sentence strips to display around a copy of the front cover in the class reading corner or school library. *Who do you think would enjoy this book? Why? What would you tell them about it to encourage them to read it? What would you hold back, so as not to spoil their reading experience?*

After reading:

- Consider the different characters, the plot and the setting. Repeat the visualisation activity from page 84, with different settings, e.g., the shooting star, the classroom during the leprosy inspection, the quayside during evacuation…
- *How does the author use the different settings of Plaka and Spinalonga? How important do you think they are to the story?*
- *Which character, aspect of the story, incident or episode interested the group the most?*
- *Did any of the characters remind you of characters in other books?*
- Review the story in chronological order, considering the different emotions Maria feels through the story, the high and low points, using the **Role on the Wall** to support discussion of her emotional journey. Use **hot-seating** to explore her feelings: one member of the group role-plays Maria and is interviewed by the other children. This activity involves children closely examining a character's motivation and responses. The children could work collaboratively to choose words that describe Maria's emotions at different points of the story. Write these on post-it notes, then organise them to demonstrate shades of emotional intensity she has felt in the story and create a **graph of emotion**. You could also explore the emotional journey of other characters such as Dimitris, Anna or Dr Kyritsis.
- Revisit Gill Smith's illustrations, considering how they clarify, reinforce or complement the text.
- *How do the illustrations help your reading? How would the story be different without them?*
- *Do they help you imagine the characters and setting, or give clues to the story? Are there certain details* – such as the photographs, or elements of the landscape – *that run through the story? How do these hook you into the book?*
- *Why do you think the wordless double-page spreads are placed where they are, and what do they do?*
- If possible, leave copies of the book in the book corner for the children to revisit and re-read in independent

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reading time if they want to, by themselves or socially in a group.

- Open up wider discussions into how people can still be stigmatised in today's society. *What kinds of things can people be stigmatised for? Why do you think this happens? How can learning more about the experience of others help us to empathise with situations outside of our own experience? How might we be able to work to reduce the stigmatisation of others in today's society?* Consider how Anna never changed her views – *do you think it is possible to change the hearts and minds of everyone?*
- *Maria's Island* is an exploration of Rita's family history. Encourage children to discuss, research and write about their own heritage and cultural identities.

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