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# THE ISLAND AT THE END OF EVERYTHING

Kiran Millwood Hargrave


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# THE ISLAND AT THE END OF EVERYTHING

BY KIRAN MILLWOOD HARGRAVE

## SYNOPSIS

Ami lives on Culion Island, a leper colony in the Philippines. Her mother Nanay is Touched by the disease, Ami is Untouched. Ami sees nothing wrong with this, until the thin, malicious butterfly collector, Mr Zamora, arrives from the mainland and begins to make changes that shake the foundations of all the islanders' lives.

Culion is to become the largest leper colony in the world, the centre for forced immigration of lepers from across the Philippines. Everyone is tested, and healthy children are to be taken from their parents and sent to an orphanage on a neighbouring island. Ami and the other healthy children leave soon afterwards, accompanied by Mr Zamora and his collection of butterflies. On the journey to the harbour, an accident causes one of Mr Zamora's cases to break open, setting the butterflies free.

Once at the orphanage, Ami looks after a young boy called Kidlat, and forms an uneasy friendship with a pale girl named Mari, born with one shrunken arm and abandoned by her parents. Ami writes to Nanay but Nanay only writes back once. Ami starts to worry.

When Mari breaks Mr Zamora's 'killing jar' - in which he traps and poisons butterflies for his collection - he threatens to send her to the workhouse unless she fixes it. In his workroom, Mari discovers that he's been hiding letters from Culion - clearly convinced that they're



contaminated. He's very disturbed and paranoid about catching the illness. Mari steals a letter from Nanay for Ami, but Mr Zamora is in pursuit and burns the remaining letters. The dry woods is set on fire, and the children – and Mr Zamora – only narrowly escape. Mr Zamora is sent to hospital to recover.

Ami reads her letter and discovers that Nanay's condition is worsening: she is close to death. Ami knows she must get home. She and Mari have been blamed for the fire, and Mari is frightened that she will be sent to the workhouse. A little abandoned sailing boat promises a means of escape, and over the next few days the girls patch it up, ready for departure.

But when they set off, little Kidlat follows. Too late to send him back to the orphanage, they decide to bring him along. After a treacherous sea journey, they reach Culion and travel across the island, discovering that Mr Zamora is on their trail. In the forest, they make a breath-taking discovery – a huge butterfly swarm. The butterflies colour the skies, and with a kaleidoscope flying about them, they cover the final stretch to Culion town. At the end of their journey, Ami is bitten by a viper and passes out.

She wakes in the hospital. Sister Margaritte, Ami's former teacher, is there. The nun confirms Ami's worst fears about her mother's health, and agrees to help Ami say goodbye to Nanay. Ami also discovers that Mari and Kidlat have been captured by Mr Zamora and sent to the mainland.

Nanay is still alive – just. Ami tells her about her adventures and the butterfly swarm, and manages to break open the window. Butterflies flood the room as Nanay slips away.

In the epilogue, we meet a young girl – Sol, an orphan lost on her way back to the orphanage from an errand – and a grown-up Ami. Sol arrives at Ami's butterfly-covered cottage by chance and we realise Ami has been telling Sol her story throughout the book. Sol, completely entranced, asks what happened next. Ami explains that she never saw Mari or Kidlat again, but she pursued her passion for butterflies, finding happiness.

The next day, they drive to the town and arrive at the orphanage where Sol lives. When they arrive, Ami hears the mistress singing. It is a song Mari taught her. She rushes inside, and here she realises that the mistress and master of the orphanage are Mari and Kidlat.



## WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

*'Kiran's second novel isn't really a story about an island – or even about butterflies, or the way a terrible disease was misunderstood and mistreated. It is about an incredible journey, about how beauty and love make a difference to a group of children who have to fight for their beliefs – despite adults who want to tell them what's best. Kiran writes beautifully, thrillingly and memorably: you'll want to stay in her world for ever.'* **BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

## AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Kiran was born in London in 1990. She completed her undergraduate studies in English and Drama with Education at Cambridge University, also performing in Footlights smokers and plays. She graduated with distinction from the Creative Writing MSt at Oxford University, and was President of the Poetry Society there. She is an award-winning poet, with three collections published and work appearing in international journals such as *Room*, *Agenda* and *Magma*. She was a Barbican Young Poet, and has performed her work internationally, from Banff to Tokyo. She lives in Oxford with her artist fiancé and writer friends.

## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

*'Fiction is sometimes at its best when there is fact at its heart. Culion Island is a real place in the Philippines, and it really did become the world's largest leper colony between 1906 and 1998. (I use the word "leper" begrudgingly, as it is considered taboo by many people I spoke to who have lived in such colonies.)*

*Leprosy was widespread for millennia throughout Asia, Africa and Europe until a cure was developed and made internationally available in the 1980s. Cases still number in the hundreds of thousands, but many of these are cured. It is a hugely stigmatizing condition, linked to dirtiness and sin when in fact it is simply a bacteriological disease. It is very hard to catch, and cannot be transmitted by touch.*

*From 1906 to 1910 alone, 5,303 men, women and children were transported to Culion Island. People's lives were*



*torn apart by this forced migration – each one of those individuals had a life, a family. Someone who would miss them. And so I decided to write a story that would put the reader at the centre of the experience, through the eyes of Ami, a girl who is taken from her mother, and wants to find her way home.*

*Stories are often better if you tilt the truth enough to let some imagination seep in, and so I have taken liberties with the timeline of events, names and sometimes even geography. But I have stayed true to the people and place, and have tried to show that they are never only one thing: bad people can make beautiful things; good people can make grave mistakes.*

*The people who came up with the idea to turn Culion into a colony weren't evil – but they did see the inhabitants of the island as lepers before they saw them as human beings. When you reduce people to one trait – be it race, religion, who they love – and don't step back to see the whole person, it is too easy to treat them as less than human.*

*You can still visit Culion Island. You can see the eagle, the church, the hospital, though the patients are long gone. It may have been known as the island of the living dead, the island of no return, or, as I have chosen to call it, the island at the end of everything. But for me, and for Ami, it was the start of everything, too.'* **KIRAN MILLWOOD HARGRAVE**

## **THEMES**

- Friendship, love and family
- Purity and impurity
- Death and sickness
- Home and journeys
- Religion and forgiveness
- Freedom and imprisonment
- Beauty and transience



# WRITING STYLE

*The Island at the End of Everything* is written in the first person, present tense, which gives it a wonderful sense of immediacy. We also feel very close to the main character, Ami, as we see the world almost directly through her eyes. The exceptions are the prologue, which is written in the second person, present tense, and the epilogue, which is written in the third person, past tense. The style throughout is lyrical, poetic and full of symbolism. However, the strong linear plot helps to keep the poetic elements firmly grounded. **244 pages, age 10+**

# PUPIL ACTIVITIES

## 1. What's in a symbol?

*'A patch of butterflies wafts upwards, purple and yellow and green and gleaming, shimmering like a thrown scarf. ... Mr Zamora kicks the road in temper. "Stop them!" he bellows.'* (Page 78)

The author of *The Island at the End of Everything* was a poet before she was a children's fiction author, and she uses her poetic style to great effect in her prose. For instance, throughout the novel, you will find objects of symbolic resonance. A symbol is a thing that represents or stands for something else, especially an object representing something abstract.

As a group, think about how the use of symbols applies to the significant objects in the novel. On a whiteboard or other shared surface at the front of the class, write each of the symbols you've noticed in the story - leave plenty of space around each of these headings. Examples might include Ami's mother's cooking basin, or Mr Zamora's killing jar. Once you've gathered together all of your symbols, explore their deeper meanings - what they might really stand for - and write a few key words in a spider diagram around each one.

Every member of the class should pick a favourite symbol from the board. Turn the symbol and key words into a short poem about an object or moment in the novel which throws light on both their literal and symbolic



meaning. Share around the class – did anyone pick the same symbol? How did their interpretation of the symbol differ? What light might this throw on the story and on symbols in general?

## **2. *There's no place like ...***

*'There are some places you would not want to go.'* (Page 5)

In her extraordinary prologue, the author conjures a very vivid sense of place to introduce us to Ami's world, describing in the second person how 'you' arrive on Culion Island. It is a short but very powerful piece of writing – read it again to familiarise yourself with the style.

Imagine arriving at a place you know well – it could be your home, or your school, or even a place you've visited on holiday. If you like, you could pick another place altogether, or even invent somewhere imaginary. Write a short piece about arriving at this place, no longer than 500 words or one side of single-spaced A4. Using all your descriptive powers, conjure the smells, sights, feelings and sounds of your arrival.

## **3. *Behind the mask***

*'If I can take one good thing from my encounter with [Mr Zamora], it's better than only bad things.'* (Page 234)

Mr Zamora is the main villain in *The Island at the End of Everything*, but he's certainly not a cardboard cut-out. In fact, by the end of the novel, Ami is able to reflect on him with equilibrium – she has learned from him, even though he stood against her. The theme of compassion for even the ugliest of people – whether they're ugly on the outside or on the inside – is strong throughout the story.

What do you think makes Mr Zamora a complex villain? Explore this by writing a scene in the novel from Mr Zamora's perspective – it might be a scene already told from Ami's perspective (the killing jar scene, or the burning letters), or it might be a scene of your own invention. How does Mr Zamora see the world? What are his fears? What are his hopes and dreams? What is it like to be in his shoes?



#### 4. *Fact or fiction?*

*'Fiction is sometimes at its best when there is fact at its heart ... Stories are often better if you tilt the truth enough to let some imagination seep in.'* (Authors' note)

The author was inspired to write this story by true historical events, and carefully balances fact and fiction in her novel. She enhances fiction with the real life story underlying it, but also enriches historical events with her own imaginings.

Separate into pairs and pick a historical event that captures your imagination. Research the event, and gather together all the evidence in one 'casebook' file or notebook. On a separate sheet, create two characters from your imagination, writing out character 'profiles', including details of appearance, age, personal history and important character traits.

As a pair, discuss how your imaginary characters might fit into their historical setting – are they rich or poor, male or female? What would their reaction be to the event you have researched, and how would it affect their lives? In front of the class, act out a short scene in which your two characters talk about the event, their part in it, and how it has affected them – has this experience shed light on the process of writing historical fiction?

## WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *'We watch them, Nanay holding my hand tight, as they fill the room like leaf-fall, swirling their invisible currents and weaving around our heads.'* (Page 207)

Butterflies are a key symbolic and literal feature of the novel. What do they mean to Ami and her mother? What do they mean to Mr Zamora?

2. *'This disease is more terrible than you can understand. Mr Zamora is right. There is no future on an island of lepers.'* (Page 60)

Discuss the way leprosy is presented in *The Island at the End of Everything*. How do different characters, and





the government, perceive the disease? Do you think the government was right to try to eradicate leprosy, whatever the cost?

3. *'Nanay is the only person I ever told secrets to, and a horrible sinking feeling drags at my legs. She is my only true friend, and no one here seems interested in talking to me.'* (Page 92)

At the beginning of the novel, Ami and her mother are extremely dependent on one another – and she cannot imagine another person in her life. By the end, Ami has had an extraordinary adventure, experienced friendship, and discovered her true passion. Is Ami's journey as a character satisfying? If so, why – or why not?

4. *'Thirty years later ...'*

Why do you think the author chose to write an epilogue? What does it add to the story, and what role does the character of Sol play? Do you feel the story has a happy ending – or is it bittersweet?

