

When I Was Elena by Ellen Urbani Hildebrand, The Permanent Press, 304 pp. \$28
Reviewed by Joan Baum

Every now and then a work of nonfiction prose comes along that suggests the power of the written word over a documentary. This may well be the case with *When I Was Elena*, Ellen Urbani Hildebrand's shattering, moving story of her two-and-a-half-year stint in the Peace Corps in Guatemala during the early '90s. Written from a distance of a few years, a necessary remove in order for her to control the rage that fueled recollections of her exhilarating but harrowing experience in this Central American outback, Ellen Urbani Hildebrand's ambivalent evocation of that time comes sensuously alive here, full of smells and tastes that only well-written narratives can deliver. "*National Geographic* lied"—this was no "Land of Lushness," she sees immediately as she gets off the bus, but a broken-down sewer, full of deadly men and incredible filth (feces, vomit, stale food, drink, semen, pus, blood). The Peace Corps had hardly let on how dangerous and primitive life would be when Ellen upped for Youth Development, a slight, red-haired, blue-eyed "gringa," former cheerleader and A-student, who arrived in the backwater with matching outfit and luggage. Despite studying and becoming fluent in Spanish, what did she know, a feisty, idealistic 22-year-old sorority girl from a protected, middle-class Alabama family?

Only 2% finish out their two-and-a-half-year Peace Corps commitment, the author notes, and many of them, certainly those in Guatemala that spring of 1992, include victims of theft, rape, terror, severe illness. Ellen Urbani Hildebrand stayed the course, though coming back at only 90 pounds. In truth, she says, everyone thought she would fail, and "I may have occasionally entertained the thought myself." The cover photo, a plaintive shot of the author's beloved dog, Cali, seen against an open door, only hints at the hardships Ellen/Elena faced. But one of the great pleasures of reading this book is recognizing the cathartic effect that writing it seems to have had on the author. She was able to catch herself on the brink of bitterness, to reclaim some of her youthful passion and original proud resolve, and she came finally to celebrate, even to love, some of the leathery, old-before-their-time indigenous women who taught her about life, as she tried to teach them to value themselves. Smart, intuitive, Ellen Urbani Hildebrand turned away from the job she was supposed to do in the village schools, concentrating instead on teaching the children how to write their names and be creative, though one nine-year-old had to run home to find out what her name was.

The memoir proceeds chronologically, intercut with first-person accounts by the women Elena met who befriended her. This device of multiple narrators allows others to present their own take on events along with Elena's often humorous, always sardonic versions, and it prevents the story from becoming sentimental, culturally biased or judgmental. The book is also notable for a sometimes awkward eloquence that smacks of foreignness—"I glimpsed [Lupe, the chicken lady's] life as it was without the hobby of me"—and also for the author's cautious self-consciousness: an unidentified "you" (the reader? herself?) is often addressed and told that some memories will not, cannot, must not, be dredged up. Of course, the reader knows that the author and Cali made it back to the States, but suspense is nonetheless maintained, especially in the closing pages where the author recounts a frightening night of being stalked and realizes it's time to leave.

The clear-eyed truths recounted when Ellen Urbani Hildebrand was Elena seem to show that in places like Guatemala Sisyphus lives, *Dallas* rules, ignorance prevails. The village women of Guatemala will continue to feed their birth control pills to their plants; kill chickens to mitigate illness; suffer incest, beatings, desertion, and denigration because, well, that's the way it is. Ellen Urbani Hildebrand came looking for a "defining moment" for herself, but was surprised by how that

“superficial” motive generated a series of unexpectedly complex consequences and, at the end, serious reflection on the expectations and limitations of American humanitarian efforts abroad.

The publishers point out in a publicity note that February 27-March 6, 2006 marks the 45th anniversary of the Peace Corps. Thinking of joining up? Taking a sociologically-inspired tour to see how the so-called real people get by in a religion-obsessed, God-forsaken country overrun with disease, poverty, corruption, brutality and crime, not to mention the kidnapping of young boys into guerilla warfare? First read this stunning, unforgettable book.