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## ***WHEN I WAS ELENA: A Memoir***

Ellen Urbani Hildebrand

When is a memoir more than a remembrance? When it also contains stories about the author written from the perspectives of those she limns—a truly unique twist on the genre.

The premise of ***WHEN I WAS ELENA*** (March 2006, The Permanent Press) is simple: A young American woman accepts John F. Kennedy's timeless invitation to "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country" by joining the Peace Corps and serving in Guatemala during the turbulent '90s. Though not an uncommon experience, Hildebrand's rendition of her adventure eclipses previous accounts by lyrically and insightfully re-creating those two action-packed years not only in her own voice, but in the voices of the indigenous women she encountered during her journey. These women challenge her in ways no politician would ever dare; though they ask much of her, they also gift to her more than she ever expected.

In 1991, Ellen Urbani Hildebrand was only twenty-two years old when she left behind a classic American youth and moved from a Southern sorority house into a scorpion-infested mud hut in one of Guatemala's poorest villages.

*"To this point, my life glistened with a veneer of shiny accolades and unquestionable accomplishment. Yet in the surface beneath I had little faith. I sensed acquaintance only with the mirage of me; feared the essence might not match up, were it there at all. I came to Guatemala to find me—all the vast possibilities of me—and save them from the gradual eroding decay of disuse. A trial not by fire but by cultural rift. If the substance of me was not buoyant enough to rise here, perhaps I was already lost to myself."*

Ellen, who was known throughout her sojourn as Elena, was originally charged with teaching local children to read and write. Instead, inspired by seven extraordinary women whose personal stories are interlaced with her own—including Lucinda, the wife of a political martyr; Alma, a twelve-year-old incest victim; and Hermilda, an escapee from house arrest—Elena teaches them, and herself, to dream. To hope. To rise above desperate circumstances and diminished expectations to discover strengths no one imagined any of them had.

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*“My Guatemala experience isn’t a phoenix tale, no rise from the ashes, rags-to-riches story, but it still involved a bit of a leap. . . . (W)ho would guess I would one day smear fourteen poisonous insects before going to bed, learn to sleep with rats nesting in my cotton mattress, their babies rustling beneath my skin, or dress in the morning and give three quick hops to release the hundreds of ants slithering inside my clothes? Asked one day to rank my life’s accomplishments, I just might list this: I moved to the mountains, and I made it through the first night. In the face of fear, I persisted.”*

In fact, Elena did much more than simply persist. She thrived. Despite mountainous obstacles—hellish heat, intestinal parasites, tarantulas the size of a man’s fist, cholera, encounters with bandits and guerillas, and an attempted rape—Elena emerged from her experience with a constant humility and an equally constant good humor that will leave her readers laughing out loud even as they cringe.

Ellen may have been a pampered, shoes-must-match-the-bag gringa, but Elena rises above her upbringing to become a model of courage and resilience. In a country known for its abject poverty and poor regard for women, Elena transforms from a girl into a woman who earns respect even from those who at first despised her.

An enthralling memoir, **WHEN I WAS ELENA** details the coming-of-age adventures of a heroine for the new millennium.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ellen Urbani Hildebrand** was born into a raucous family of Irish and Italian immigrants in Philadelphia. Always open to new experiences, she transformed herself at the University of Alabama into the epitome of a Southern belle. After college, she ventured to Guatemala as a Peace Corps Volunteer, where she spent the early 1990s post-civil war years teaching in the guerrilla-controlled mountains, the setting for her memoir *When I Was Elena*. She returned to the United States penniless, with tuberculosis, and married to a fellow Volunteer. They camped on the bank of an Oregon river while Ellen awaited graduate school admission; she received her MA in Art Therapy. Her work designing arts programs to assist cancer patients in coming to terms with illness and death was the subject of an Oscar-qualified documentary in 2000, titled *Paint Me A Future*. She now resides in Portland, Oregon with her husband and two children.

#### **WHEN I WAS ELENA**

By Ellen Urbani Hildebrand

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