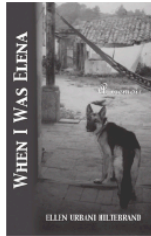


BOOK REVIEWS

death and grief are hot literary topics these days, fueled by society's perennial search for ways to comprehend such an overwhelming concept. In his deeply personal, yet universally recognizable way, Klaus advises readers to take it one day at a time. (May)

Carol Haggas



When I Was Elena
Ellen Urbani Hildebrand
The Permanent Press
304 pages
Hardcover \$28.00
1-57962-124-4

The author arrived in Guatemala in 1991 a fresh-faced twenty-two-year-old, straight from life as a southern belle at the University of Alabama. She left at the end of her two-year Peace Corps stay as Elena (so nicknamed by the Guatemalans she met), a woman forever changed.

In this book, labeled a memoir but transcending traditional genre, Hildebrand tells the story of her Guatemalan years. As a memoir-fiction-guidebook hybrid, the novel contains chapters written from Hildebrand's perspective interspersed with fictional imaginings of first-person tales from seven women (six indigenous and one fellow volunteer) she meets in Latin America.

With the volatile political environment as a backdrop, Hildebrand integrates herself into community life in the poor rural villages as closely as a white woman—a *gringa* to the natives—possibly can. Teaching in a school, she tries to make a difference, but learns the limits of her power to effect change, as when a young girl shows signs of physical and sexual abuse and Hildebrand can do little to help. Struggling with the near-constant threat of sexual violence and envy of those around her (neighbors would regularly root through her personal belongings, taking whatever they fancied), Hildebrand also experiences generosity in the face of overwhelming poverty, as when a woman kills her own chickens to feed Hildebrand's sick dog.

Hildebrand's lovely, inventive prose makes even something as simple as the arrival of evening feel charged: "Darkness hugged tight to the ground and night loomed hot and dry." No less thrilling than Hildebrand's discovery of the physical terrain of Guatemala and its people is her discovery of the terrain of herself. She writes of her motivation: "I came to Guatemala to find me—all the vast possibilities of me," and her self-exploration is fascinating. She is unflinchingly tough on herself—skewering her own preconceived notions of Guatemala—thereby balancing out the portions of the book where she treads a mite too close to being self-congratulatory.

Seventy volunteers reported for Peace Corps duty alongside Hildebrand, yet by the end, fewer than twenty remained. Volunteers were raped, robbed, and murdered; some simply gave up

and went home. Ellen Hildebrand survived and documented that journey. It is somewhat troubling that she puts words in the mouths of the indigenous women; one imagines that her evocative writing would have resulted in a strong story solely from her perspective. But Hildebrand deserves praise for telling both her own story and that of those who, because of the collective din of poverty, war, and misogyny, would otherwise never have been heard. (May)

Iris Blasi

MYSTERY



Black Silk Handkerchief
D. L. Birchfield
University of Oklahoma Press
368 pages
Hardcover \$26.95
0-8061-3751-7

The first of a proposed series of mysteries, this novel introduces protagonist Bill Mallory, a drifter who privately sees himself through the lens of his Choctaw name, Hom-Astubby. Although he has a law degree, Mallory works as a freelance nature photographer. He is on assignment in the small and remote town of Alpine, Colorado, when he becomes involved in the disappearance of a glamorous former Olympic skier and the murder of a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter. When the amiable county sheriff hires him to take crime-scene photos, Mallory finds himself smack in the center of the investigation.

The author, who won the 2005 Spur Award from Western Writers of America for his novel *Field of Honor*, endows Mallory with a distractingly convoluted history. In addition to his varied academic and job experiences (he's worked for a succession of newspapers), Mallory has also—before the story opens—won nearly nine million dollars playing the slots at an Indian casino. Of that amount, he spent five million on an enormous horse ranch in Oklahoma, a spread that boasts a seven-story mansion with 298 bathrooms.

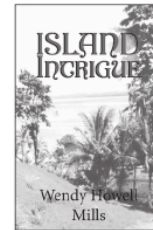
Yet despite his substantial wealth, Mallory frets incessantly about being hassled by the IRS, is constantly low on cash, and wheedles editors into paying him exorbitant fees for his news photos. While fascinating in themselves, none of these details seems to bear on the plot or on Mallory's actions within it.

On the purely personal side, Mallory is torn between the gaudy lures of the white world he's chosen to be in and the more common-sense values of his tribe. He ponders, for example, the differences in marriages between the two societies: "Instead of living a leisurely life in the modest but adequate midst of a cooperative and sharing community," he reflects, "each white couple lived in carefully guarded and

very expensive seclusion, in the most wastefully large and pretentious house they could 'finance,' which they used as a base from which to work and worry themselves into nervous exhaustion." Even as he muses on this puzzle, he is driving a mammoth truck and custom-designed camper that cost him a million bucks.

Relying on information from the sheriff, an informal network of newspaper friends, and clues he discovers in his own photographs, Mallory gradually narrows down the list of suspects. Principal among these are the secretive and menacing Texas billionaire, Nelson Towers, and some lurking white supremacists. Birchfield, a Choctaw himself, has an obvious love for the West and a real gift for depicting the rugged landscape. But with all the wealth William Hom-Astubby Mallory has accumulated by the book's end, one wonders how he will maintain his distinctive "drifter detective" persona for subsequent mysteries. (May)

Edward Morris



Island Intrigue
Wendy Howell Mills
Poisoned Pen Press
254 pages
Hardcover \$34.95
Softcover \$29.95
1-59058-217-9 (HC)
1-59058-218-7 (SC)

A cutthroat family secret isn't enough to hide the dead in this author's newest novel, the first installment of an anticipated new mystery series set in the tropics. Best known for her popular "Callie McKinley Outer Banks" novels, like *Death of a Mermaid*, which take place off the coast of North Carolina, Mills turns to the macabre nature of isolation and jealousy in this gritty composition.

Sabrina Dunsweeney, a hypochondriac teacher from Ohio, decides to revitalize her life after a breast cancer scare. In a moment of spontaneity, she travels to fictional Comico Island for some relaxation, only to find herself entangled in dangerous family rivalry that dates back millennia. What begins as a soothing break from reality quickly shifts into a bloody series of events when a controversial member of the Wrightly clan returns to seek vengeance on the island's supposed heirs, the snobby Titteltots.

Rolo Wrightly, the direct descendent of a bloodthirsty pirate, intends to reveal a guarded family secret that could derail a childhood friend-cum-enemy's bid for Sanitary Commissioner of the island. After having been banished from the island for a crime he may not have committed, Rolo is again the center of gossip as election festivities ensue. It isn't until Rolo is horrifically murdered that the island is paralyzed by the ramifications of the revelation of the secret. It's up to Sabrina, the outcast, to play the role of detec-

