

Review

When I Was Elena

by Ellen Urbani Hiltebrand (Guatemala 1991–93) Permanent Press

February 2006

304 pages

\$28.00

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Author Readings



Reviewed Jacqueline Lyons (Lesotho 1992–95)

ANYONE WHO HAS OR HAS NOT traveled in South America, joined or not joined the Peace Corps, taken or avoided taking a bus ride through the mountains should enjoy Ellen Hiltebrand's *When I Was Elena*. As with any memorable story about an "other" place, Hiltebrand extends a generosity of attention that allows readers to create their own sense of familiarity with Guatemala. As a former Peace Corps Volunteer and rider of buses through mountains in Southern Africa, I was captivated by both the shocking and the quotidian aspects of Hiltebrand's two years in Guatemala.

One of the book's strengths is the author's three-dimensional self-characterization. Some writers of travel memoirs appear so invincible



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and well adapted to the foreign that while they are admirable they also seem somewhat unbelievable; or, in contrast, some stories aim to report only the hilarious, the hapless, or the tragic. While Hiltebrand is nothing if not invincible at moments, we also read about her humor and her fear, her uncertainty and regret. Hiltebrand writes about losing some of her youthful naivety. Those of us who have traveled when young know that being betrayed — or saved — when far from home leaves a distinct impression.

The author conveys clear and varied images of herself at different stages of her Peace Corps experiences, from her pristine, beribboned self upon arrival (her fellow Volunteers immediately place bets on how long she'll last) to some of her least decorous moments (trying to swab her dog's excrement from the bus seat), to the everyday and extraordinary in-between actions, like the regular efforts to keep herself clean, fed and healthy in places with no amenities, few essentials, and sometimes imminent threat.

One of my favorite moments in the book, for the footage it offers of the special blend of resourcefulness and "inanity" that can characterize cross-cultural challenges, is when Hiltebrand, with faithful German Shepherd and newly purchased horse, must cross a river. When both horse and dog balk at the muddy, flooded river, Hiltebrand declares, "I like a good fight." She reports, "I coaxed. I cajoled. Finally, I stepped back and pinched them." They start off in the manner she imagined: she rides the horse and, with a grip on the dog's collar, they enter the current. But the horse rears, throws its rider, and the dog is swept away. Hiltebrand treads water, tries to keep a hand on the horse, and hollers encouragement to the dog as it swims back toward them, finally leaping onto the horse's back "where she clung like a withered saddle. Plan be damned, here's how we paraded

back into town: I swam, the horse got pulled, the dog rode triumphantly home.”

The humor is tempered with tragedy, in the form of some very, very close calls for the author, and the tragedy for the author’s friends. The book is arranged in chapters that alternate between traditional first-person memoir (“Elena’s Story”) and chapters in the voices of women that populate Hildebrand’s story (“Rosa’s Story”, “Hermilda’s Story”). The form promises additional perspective on Hildebrand’s presence as well as potential insight into some of the Guatemalan women the author befriended.

The chapters written in the voices of Guatemalan women have some problems in that they unfold in a somewhat simplified English which, though may be true to the English some of the women speak or would speak if they knew English, this has the effect of simplifying the women’s thoughts and making them sound too much alike. And though readers agree that the women have much to praise about Hildebrand, when she has the women express admiration for her the self-praise feels awkward to read.

Yet the intention to give voice to the voiceless is important work. A great deal of sadness lies within these stories. Poverty and a range of abuses — physical, psychological, sexual — characterize part or all of the women’s lives. What makes Hildebrand’s inclusion of their stories admirable is that her formal choice focuses on the telling — testimony rather than condemnation. These stories also testify to Hildebrand’s impact and involvement in Guatemala — she made friends there. By covering the same events as the chapters written in first-person, the chapters written from the other women’s perspectives also succeed in inviting readers to consider how one’s actions are perceived by a cultural other, and provide a glimpse of the unusual, ephemeral and very memorable circumstance created when different

worlds temporarily combine.

*[Jacqueline Lyons](#) is the author of the book of poetry **The Way They Say Yes Here** (Hanging Loose Press 2004) and of numerous other poems and essays. She holds an MFA in poetry from Colorado State University and a Ph.D. in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Utah. She received a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship in 2003. She's currently Faculty-in-Residence in the English Department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.*

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