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FOOD BOOKSWANT MORE BOOKS?

April 12, 2006

When I Was Elena

By Ellen Urbani Hildebrand (Permanent Press, \$28)

By [Sara Niegowski](#)

Using writing as therapy, Ellen Urbani Hildebrand tangles with decade-old demons (and scorpions and scabies and would-be rapists) in her new memoir. College diploma newly in hand in 1992, the Alabama sorority girl joined the Peace Corps—a great opportunity, she thought, to pocket some life-defining moments while ditching her boyfriend. She landed bright-eyed in Guatemala in a royal-blue Laura



Ashley dress with a matching hair bow, backpack, and sleeping bag. Nothing like two years of Central American filth to tarnish that surface sparkle. Ultimately, her book is a giant IN YOUR FACE! to all those who literally placed bets on how long she'd last there.

Hiltebrand gets plenty of chances to prove herself during her tour of service teaching in remote villages. Her adventures make you taste, smell, hear, sweat, fear, and love Guatemala—and wonder if you could've possibly survived as she did. She almost dies from intestinal parasites. She confidently fibs her way back onto a bus after militants detain her. When her dog begins shitting on another long bus ride after eating cheese, she writes, "I tried ripping pages out of Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, cupping them in my hands beneath her before hurling the whole mess out the window."

In a questionable narrative strategy, the author juxtaposes her own experiences ("Elena's Story") with the perspectives from seven local women (e.g., "Alma's Story") and employs a first-person style to tell their stories. One grew up in a dump; another's husband was a "disappeared," secretly killed by the government during Guatemala's long civil war. Unsettling? Definitely—but perhaps more so because these sections seem disingenuous. She puts words in the indigenous women's mouths to describe her own impact, as when one declares, "Elena is the most exciting thing that has ever happened in my life for as long as I can remember." Really? Is that an exact quote, reconstruction, or wish-fulfillment? It's hard not to be suspicious about these passages.

Still, Hiltebrand's account is a testament to the tenacity of the human spirit—her own and that of the unbreakable Guatemalans. Potential Peace Corps do-gooders will find plenty of inspiration here. Either that, or they'll be too terrified to even consider volunteering.



Ray Bidegain

EXTRA INFO

Ellen Urbani Hiltebrand appears at Third Place Books, 17171 Bothell Way N.E., 206-366-3333, www.thirdplacebooks.com. Free. 7 p.m. Tues., April 18.

Also: Parkplace Books, 348 Parkplace Center, Kirkland, 425-828-6546. Free. 7 p.m. Thurs., April 20.

Also: Elliott Bay Book Co., 101 S. Main St., 206-624-6600, www.elliottbaybook.com. Free. 2 p.m. Sat., April 22.