

ADVERTISING



**Save up to 75% on Cruises!**  
Last-minute deals from top cruise lines. **GO**

**VACATIONS ToGo.com**

The Seattle Times Company

Jobs | Autos | Homes | Rentals | NWSource | Classifieds | seattletimes.com



SEARCH

Home delivery

Contact us

RSS

Traffic | Weather | Your account

Movies | Restaurants | Today's events

- Search
- [Advanced search](#)
- Home
- Local
- Nation / World
- Business / Tech
- Editorials / Opinion
- Columnists
- Sports
- Entertainment
- Comics / Games
- Living
- Pacific Northwest Magazine
- Travel / Outdoors
- Real estate
- Obituaries
- Special reports
- Photography
- Corrections
- Archive
- Alerts / E-mails
- Marketplace**
- Jobs
- Autos
- Homes
- Rentals
- Classifieds
- Shopping
- NWSource
- Personals
- Post an ad
- Services
- Your account
- Contact us
- Submit listings
- Send us news tips
- Seattle Times store
- Advertise with us
- RSS feeds
- Wireless
- Newspapers In Education
- Home delivery
- e-Edition

Entertainment & the Arts: Friday, April 14, 2006

E-mail article  Print view

Book Review

## A sorority girl's coming-of-age chronicle of two years in the Peace Corps

By Paula Bock  
Special to The Seattle Times

The Peace Corps volunteers I've met are a singularly humble bunch. They never brag of bravery, rarely name-drop diseases and usually refrain from dazzling language when describing their remarkable — and remarkably challenging — two years.

**Ellen Urbani Hildebrand** breaks that mold in "When I Was Elena: A Memoir" (Permanent Press, 304 pp., \$28), her proud memoir of Peace Corps service in Guatemala between 1991 and 1993. Please note: She lasted the FULL two years and then some. Nobody thought she would. **Hildebrand** reminds us of this several times.

Known in-country as "Elena," she survives countless robberies, a serious attack, debilitating dysentery, worms, threats, stalkings, an attempted rape, three coups and a rumbling revolution. More than half of the 70 or so volunteers who started with **Hildebrand** went home before the end of their tours. (Four were raped, a few beaten, one kidnapped, one died.)

"Laughable, in light of the statistics, that on that long-ago day someone bet money on the fact that a little dirt in my hair would be enough to scare me away," **Hildebrand** writes. "Even more ironic: The bettors beat me home."

From the start, Elena was different from the other volunteers. A Southern sorority girl (straight-As, cheerleader) with a spanking-new blueberry backpack and matching Laura Ashley dress, she was not an idealist and feared chickens.

An article in Cosmo first sparked her interest in the Peace Corps. Signing up seemed a good way to gain distance from her college boyfriend and, most of all, to have a "defining" moment, "when something happened ... or we did or said

### Author appearances

**Ellen Urbani Hildebrand** will read from "When I Was Elena" at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Third Place Books, 17171 Bothell Way N.E., Lake Forest Park, free (206-366-3333 or [www.thirdplacebooks.com](http://www.thirdplacebooks.com)); and at 7 p.m. Thursday, Parkplace Books, 348 Parkplace Center, Kirkland, free (425-828-6546).


→ [Marketplace](#)

[Jobs](#) | [Autos](#) | [Shopping](#)

[Homes](#) | [Rentals](#) | [Post an ad](#)

ADVERTISING

Drop it in your cart.



The new at&t

ADVERTISING



**Save up  
to 75%  
on  
Last-  
Minute  
Cruises**

[Click here](#)  
for a complete list  
of deeply-discounted  
cruises departing  
in the next 90 days.

**VACATIONS  
ToGo.com**

a certain thing or responded to a challenge in such a way that defines who we most truly are."

"When I Was Elena" has an abundance of defining moments. The time Elena used a machete to hack a pit viper that was about to strike a girl (and admits later ignoring symptoms of sexual abuse of same girl). The time she flirted with a police captain to fill out paperwork so she could leave town with a fellow volunteer who had been recently raped. The time diarrhea struck during an arduous hike up to a highland village and she had to decide whether to wipe with her sock or her underwear. (The latter.)

**Hiltebrand** alternates her own lushly written memoir with tales of six local women and another Peace Corps volunteer. We see Guatemala — and Elena, the heroine of practically every chapter — through the eyes of a pre-teen incest victim; a wife who married for security rather than love; the widow of a disappeared political martyr; a Mayan woman confined to home by her Guatemalan husband and mother-in-law.

All the stories are told in first-person, a strange technique that melds fiction with reality. At its best, Hiltebrand's adoption of other women's personas is riveting, drawing readers deep into smoky kitchens and dark secrets; at its worst, it violates their emotional turf and detracts from the book's credibility. **Hiltebrand** is no doubt well-meaning, but it feels wrong for her to wear others' emotions for literary purposes, to pretend to know the grief of a *real* mother who watches a runaway truck kill three daughters.

Hiltebrand's writing is strongest and most original when describing her German shepherd, Calixta. Her devotion to the pup is initially amusing, almost embarrassing, very American. She feeds the pooch orange popsicles from the tienda, and when Cali steps on a scorpion, enlists the help of the mayor to drive her to a veterinarian, who instructs: "To prevent her brain from boiling, keep her cold in the desert. To combat paralysis, give her vitamins that are not sold in our pharmacies. And to build her strength, feed her protein in this country that does not have enough for its own children."

A friend sacrifices 17 chickens, **Hiltebrand** rounds up ice and vitamins, Cali lives. The dog later repels numerous unsavory men and probably saves Hiltebrand's life. Cali, who came home to America with **Hiltebrand**, died in 1999. **Hiltebrand** lives with her husband and two children in Portland, where she counsels cancer patients.

*Paula Bock is a writer for Pacific Northwest Magazine.*

Copyright © 2006 The Seattle Times Company

#### [Lose 20 lbs by JULY 4th](#)

Featured on Oprah & CBS, Hoodia is a weight loss secret! Try a Free Sample  
[www.curbyourcravings.com](http://www.curbyourcravings.com)

#### [Actual Fountain of Youth](#)

Discover How To Be Healthier Than A 20-Year-Old--Even If You're 62!  
[boardroom.com/healthnews](http://boardroom.com/healthnews)

#### [Eliminate Your Debt!](#)

Get the Debt Help You Need & Improve Your Credit Score. Quick Application!  
[www.freshstartdebtervices...](http://www.freshstartdebtervices...)

[Buy a NWad](#)

#### [nwjobs](#) JUST POSTED

Updated 8:30 PM

[APARTMENT MAINTENANCE.](#)  
Everett, WA Confidential  
2007-06-11

[ELECTRICIANS.](#)  
Seattle, WA Confidential  
2007-06-11

[PURCHASING AGENT.](#)  
Bellevue, WA Azimuth  
Trading 2007-06-11

[AUTO PAINTERS HELPER.](#)  
Seattle, WA Confidential  
2007-06-11

[Senior Application Developer.](#)  
Bellevue, WA 98004 Allyis  
2007-06-11

[More jobs | Post a job](#)



Search jobs



NWsource shopping



Daily find  
**Oslo's – A  
 Men's Store**  
 Save face this  
 Father's Day  
 by giving Dad

an old-fashioned shave,  
 and perhaps a minifacial, at  
 the Queen Anne  
 boutique/barbershop.

**More shopping**

[Sales & events](#)

[Articles](#)

[Store guides](#)

[seattletimes.com home](#)

[Home delivery](#) | [RSS feeds](#) | [Low-graphic](#) | [Search archive](#)

[Site map](#) | [webmaster@seattletimes.com](mailto:webmaster@seattletimes.com) | [Contact us](#) | [Privacy statement](#) | [Terms of service](#)  
[NWclassifieds](#) | [NWsource](#) | [Advertise with us](#) | [The Seattle Times Company](#) | [Employment opportunities](#)

Copyright © 2007 The Seattle Times Company

[↑ Back to top](#)