

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Ellen calls this a fictionalized version of her years in Guatemala. Does the book feel to you more like a memoir or a novel? Why do you think it was classified as a memoir, and is this an honest representation of the work?
2. Though set up as if written by seven other women, all the stories are authored by Ellen herself. Does she succeed in capturing other's voices, or no? What might the process of writing about, and writing as, such divergent characters have been like? Whose stories do you prefer - Elena's or the other women's - and why?
3. It is not until Chapter 7 that Ellen describes her arrival in Guatemala - jumping back and forth at that point between her arrival and her revisiting, a year later, of her host. Why do you think she waited so long to describe her arrival in the country, and does it help or hinder the flow of the story to return to the beginning halfway through?
4. It has been said that Ellen tells her story "without histrionics... with clear-eyed, anthropological interest." Do you feel that you understand the country, its cultures, and its people better after reading this book? Was Ellen clear about her own biases, and were you able to recognize and prevent them from influencing your own perceptions? If not, why?
5. Though Elena influences, and is influenced by, all the women in the book, it is Hermilda whose life seems most transformed through Elena's friendship. Do you think it is realistic that a person can be so swayed by another's example in such a short period of time?
6. Her first readers said of the book, "Your anger, your fear, comes across very clearly in the pages you've written." Ellen responds: "If you can sense my frustration can you not feel the joy, too?" (page 270) Do you feel that anger and joy are balanced in the book, or that one outweighs the other? If there is a disparity, is it a justifiable one?
7. Men are essentially shadow figures in the book - introduced only when they directly impact one of the women's stories. Yet the dedication makes it clear that men played an essential role in Ellen's own experience in Guatemala. Why do you think she chose to exclude them from her retelling? How would the book have been different if their stories were also told?
8. In addition to Elena, there are seven women with their own chapters and voices. Can you identify other vital female characters woven throughout the text? If so, who are they, and to what extent do they impact the story?
9. Lucinda is portrayed as someone who "drank a lot; an amount I considered to be rather too much, but which she likely believed to be just enough." (page 264) Regarding the feria (town festival), Ellen says, "I admit to losing patience swiftly with these intemperate, if festive, inclinations." (page 213) On page 155 she refers to the fact that some Volunteers return home with drinking problems by stating "Such is the habit in these countries where only one pastime exists." As a teetotaler, do you feel Ellen demonstrates empathy toward the drinkers she encountered, or exhibits an understanding of their rationale for the habit? Should she?

10. Missionaries are not portrayed kindly in this book. Do you feel this is a case of Ellen's personal religious history and upbringing interfering with her ability to accurately judge, or does she make a valid case for her opinion? Is it hypocritical of her to decry the motives of these groups when she herself ventured into Guatemala as a member of a governmental organization with its own agenda - humanitarian though it claimed to be?

11. One of Ellen's stated goals was to demonstrate what she and the Guatemalan women she befriended had in common, yet also to highlight those areas where their perspectives, expectations and aspirations utterly diverged. Nowhere is this clearer than in her description of Rosa: "I pledged a sorority while she birthed her first child... She learned to till fields while I prepped for graduate school boards..." (page 110) Juxtaposed against the physical hardships and privations the Guatemalan women were accustomed to, does Elena's tendency toward introspection and self-assessment seem frivolous? Would it be inaccurate to describe Americans as spoiled by comparison?

12. Based on this book, is Guatemala a country you would be inclined to visit? Why do you think Ellen has not yet returned? Do you think she ever will?