



When I Was Elena

Ellen Urbani

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When I Was Elena is an extraordinary account of a young American woman's sojourn in the guerrilla-infested mountains of Guatemala. Shattering the concept of a typical memoir, the author's personal story is interlaced, chapter-for-chapter, with tales told from the perspectives of seven indigenous women she encountered during her journey. At once a coming-of-age adventure and a haunting history of the struggle to overcome oppression - both personal and cultural - this genre-breaching work heralds the arrival of a daring new talent in American literature.

At age 22, Ellen Urbani left behind a classic Middle America upbringing, moving from a Southern sorority house into a scorpion-infested mud hut in order to live, work, and immerse herself in the culture of Guatemala's poorest villagers. There she encountered seven local women - among them the wife of a political martyr, a twelve-year-old incest victim, and an escapee from house arrest - whose experiences unexpectedly illuminated her own. Told with unflinching honesty, disarming humor, and an astonishing ear for dialect, this is a work of such atmospheric accuracy that the scent of fire-roasted tortillas virtually wafts from the pages as this tiny country - and the women who occupy it - bursts to life.

A paean to friendship and the resilience it lends to the human spirit, When I Was Elena joins a host of disparate voices into a composite of masterful storytelling. It echoes as a work of singular achievement.

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