

## Discussion Questions for *When I Was Elena* by Ellen Urbani Hildebrand

(Most of these questions were taken from <http://www.ellenurbanihildebrand.com>.)

1. Did you like the book? If yes, why? If no, why not?
2. One of my favorite passages starts on page 256:

The postman suffered the uncertainty many long months until finally he broke.

“Miss Elena,” he said, standing besides his bicycle, fingering the nailed-on wooden seat in anxious anticipation of my maybe-really-bad-news response, “what has happened to our Samuel?”

I had no idea to whom he referred, but this is not unusual. “Our Samuel?” I repeated, a question, as in “You and I, who see each other so rarely, only when you bring me my opened and peered-through letters, we have a mutual Samuel?”

It turned out that Samuel was part of a code used by the government to warn Elena about problems in Guatemala. She has to assure the postman that the fictional Samuel recovered, and he takes her through the whole village to share the news. Later, Elena hides the boys of her friend Lucinda in her altar room, and she arranges a statue so that it will fall and frighten any soldier who tries to search the room. This works so successfully that whenever soldiers come to take the village boys away to serve in the army, the boys all hide in the altar room. The villagers cannot acknowledge this to Elena. The story continues on page 262.

Instead, the mothers and fathers, too, they ask me about Samuel; more so, I noticed, after these misadventures. Samuel is still code, and we all learned to readily decipher his missives.

“I have been thinking about your friend Samuel,” someone would say as she passed in the street, and I knew this to mean, “You are in my thoughts and prayers, Elena.”

“Give my regards to Samuel,” meant, “Thank you, Elena, for this thing you have done for my family, this thing of which I am too frightened to speak.”

To me, this passage shows how Elena has really come to know and love Guatemala; she is willing to endanger her life to save the village boys, and she understands the ways of the people well enough to ensure that the soldier is frightened off and no one ever checks the room again.

Were there passages or parts of *When I Was Elena* that struck you?

3. Toward the end of the first chapter, Elena’s dog is bitten by a spider and becomes very sick. The vet says (p. 33):

Here is what you do. 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.

Elena does her best to do those very things, although the vet was being sarcastic. What did you think about this incident?

4. 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?

5. Did you like the author's format of alternating her own chapters and chapters from the perspective of the women she met? Did you feel the stories of the women were authentic?
6. Though set up as if written by seven other women, all the stories are authored by Ellen herself. Does she succeed in capturing the other voices? Do you prefer Elena's stories or the others? Why?
7. 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?
8. Do you feel that you understand Guatemala, 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?
9. Though Elena influences, and is influenced by, all the women in the book, it is Hermilda (p. 198) 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?
10. 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?" (p. 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?
11. 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?
12. 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." (p. 264) Regarding the feria (town festival), Ellen says, "I admit to losing patience swiftly with these intemperate, if festive, inclinations." (p. 213) On p. 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?
13. 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?
14. One of Ellen's goals was to demonstrate what she and the Guatemalan women she befriended had in common, while highlighting those areas where their perspectives, expectations and aspirations diverged. This is clear 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..." (p. 110). Juxtaposed against the physical hardships the Guatemalan women were accustomed to, does Elena's tendency toward introspection and self-assessment seem frivolous? Are Americans spoiled by comparison?
15. 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?
16. Are there questions you would like to ask?