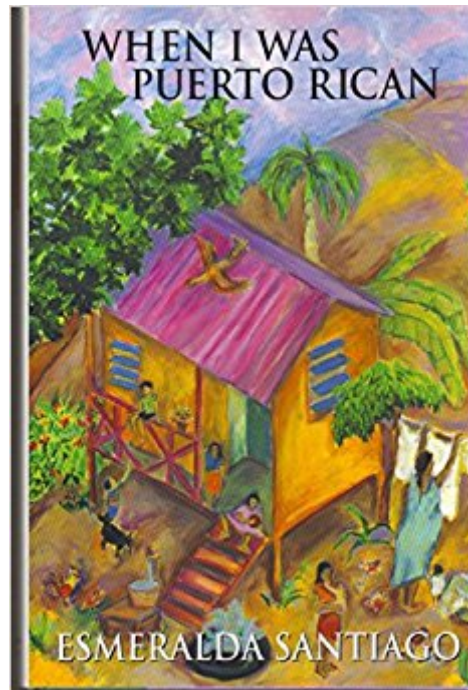




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# When I Was Puerto Rican





## Synopsis

Magic, sexual tension, high comedy, and intense drama move through an enchanted yet harsh life chronicle, as a young girl leaves rural Puerto Rico for New York's tenements and a chance for success.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Our home was a giant version of the lard cans used to haul water from the public fountain. Its windows and doors were also metal, and as we stepped in, I touched the wall and burned my fingers." So begins this involving memoir of family life, poverty, ambition, island countryside and Brooklyn, N.Y., cityscape by the eldest of 11 Puerto Rican children. Santiago attended Harvard on a scholarship and she is now president of her own film company. She relates with humor and affection a childhood punctuated by the birth of a sibling almost every year, by the fights between her parents--both of whom she loved--over her father's refusal to marry her mother, and by the many times her mother would leave him, always to relent--until the final move to Brooklyn, where the author's grandmother lived. Shocked by the cement-ugliness and the crime-ridden Brooklyn streets, Santiago determined to get out. Although her English was poor, she was a good student who attracted the interest of her teachers. They helped her audition for the elite New York High School of Performing Arts--and she was on her way. Santiago's portraits are clear-sighted, the Puerto Rican ambience rich, and her immigrant experience is artfully and movingly told. One wishes, however, that she had been specific about the chronology of events. Copyright 1993 Reed Business



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YA-Esmerelda and her seven siblings live in a corrugated metal shack in Puerto Rico. She is uprooted as a result of poverty and her parents' quarreling and suffers blows to her ego from their expectations of her. The girl goes to New York, where her grandmother lives, and must rely on her intelligence and talents to help her survive in an alien world in which being Puerto Rican is not advantageous. Her story rings true and will be an inspiration to YAs forced to make their own way in a sometimes hostile environment. Ginny Ryder, Lee High School, Fairfax County, VA Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

A trip down memory lane into the Puerto Rico of my aunts, which I remember well, even though it was already changing for me. Funny and sad especially as it describes the changing reality of those who could not see a future on the island but were surprised by the harsh reality of life in "los nuevayores". It is great to see how the author did not allow these obstacles to keep her from achieving her goals. Certainly a great example to set for all those who feel overwhelmed by the boulders in the road.

Even though I was born at a much later time than Esmeralda Santiago did, I can relate to her in a few things such as the aromas and the textures of the fruits, vegetables and herbs used daily in a Puertorican home. Her curiosity of the world. The love she had for her parents. The things she learned from other young ladies because it was taboo for her mother to explain to her. The way she explored her neighborhood when her parents were not around. This book takes me back to my early childhood to Puerto Rico and made me realize how much I miss my hometown.

the struggles of a young girl to understand not only the culture of her Puerto Rican heritage but how to aculturate to the diversity of New York City. From small rural area to the Big Apple she must learn to understand. understand not only the cultural differences but the changes in herself and her relationships with her father, mother, and ten siblings. Loss of cultural reference in Spanish make the reader attempt to translate based on limited information. That said, the story developed and the final outcome is believable.

One of the most difficult challenges facing a memoirist is the task of making her particular story resonate with universal truths. Esmeralda Santiago's "When I Was Puerto Rican" is a stunning



success; it not only captures the dynamics of identity creation, does so in the context of ethnic, class and geographic tensions. Santiago's coming-of-age saga encompasses an incipient awareness of her unique status as an oldest daughter, conflicted thinker and anguished observer of family disintegration. That she writes without a drop of self-pity is remarkable given the abundance of sadness and betrayal which swirl in her story. For much of her childhood in Puerto Rico and her early adolescence in New York City, Santiago lives a dual life. Possessed of a "stubborn pride," her "frightened self hid" behind a false veneer of acceptance that "everything was all right." At once proud and ashamed of her rural "jibaro" identity, Santiago grapples with exactly who and what she is. In this respect, "When I Was Puerto Rican" reverberates with the near-universal dynamic of identity creation, hidden shame at life's circumstances and constant questioning of how and why families created such tortured environments in which children evolve. Plaguing Santiago is the ambiguous, tormented relationship between her mother and father. Exposed equally to the sounds of lovemaking and arguments, Santiago can neither be surprised that her parents never wed or the constant absence of her hard-working, poetic but irresponsible father. Eventually, the pressures of this quasi-marital status between Mami and Papi erupt, and Santiago saves her best writing for its description. As her mother and father savage each other in verbal warfare, "they growled words that made no sense." Their fighting echoes "all the hurts and insults, the dinners gone to waste, the women, the abandonments." As Santiago "crouched against the wall," she witnesses her parents "disfigure" themselves with anger. "In their passion Mami and Papi had forgotten" their children. They were real "only to one another." Santiago and her siblings cower in a corner, "afraid that if we left them, they might eat each other." This authentic voice carries throughout the memoir as the author explores the various influences of her own existence. Nicknamed "Negi" by her parents due to her dark complexion, Santiago is acutely aware of her ethnicity and is perplexed upon her move to New York that people who look like her (African-Americans) have deep, unfounded suspicions about her and her people. As a Puerto Rican, she develops ambivalence about the United States and the American presence not only on her native island, but in her heart as well. How American will she become? At what cost? These are the same questions millions of immigrants have asked themselves as they immerse themselves in their new land. But how can she be "new" when Puerto Rico is and has been America for all of her life. Though "When I Was Puerto Rican" treats Esmeralda Santiago's life during the 1950s and 1960s, it has a timeless feel to it. Moving, illuminating and compelling, this memoir does much more than describe one girl's emerging self; it invites us to explore our own past and examine the forces which have created our own identity.



This story was wonderful. I love how Esmeralda makes us see life through the eyes of that little girl she once was. Her words are so beautifully descriptive – they took me to the many places she lived and to the era. I also like how honest she was about her parents. She was able to show their tender and loving side as well as their human side, people who made mistakes, even with their children. Many times we forget that our parents are someone other than our mom and our dad.

Extra credit reading for Spanish class: trying to be sure I got a good grade. An excellent light read!! was able to finish it in a couple of days! Well written and entertaining, deserving of all awards received.

Truly an inspiring coming-of-age memoir about a Puerto Rican girl in an impoverished environment where parent-figures seek the American Dream, while constantly drinking and fighting along the way. I was captivated from start to finish, with Esmeralda's loss of childhood innocence--she even having to gaze upon a baby in a coffin--and how children were expected to take on adult responsibilities.

This book was simply amazing!!! Esmeralda Santiago really gets in depth on how she was raised in Puerto Rico. Her struggles as a child was not speaking English and living in poverty. Once I started reading this book I couldn't put it down.

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