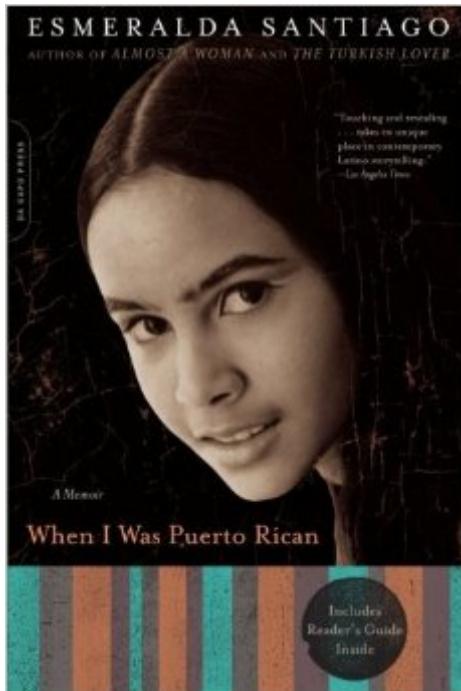


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# When I Was Puerto Rican: A Memoir (A Merloyd Lawrence Book)



## Synopsis

Esmeralda Santiago's story begins in rural Puerto Rico, where her childhood was full of both tenderness and domestic strife, tropical sounds and sights as well as poverty. Growing up, she learned the proper way to eat a guava, the sound of tree frogs in the mango groves at night, the taste of the delectable sausage called morcilla, and the formula for ushering a dead baby's soul to heaven. As she enters school we see the clash, both hilarious and fierce, of Puerto Rican and Yankee culture. When her mother, Mami, a force of nature, takes off to New York with her seven, soon to be eleven children, Esmeralda, the oldest, must learn new rules, a new language, and eventually take on a new identity. In this first volume of her much-praised, bestselling trilogy, Santiago brilliantly recreates the idyllic landscape and tumultuous family life of her earliest years and her tremendous journey from the barrio to Brooklyn, from translating for her mother at the welfare office to high honors at Harvard.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a rich and evocative memoir of the author's chaotic childhood. Growing up in rural Puerto Rico, while often living in primitive conditions, the author's lush and lyrical prose paints a vivid picture her early life. The flavor and rhythms of her island home come alive under her expert hand, creating an unforgettable picture of her early childhood. The author grew up in a poor family. During her childhood, she lived in Puerto Rico with her unmarried parents, who were always at war with each other, as her father was a somewhat irresponsible philanderer. It was her mother who

centered the family and who always sought a better life for all of her children. When an irrevocable break occurred between her parents, her mother moved to New York during the nineteen sixties, eventually settling with her seven children in the mean streets of Williamsburg, Brooklyn in New York City. The author details her life's journey from rural Puerto Rico to Brooklyn. The author was transplanted to Brooklyn at the age of thirteen, and her description of her life in Brooklyn is every bit as interesting as that of her life in Puerto Rico. Her oftentimes bewildering transition from her native, Spanish speaking Puerto Rico to an English speaking environment is engagingly chronicled. The author takes the reader on her journey through Brooklyn's public school system to the prestigious High School of Performing Arts, where she graduated and went on to attend Harvard University on a scholarship. This coming of age memoir is so engagingly written that I was left with the desire of wanting to know more about the life of this remarkable woman. I was also very taken with her writing style. So, I went ahead and bought every book that this author has ever written and look forward to reading each and every one.

A joyful and proud eulogy to the island of her youth. Santiago is a wonderfully talented voice that exudes passion. The title alone, *When I WAS Puerto Rican*, is at first intriguing. But we soon learn the profound sense of this past tense usage. I read Santiago's memories in Spanish, which, in my view presents her story in a distinctive poetic prose, rhythm and rhapsody (often characteristic in Spanish) that is absolutely captivating. However, what is most appealing about this autobiography, interwoven delightfully with memorable and richly detailed anecdotes, is the moving revelation that Santiago shares with her readers who don't know what it means to be caught in the agonizing web of dual-identities/dual-allegiances that is largely the Puerto Rican Experience ... as well as other North American immigrant experiences. This writer has presented us with a lyrical gift of enormous joy. High on the list of Must-Read novels, especially those by the new cadre of Latina writers. If you haven't as yet seen the excellent movie version of the sequel to this novel, *Almost A Woman*, do so. Wanda de Jesus is brilliant in the lead role. Alan Cambeira Author of *AZUCAR! The Story of Sugar* (a novel)

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.

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