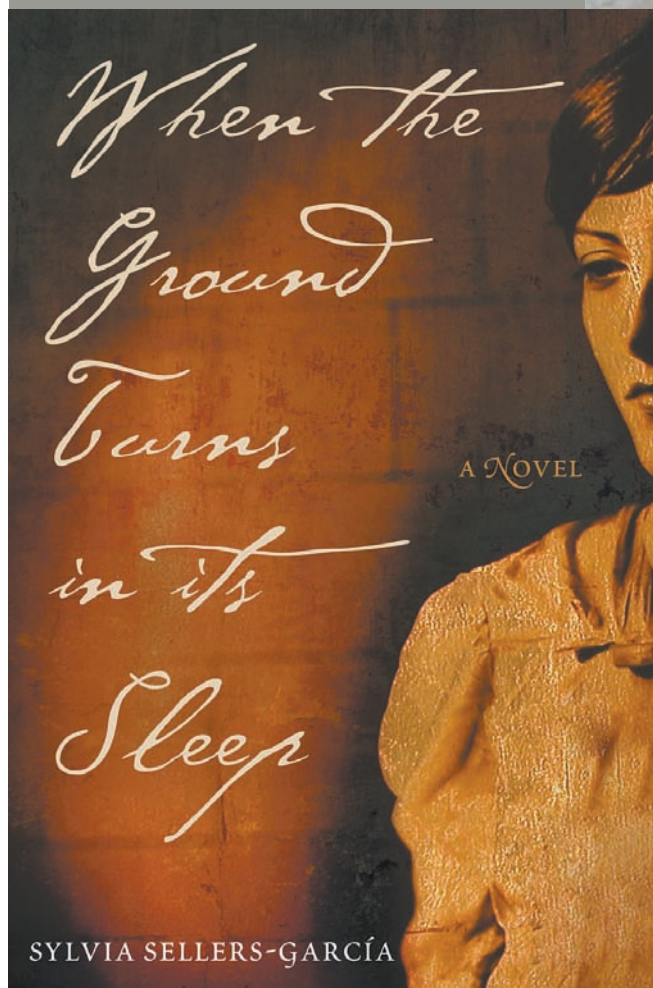


# SYLVIA SELLERS-GARCIA

Lexington Native writes of  
**GUATEMALA**



BY JUDY BUSWICK

Sylvia Sellers-García's first novel, "When the Ground Turns in Its Sleep," challenges our perceptions of reality and historical truth. We meet Nítido Amán,

teaching position, and helped his mother move across the country to Oregon after his father succumbed to Alzheimer's.

Narrating the account of his quest for his family background and sometimes talking to his deceased father, Nítido returns to his parents' village in the Guatemalan mountains in 1993. He confronts the past by listening to stories, reading his father's

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Grieving and feeling disjointed, Nítido had climbed off the bus in Río Roto to ask about his family, only to be mistaken for a long-awaited village priest. He went along with that confusion and started unraveling his unclear understanding of his parents by taking the priest's role. Parishioners came to confession and told, not their sins, but rather their physical ailments. He was aware that people in the village were keeping secrets and trying to hide something repulsive. Ultimately he learns what happened in the mountains

political positions. This is the chronicle of a transnational, a somewhat flawed character, who returns to his homeland for answers about his own identity. Sometimes confusing, but ultimately revealing, Nítido's narration is influenced by modern bi-cultural experience, paternal memory, letters and essays, dreams, mental confusion, and repressed anger in a remote Guatemalan village. All pieced together these elements demonstrate how tenuous memory is in reporting events.

Being a transnational herself, author

PHOTO BY PABLO SANDOVAL



*"Is it possible to give an 'accurate' account of your life, or is every story transformed by perspective and invention?"*

—SYLVIA SELLERS-GARCIA

born in Guatemala but brought up in the United States by his immigrant parents who never talked of their village life. Nítido has been accused of plagiarism in graduate school, lost his high school

journal, and experiencing life as an outsider in rural Guatemala. His story pulls readers into a swirling mix shrouded in mystery and undeclared conflicts between cultures, generations, and villages.

during Guatemala's 36 year-long 'civil war,' that a UN commission later denounced as state-sponsored genocide.

Though the story hinges on the guerrilla warfare, the novel does not explain

Sylvia Sellers-García might be compared with Nítido. Each has experienced a variety of communities growing up and each returned to Guatemala to learn about the past. But, Sylvia has never impersonated

a priest, nor committed plagiarism!

Born in Boston, she was only three months old when she accompanied her parents as they drove across the U.S. and Central America to Costa Rica, where they were to pursue their anthropology studies at an agricultural research institute. Her mother Martha Julia Garcia-Sellers was from Guatemala and had met her husband-to-be, Stephen Sellers, when he was there working for the Episcopal Church in the late 1960s. Like her mother, Sylvia's first language was Spanish. When she was three years old, the family returned to live in Arlington for a while, and then moved to St. Louis and towns in California. In 1989 they selected a long-time home in Lexington.

Says the author who has traveled widely, "Lexington feels like home-base." The Lexington High School class of 1993 may remember her as Sylvia Sellers, but for several years she and her younger brother, Oliver, have included their mother's name in their surname—now Sellers-Garcia. Teachers at Lexington High greatly influenced Sylvia; and when she did a reading at the Porter Square Book Store in Cambridge, one of her teachers, Patty Maier, attended. Sylvia recalls that Ms. Maier was an English "teacher who met each student at their own level and pushed them to go on to the next" step in their writing development.

A graduate of Brown University and a former Marshall Scholar at Oxford, Sylvia has interned at "Harper's Magazine," worked at "The New Yorker," and been published in "StoryQuarterly." Collecting oral histories in Guatemala was part of her Master's thesis at Oxford. Gathering first-person accounts of what happened during the years of civil unrest proved difficult and confusing at times. She came face-to-face with the tentative relationship of "fiction and presumed fact," she says. Stories often conflicted

with other accounts. This real-life experience led her to create her fictional search for the truth, where the truth would be portrayed as not always clear. As an historian pursuing a PhD in Latin American History at the University of California, Berkeley, she finds fiction writing and recording history complement one another. "I find that fiction-writing has helped me tremendously in thinking about the methodology of



**Lexington's Sellers family: Son Oliver is now a city planner and lives in Cambridge, anthropologist Stephen Sellers, author Sylvia Sellers-Garcia, and anthropologist Martha Julia Garcia-Sellers.**



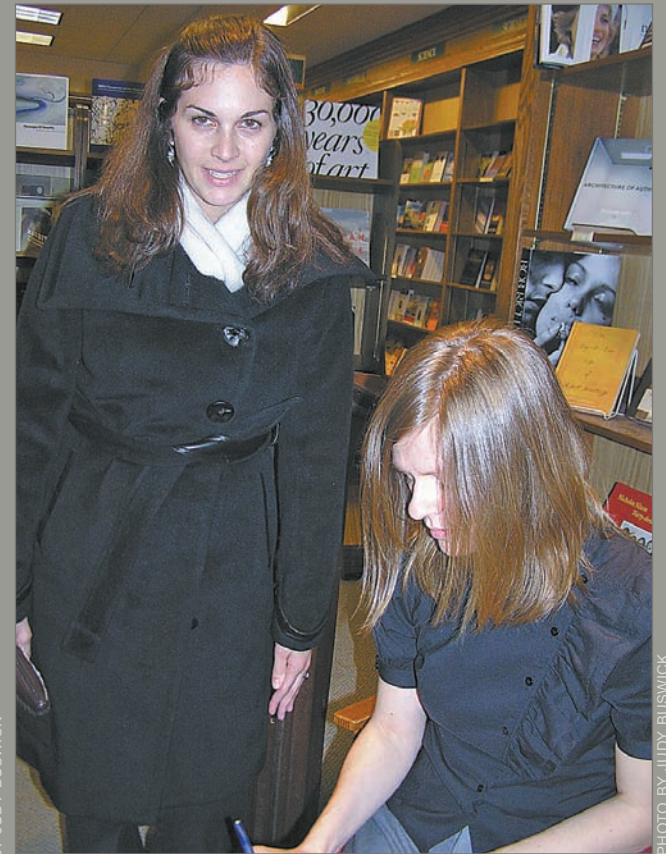
**Sylvia and her husband Pablo Sandoval at the Colonial Inn following the Concord Book Shop reading by Sylvia.**

history-writing," she notes.

For an audience of about thirty, Sylvia spoke at the Concord Book Shop recently about "When the Ground Turns in Its Sleep" and her

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# BOOK SIGNING IN CONCORD



**Fellow LHS classmate Amy Hyett asked for an autograph. Hyett and Sellers were on the Debate Team in high school; Hyett went on to teach English at Lexington High and now in Brookline.**



**Sylvia signs books at the store with Dana Weigent.**

PHOTO BY JUDY BUSWICK

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>García, from page 29

oral history project in Guatemala. She referred to the autobiography of Rigoberta Menchú who won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her book “I Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala.” Menchú’s testimonial biography of her homeland’s conflict had spread world-wide. Her account of her life and guerilla warfare was challenged a decade after its publication by anthropologist David Stoll of Middlebury College who went to Guatemala to research her stories.

Stoll found Menchú had changed many elements of her life, family and village; he wrote that her “untruths” were added to meet the publicity needs of the guerrilla movement and written only for her benefit. He accused her of lying. These two accounts of the violent past are hard to reconcile, says Sylvia; though, “You can’t brush aside either.” But, these variant views led her to wondering about verifying reality. “Is it possible to give an ‘accurate’ account of your life, or is every story transformed by perspective and invention?” was Sylvia’s question as a novelist.

Two characters in “When the Ground Turns in Its Sleep” have their own versions of one event and each tells the story to Nítido. Xinia, a teacher and volunteer at the church, tells of neighboring villagers who committed murder and then kidnapped Xinia’s young nephew Hilario, an event she witnessed. In contrast is the story told by the holy man from neighboring Naranjo. Santos tells Nítido about his parents who once lived there and about the Naranjo patrol that arrived in Rio Roto after a massacre and saved the child Hilario. They brought him back to their village and Nítido’s uncle raised him as a son. The novel does not try to justify either version, nor resolve the conflicting memories. Such contradictory versions of remembered events were common in Sylvia’s oral history project.

Instead of telling a simple story where the reader picks up hints of what lies ahead or what happened in the past, this author has created a novel which toys with time and place. A casual meeting or a clearing in the jungle may cause confusion. Mistakes are made, people live with their memories. While the story of Nítido’s quest does unfold for readers, this American author introduces us to the many issues that cloud reality of that time and location in Guatemala. She calls into play essays written by Nítido’s father that re-

peat descriptions of places he’d lived, but he makes subtle changes with each rewriting. She delves into Nítido’s dreams and his recollections of questions asked and not asked. She slowly draws out the villagers’ memories of terrifying times. And, thus, we are never sure exactly what happened, but all the events of the past simmer in a cultural pot where mistrust of strangers seasons the stew.

“When the Ground Turns in Its Sleep” was released across the country in January and received positive reviews. “The New Yorker” called it “an impressive debut.” Jessica Inman at Booksamillion.com wrote, “accomplished scholar and short-story writer Sellers-García evokes compassion.” Dana Weigent of the Concord Book Shop noted, “It is haunting and will linger in my thoughts.”

Weigent later commented on the book’s attractive cover, to which Sylvia pointed out its unique blend of reality and art. She related that when her publisher, Riverhead Books, began designing the jacket, they asked Sylvia for some suggestions for “visual inspiration.” She had no recent photographs of Guatemala to offer and so suggested the art of Luis González Palma, a modernist Latin American photographer whose portraits she has admired. When the Guatemalan artist and the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery in Miami provided an image for the cover, Sylvia was thrilled. The publisher then added the book title in a spindly script, based on a handwriting sample from Sylvia’s mother’s mother who wrote in a formal, old-fashioned cursive. The cover’s sepia tone suggests faded memories of past events.

In one final point worth sharing, the author’s photo on the inside back jacket was taken by Pablo Sandoval. He is Sylvia’s husband and a transnational himself—born in El Salvador, raised in the U.S., and a graduate of Yale Law School.

“When the Ground Turns in Its Sleep” is storytelling that brings to American readers insight into Guatemala and its culture. Yet the novel’s overwhelming sense is that both the ground (or the land) and the people living there struggle to understand issues of reality.

*Judy Buswick is the co-author of Slate of Hand: Stone for Fine Art & Folk Art, available at SunDial Bookstore in Lexington.*