

Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood

by Rebecca Wells



About the Book

Sidda is a girl again in the hot heart of Louisiana, the bayou world of Catholic saints and voodoo queens. She walks barefoot into the humid night, moonlight on her freckled shoulders. Near a huge, live oak tree on the edge of her father's cotton fields, Sidda looks up into the sky. In the crook of the crescent moon sits the Holy Lady, with strong muscles and a merciful heart. She kicks her splendid legs like the moon is her swing and the sky, her front porch. She waves down at Sidda like she has just spotted an old buddy. Sidda stands in the moonlight and lets the Blessed Mother love every hair on her six-year-old head. Tenderness flows down from the moon and up from the earth. For one fleeting, luminous moment, Sidda Walker knows there has never been a time she has not been loved.

When Siddalee and Vivi Walker, an utterly original mother-daughter team, get into a savage fight over a New York Times article that refers to Vivi as a "tap-dancing child abuser," the fall-out is felt from Louisiana to New York to Seattle. Siddalee, a successful theatre director with a huge hit on her hands, panics and postpones her upcoming wedding to her lover and friend Connor McGill. But Vivi's intrepid gang of life-long girlfriends, the Ya-Yas, sashay in and conspire to bring everyone back together. In 1932, Vivi and the Ya-Yas were disqualified from a Shirley Temple Look-Alike Contest for unladylike behavior. Sixty years later, they're "bucking seventy," and still making waves. They persuade Vivi to send Sidda a scrapbook of girlhood momentos entitled "The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood."

Sidda retreats to a cabin on Washington State's Olympic Peninsula, tormented by fear and uncertainty about the future, and intent on discovering a key to the tangle of anger and tenderness she feels toward her mother. But the album reveals more questions than answers, and leads Sidda to encounter the unknowable mystery of life and the legacy of imperfect love. With passion and a rare gift of language, Rebecca Wells moves from present to past, unraveling Vivi's life, her enduring friendships with the Ya-Yas, and the reverberations on Siddalee. The collective power of the Ya-Yas, each of them totally individual and authentic, permeates this story of a tribe of Louisiana wild women impossible to tame.

Discussion Guide

1. Wells uses three quotations as epigraphs for the novel. Why might she have chosen the first two, which address the need for spiritual growth and love? What connection, might there be between the "unknowable" that sits there "licking its chops" and our need for spiritual growth and love?
2. While Vivi was not a perfect mother, Wells does not blame her as a mother. Discuss the concept of the "good enough" mother and what acceptance of that concept means to a woman's acceptance of self.

3. One of the dominant motifs in the novel focuses on the contrast between the spirit and the law. Sister Solange and Sister Fermin take very different approaches to teaching Vivi. The Ya-Yas and Buggy have very different ideas as to what makes a statue of the Virgin Mary beautiful. The Ya-Yas and the Catholic Church have very different ideas as to where Genevieve can be buried. And, on one occasion, Vivi thinks that "Sometimes higher laws than Thornton's must be obeyed." To what higher laws is Vivi referring? Do those higher laws have any connection with the conflict that Wells seems to see between the spirit and the law?
4. Religious imagery abounds in the novel. The young Ya-Yas prick their fingers and drink each other's blood and experience a communion. Sidda baptizes herself. Why might Wells rely so heavily on religious imagery to describe everyday experiences?
5. One of the themes of the novel is the necessity of and the difficulty of personal growth. For instance, Sidda must remind herself and be reminded that she is a "grown up." Which characters in the novel experience personal growth? What obstacles must those characters overcome in order to grow? How do those characters that grow overcome the obstacles that stand in their way?
6. Is there any special significance that can be attached to the fact that Wells ends her novel with a marriage?
7. Vivi is a tangled, charismatic, and haunted character. How much does the culture Vivi grew up in influence her? Does a woman face special problems when she grows up in the South during the '40's? Look closely at Margaret Mitchell's **Gone with the Wind** to see how it influenced Vivi's idea of who she was. In what way might "being a lady" pose problems for Vivi, her friends, and their daughters?
8. Why does Wells switch back and forth between the present (Sidda's current life) and the past (Vivi's youth and early motherhood)? What might Wells be suggesting about mothers and daughters?
9. "The Holy Lady" appears at the beginning and at the end of the novel. Discuss her presence in the book and what Wells might be suggesting with such inclusions.
10. What role does humor serve throughout the novel? Discuss how closely Wells weaves humor and pathos.

Author Bio

Rebecca Wells, actress, playwright, and *New York Times* bestselling author of *DIVINE SECRETS OF THE YA-YA SISTERHOOD*, *LITTLE ALTARS EVERYWHERE*, *YA-YAS IN BLOOM*, and *THE CROWNING GLORY OF CALLA LILY PONDER* was born in Louisiana.

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After college, Wells later moved to New York City to pursue her acting career and began studying the Stanislavski method of acting, as well as a depth approach that integrates spirituality and performance with Maurine Holbert. "I live in an actor's body, in which the cultivation of sense memory, active listening, and the belief that the sublime can arise out of the most common character, word, or gesture is somewhat of a religion for me," she says.

Wells's commitment was not only to the stage, but to peace and social justice as well. In 1982 she went to Seattle, Washington, where she performed at numerous professional theaters. She also founded a chapter of Performing Artists for Nuclear Disarmament. Charmed by the beauty and grace of The Great Northwest, she decided to make it her home.

Her writing, however, resides in the heart of Louisiana. While many fans assume her work is autobiographical, Wells maintains that her stories are just that --- stories. "I grew up in the fertile world of storytelling, filled with flamboyance, flirting, futility, and fear. My work, though, is a result of my imagination dancing a kind of psycho-spiritual tango with my own history, and the final harvest is fiction, not memoir." *LITTLE ALTARS EVERYWHERE*, which won the Western States Book Award and was a *New York Times* bestseller, and *DIVINE SECRETS OF THE YA-YA SISTERHOOD*, a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and winner of the 1999 Adult Trade ABBY Award, have given Wells a dominant place in American literature.

She lives in Washington State with her husband and her King Charles Cavalier Spaniel, who is named Mercy. As Wells is fond of saying, "Dogs always remind me why the word *God* is *dog* spelled backward."

Critical Praise

"Rebecca Wells's new novel is a big, blowzy romp through the rainbow eccentricities of three generations of crazy bayou debutantes trying to survive marriage, motherhood and pain, relying always on their love for each other. It is a novel of wide reach and lots of colors: fun in a breathless sort of way. Vivi is one of the best characters in any novel you'll read this summer."

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