



Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood

By Rebecca Wells
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"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."
--*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

Plot Summary

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.

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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 mementos 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.

Questions for Discussion

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 1940'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.

About the Author: Rebecca Wells, a Louisiana native, is an author, actor and playwright. Her works for the stage include *Splittin' Hairs* and *Gloria Duplex*, for which she created the lead roles.

She has received numerous awards and fellowships, including the Western States Book Award for her first novel, *Little Altars Everywhere*.

She tours a one-woman show based on *Little Altars Everywhere* and *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*. Wells lives on an island near Seattle, Washington.