Rebecca Wells was born in Alexandria, Louisiana, where party-loving French Catholic Louisiana meets North Louisiana Baptist territory in the same parish where her family has lived since 1795. She grew up on a working plantation and was trained well in the school of Southern Ladyhood and Roman Catholicism. Early on, she began to suspect that "she might have a vocation other than marrying a lawyer or becoming the local T.V. weather girl," but the idea of being a professional writer never entered her mind. Writing, she thought, "was done only by people who lived in New York City who were very thin."

Wells has always been a storyteller and an actor. As a girl, she staged plays with her siblings, cousins, and friends, and performed in community theater productions. She learned to read early, and recalls, "It was like someone handing me the keys to another country, and I could go there any time I wanted."

The geographical territory of her writing has stayed close to Louisiana, however, and readers often assume that her work is autobiographical. Wells admits, "I grew up in a fertile world for story-telling, filled with flamboyance, flirting, futility, and fear. My work, though, is the result of my imagination dancing a kind of psycho-spiritual tango with my own history, and the final harvest is fiction, not memoir."

Starring in college productions, she began to write one-woman shows for herself, as well as short plays. After traveling the United States by train, Wells attended The Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, where she studied language and consciousness with Allen Ginsberg and Choyyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and acting, movement, and voice with members of The Living Theatre, among others.

As an actress in New York City, Wells studied with Maurine Holbert, working within the Stanislavski method, as well as a depth psychology approach to acting, which seeks to integrate spirituality and performance. "I live in an actor's body," Wells says, "in which the cultivation of sense memory, active listening, and belief that the sublime can arise out
of the most common character, word, or gesture is somewhat of a religion to me." While performing at regional theaters throughout the country, Wells was also active in the nuclear disarmament movement. An early member of Performing Artists for Nuclear Disarmament, Wells visited Seattle in 1982 to help initiate a chapter of that group. She fell in love with the Pacific Northwest, and has lived there for the past fifteen years. Her solo play, Splittin' Hairs, was developed at The Seattle Rep before going on to tour over fifty cities, including the wilds of bush Alaska. Wells is currently writing a novel based on Splittin' Hairs, which HarperCollins will publish. Wells's Gloria Duplex, "an erotic worship service for the theatre," debuted at Seattle's Empty Space Theater in 1987, with Wells in the title role as an erotic dancer who undergoes a mystical experience when she sees the face of God in the mirrored ball above the dance floor. Her acting and writing for the theatre was hailed by the Seattle Post-Intelligencer as "uncanny and beautiful with a flair for mystical humor," and Gloria Duplex was praised as "one of the glories of the decade." It is this rare gumbo of humor and pathos, and an ever-present awareness of the spiritual life that flows like an underground river even in the most commonplace circumstances that gives Wells's writing such energy and depth.

Little Altars Everywhere, Wells's first novel, won the Western States Book Award, becoming an underground bestseller, and was included in the anthology Five Hundred Great Books By Women (Penguin, 1994).

**About this 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 Questions

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.