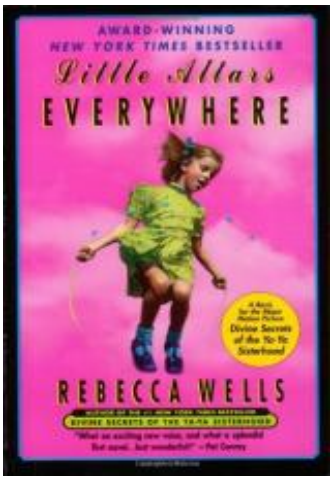
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Little Altars Everywhere

by Rebecca Wells



About the Book

I feel a hairline fracture of pain in my heart. And I feel it: the sweet pure longing of each of us, still intact. My family stands in a circle around me. All the innocence, the old woundings. It grows so quiet. I feel my godchild's breathing against my chest, but it is also the breathing of parched babies in drought-stricken lands. I feel each member of my family's breath dropping in and out, until it seems like we are all part of one giant bellows. And all the suffering spirals down into one shaft of sunlight which shines though one stained glass window in Thornton, Louisiana. This is what I come home to. I do not have to crawl across the desert on my knees. I do not have to swim through turbulent oceans to stop the drownings. All I have to do is watch and pray, and love them. Not save them, not hurt them, just love them.

Little Altars Everywhere, the first novel by Rebecca Wells, is the bittersweet story of the Walker clan of Thornton, Louisiana. Vivi Abbot Walker, the mother, is the eye of the hurricane. Her husband, Shep, is a cotton planter, and the two of them have four children: Siddalee, Little Shep, Baylor, and Lulu, who is named for Tallulah Bankhead, one of her mother's patron saints.

Each member of this funny, charming, and wounded family describes the view from his or her perch on the family tree. The book opens in 1963 with the recollections of Siddalee as a young girl, and continues with entries from her siblings, parents, and the black "help" who cannot save the Walker's from their darkness.

Twenty-seven years later, Wells returns to the Walkers, and this time the stories are startlingly different. The previous stories weren't necessarily lies, but they weren't the whole truth. It becomes clear that ultimately, there is no one truth within a family; there are only each character's tiny pin-light of truth. **Little Altars Everywhere** is finally about the tiny murders that occur within a loving but lost Catholic Louisiana family. It offers no miracles of redemption; instead it suggests the power of an open heart to offer protection to the innocent.

Discussion Guide

1. Wells uses multiple narrators to unfold the story in **Little Altars Everywhere.** What advantages are gained by this? Does this multiple perspective mean that we sense the story from a broader perspective from that of any one character? And what, if any value, is that broader perspective when evaluating the moral behavior of a character? Does the use of multiple narrators point to a truth that is too big, too uncertain, and too complex for any one character or person to put all together into a cogent vision? Do multiple narrators soften our judgments about a character?

2. What attitude does the novel take toward institutional religion (i.e., denominations), spirituality (a belief in and need for God and meaning), and human suffering. Catholicism is a strong presence in the novel. How does Catholicism both bless and damage the Walker family?

3. Vivi imparts a complex legacy to her children. What are the ingredients of this legacy? Shame? Suffering? A sense of wonder? A capacity for rapture?

4. Wells has said that "humor is the healing art." Discuss this in light of this novel.

5. Wells opens the novel with references to Little Richard in the "Prologue" and to Aaron Neville in the concluding chapter? What significance might this have? What role does racism play in the story of the Walkers? How does the value system of Chaney and Willetta differ from that of Vivi and Shep?

6. At the end of the novel, Sidda has a moment of insight into both her life and the lives of her family when she suddenly realizes that, "All their longing was pure." What does Sidda mean by this expression?

7. How can the acceptance of suffering help transform that suffering into love?

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

"Some writers have all the luck. Not only did Rebecca Wells get to be Catholic, she also got to come from Louisiana. This means that half of her is conversant with the Mystery and the other half is crazy. Out of this chemistry she has written a brilliant, pungent and hilarious novel about the Walker clan of Thornton, Louisiana. Frankie Adams and Scout Finch, I'd like you to meet Miss Siddalee Walker, a force of nature and a tool of fate, and one of the sharpest eyed little chatterboxes since Huckleberry Finn. *Little Altars Everywhere* teems with wonderful characters. But it's Wells's tireless invention and ruthless evocation of childhood combined with an unfailingly shrewd comic ear that makes *Little Altars Everywhere* such a thoroughly joyful and welcome noise. "

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