Chapter 9

So Much Depends Upon a Ya-Ya Scrapbook

Trauma, Figured and Reconfigured

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Angels of the Southern Crescent, fluff my pillows, please. Let moonlight bathe me in my slumber. I’m a second-generation Ya-Ya on a long, long trip.

—Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood

Rebecca Wells’s novel Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood (1996), a sequel to Little Altars Everywhere (1992), generated tremendous interest when it was first published, leading to a French translation, Les divins secrets des petites Ya-Ya (1998); Ya-Yas in Bloom (2005); and a film version. The Warner Brothers film Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood (2002) came out with a star-studded cast, including Ellen Burstyn, Ashley Judd, Sandra Bullock, James Garner, and Maggie Smith, lending cultural capital to the film production. The name of one of the film’s production companies, All Girl Productions, would imply that the film is intended for a particular audience. Angus Macfadyen, playing the Irish fiancé role, confirmed the market niche for the text—primarily women readers and viewers—and fulfilled his description as a looker: “He’s Liam Neeson crossed with a young Hank Fonda, who’s spent a few sessions on the couch” (Divine Secrets 169). However, well before the film Divine Secrets came out, the novel and its predecessor had already spawned a social network: local meetings of older women (Ya-Yas) and younger ones (petite Ya-Yas), to borrow the novel’s vernacular; a regular online column by the author; and chat rooms and gatherings for fans. Online Ya-Ya chat rooms and Q&A with the author echoed the novels’ and film’s focus on friendships among women that endure over fifty years.
While the emphasis on women’s friendship in popular response is consistent throughout the novels and the film, a shift in focus happened between *Divine Secrets* as novel and film. The novel explores the experience of the early-middle-aged protagonist, actress and playwright Siddalee Walker, as she reads the scrapbook kept for half a century by the Ya-Ya Sisters (a group of four women, friends from childhood, that includes Sidda’s mother). For Sidda, reading the scrapbook alone in a remote cottage becomes the means whereby she learns to understand the correspondence between her mother’s joys and failures and her own. Through Sidda’s experience, the novel, therefore, explores the consequences for the petite Ya-Yas of having been raised under the wing of the Sisterhood. In contrast, the film foregrounds and celebrates the Ya-Yas themselves. Exclusive sisterhood among women, shaped by Native American spirituality, southern Catholicism, and voodoo and African American folk rituals, binds the Ya-Yas together in the film and online (the principal Web site for online communication is http://www.ya-ya.com/).

In their concentration on how the younger women were shaped by their upbringing, the three English novels, *Little Altars Everywhere*, *Divine Secrets*, and *Ya-Yas in Bloom*, actualize powerful social issues—mother-daughter relationships, absent fathers, alcoholism, and child abuse. In particular, the highly performative fiction, drawing especially on dialogue, internal monologue, and dramatic scenes, highlights the theme of trauma. Through her reading of the scrapbook, Sidda confronts again her painful abuse as a child that continues to traumatize her adult life, preventing her marriage, and putting her theater career on hold.

The novel begins with Sidda’s unassimilated feelings about her childhood abuse unexpectedly surfacing when Sidda inadvertently blurts out to a *New York Times* interviewer that her mother strapped her as a child, a confession that leads to a rift between Siddalee and her mother, Vivi Abbott Walker. Searching for explanation, clarification, and the restoration of the relationship that her mother has broken off, Sidda asks to read the Ya-Ya scrapbook, a collection of personal memorabilia from her mother’s and her mother’s friends’ lives. As Sidda works her way through the scrapbook, mostly in isolation in a cabin on Lake Quinault in Washington State, the older women’s stories are revealed to her. Understanding more fully the context in which she was reared, Sidda is freed to investigate her own impasses and move beyond them in her playwriting and marriage plans. Thus the theme
of this volume (the spiritual adventures of midlife and older women) is
enacted here in an early-midlife woman spiraling back and advancing
on in her quest for self-understanding and spiritual insight.

This chapter will examine (1) the different ways in which *Divine
Secrets* portrays Sidda’s abusive childhood; (2) Sidda’s adult journey
back into childhood memories as a process of spiritual healing—the
acquisition of detachment from a past that tainted her sense of self
and the recovery of her own inner rhythms and meanings—in order to
recover independence understood as day-to-day, full functioning in the
world; (3) the process by which readers undergo their own spiritual
and therapeutic journeys while discussing the novels and the film in
Internet sources; (4) a spiritualized, cathartic return to origins in *Little
Altars Everywhere*; and (5) the reconciliation of Sidda and her mother,
and the hope this provides for the future.

**Divine Secrets**

The narrative of *Divine Secrets* works through flashbacks that are
triggered by Sidda’s encountering objects in the scrapbook such as
invitations, ticket stubs, a key, and photographs, items that draw out
memories from Sidda—often painful ones. For example, in the scrap-
book, Sidda finds a handwritten thank-you note to Vivi from Willetta
Lloyd, the Walkers’ housemaid, dated December 1, 1957, “for the cash-
mere coat you done give me” (257). The note leads Sidda to speculate
about “this woman [Willetta] who had been a mother to her[, who] . . .
had given Sidda an acceptance and affection that were miraculous”
(258). Vivi had given the coat to Willetta in order to appease her own
guilt for running away to the Gulf Coast and leaving her children in the
African American woman’s hands without explanation. The memory
had previously occurred to Sidda as a nightmare recollection: “Once,
years ago, Sidda had dreamed of seeing her mother standing in a door-
way. In the dream, when Vivi unbuttoned the coat, she had been naked
underneath, with gashes all over her body, as though she had fallen
on a bed of knives” (259). The “gashes all over her body” convey the
impact of Vivi’s destructive marriage, the tension eventually leading
to Vivi and her partner Shep sleeping in separate bedrooms. As she
begins to reexperience childhood emotions, Sidda slowly reassembles
and reconstitutes past memories, including dreams, which provide a
glimpse of what was previously only partially known to her, in this case
the extent of her mother’s anguish, pain, and depression.
The flashbacks bring attention to a special feature of Wells’s novel: its disjointed time sequence. Sidda’s response while reading the scrapbook is typical of traumatic memory, which is unruly, jumping from one time frame to another, reasserting the traumatic memory from the past into the present. Trauma, according to Cathy Caruth, constitutes “a break in the mind’s experience of time” (61). Elaborating on this idea, Suzette Henke postulates that “traumatic memories constitute a kind of prenarrative that does not progress or develop in time” (xvii). Drawing on Caruth’s insights into the unruly and chaotic characteristic style of trauma narratives, Henke emphasizes the manner in which this writing gives words to what had before been only abstracted, privately held impressions. According to Caruth, the traumatic event repeats itself in the form of neurosis that is “not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (4). Using flashbacks triggered by clues attached to the scrapbook, Wells’s fiction both fleshes out Sidda’s and her mother’s history and suggests the workings of traumatic memories. 3

Before the New York Times interview, Sidda had built up a secure life in the North, developing marriage plans to Connor and making her own life. However, following the interview, Sidda is caught in a nightmarish repetition of her mother’s behavior, incapable of acting other than she imagined her mother did. Sidda identifies her individual possibilities so closely with her mother’s failure to achieve self-fulfillment that, when the story of Vivi’s abusive child-rearing is published, Sidda is transported psychologically and emotionally back to the impasses of her childhood. Reenacting her mother’s loss of her lover Jack who was killed in World War II, Sidda leaves Connor after imagining that she will follow her mother’s example and fail as mother and spouse.

At the remote Washington cabin where she goes after leaving New York, Sidda pores over the scrapbook, uncovering the past of both her mother and her mother’s friends, a past that had been only vaguely contemplated by their daughters in the context of their limited childhood understandings. In the course of her intensive study, a hard kernel of the past is turned up, one that Sidda cannot manage to process on her own. Fortunately, the company of the Ya-Yas arrives (Necie, Caro, and Teensy, but not Sidda’s mother, Vivi) after it becomes clear in conversation with Caro, who is now old, suffering from emphysema, and struggling to breathe, that Sidda was never given any explanation for her mother’s long disappearance after she beat Sidda severely. This particular beating, the worst recorded in the fiction, operates as a limit-event. Other stances of abuse approach or recede from this
extreme instance. Sidda is severely traumatized when her mother lines up and belts naked Sidda and her naked siblings (from the child’s eyes, as punishment for wickedness) and then suddenly disappears with no explanation. The child had conjectured—“She went away because of me, didn’t she, Caro?” (173). In Laingian psychoanalytic terms, Sidda bears the guilt for her mother’s furious disapproval.

Sidda is not able to come to terms with her past trauma and assimilate it in her present understanding of herself until she reads her past differently in the scrapbook. In doing this she helps bridge what Cathy Caruth, in her study of traumatic repetition, calls the chasm between past trauma and future possibilities. Until Sidda can reconfigure her mother’s beating her and then disappearing, she cannot but react to memories that invade her present. The traumatic memory has not been narrativized but instead is fixed in the past. In her introduction to Shattered Subjects, Suzette Henke speaks about the power of telling one’s story to bring unintegrated traumatic memories into one’s consciousness where they can be dealt with. In Henke’s words, “Narrative recovery . . . pivots on a double entendre meant to evoke both the recovery of past experience through narrative articulation and the psychological reintegration of a traumatically shattered subject” (xxii, emphasis in original). Thus narrative has the power to free up the past—when the individual is ready to receive it. In retelling her story, Sidda incorporates material from the past (found in the scrapbook), which as an adult she now has the capacity to interpret, into a new sense of self. Decoding the Ya-Ya scrapbook with support from Caro, Teensy, and Necie represents the summation of Sidda’s training as a reader.

**Spiritual Awakening**

Importantly, many of the scrapbook’s contents are objects, which have the effect of returning Sidda and the reader to a previous time. For example, Sidda reexperiences childhood fear and her mother’s response after she finds a key, which, as she explains to Connor, “used to hang from a key chain that had a blue plastic elephant attached” (317). Suddenly invaded by memories of the past, Sidda narrates a fantastic elephant ride arranged for her by her mother after the real ride on the mall tarmac had closed. Vivi began with a prayer:

“Siddalee,” Mama said, “close your eyes, just for a minute.” Then,
in her most magical high-priestess-European-queen-gypsy-fortune-teller voice, Mama began to speak.

“Lawanda [the elephant], oh Magnificent One, spirit Siddalee and Vivi Walker away from this hot blacktop parking lot! Return us to the untamed green jungle from whence we came!

“Are you ready?” Mama asked. “Are you willing?”

“Yes, Mama! I’m ready. I’m willing!”

“Then open your eyes! Open your eyes and witness Vivi and Sidda of the High and Mighty Tribe of Ya-Yas as they commence their great escape on the back of Royal Lawanda!” (325)

On the way home after the elephant ride with her mother, Sidda found that “the world outside our car seemed charged with mystery, all new and unknown” (326). Within “the generosity of Connor’s listening” (317), Sidda has contemplated the key and the magic moment it conjured up and found her way to accept the wisdom that her mother had proffered in that moment: “It’s life, Sidda. You just climb on the beast and ride” (326, emphasis in original). Thus Sidda is able to begin the process of reclaiming her past and endowing it with her own meanings.

Though it had been possible while she lived up north for Sidda to write beyond the limits of her family’s traumatic life experience, living a new role proves much more difficult after the *Times* interview rekindles the emotions and experiences of the past. Even to *consider* change requires Sidda’s disengagement from the childhood web of intense feelings and thoughts such as those instigated by finding the key. While the process centers on Sidda’s reading the scrapbook alone in the cottage, by itself the scrapbook is not enough. Human mediation is also needed, and, at a crucial point, the Ya-Yas (not including Sidda’s mother, yet) recognize the need to intervene personally. They arrive at the cottage as witnesses to the scene of a long-ago crime. While the scrapbook opens up the past, the lifetime friends flesh out that past for Sidda. Vivi perceives the necessary healing for which Sidda yearns and accepts her own temporary ostracism from the group and, in the process, begins to come to terms with her failings as a mother and her struggles within her marriage as she waits to be reinstalled within the circle of the tribal Ya-Ya elders. Vivi responds to Sidda’s need for access to her mother’s past by sending the scrapbook. As Vivi explains to Teensy: “I have sent my oldest daughter—The Grand Inquisitor—Our ‘Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood.’ But there is so much I didn’t give her, cannot give her. Cannot give myself” (248). Allowing the Ya-Ya Sisters to act as a
conduit, Vivi acquiesces to their wish to explain Vivi’s disappearance to her daughter.

The most crucial contribution of the elders (minus Vivi) centers on the time after the children had been so severely beaten: Vivi Walker “checked into a psychiatric clinic for three months. No one ever knew, except us,” Caro informs Sidda. Caro continues by expressing her regret that social convention prevented the Ya-Ya Sisters from explaining Vivi’s disappearance to her traumatized children: “What I regret the most is that none of us ever talked with you, Sidda—or Little Shep, Lulu, or Baylor. We hid behind some archaic belief that you do not interfere with another person’s children” (305). Unlike her interaction with the scrapbook and her mother, Sidda can question her mother’s friends about her mother’s mental breakdown, and they clarify her interpretation in an ongoing dialogue that uses the scrapbook as facilitator. Specifically about Sidda’s mother’s disappearance, Caro states: “Here’s what I want you to know: not one bit of this is your fault. Something just cracked in Vivi” (305, emphasis in original).

This is only one example of how the power of social norms prevents the Ya-Yas from interfering with the children and trivializes or distorts the symbolic content of life histories. Thus Divine Secrets investigates numerous youthful misadventures, sometimes leading to trouble, undertaken by the Ya-Yas that at the beginning of the narrative remain unanalyzed within Sidda’s unconscious. The novel’s structure mimics Sidda’s consciousness, being nudged along by the scrapbook, which brings to mind unconscious experience. The story is fragmentary, revealed through bits and pieces of information given in different time frames and in different narrative forms. For example, we have the time frame of the narrative’s present in 1993 as Sidda thinks over an embarrassing incident in the past in which the Ya-Ya Sisters were put in jail for the night on account of bathing in the town’s water supply. Her recollection, given in the third person, draws on scrapbook entries of two newspaper clippings from 1942. These are followed by an omniscient account of the jail incident: “The night of August 3, 1942, not five hours after Jack Whitman announced he was joining the Army Air Corps, an embarrassed policeman locked Vivi Abbott and the Ya-Yas into a cell in the Thornton jail” (149). These omniscient narrative interludes, drawn from different time periods, provide material to the reader that is not immediately available to Sidda, thereby inviting the reader to construct the symbolic meaning of events and Sidda’s experience of them. Thus Vivi’s past suffering, including physical entrapment
in jail, enters the current story through Sidda’s and the readers’ construction and interpretation of the stories of the Ya-Yas’ past.

Only thus through omniscient interludes and reconstruction do we gradually uncover the part that the Ya-Yas have played and continue to play in Sidda’s life. Each of the Ya-Ya Sisters has a distinct role in their grouping, as may be seen when, in 1993, “they took the same positions they had been taking in Teensy’s convertibles since 1941: Teensy behind the wheel; Vivi, shotgun; Necie just behind the driver; and Caro in the backseat behind Vivi” (12). Further, Necie toasts their combined “sense of history” together, which Caro sees revealed in “Ya-Ya-rabilia.” It is Caro who insists that Vivi make the scrapbook available to her daughter, who has asked to see it: “‘Life is short, Pal,’ Caro said. ‘Send the scrapbook.’” The Ya-Yas clink their glasses in agreement when they have convinced Vivi to send the scrapbook: “Each of them in turn met each others’ eyes. . . . This is a cardinal Ya-Ya rule: you must meet each person’s eyes while clinking glasses in a toast” (16, emphasis in original). An important aspect beyond having known each other in depth over a long time is this trust and acceptance of one another. Caro, for example, “didn’t” at the time and subsequently “won’t” judge Vivi for her parenting failures (305). However, Teensy does step in to clarify for Sidda her mother’s disappearance when Sidda was a child, though with Vivi’s blessing: “Okay, it’s in your [Teensy’s] hands. Do whatever you think is right,” Vivi tells her (256). Thus the Ya-Yas’ decision to send Sidda the scrapbook is done with Vivi’s consent, as is their subsequent visit to Sidda without Vivi.

Within Divine Secrets we go back to the earliest days of the Ya-Ya Sisters when they originally give themselves the name “the Louisiana Ya-Yas.” Folk rituals drawn on (not from) Native American initiation ceremonies from popular culture characterize the initiation ceremony when the pubescent Ya-Yas form themselves into a group and begin to constitute the ritual practices of the Ya-Ya Sisters. The chapter subsection “The Secret History of the Louisiana Ya-Yas” even gives the teenaged girls names that suggest Native American culture: Vivi is Queen Dancing Creek; Caro is Duchess Soaring Hawk; Necie is Countess Singing Cloud; and Teensy is Princess Naked-as-a-Jaybird (70–72). The self-named group is tribal in construction. Although married eventually, the women are not only tied emotionally to their husbands or to images of respectability. Their allegiance is also to one another. In contrast, it is powerful husbands and social norms—especially those implied by marriage and then motherhood—that destroy Genevieve,
Jack’s mother, after her son is killed in war and that torment Vivi. Genevieve, the mother of Teensy and Jack, wildly spirited, her language spiced with Cajun French, is mismatched to her very rich, conservative husband, who is president of Garnet Savings and Loan. When Jack is killed, Genevieve, a demonstratively loving mother, unable to accept the fact of her son’s death, is heartbroken by the loss and does not recover psychologically. She cannot forgive her husband’s desire that Jack should join the war effort, reading her husband’s attitude as male pride that put their son at risk.

If their sisterhood is portrayed as their strongest support, Catholicism is portrayed as a spiritual dead end, that is, a form of social constraint associated with patriarchal norms. It enters the fiction principally through Mary Katherine Bowman Abbott, who is called Buggy by her grandchildren. Buggy Abbott, as she is referred to throughout the novels, is Vivi’s pious, sexually repressed, jealous, vindictive mother. Part of the psychic turmoil for Sidda in the fiction stems from the ominous insight that she cannot be free from this guilt-ridden past (reminiscent of the biblical reenactment of original sin). When Vivi in desperation confesses to a priest of her desire to injure her children and leave her spouse and family, the priest, while absolving her sin, sends her home where she proceeds to beat her four children. The Church conspires with societal values to hold women like Vivi and Genevieve in unhappy situations. Moreover, the partners in Vivi and Genevieve’s marriages represent patriarchal values—mirrored in the gospel and power structures of the Catholic Church—that these wives are incapable of challenging effectively.

Nonetheless, the secular Catholicism that the Ya-Yas represent is a lively challenge to Buggy Abbott’s guilt-encompassing religious practice that acts like a stranglehold, preventing her daughter Vivi from finding joy with Jack. In the antebellum South of the Ya-Yas’ generation, marriage constituted women’s only social or employment option; within that sphere, Vivi could make a self-fulfilling or self-limiting match, but the social expectation was marriage. The story may falter over this issue for some readers who are not comfortable with Vivi’s dependence on Jack for satisfaction. However, the second generation of women, the petite Ya-Yas, has a new source of satisfaction and comfort. It is not a male lover but the mother-daughter bond that is the source for Sidda’s playwriting. As she says in the *New York Times* interview that precipitates the impasse between herself and her mother, her difficult childhood is to be embraced (not rejected). After the *Times* interview
is released, Sidda asks Vivi on the telephone if she “read the part where I credited you for my creativity? Where I said, ‘My creativity comes in a direct flow from my mother, like the Tabasco she used to spice up our baby bottles’” (2, emphasis in original). The plot is centered precisely on this reconfiguring of the past by Sidda within the context of her current struggle over the fulfillment of work and marriage plans. Working out psychopathology interactively in the family is an important development of R. D. Laing’s psychoanalytic theory: through the family’s admission of a cross-generational destructive pattern, as signaled by Vivi sending her daughter the scrapbook, Sidda can potentially work through it. Reenacting the pattern of familial behavior as configured in her own troubled engagement, Sidda learns to revalue and appreciate her spiritual journey as a thread connecting female generations.

Vivi’s positive influence on Sidda the playwright and her other children is apparent in the dramatic flair they exhibit. The four Abbott Walker children are raised in theatrically charged spaces. They are aware of their own capacity to create, even from a young age. “This is more fun than I thought it would be!” says young Shep, Sidda’s brother, when he has prompted his grandmother’s craziness by throwing dolls into the kitchen wastebasket (Little Altars 119). Buggy contends that her dog sees the dolls as her puppies. In the subsequent chapter Sidda creates havoc at a pious friend’s house by taking an extra slice of bread that is not accounted for. She reflects on the disorder her sly act has achieved: “I’m so thrilled with what I’ve put into motion that I can hardly sit still. I don’t know how I can ever confess this! It feels great, like something I was born to do” (135). This performative characteristic the children inherit from their mother. Recognizing her inescapable participation as a child in roles that were predetermined by her parents and her role as firstborn helps Sidda determine what is valuable to take from her past.5

Sidda’s healing is a process of coming to terms with her past. Here life is explored as a spiritual journey—through the generations—in all its intensity, pain, and sudden illumination. With a greater understanding of her family story, and in particular family trauma, Sidda is better able to discover new strengths and move forward with her life.

The Importance of Chat Rooms

The Ya-Ya movement outside the novel can be viewed as performing
a bonding function for women readers that is similar to the necessary reconnections that are formed in the course of the novels between mother and daughter, Ya-Ya and petite Ya-Ya. Wells’s novels show this primary relationship between women as necessary for sustaining health and mental well-being. Through the documentation of their shared history and their discussion of it, the female figures in the novel as a group act out their past, bringing it into the present. Chat room and online readers discuss and unravel the significance of the scrapbook disclosures even as Sidda and the Ya-Ya Sisters perform this function in the novel. Importantly, for readers of Wells’s fiction, making sense of the scrapbook is itself a shared experience.

The Ya-Ya chat rooms allow for letter-writing intimacy among readers as they share interpretations of the novel. What further intimacy occurs in this Internet setting? Online visitors compose identities that can be compared to those of “the Louisiana Ya-Yas.” The element of fantasy experienced by the Ya-Ya chat room visitors is explored in Mark Poster’s book *What’s the Matter with the Internet?* In particular, he elaborates on the aspect of “simultaneity,” which “completely erases spatial factors and implodes time. The vectors of space and time are drastically reconfigured in the new technologies. They allow and even promote . . . forms of eroticism that threaten to destroy basic social institutions” (26). Furthermore, the fantasy of the Ya-Ya or petite Ya-Ya chat is not carried forward from Internet dialogue in predictable ways. This interaction is unlike the film and novel plot of *Divine Secrets*, which is resolved by the eventual face-to-face meeting between Vivi and Sidda (who has been informed about events in her childhood through the scrapbook) and by visits to the cabin by the Ya-Yas and Connor. But the virtual interaction has its own kind of power. In her “Welcome” comments, Wells recognizes the specificity of the online Ya-Ya groups. She addresses “one of the dedications of *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*: ‘To the Ya-Ya Sisterhood in all its incarnations.’ One of those incarnations is a Cyber-Sisterhood . . . , and I feel blessed to have been called into such community” (“Ya-Ya Notes”). Potentially, “meeting” new people on the Web (and, in some cases, at Ya-Ya gatherings) also facilitates the process of narrative recovery of past experience and its reintegration by the individual, but in an imaginary environment without risk, in a manner similar to viewing the *Divine Secrets* film or reading Wells’s books.

Poster seeks to “specify the parameters of these ‘virtual’ configurations” (18) that include chat rooms, or Q&A with the author. These
seem to share with popular culture, which includes Wells’s best-selling fiction, what John Fiske calls an emphasis on “process” rather than on “products”: “Popular culture . . . is better recognized by what it does than by what it is” (323, emphasis in original). Wells explains, in her “Valentine’s Day, 2003” column addressed “Dear Sisters-in-Heart,” the way in which her fiction has come to life in Ya-Ya meetings initiated through chat rooms: “As I write to you this month, I’m filled with excitement at all the Ya-Ya gatherings I read about on the porch! Oh, how I love the idea of all of you getting together. Meeting one another, sharing secrets, finding soul sisters, laughing, getting rowdy, getting quiet, quaffing, dining, howling, dancing, boogeying, chanting, being your luminous selves.” Through the Internet the process of interpreting women’s lives that is initiated within *Little Altars Everywhere* and *Divine Secrets* continues by making use of stories from the chat room visitors’ lives.

In addition to the interactive Web site, part of the structuring of community for readers not from Louisiana or nearby is the audiotape of *Divine Secrets* and *Little Altars Everywhere*, read by Rebecca Wells. Additionally, she provides an epigraph to *Little Altars Everywhere* from Katherine Mansfield’s *Journal*: “Everything in life that we really accept undergoes a change. So suffering must become love. That is the mystery.” Wells articulates in her “Note to the Reader” what this quotation means in terms of her sense of the relationship between reader and writer through text. Fleshing out words, she describes “the mystery” whereby “suffering [may] . . . become love.” In her words, “Hidden blessings inside suffering. This is ultimately what *Little Altars Everywhere* is about. . . . Breaks create openings that were not there before, and in that space grow the seeds for new creation. So that at the dark center of suffering that suffuses *Little Altars Everywhere* lies both the luminance of blessing, as well as the seeds for my second book, *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*” (*Little Altars* xviii).

**Beginnings: Little Altars Everywhere**

*Divine Secrets* is more celebrated than *Little Altars Everywhere*. But the success of *Divine Secrets* and the intensity of Sidda’s struggle with her mother in that book led readers such as myself to search out the previous novel, which is more clearly focused on the characters’ suffering. Divided into sections that represent particular figures in the story,
there is significant accounting for Vivi’s partner, Shep, and her children other than Sidda, figures who appear with little introduction in the subsequent Divine Secrets. Little Altars Everywhere describes the cycle of child abuse across generations between 1961 and 1991 from various subjective viewpoints. The perspectives of Vivi’s partner, Shep, and Sidda’s three siblings, present in Little Altars Everywhere, are absent from Divine Secrets, which focuses on Sidda, while the film focuses on the Ya-Yas. Without Little Altars Everywhere, one could imagine that Wells neglected to develop the other characters—Big Shep, Baylor, Lulu, Little Shep, Willetta, and her spouse, Chaney; however, it is fair to say that she had elsewhere already considered their positions in the story and the defining aspects of their past.

Sustained verbal, physical, and sexual abuse is revealed from various points of view in Little Altars Everywhere. Details of the children’s sexual trauma will be considered later; first, it is important to recognize the pathological nature of the abuse that is confirmed by Chaney and Willetta and the Abbott Walker children. Vivi refers obliquely to her madness in Divine Secrets only as “when I dropped my basket” (255). Two Canadian collections of writing by women titled Dropped Threads, collected by Carol Shields and her coauthors, use the metaphor of dropping to highlight restrictive information that young women are told, what is concealed from them, and what women must discover. In order to achieve full function in society, Sidda has to learn similarly what occurred when her mother “dropped [her] . . . basket,” or went mad. In her letter to Necie dated July 23, 1963, Vivi admits: “I cannot talk about what happened. My life was a basket and I dropped it” (Divine Secrets 297). The recovery of “dropped” items is essential to Sidda’s comprehension of her relationship with her abusive mother and to her picking up and continuing her own inner growth.

Incidents such as Vivi’s disappearance are only partially understood by Sidda as a young girl. Clarification seems to have been deliberately withheld from her. Sidda’s frustrated child’s viewpoint is shown, for example, in the chapter titled “Wilderness Training: Siddalee, 1963,” from Little Altars Everywhere, when Sidda’s girlhood voice introduces the Ya-Yas to the reader and concludes with the following comment about her being puzzled: “Also, the Ya-Yas were briefly arrested for something they did [bathing in the town water supply] when they were in high school, but Mama won’t tell me what it was because she says I’m too young to comprehend” (Little Altars 5). Sidda needs to follow her urges and hunches to satisfaction if she is to develop beyond
a child’s perspective or to discover through the “Breaks” in the text what Wells identifies as “the seeds for new creation.” For example, Sidda’s childhood observation that Aunt Jezie, her mother’s sister, and Charlene Parks, Sidda’s dance teacher, are unusually direct and open with each other (30–31) develops more fully when she later finds them in a lesbian embrace in bed (39). This follow-up on an early observation is a model that Sidda will need to use as an adult if she wants to uncover the deferred meanings that seem to have been purposely concealed in her family.

Social and familial stability seems to require that psychological or intellectual matters are not examined in Sidda’s family. Her father, though absent much of the time drinking at the duck hunting camp, represents the basic values that underpin the property-type relations of white landowners. At the base of the family is “Daddy,” who, if he “drives up [into the summer camp at Spring Creek where the Ya-Yas vacation together with their children] in his pickup, you know he’d yell at us, white women dancing like that,” released to the music of Little Richard (Little Altars xxiv–xxv). Functioning in this family as patriarchal authority, Shep Walker censors the spirited pleasure of the women and limits the capacity of Sidda and her siblings, survivors of child abuse, to question his authority effectively.

Each child in the family has a characteristic mode of response to the “devil dance” between Shep and Vivi (Divine Secrets 167). Schizoid attitudes and behavior are evident in all the children. Sidda notes: “I don’t cry because I can’t breathe. Lulu starts eating her hair, like she does whenever she gets upset. Little Shep and Baylor are mute, and Baylor is shaking” (Little Altars 146).

Little Altars Everywhere identifies Sidda’s bias toward language as a means to escape repressed emotions and develop understanding and psychological well-being. When she runs away from her maddened mother, Sidda finds refuge in a perilous hideaway in the cupboard of a visiting library service van parked, and subsequently locked, in the sweltering Louisiana heat. “That bookmobile is hot as hell, it’s a 475-degree gas oven” (96). Her occupation of the cramped, suffocating quarters represents her current and future existence as a “word-dweller.” I borrow this notion from J. J. Steinfeld’s short story “Would You Hide Me?” In the Steinfeld fiction, a fifty-four-year-old comparative literature professor describes her existence: “I . . . have spent a lifetime dwelling in words” (15). Sidda’s unusual vocabulary for a small child and developed language skills were noted by her mother
(Little Altars 81, 85): “The nuns tested the fifth graders and said Sidda has the reading skills of a high-school junior. Well, I could’ve told them that. The child used the word ‘impeccable’ before she even started first grade” (81).

Sidda’s language skill is apparent when she borrows the word “impeccable,” which in her mother’s vocabulary signifies purity. Sidda will learn to use this word (along with other family experiences) for her own purposes. However, Sidda cannot remain in the book van of words while she waits for her mother to rescue her. Eventually, she will turn inherited words into what her mother sees as hurtful performative theater and living.

At first Sidda’s performances are purely for herself as she attempts to find solace in art. Preparing the piano piece she would perform, called “The Elf and the Fairy,” is “the calmest part of my day. . . . I take my quiet wherever I can find it” (Little Altars 141). From her recital piece Sidda garners an image of fairies as “midget guardian angels with a good sense of humor” (142). She invents a similar self-image for herself: when she puts on her hand-me-down loafers, she is “a cheerleader who writes poetry” (147). Sidda escapes from the madness in her family, a version of what Vivi endured living with Buggy Abbott, “to a place in another state that doesn’t have all the hot white light of Louisiana. There are waterfalls there and the air i s so sweet and easy to breathe” (142). This imaginary environment contrasts with her constricted breathing when Sidda finds herself, along with her siblings, embroiled in their parents’ heated arguments. For example, one fight rests on the power of naming; Shep has called his spouse a drunk and “just his saying that word ‘drunk’ changes everything, even changes the air in the room” (146). Instead of this kind of chaos, Sidda creates order through piano playing and school routines. Repeating the notes in her recital piece, she “feels like I can climb up inside them and live there. Piano practice is the best way I know to feel organized” (143). Similarly, she comments: “I can never fall asleep until everything is organized [for school] and ready to go at the foot of my bed” (145). Sidda needs to be resolute in her planning, as her family’s instability is a constant source of upset that in fact serves to derail her well-prepared recital piece. Sidda performs the piano recital in a schizoid manner: “somebody else’s hands—wild, shaking, and ignorant—take over. . . . I am confused, because part of me can actually hear myself playing the music impeccably” (151, emphasis added).

Prior to the recital upset, Sidda had appreciated the self-control
demonstrated by Sister Philomena, her piano teacher. Her mother, however, has always been ambivalent about the education her children receive at Our Lady of Divine Compassion parochial school, largely on account of the nuns being critical of her child-rearing and her marriage outside of the faith to affluent Shep, a Baptist. Yet, when conflict at home disrupts her performance in the recital, Sidda also sees the refuge in school and piano routines as illusory. Control, represented by clean, orderly, quiet Sister Philomena, is rejected. Thinking about Sister Philomena, Sidda concludes: “You don’t even know who I am” (153, emphasis in original).

Will Sidda find her home in words? She has been remarkably adept at using words from a young age. Both her parents note her vocabulary and insight that are unusual for a child. It is probably not coincidental that Sidda and the comparative literature professor in J. J. Steinfeld’s short story both pursue an interest in drama. Siddalee becomes a playwright. The specialization of the narrator in “Would You Hide Me?” is Samuel Beckett. She comments: “I bet Beckett would have loved the texture of my [life] story . . . Yearning, longing” (9, emphasis and ellipsis in original). Sidda bunkering down in a cupboard within the town bookmobile (during the scorching Louisiana summer) has chosen a location in which she feels safe. Issues of safety also occupy Steinfeld’s narrator, who is described as a “word-dweller” in relationship to her father, who was once hiding under Nazi occupation, a “forest-dweller” (15). The recurring question “Would you hide me?” speaks to the daughter’s security in words and her Jewish father’s unease now in a nursing home, and previously among non-Jews. Sidda at home among books recalls a line from her demonstrative, vocal mother: “I should have been a writer myself” (Little Altars 80). However, while Vivi might have found release from her mother, Buggy Abbott, through creative imagination, she didn’t. Her behavior is symptomatic, and instead of creating new output, she and Shep Walker read Reader’s Digest condensed books.

In response to the familial “devil dance,” Sidda’s sister Lulu resorts to thievery in order to appease her “dry heart” (174). She has learned “to reach out and take what I want for my own self” (155). She equates stealing with her mother’s manipulation of social norms to meet her own needs (157). The “Queen of Gimmee” (177, emphasis in original) has trained the “Princess of Gimmee” (155). Lulu has been caught in the act of stealing a hat for her father, whom she wants to protect from the sun that exhausts him while burning up his energy in the cotton
fields. What is interesting is the emotional chasm within, from which Lulu's need for compassion and understanding emerges. Maxine and Verna, who catch her stealing from the Cowboy Store of Thornton where they work, listen to her and hear her fictional story about her being an orphan cared for by her brother. Lulu cannot explain the tears that erupt: “I don’t know where they come from, like they’ve been there on the edge waiting for a long time” (174). Lulu fantasizes about leaving her family and embracing the two women as guardians.

Little Shep’s derision toward his mother is explained in the chapter titled “Snuggling: Little Shep, 1990.” The chapter is written from the viewpoint of Little Shep, who is now married to Kane and has two children. The memories of sexual abuse by his mother haunt Little Shep’s adult life. Little Altars Everywhere elaborates most graphically on the sexual play between the mother and her children (“kissing me and her hand would start wandering” [232]; “rub[bing] her hand across one of my nipples” [236]; “I know those breasts and I hate them” [235]). As a child, he read his mother surreptitiously and called her (silently) an “old witch” (122, emphasis in original). Now, as an adult, Little Shep says, “Mama acted like it was all normal, you know, like it was her right. I’m not sure what all she did with Sidda and the others—I just know what she did with me. They moved Baylor out of my room when I was in third grade. They added onto the house so we could each have our own private cell. No wonder she wanted to have us all in separate rooms. That way there wouldn’t be but one at a time to witness what she was up to” (230). Further, Little Shep describes his childhood psychosomatic deafness, whereby he had lost 83 percent of his hearing in his left ear, as symptomatic of abuse: “I made the hearing go out of that ear because it’s the one that faced the wall when I tried to sleep. I got tired of hearing all the shit you had to listen to in that house. If Sidda convinced Mama she was already sleeping or if the bitch hadn’t gotten enough, the old lady would come into my room. And then it would start up.” In consequence, as an adult, Little Shep never lets his children sleep with Kane and him, and he has “been careful from the beginning to watch how I hug them, kiss them, touch them.” Furthermore, he needs to be drawn into the family by his wife and encouraged to bathe Kurt or Dorey, his own children: “But I didn’t want to go near the kids while they were naked. Finally Kane got up and put a washcloth in my hand” (231).

In Little Altars Everywhere, sexual abuse is verified by the children among themselves and revealed to the reader primarily by Little Shep,
who offers insights into what may have occurred between Vivi and her other children. The siblings support each other by attesting to the fact of abuse and discussing its implications for themselves as adults. For example, after Little Shep wonders to himself (and, by implication, the reader)—“Did she do the same thing with Baylor?” (232)—the next page implies that sexual abuse occurred with both sons and that there are consequences of this seen in Baylor’s sexual dysfunction as an adult. On an outing at the duck camp, Baylor reveals to his brother: “Bro’, most of the time I can’t even get it up. When I do, I just want to do it and get it over with” (233). Baylor’s inseparability from Pecan Grove is also evidence of the effects of trauma. Unlike Sidda, whose reaction to abuse is escape, Baylor is confined by the experience. He tells his “big sister, I am entombed here. I will not get out of this town [Thornton] until I die” (261). The various segments in Little Altars Everywhere function as testimonials of abusive child-rearing and the results.

In 1990 Sidda, in her late thirties and entering early middle-age, is still querying her brother Baylor over the facts of their childhood: “Bay, . . . you’re the one who told me I didn’t make it up. It all happened” (263). The chapter title “Willetta’s Witness: Willetta, 1990” (207) foregrounds the aspect of verification of events that is necessary in order for Sidda to reclaim from her unconscious and bring into conscious play her tortured childhood. “Watching,” “Seeing,” “Witnessing” are repeated words in “Willetta’s Witness.” Vivi’s black servants, Chaney, Willetta, and their daughters, Pearl and Ruby, hear and see Vivi attack the naked children: “I done heard them chilren screamin fore my eye even seen what was goin on. All four of my babies lined up against the wall of that brick house and every one of them buck naked. Miz Vivi out there with a belt, whuppin them like horses. And them just standin against the red brick. Yellin and cryin and screamin, but not even tryin to get away from her” (223). While Buggy instructs Willetta and Chaney—“I don’t want a word of this to go any further than this house, yall hear me?” (227)—and Shep “never sa[ys] . . . nothin at all” (228), Shep gives Chaney “his gold El Camino” automobile (228), a form of symbolic exchange that seems to recognize Willetta and Chaney’s intervention on behalf of the children. Vivi’s scrapbook contains information like the witnessing of Willetta that is evidence and confirmation of memory for each of the Abbott Walker children and is essential for Sidda’s return to health and functioning.

“I got to keep my gaze on them chilren till the day I die,” says
Willetta (228), even though she has two daughters and eventually grandchildren of her own. Chaney reminds Willetta that she is a “nigger-woman” (223), and Vivi insists that Chaney (“filthy nigger” [224]) not touch her and that Willetta not interfere with raising the Abbott Walker children. However, Willetta speaks her mind. She states simply: “That aint how you raise no child!” (210), unlike the white community, of which she says, “Aint nobody in this town gonna say nothin to nobody bout the way they raise they chilren” (221). Willetta sees the children as hers—“All four of my babies”—while Vivi dismisses this possibility by racializing Chaney and Willetta (219, 224) when they intervene in support of the children. Meanwhile, lack of recognition of the inequitable position of the African American family and the bitterness it creates within herself disturbs Willetta: “This [racial inequality] is somethin what haunt me when I pray, somethin I can’t forgive” (227).

Figures are also demarcated according to faith. Willetta reinterprets the notion of sin as a matter of conscience, not rigid principles fixed by the Church. She denigrates the impact of the Catholic Church on Vivi and dismisses the institution: “Well, I got my own thought bout what kind of church say boots [in the sanctuary] be sinful” (215). Willetta notes that while Vivi “done start up listin sins for the chilren” (215), “she don’t know nothin bout the Lord of mercy” (217). Buggy sees the culprit as “that Baptist husband of hers! [Vivi’s]” (227). Willetta does not forgo the Christian faith but instead identifies her own “good church home” where “they look out for you when you in need” (228). In order to appease his guilt and exercise his power to silence Chaney and Willetta after Vivi beats the children, Shep gives them a second vehicle “that coulda took us anywhere we wanted to go.” However, they do not leave Pecan Grove and their responsibilities to the family: “But even though I ain’t a big one for countin sins, leavin outta here woulda been a sin in my book” (228). Thus Willetta differentiates between sins and highlights those committed out of omission.

Willetta and Chaney remain at Pecan Grove throughout their lives keeping watch over the family’s welfare. Willetta describes the nature of Vivi’s instability: more than Vivi’s drunkenness, Willetta estimates “she [Vivi] crazy as a Betsy bug.” Finally, Willetta recognizes the long-term effects of abuse on the children: “Sweet Jesus, I seen they whole lives in front of them, how they would be when they was grown. I seen it all just by lookin at them right that minute in that yard” (225).

In leaving Pecan Grove, Sidda creates for herself a community in the theater, where she becomes capable of transcending Pecan Grove’s
insular, contained life. Here she dramatizes her own existence, including her relations with Vivi, her tormented mother. It is because Sidda’s life and work is performative that she lets slip the detail about her belt-wielding mother. Sidda lives in the moment that she creates, whereas Vivi stumbles uncontrollably through an existence from which she cannot escape, and Buggy blindly lives in shadows composed of strict religious morals. Hope is signaled by Sidda’s decision to marry and thus change the abusive family tradition. In the end, she is in effect accepting her personal history and the challenge to change it over her life course. While child abuse is perennial in this family (including Sidda’s father’s side, as well), there is hope as abuse becomes less prevalent among Sidda’s siblings, while Sidda uses language and, especially, the theater to articulate her difference from her predecessors. In the theater Sidda has facilitated cathartic alternative roles on stage and played new roles for herself among friends. As her costume designer Wade Coenen notes, in pouring Sidda a comforting glass of brandy, “Glorious theater. It creates family for all kinds of orphans” (Divine Secrets 182). Sidda’s stamina is tested when her fiancé, Connor, suggests that she consider her mother as a figure in a play: “He held the [scrap]book up closer to Sidda’s face. ‘Look at them. Look at them like you look at actors, without yourself in the way’” (312). At this point Sidda cannot imagine her family scene without herself as central to the plot.

Part of her discovery on the pathway to spiritual healing and recovery requires a revaluation of power. Events would have unfolded as they did regardless of her role; however, as a result of growing up at Pecan Grove, she still must cope with the consequences of abuse. Caro insists, “You’ve got Ya-Ya blood, Siddalee. Whether you like it or not. And sure, it’s tainted” (Divine Secrets 305).

Sidda must learn to balance acceptance of her past with the ability to become detached from it. This part of her spiritual journey takes her back to positive aspects of her youth when, in 1963, at the Girl Scout camp overseen by the Ya-Ya Sisters, she had an illumination: “I see all the ordinary stuff . . . lit up from inside so their everyday selves have holy sparks in them, and if people could only see those sparks, they’d go and kneel in front of them and pray and just feel good. Somehow the whole world looks like little altars everywhere” (Little Altars 22). Sidda’s journey back into the Ya-Ya fold recovers not only the guilt-encompassed altars of Our Lady of Divine Compassion parochial school but also, importantly, untainted, visionary altars, which are a source of creativity and hope.
Reconciliation and Hope

While the scrapbook may facilitate Sidda’s “return of [adjusted] memory” (Schwarz 40) and her marriage (her personal way of writing herself into social practice), Sidda’s own testimony in her *New York Times* interview in the 1990s implies the possibility of legal action. Within the purview of the story, though, it is perhaps opening the personal into the social realm that causes Vivi’s shame and punishment (in the construction of a Ya-Ya Native healing circle). In an effort to restore her own dignity, which is affronted by the fact of child abuse, Vivi attempts to exclude the victim. As in tribal justice, it is Vivi who is temporarily ostracized by her soul mates. The Ya-Yas who are witnesses to each family’s commingled existence, including their misery, know that the words, images, and objects that are part of the scrapbook will assist Sidda with “reestablishing dialogue between [her]self and [the] world” (ibid.). The facticity represented by the Ya-Ya scrapbook, its referential bias, is required in order for Sidda to test the validity of family frames of understanding that do not mirror her recollections. If the family image has been emptied of relevant experience, Sidda’s self-image will be incomplete. Her mother’s social guilt has managed to erase relevant experience that her daughter needs to know about.

Vivi is sorrowful for the suffering she inflicted on her children, and she mourns her daughter’s absence, which is a consequence of abuse. Teensy asks Vivi during her separation from Sidda, “Don’t you miss her?” to which Vivi replies, “I miss Sidda horribly. I think about her all the time” (*Divine Secrets* 255–56). Sidda is accepting her mother’s sorrow when she brings her mother the gift of a lachrymatory at her wedding to Connor, which occurs at Pecan Grove at the end of *Divine Secrets*: “A tiny jar of tear drops. In olden days it was one of the greatest gifts you could give someone. It meant you loved them, that you shared a grief that brought you together” (348). The Ya-Ya circle remains torn until Vivi and Sidda rejoin it by reconciling over their “grief” at the wedding. Through the concern over her daughter’s psychological well-being, Vivi grows as an emotionally charged human being, but she does not change the direction of her journey. Vivi understands her limitations and differences from Sidda as generational. In Vivi’s words, “I was born before you could do what you wanted” (*Little Altars* 315). Vivi’s patterns of interaction are interpersonal within her growing multigenerational family and with her Ya-Ya friends—affectively communicating that she has done harm, which she is trying to ameliorate on
a personal level. In the prewedding gift exchange between Sidda and Vivi, Vivi gives Sidda her sweet-sixteen ring, which was a gift, symbolizing female maturity, to Vivi from her father and which her mother Buggy wanted to deny by taking the ring away. Signifying the completion of the healing circle, the ring given to Sidda also symbolizes her mature capacity to change her life by continuing to develop within the Ya-Ya circle, but in ways different from Buggy’s and Vivi’s examples.

The stories kept by the Ya-Yas, now older women, provide a mediating factor for cleansing and healing in subsequent generations. Repetition compulsion toward domestic failure prevented Sidda from going ahead with her marriage plans. However, with the reading of the scrapbook, what before was the “stagnant,” dredged-up, traumatic past becomes available for Sidda’s scrutiny and use. The Ya-Ya relationships revealed in the scrapbook have developed over generations and are a rich source of what Habermas refers to as “meaning-potential” for the future (215). The fullness of Willetta and Chaney’s viewpoint and the abundance of the old women’s history that is etched in the scrapbook are implied also by Constance Rooke’s introductory comments to *Night Light: Stories of Aging.* According to Rooke, “The old person is an especially useful protagonist since he or she makes available to the writer nearly the whole span of a life history—as opposed to just that truncated, glibly predictive bit before the heroine decides whom to marry” (ix). These remarks speak to Rebecca Wells’s novels, which represent the life spans of at least eight characters of advanced years—particularly those of the four Ya-Yas, but also Willetta, Chaney, Buggy, and Shep.

By way of the newly found evidence that wants processing by Sidda (and reevaluation by the Ya-Yas in her company), Sidda’s trajectory forward into marriage circles back to her own childhood and the Ya-Yas’ youth in the 1960s recounted in the first half of *Little Altars Everywhere.* In this way Wells’s Ya-Ya fiction subscribes to the circular staircase model that Rooke sees in stories of aging (xi). Moving forward with Sidda’s life requires circling back through a process that revisits the lives of her father, the Ya-Yas, Buggy, and Chaney and Willetta. Similarly, the theme of turning suffering into love—modeled in present-day healing circles, truth commissions, and other ritual practices—developed throughout Rebecca Wells’s texts and the film version of *Divine Secrets* circles back to the epigraph of *Little Altars Everywhere:* “Everything in life that we really accept undergoes a change. So suffering must become love.” Communication facilitates
change and love, which characterize Sidda’s growth. Interest in the goings-on within Thornton, Louisiana, extends far beyond the southern American states. The mostly female followers of the wildly popular Ya-Ya material make use of the stories about Sidda and her mother and family in their own lives. On the lively Rebecca Wells Internet site, evidence of a similar back-and-forth process is found in the response and engagement of readers, both with the explosive themes in her fiction and with each other.

Notes

1. Shoshana Felman defines and gives examples of psychological trauma: “Psychological trauma occurs as a result of an overwhelming, uncontrollable and terrifying experience, usually a violent event or events or the prolonged exposure to such events. The emotional damage often remains hidden, as though the person were unharmed. The full scope of the symptoms manifests itself only belatedly, sometimes years and years later. The trigger of the symptoms is often an event that unconsciously reminds the subject of the original traumatic scene, and is thus lived as a repetition of the trauma. Trauma thus results in lifelong psychological liabilities, and continues to have delayed aftereffects throughout one’s existence. Classic examples of traumatic catalysts include wars, concentration camp experiences, prison experiences, terrorism incidents, auto and industrial accidents, and childhood traumas such as incest or sexual and physical abuse” (171). I am indebted to Jeanie Warnock, whose work sparked my interest in trauma studies, and to Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis, editor and friend.

2. Author-actress Rebecca Wells had her own experience of trauma—she began writing novels after an injury prevented her from acting (*Little Altars* xvii).

3. Dominick LaCapra spells out the relationship between memory and trauma, in a way that is helpful for grasping the inevitability of trauma resurfacing—in Sidda’s case, during an interview celebrating her career. “Yet the memory lapses of trauma are conjoined with the tendency compulsively to repeat, relive, be possessed by, or act out traumatic scenes of the past, whether in more or less controlled artistic procedures or in uncontrolled existential experiences of hallucination, flashback, dream, and retraumatizing breakdown triggered by incidents that more or less obliquely recall the past. In this sense, what is denied or repressed in a lapse of memory does not disappear; it returns in a transformed, at times disfigured and disguised manner” (10).

4. Caruth identifies the mediating function of the encounter with the “other,” in this case eventually Sidda’s mother, as crucial for healing, as “one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, [and] . . . may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another” (8).

5. Laing and Esterson investigate psychopathology in order to separate out roles that individuals perform in dysfunctional families: “The way in which a family deploys itself in space and time, what space, what time, and what things
are private or shared, and by whom—these and many other questions are best answered by seeing what sort of world the family has itself fleshed out for itself, both as a whole and differentially for each of its members” (21). In her reflections, while reading the scrapbook, Sidda is in effect performing an analysis of herself within the Walker family. According to Hayden White, with reference to psychotherapy: “The problem is to get the patient to ‘reemplot’ his whole life history in such a way as to change the meaning of those events for him and their significance for . . . the whole set of events that make up his life. . . . We might say that the events are detraumatized by being removed from the plot structure in which they have a dominant place and inserted in another in which they have a subordinate or simply ordinary function as elements of a life shared with all other [women and] men” (87, emphasis in original).


7. In conclusion, it seems necessary to note another pattern at play in the series, a progressive movement toward personal independence from lives determined by traumatic events—war, sexual and physical abuse, and racism, for instance. *Ya-Yas in Bloom* includes the first, second, and third generations of Ya-Yas in the ending, an extended family Christmas celebration. The event shows that eventually the suffering of *Little Altars Everywhere* has been considerably diffused, that suffering is being worked through now that the past has been admitted.

8. Little Shep gives special significance to the word *stagnant.* Making allusion to the extent of child abuse in Pecan Grove, he recalls “that brick house on the bayou,” his childhood home, “that stinking bayou of thick brown water that didn’t move. Stagnant water that was full of shit you couldn’t see, couldn’t guess at, didn’t even want to know about” (*Little Altars* 239).

9. Habermas’s theory of communicative competence could help us classify the hope that is signaled by keeping memory alive and responsibly passing it on to Sidda. In his view, “this transfer of semantic contents from the prelinguistic into the common stock of language widens the scope of communicative action as it diminishes that of unconsciously motivated action” (215).

**Works Cited**


