



Rebecca Wells

Ya-Yas in Bloom
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A Conversation With Rebecca Wells

The Ya-Yas have made you a world-wide celebrity. What has been the biggest change in your life following the phenomenal success of *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*?

WhoA: I don't know about that word "celebrity." I don't think of myself as a celebrity. I think of myself as Rebecca Wells from Lodi Plantation, in Central Louisiana, a girl who was lucky enough to be born into a family that encouraged creativity and didn't call me lazy or nuts when I dressed up in my mother's peignoirs and played the piano, having painted a small sign decorated in glitter that read "The Piano Fairy Girl." I also consider myself blessed to have people want to read what I write.

The biggest change in my life has been a series of health challenges related to environmental illnesses. At the same time my books became successful, I was also visited with illness. Out of the illness has come suffering, out of the suffering has come an increased compassion and an awareness that we are each inextricably linked one to the other, and that every chemical that is released into the environment carries potential danger. That the health of the environment is crucial to the health of our children, the health of our parents, and the health of our own bodies. And that we are responsible to care for the earth as well as our bodies, little "temples of the Holy Spirit" that they are.

The main change that has occurred in my life is that I now know that anything can happen at anytime. I now know that things I always thought I could depend on can crash in an instant. Because of the love that I have been shown, I now know what it means to be "beloved." I now know that no breath is to be taken for granted.

Through this all, I have been blessed by slowly beginning to understand that many readers have been touched by my work, and that the books I have written have in some way helped them possibly create some healing, some community. I do not take credit for this. I do not take credit for my work, not in the sense that it all originates with me. My job is to let the gift of imagination flow and not get in its big, beautiful way. As a writer, I am not goddess of the universes I create. I am at most a stage manager of the plentiful gifts which tumble out of the horn of plenty, which is to say there is a source so sweet and forgiving and generous that I pray every day to let that source be my guide. I try not to "mistake the flame for the source of the fire," as the I Ching says.

You grew up in Louisiana, and all three of your books have dealt with that state and the Walker family and friends. What first prompted you to create the Ya-Yas? Are they based on real women you knew or your own childhood?

I grew up in a tiny kingdom of bayous and cotton fields, a big extended family, with tons of relatives, with parents whose friends were too numerous to count. My family has been in that part of Central Louisiana since the 1750s or thereabout. You'd go anywhere and they'd know "she's a Wells girl." All around me were these utterly original characters, honorary aunts and uncles; African American women who helped raise me. I lived in a gumbo of stories, tales, histories. I saw friendships that last lifetimes. I knew who everyone was and everyone knew who I was, or at least that is how it felt. My parents loved to celebrate. They'd throw a party for anything. That's how Louisiana was then. My grandfather used to hire this country band to play music on Sunday afternoons and we'd dance together — all ages, little kids with grandparents, you name it. I was infused with a love of life, with a sense of being not so much a part of the United States of America as being a part of the Sovereign Stage of Half-Crazy, Half-Holy State of Louisiana. How could I not be influenced by such rich characters, food, music, the beauty of the flat land stretching out forever, dotted like snow with cotton. How could I not let the Ya-Yas emerge from my unconscious and start telling their stories.

Did I know people like the Ya-Yas? Of course. I was surrounded by women who were the most beautiful, funniest, most original, and sometimes most wounded goddesses I can imagine. Let me make it clear, however, that the Ya-Yas are not factually real. They are an amalgam of memory, research, and imagination. Vivi is not my mother. Vivi is Sidda's mother. I am Rebecca; Sidda is Sidda. It has been difficult for me when these distinctions get confused. We live in such a literal world. We seem to always want a writer to claim that her fiction is actually her autobiography. My work is not my autobiography. It contains elements of my life, but those elements are imagined — emotional truth, not factual truth.

The tiny kingdom I grew up in has now disappeared. Only shards of that world remain. I consider it part of my job as an artist to call it back up, so that time, that place, those people will not be forgotten.

Great food and fine spirits are all part of the Ya-Ya approach to enjoying life. Talk about the food, please! Do you cook? Where did the dishes you discuss originate? What are some of your favorites?

Oh, I love that Louisiana food. Love chicken and shrimp gumbo — which I do a decent job of (but nothing compared to my mother's). I ate shrimp gumbo and really started cooking it while I was in college at LSU in Baton Rouge. We would go down to the shrimp boats and buy shrimp for 17 cents a pound! Louisiana food was not all chi-chi then. You just bought good shrimp for cheap prices and cooked up a big pot and had friends over for some music and dancing. I am always astounded to go into restaurants and see what a simple dish like gumbo costs now. The other dish I love to cook because it can feed a ton of friends and is inexpensive and healthy is good old red beans and rice. Throw in a little organic turkey sausage and you've got it made. A big salad and you got a feast, Dahlin. I grew up with a father who was an excellent cook. My mother always claimed that he is the one who taught her to cook. Louisiana men love to cook, and I grew up thinking all men did. My cousin has one of the best restaurants in New Orleans, The Upperline, and when we're down there, she flings open the doors and feeds us some of the finest cooking around. So when people talk about gourmet this and gourmet that, I'm always a little snooty. I mean, what could measure up to the food I grew up with? And it was served with love. Even when I was a total

vegetarian, I would eat my mother and father's cooking after I learned not to worry about the meat, but to eat and digest the love.

Imbibing alcohol — from bourbon to rum — is also part of a great Southern tradition. And so is alcoholism. Is there anything about Southern culture that leads to "self-medication" with alcohol ... and in particular why do the Ya-Yas "overindulge"?

Really! Imbibing alcohol is not simply part of a "great" Southern tradition; it is part of a "great" American tradition! (And I question the use of the modifier "great.") Alcoholism is rampant in this country. And it is a disease that needs to be treated with all seriousness. Especially with teenagers and college students. Proclivity tests for alcohol and drugs are, in my opinion, essential. Find out if you have a tendency to abuse these drugs and anticipate! Personally, I do better not drinking any alcohol at all. When I was growing up, it seemed like the whole state of Louisiana was drunk. Another life time.

The Ya-Yas do like their drink. They are women whose environment did all it could to trim back their spirits. They grew up when women were expected to get married, have kids, stay home and be a housewife, period. The Catholic Church expected them to be pure as the driven snow. Alcohol was the natural and, for the most part, socially acceptable way for these vital women to try to anesthetize their pain and frustration. At the same time that I recognize the pain that alcohol often caused these characters and their families, I feel nothing but compassion and admiration for them in their struggle and in their bravery.

Although your new book, *Ya-Yas In Bloom*, still has some darker elements, including a kidnapping, it is very much a celebration of family as well as sisterhood. Do you think it is a sweeter, gentler book than your two previous novels? Does it reflect a change in your own internal or emotional life?

The words "sweeter, gentler" kind of scare me because they sound like something a political figure would try and palm off on a gullible electorate. I would say that ***Ya-Yas In Bloom*** reflects aspects of the Ya-Yas which were present in the previous books, but which may have been eclipsed by some of the pain and suffering. In terms of my own internal life, I pray that I am growing in my ability to see the daily and countless kindnesses and miracles which, if we let them, will sustain us, even through the roughest times. Life is not easy. It is filled with pain. It is also filled with joy and moments of rapture. You can be standing in line at the grocery store and see a mother with three little kids. She looks like she has her hands full, and you might offer to help. But she turns to you and says calmly, "Thank you, but I think I've got it handled." And all of a sudden she seems like the Blessed Virgin Mary; she seems like a pure incarnation of beauty and love and, right there next to the rack of "National Enquirers," you have a little epiphany of how beautiful this gorgeous and raggedy life is. It's all a matter of what you train your eyes to see, and a willingness to embrace it all: the dark and the light. I try to write from this perspective. Our hearts are broken daily. And they are mended again. The heart is meant to be broken, so that a huge tree can grow out of it. Our tears water the dry places in the heart so the tree can grow wide and wild, and all kinds of creatures living in it. Writing from the heart and living from the heart is what keeps me from jumping off the Agate Pass bridge.

Which character do you feel changes the most in the course of *Ya-Yas In Bloom*? What, in particular, is the catalyst for the change in him or her?

A lot of characters change in a lot of different ways in this book. But I think I'd point to Baylor Walker. He steps out of the Southern manhood role he was raised to live within, and chooses love over fear. His love for his children and his willingness to suspend judgment on Necie's husband, George, mark his transition to a deeper consciousness and a mature wisdom. He was born a sensitive soul, but toward the end of the book, Baylor confronts the culture of guns and hunting and fear and decides to risk being more open, softer. I love that Baylor.

Some of your most beautiful stories in this novel involve the "miracle" of snow in the deep South and stars or stardust. These stories involve the positive impact of Nature on people, rather than the course of human events. Are you saying that Nature is restorative or healing?

Without a doubt. Nature, in her ever-changing beauty, reminds us that everything changes, nothing remains the same. That hope itself is inside a seed. We plant the seed in the spring and when autumn comes and the darkness descends, nature reminds us through the burst of color in the dying leaves that all kinds of things are happening. Underground there is life, coursing, growing. If we have faith, we do not dig up the seed to see how it is doing; we leave it there and trust that all the forces that make it grow are doing their work. Nature reminds us that we are in a continuous cycle of birth, death, and resurrection. I have found that if I can just try to walk outside every day possible, that I am able to walk away from my problems and into the embrace of a natural kingdom whose comfort keeps me going. The sun rises and the sun sets. Glorious La Luna rises, and when she grows full, we are enchanted by lunar light. That's why I try to post on ya-yA.com on the full moon: it's a strong time for me. I feel bathed by the full moon's light, and reminded that darkness holds its own beauty and secrets. In our culture, we strive so much for the light. The sun is great. Light is great. But so much growth occurs in the dark. Both in Nature, and in our natures. Our own dark times carry with them the new life that is waiting to be born.

Writing does seem to be fun for you — and akin to a performance in the energy that buzzes on the page. Tell us about your act of creation. Do you have a whole story in your head before you start or does it just unfold as you're writing? Do you write every day? Do you write quickly? Do you read aloud chapters in progress with anyone else? Share with us please.

Like most everything in life, sometimes writing is sheer pleasure; sometimes it is hell.

I come to writing from hearing great stories as a child in Louisiana, where the mark of a person was his or her ability to be a raconteur. I also come to writing as a professional actress whose body has been trained to listen and smell and inhabit characters without judgment. When I write, I usually see the scenes in my head. Each book is different. I created ***Ya-Yas In Bloom*** working mainly at night because that is when I had the most energy. My energy just seemed to kick in around 11PM, and I'd work till about 3 or 4AM. I cannot explain this. I am learning to take it where I can get it, when I can get it, and not question or complain. I am aware of the limitations of my own human vessel, and I am trying to learn to tap in to the energy of my muse — or my angels — or the Universe, whatever you want to call that ineffable energy that flows through all things. That energy that flows through a blade of grass and whispers "Grow! Grow!"

I read my own work to myself in silence, but I hear it as though I were performing it to an audience who I want to enrapture. I was blessed with this book to have my best girlfriend, Susan Ronn, who is also an actress, read the manuscript and give me feedback when I most needed it. My husband reads everything I write, and I also have several friends who I acknowledge in the book, whose innate sense of story-telling I trust. Without their love and support, this book would not have been born. I still say: If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes several villages to write a novel.

Sometimes an author strongly identifies with one of the book's characters.'Vivi is a major voice in all the Ya-Ya novels.'Yet so is Sidda: Does any character in this work speak with your voice?

I believe that every character speaks with some aspect of my "voice." "Not one of us is only one "voice." "We contain at least 84,000 voices." "We contain goodness, evil, craziness, and calm." I look at the creation of character and story as evidence that if you are nonjudgmental, then it is possible to let the varied parts of yourself find expression. Conversely I believe that by suspending judgment it is possible to give voice to those and that which you do not agree with. These days, when the world seems so polarized, I think it is especially important to be able to write from the point of view of those who do not share our values and beliefs. We need to live inside those characters and try to understand them, the way a traveler sets out to open herself to a foreign country. Not as a tourist, but as an adventurer who keeps her eyes open, her ears tuned, all her senses honed for that which is different and new. Encountering each character (and a character or a novel is like a country) without letting your own background blind you to the complexity of The Other.

Would you talk about the title of this book?'What do you mean by "Ya-Yas In Bloom"?'Does "bloom" mean they're aging — or something else? Are there any literary or hidden meanings?

The Ya-Yas, like all of us, are in bloom. Our roots are deep in the earth and we reach to the heavens. Our life experiences are fertilizer that helps us grow. Sometimes our life experiences are more like pesticides, and cause us great suffering, but nevertheless effecting growth of some kind. Either way, we, like flowers, are changing, and hopefully gracing the world with unique beauty. My father was a farmer. My husband and my brother are fine gardeners. I am a connoisseur of gardens and farms. But the more I learn about growing things, the more respect and awe I have for natural processes. Human lives are so much more like the lives of trees and plants and flowers than we realized. I was looking at a drawing recently of the "bronchial tree" of the human body, and for the first time understood that yes, it is a tree! Just like the huge Live Oak in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* is a tree! We are all cousins. That's one of the reasons it breaks my heart and knocks the breath out of me when I witness the destruction of this fragile planet, especially during the past five years.

And speaking of literary allusions, which authors have inspired you?'What books have you read recently?

Oh my, I have been inspired by so many authors. From Dickens to Shakespeare to Tim O'Brien to Flannery O'Connor to Pat Conroy to Adrienne Rich to Tennessee Williams, to the South African playwright, Athol Fugard; the poets Ceizlaw Milosz, Rilke, Rumi, Amira Baraka, all the Anne of Green Gables books; Reynolds Price, Amy Tan, Toni Morrison, Henri Nouwen, and everything my mother performed for us when we were little.

During the worst of the election year I have been reading, in between the best-selling books on current national and international affairs, cozy mysteries to comfort myself. I just recently re-read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and many articles on the dangers of pesticides and herbicides, as well as books on Multi-Chemical Sensitivity. I have been reading books on energy medicine, re-reading some of May Sarton's journals, re-reading Louis Hyde's seminal book, *The Gift*. I am currently reading a book called *Illness As Blessing* by L.F. C. Mees, a Dutch doctor.

The performing arts figure hugely in your books.'The Ya-Yas sing and dance their way from first page to last.'Sidda becomes a director.'How important do you feel creative expression is in the development of young women's lives?'How can we better foster it?

Creative expression is as important as oxygen! In fact, the two are inextricably linked. What better workout for the body than singing and dancing every day?! Even if we aren't blessed with the stamina or health for full-tilt boogie singing and dancing, we can hum or dance in our chairs. Our bodies want to do this. Start singing "This Little Light of Mine" right now and see if you don't feel better. Go on, try it! For the sheer joy of it! Don't be afraid to "make a fool" of yourself. Being a fool is vastly underestimated. Just look at Shakespeare's deepest wisdom uttered from the mouths of fools. I say: Encourage young women, young men, people of all ages to sing and dance. Do not dare let the corporate culture relegate performing to the "professionals" or "celebrities." We need to reclaim creative expression in our daily lives, turn off the TV, and stop living vicariously off the "celebs." We are the stars of our own lives. Each one of us. We write the scripts; we act the roles, we choose the musical score. Sometimes I put on old Supremes songs and dance, and my day is changed. I say: Learn the words to songs you always loved; make up your own songs. Make up dance numbers and never, ever be afraid to use a pencil for a microphone.

Although the Ya-Ya books take place in Thornton, Louisiana, and Southern culture plays a major part, the Ya-Yas have touched a familiar chord in women around the globe.'Ya-Ya groups have sprung up everywhere.'What in your writing is so universal?'Why have millions of women responded on an emotional level to it?

Women are hungry for sisterhood. People are starving for community, especially in industrialized nations. It is what we were created for. Sisterhood, brotherhood, cousinhood. We long to connect. We long to deliberately slow down, stop "living to work" and start "working just enough to live." We long for long, lazy afternoons with friends, time to just shoot the breeze, time to lollygag, time to stop the driven-ess of a consumerist culture long enough to be creatively idle. We are lonely in front of our TV sets alone in our living rooms. We are lonely in our cars on the freeway. Why do you think people are glued to their cell phones? We want the warmth and intimacy of friendship; we want to know we are not alone. Not only women and girls, but all of us want this. The Ya-Yas remind us that such community is positive, fun, and possible.