Little Altars Everywhere Study Guide

Little Altars Everywhere by Rebecca Wells

Contents

Plot Summary

Little Alters Everywhere is the hilarious, poignant, tragic, compassionate multi-layered saga of the turbulent Walker family in Thornton, Louisiana from the 1960s to the present. Different facets of the story are revealed gradually. Siddalee Walker's mother Viviane is a witty, bright, cultured drunk. She is also viciously abusive to her children. Sidda's father Shepley Walker is immature but a hardworking farmer who hides out at the duck camp whenever things are not going his way. When Big Shep leaves, the children are at the mercy of their mother, who beats them with a belt until their legs bleed.

Still, there are idyllic scenes when Mama and her girlfriends, the Ya-Yas, take all the children to Spring Creek, the summer retreat. There, without the fathers around, everyone swims, reads and just relaxes. Viviane's own mother Buggy is mentally unstable and as selfish as her daughter. The narrative focuses on eldest daughter Siddalee Walker, who is the major target of her mother's alcoholic rage.

The great tragedy of Viviane's life was the death of her first son, Siddalee's twin brother, when he was just a few days old. Viviane or "Vivi" as her friends call her, also abuses prescription drugs. When Shepley Walker accuses his wife of being a drunk and an unfit mother, she moves out of their bedroom permanently. Viviane begins fondling all of her children in bed at night, especially her eldest son Little Shep.

Shepley Walker is struggling with his own problems including a mountain of inherited debt, which he hides from his wife and family. When he is appointed to the draft board, Big Shep finds that he must send scores of young men, many of them the sons of friends, to die in Vietnam. Whenever the combined weight of these problems becomes too great, Big Shep flees to his duck camp, leaving his children at their mother's mercy.

Viviane turns to religion after the break in her marriage. One night, she returns from a retreat in a vicious mood, from not having had a drink or any drugs for three days. Later that evening, she takes all four of her naked children outside and brutally beats then with a belt, until they legs are raw. The family's faithful maid. Willetta, intercedes and forces Mrs. Walker to stop. Despite this abusive, chaotic and sometimes charming childhood, the four Walker children grow to be productive adults, although each is scarred in his or her own way.

Siddalee is on Xanax for anxiety. She is a theater director based in New York who seldom returns home to see her family. Little Shep is perhaps the most damaged by Viviane's sexual abuse, although he buries his feelings and shows it the least. Still, his relationship with his own wife and children is profoundly affected because Little Shep does not trust himself to be close to anyone. He also drinks behind his wife's back. Lulu shoplifts constantly as a teen and has a problem with overeating. Baylor, the youngest, overcompensates by becoming an attorney, although he wrestles with private demons. His three children, including baby Lee, are the light of his life.

When Siddalee finally returns home for baby Lee's baptism, she finds her mother unchanged. Still, Sidda manages to see her mother as a funny, troubled, witty woman who did the best she could. Sidda is then able to forgive her mother, finding her own peace in the process.

Prologue and Chapter 1

Prologue and Chapter 1 Summary

Little Altars Everywhere is a retrospective look at the lives of the four Walker children in Louisiana in the 1960s. Their mother, Vivi Walker, is fun, zany, hilarious, intelligent, and a raving alcoholic who physically and sexually abuses her children. Father Shepley Walker is completely unable to protect his children. Scarred by child abuse in his own life, Shep Walker retreats to his duck camp whenever the family conflict grows too strong. Despite this upbringing, the Walker children manage to cope with their problems in various ways and develop into sane, productive adults.

In the Prologue, Ooh! My Soul (Siddalee, 1991) Siddalee walker dreams she is five years old again, back in Louisiana at Spring Creek, the family's vacation home. Her mother's girlfriends, the Ya-Yas, are there. Mama puts a Little Richard record on and insists that Siddalee dance with her, gyrating their hips and shaking so hard "freckles jump off my face." She knows that if her Daddy drove up, he would disapprove of such wild dancing by white women. When she wakes up laughing she feels loose and happy, despite the tears on her face. She has a rare good memory of her mother.Still, Sidda longs for her mother to come and hold her.

In Chapter 1, Wilderness Training (Siddalee, 1963), nine-year-old Sidda is shocked when her mother and another Ya-Ya, Necie Ogden, volunteer as leaders for Sidda's troop of Girl Scouts.The Ya-Yas spend most of their time together drinking, shopping and playing bourree, a kind of Cajun poker. Sidda's mother Vivi Walker refuses to wear a uniform, and shows up at every meeting in her signature orange stretch pants and an oversize sweater. At the Girl Scout camp, Camp Mary Alice, Necie backs her station wagon into the flagpole, leveling it. Both Necie and Vivi think this is hilarious.

Sidda is the lowest-ranking member of the popular girls from Our Lady of Divine Compassion Parochial School. She is terrified that her mother will do something to make her less popular, even though Mama was one of the most popular girls at her high school. Although Sidda feels a kinship with the unpopular Edythe Spevey, she is also afraid to be ostracized as Edythe is. Sidda avoids the girl's overtures of friendship, and is even rude to her. Sidda feels that she has enough problems staying popular, since she has a wacky mother and must use an asthma inhaler.

When Edythe Spevey complains to Mama and Necie about the other girls staying up past curfew, Sidda is scared. Mama does not tolerate intentional cruelty. That's the reason she whipped Sidda with a belt last Thanksgiving, creating welts so bad that Sidda couldn't go to dance class for two weeks. Mama laughs at Edythe, sending her back to bed. The popular girls think Mama is cool. At the end of the year, the Girl Scout Counsil lets Mama and Necie know they will not be required as leaders next year. Sidda quits scouting as an act of loyalty to her mother.

The chapter closes with another dream. Sidda is swinging in her backyard with Edythe. The two are so close they feel like one person. The swing goes so high that when Sidda looks down, all their ordinary belongings like the porch, the barbecue pit, the tool shed, the chinaberry tree seem illuminated like "tiny altars everywhere."

Prologue and Chapter 1 Analysis

In the Prologue, Siddalee is completely happy in her dream, dancing with abandon at the idyllic vacation home, surrounded by almost all the people who love her. The prologue serves several functions in the story. It foreshadows the ending, Sidda's eventual acceptance of things she cannot change including her abusive childhood. This section throws a lifeline to the reader, so that no matter how uncomfortable or tragic the Walkers' family life is, the reader knows the story will end happily. More than that, the dream symbolizes Sidda's final acceptance of her childhood trauma, a subconscious decision to embrace the good parts of her life and have compassion for her parents, who are both flawed people. The dream also illustrates one of the book's basic themes, that happiness and tragedy, even violence, can coexist within the same family. The mother Siddalee longs for is not Viviene Walker, or rather is only the kind, fun, compassionate part of Viviene Walker. Some part of Sidda still longs for a nurturing mother who will protect and comfort her — things that her real mother, Viviene Walker, could never be.

In Chapter 1, like many nine-year-olds, Siddalee is intensely focused on her social position compared to the other children her age. However, Sidda's concern extends far beyond the usual schoolchild's need to be accepted by her peers. Instead, she feels a need to live up to her mother's example, or even a competitiveness with her mother's childhood exploits. The author uses irony in expressing this. The reader is aware that this competition is sparked by the mother, rather than the daughter.

Sidda realizes that being friends with an outcast like Edythe Spevey will make the popular kids reject her. The name of Our Lady of Divine Compassion school is ironic. The children who attend it, including Sidda, are not compassionate towards their schoolmates. In another way, though, the name is highly evocative. Eventually, Sidda does learn to feel compassion for the parents who have failed her greatly. There is also great irony in Sidda's casual acceptance that it is reasonable to raise welts on a child's legs with a belt, accusing the child of deliberate cruelty. If beating a nine-year-old is not cruel, what is?

One of author Rebecca Well's techniques is to use varying points of view to illuminate the character of the speaker, and those she is speaking about. This section paints a deft portrait of Siddalee as an earnest, quiet, somewhat bookish girl who is very sensitive to rejection and emotional nuance. It also portrays Vivi Walker as a zany, fun-loving free spirit who is also an alcoholic and beats her young children. Like all children, Sidda accepts her mother's behavior as normal.

The final dream sequence is the souce of the novel's title. In her dream, Sidda's compassion for Edythe causes all the ordinary features of the Walkers' backyard to light up like tiny altars. This image is highly symbolic. First, it introduces the concept that compassion allows us to see the holiness in ordinary items, and everyday relationships. In some ways, the entire novel is Sidda's attempt to see her parents with compassionate eyes, therefore understanding and forgiving them. Seen through this prism of compassion and empathy, the most mundane events become sacred. Yet, small altars also carry a second, more sinister meaning. They can be used for human sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of children. Vivi Walker's alcoholic abuse of her children (and her husband's absence and emotional neglect of them) has damaged them as surely as if their hearts were cut out. Each of her children struggles in some way with permanent damage. So the image of little altars everywhere conjures up both devastation to innocent children, the lasting damage it creates, and the sacred healing power of compassion. These three concepts are the foundation upon which the novel is built, the contention that it is possible to cherish the good memories and forgive bad parents, even when it is not possible to forget. It may even be possible to cherish the ordinary, specifically because it is imperfect.

Chapters 2 & 3

Chapters 2 & 3 Summary

In Choreography (Siddalee, 1961) seven-year-old Sidda develops a crush on her dance teacher, Charlene Parks, a former June Taylor dancer on TV. Sidda especially envies her teacher's high-heeled tap shoes. To her delight, Charlene picks Sidda as a favorite student and is invited to visit Charlene at home, where Charlene's African American maid Jewel takes care of them. Sidda revels in the attention she receives from Charlene.

Sidda is disappointed when her Aunt Jezie returns from college because instead of paying attention to Sidda, Aunt Jezie befriends Charlene Parks. Soon they are going to dances and soda fountains almost every week. When Sidda encounters the two by chance at a burger place, she rushes to speak to them. Charlene is cool yet polite, while Aunt Jezie ignores Sidda altogether. Sidda is crushed. Later, when the two women realize that Sidda feels excluded, they take her to the drive in. Again, Sidda revels in the attention but it is short-lived. Soon they are ignoring the girl again.

In her loneliness, Siddalee creates a fantasy world where Aunt Jezie and Charlene Parks are planning a wonderful surprise for her, like a trip to New Orleans or her own high-heeled tap shoes. They are simply acting aloof to heighten the surprise. When her friend Sherry doesn't believe that Sidda is friends with Charlene Parks, Sidda is determined to prove it. The two sneak over to Aunt Jezie's house, but only Sidda goes inside. There, she finds Jezie and Charlene in bed together, naked, kissing. Sidda and Sherry dash home, where Sidda kisses Sherry once and makes her promise not to tell.

Wandering Eye (Big Shep, 1962) is told from the point of view of Siddalee's father, 33-year-old Shepley Walker. Big Shep's father was a hardworking man who whipped his children unmercifully. He was also a smart farmer who managed to hold on to three plantations through the Depression. Vivi's mother, Buggy, never believed that a simple farmer like Shep was good enough for her daughter. It is true that Shep was a college dropout while Vivi finished her degree at Ole Miss, the University of Mississippi. Still, the Walker family is rich in Louisiana history and one of the wealthiest families in the area.

Both of Shep's parents were alcoholics. His mother frequently passed out in the middle of Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner. This didn't strike Shep Walker as unusual. As far as he knew, "everybody in the state of Louisiana" drank like that. Shep's opinion began to change when he was driving home drunk from a friend's house one night, with his wife and children in the car. A policeman pulls him over. When the cop learns that Shep is the son of Mr. Baylor Walker, he lets him go with a warning to drive carefully.

When Sidda is in first grade, she has to have an operation on her left eye because it wandered, causing her to see double. Shep blames his wive Viviane for this condition. Viviane had a wandering eye herself, but she used it as a way to charmingly flirt with

boys when she was in college. Shep is in denial, and refuses to give his permission to allow the surgery. He leaves the family and stays at the duck camp, where there is no phone. Days later, when Sidda is out of the hospital, he sneaks into the house to see her. Sidda is sitting up in bed with her eyes bandaged. Shep has brought her a small gift, a wrapped package of headbands for her long, beautiful red hair. Shep stands in the door silently staring at his daughter, but leaves without being seen by anyone. When he returns to the home that evening, he and Vivi get into a vicious fight over his absence.

A short time later, Shep's father Baylor Walker died of a heart attack. His "right hand man" Chaney and Willetta find Shep in the fields to tell him that his father has died. At the funeral, Shep looks at his well-dressed children and wonders when they became blue-bloods. That night, as he lay in bed gasping with asthma, all four children come climb in bed to comfort him, for the first and only time. Later, Vivi tenderly removes his magazine and joins the family in bed. It is the least lonely that Shep has ever felt in his life.

Chapters 2 & 3 Analysis

When Charlene parks asks why her African American maid Jewel is so good to her, the older woman replies that it is because Charlene's mother is going to take care of Jewel in her old age. This exchange perfectly illustrates the dependence and affection that lies between the two races in central Louisiana in the 1960s. Although Jewel has worked hard for the white family all her life, she has no pension or 401k. She is entirely dependent upon the kindness of her employer for survival when she can no longer work. Despite this, Jewel feels a type of affection for Charlene, a woman she has raised almost from birth. Yet, that affection is tempered by Jewel's knowledge of the inequities between the two. No matter how hard she works, Jewel will always be poor and Charlene and her mother will always be comparatively wealthy and secure, simply by virtue of the color of their skin.

Part of Sidda's longing for a friendship with Charlene Parks and Aunt Jezie is due to her troubled relationship with her own mother, who gives the girl little attention or nurturing and is openly competitive with her. Sidda's feelings about discovering Aunt Jezie and Charlene Parks in a lesbian embrace are complex. On one hand she is shocked, and wants to tell her mother, her grandmother and the director of the community center where Charlene gives dance lessons. On the other hand, she is aroused and wants to join them in bed, although at seven years old she has only the vaguest notion of what they might be doing. Sidda ultimately keeps the secret and tells no one.

Like many incidents in the novel, the lesbian scene is told matter-of-factly and never considered again. As a child, Sidda simply accepts what she has seen. There is no further mention of Aunt Jezie's sexuality or Charlene Parks in the book. Sidda seems to be heterosexual as an adult, because she mentions boyfriends in the final chapter. Despite her mother's many accusations, Siddalee does not dramatize this incident.

Wandering Eye (Big Shep, 1962) is the first chapter from another character's point of view. This tactic illuminates the character of Shep Walker, Siddalee's father. It also includes vital facts about his wife and their children, that as a child Sidda would be completely unaware of. Shep Walker believes that he is a good man because although his children are whipped, he never knocked out a tooth or broke their ribs, as his father did to him. It also reveals that Shep believed at that time that alcoholism was normal. This opinion changed later in his life.

The Walker family's status is revealed in the scene where the police stops Shep Walker for driving while intoxicated. Although Shep is guilty, the policeman does not arrest him, or even give him a ticket. This prestige within the community is a double-edged sword. It is helpful when Shep needs a loan at the bank, but it also meant that his father could beat him with impunity because no one would dare interfere. The same attitude persists in the next generation, with everyone ignoring the welts on Sidda's legs because a wealthy white family like the Walker's cannot be accused of beating their children.

Deserting his wife while his daughter is in the hospital seems like the action of an unfeeling man. However, this point of view allows author Rebecca Wells to illuminate Shep's character. He loves his daughter Sidda so passionately that he is terrified something bad will happen during the surgery, He thinks his wife's wandering eye is charming, and does not see why they need to risk surgery for Sidda. He is not absent because he cares too little, but because he cares too much, and does not know how to handle that emotion. Vivi assumes that Shep just does not want to spend the money to correct Sidda's double vision. Shep's response to all family drama is to retreat to his duck camp, where he can be alone and cannot be reached by phone. This pattern of behavior leaves him feeling isolated and lonely, yet he is unable to bridge the gap with his family and discuss their feelings.

Shep Walker's attitudes on race are also illuminated in this chapter. He describes Chaney and Willetta without mentioning their race, and clearly relies on Chaney. Yet, Shep expresses surprise when Chaney cries about the death of the man he's worked for all his life. This suggests both that Shep considers emotion unmanly, and that he thinks of Chaney and Willetta as not quite human.

Chapters 4 & 5

Chapters 4 & 5 Summary

Chapter 4, Skinny-Dipping (Baylor, 1963) recounts an idyllic visit to the family summer home, Spring Creek, from the viewpoint of six-year-old Baylor, the youngest of the Walker children. Vivi Walker pends every summer at Spring Hill with her fellow Ya-Yas and their children. The men only visit occasionally on the weekends, remaining in Thornton to work. Each family has a cottage or "camp" at Spring Creek. The Walkers' camp is called Sans Souci, French for without a care. Afternoons are spent at Shop-and-Skate, the only combination skating rink and grocery store in Central Louisiana.

The camp is within walking distance of three different swimming holes. The Walkers have the best inner tubes, from their father's farm machinery. Sometimes Bay will stand across from Sidda on the inner tube, holding hands to balance as they float away. At sunset, they all go back to the creek for another swim, and pass around Ivory soap to wash with. One evening, when they have the entire camp to themselves, Caro tears off her swimsuit. The other Ya-Yas do the same, so the kids follow suit. Soon, 16 kids and three moms are all cavorting naked, with no one else around. They have a great time until the sheriff arrives and threatens to put them all in jail. The Ya-Yas, who were arrested as teenagers, find this hilarious and cannot stop laughing. That night, after a weenie roast, the Ya-Yas do imitations of the sheriff and laugh so hard they fall down.

Chapter 5, Bookworms (Viviane, 1964) is the first chapter in the voice of Sidda's mother. Vivi recounts how much Sidda loves books. Because they can check out only two books each time they visit the library in town, Siddalee also visits the bookmobile when it comes to Pecan Road every two weeks. In summer, the mosquito truck only goes as far as Pecan Road. The kids jump on their bikes and race along behind the truck, getting coated with DDT. This keeps the mosquitoes off them, at least for a while.

One night Viviane and Shep have a bigger than usual fight. As usual, Shep leaves for the duck camp to spend the night. When he doesn't return the next morning, Vivi becomes hysterical, believing that Shep has been killed. She wakes all the children up and has eleven-year-old Sidda call the police, the local bar and Shep's friends while Vivi gets drunk on mimosas. Finally, Vivi tells Sidda to go play with matches. When Sidda looks shocked, Vivi tells her "Don't you look at me in that tone of voice." Sidda disappears into her room.

Finally Shep returns at noon and Vivi is so relieved to see him that she makes him lunch. Sidda runs in hysterical, crying because she believed her father was dead. Vivi thinks her daughter is just being dramatic. The kids all go out to play while Vivi takes a mid-day nap and gives herself a pedicure. When Sidda doesn't show up for dinner, Vivi realizes that she is missing. The other kids haven't seen her since they went to the bookmobile. By dark, the family calls the police. They give the officers Sidda's school photo. Seven-year-old Baylor gives them a picture of Sidda that he has drawn, insisting

that she looks exactly like it. The Ya-Yas arrive along with Buggy, Vivi's mother. Vivi makes a few appetizers for everyone and they mix cocktails.

While the police search, Vivi muses about the day Sidda was born. She feels she deserves her beautiful red-haired daughter, who cost Vivi her waist. She also thinks about Sidda's twin brother, who died when he was just four days old. It was after this death that Vivi started to drink in the middle of the day. Vivi stands in Sidda's room looking at her tennis shoes and books. Suddenly, Vivi has an inspiration. She calls the mayor and demands that he unlock the bookmobile for her. Sure enough, Sidda is hiding inside. Vivi gives her daughter a Darvon and puts her to bed, then takes a Darvon and a shot of bourbon herself.

Chapters 4 & 5 Analysis

Although Viviane is constantly accusing Sidda of being dramatic, it is really Vivi who must be the center of attention at all times. Vivi sees Sidda's asthma as a bid for attention, something that is voluntary, instead of an involuntary illness. Vivi is particularly cruel when she tells her daughter to go play with matches. Sarcasm is lost on children, and Sidda hears the anger and resentment that lie beneath the joke. On some level, her mother really wishes that all her children, all her responsibilities, would disappear. There is incredibly cruelty in telling the children their father is dead. Most of all, Vivi seems completely unaware of the emotional effects of her actions on her children, probably because she is perpetually drunk.

Vivi is also incredibly self-absorbed. This is shown in the way she enjoys an intimate lunch with her husband, takes an alcohol-fueled nap and gives herself a pedicure, all while her daughter is missing. It is particularly evocative when Vivi says she was so frightened by Sidda's absence that she couldn't even mix herself a drink, her husband had to mix it for her. Many parents confronted with a possible abduction of their child, would not have happy hour on their minds, or arrange an impromptu cocktail party for their friends. Vivi comes by this naturally. Her own mother, Buggy, is equally self-absorbed and opines gently that Sidda's absence is God's punishment for the way Vivi treats her own mother.

This point of view reveals several unexpected insights into character.While Shep characteristically runs away from problems and intense emotion, Vivi's reaction is to take prescription drugs and get drunk, a bad and sometimes lethal combination. Although Vivi is a lush who often acts unpredictably, there is always a rational reason for her behavior in her mind. She is not intentionally cruel. Perhaps most surprising, she loves her husband and finds him sexually attractive. Most of all, it reveals the source of Baylor's actions in giving the picture of Sidda to the police is touching, showing both his intelligence and his emotional sensitivity.

Much of Vivi's behavior is motivated by her almost unbearable loss over the death of Sidda's twin brother. Vivi also keenly feels the loss of her own potential, that came with being a wife and mother in the 1960s. Still, she frames the loss in the most selfish way,

thinking that Sidda deprived Vivi of the status accorded to mothers of twins. Vivi believes that if the male twin had survived, they would have been a happy family and everything would have worked out great, is totally unfounded. It is Vivi and Shep, along with Buggy, who create the family's problems and can solve them. In a humorous note, Vivi promises God that she will give up Bombay gin if Sidda is found safe. Not Tanquerey gin, just the Bombay brand.

The reader is already aware that eleven-year-old Sidda survives this incident, because in the prologue, she is 38 years old. The author foreshadows Sidda's hiding spot in the mention of the bookmobile and books in her bedroom, so the reader knows where Sidda is before Vivi does. Once again, the Walkers' social status earns them special privileges when the mayor, a man Vivi dated in college, unlocks the bookmobile for them in the middle of the night.

Chapters 6 & 7

Chapters 6 & 7 Summary

The voice of Chapter 6, Cruelty to Animals (Little Shep, 1964) is Sidda's younger brother, ten-year-old Little Shep. He loves his family's three large dogs, but feels sorry for Miss Peppy, the miniature poodle that belongs to his grandmother, Buggy. Little Shep thinks that even yappy little dogs should be treated with some respect. His father Big Shep says that Buggy is making the dog as crazy as she made her daughter. When Miss Peppy loses her first litter of puppies and must be spayed, Buggy gives the dog some baby dolls as a substitute. Eventually, Buggy is able to teach Miss Peppy to carry the dolls like puppies and cover them with a blanket, like a human mother.

One Saturday Buggy is babysitting all four Walker children while their mother goes shopping in Lafayette with her friends. If the children misbehave, Buggy tells them that Baby Jesus is very upset. Shep throws Miss Peppy's baby dolls in the trash, and substitutes some bald rubber dolls that belong to his sisters. When Miss Peppy discovers that her babies are missing, she begins howling and Buggy shrieks "like she'd rehearsed all her life for something like this to happen." Buggy honestly seems to think that a criminal has kidnapped the baby dolls. Meanwhile, Miss Peppy is having a doggie nervous breakdown. Buggy cuddles Miss Peppy to comfort her, and the dog bites her on the hand. Buggy leads all the children in reciting the rosary for the return of the puppies, but they collapse in laughter.

Finally Miss Peppy tracks her baby dolls in the kitchen trash can. She rips them out and runs in circles, jerking the dolls back and forth. Little Shep has only seen his mother act this crazy, not Miss Peppy. Buggy realizes the children pulled the prank, and locks them into the playroom, where they play contentedly all afternoon. When Vivi returns, she is shocked to learn that her children have not been fed. She asks her mother why. Buggy replies that Little Shep bit her on the hand.

In Chapter 7, Beatitudes (Siddalee, 1963) the nuns at Our Labor of Divine Compassion Parochial School think Sidda's father is rich. She gets in trouble constantly for this. They are particularly angry because a generation ago, Sidda's Baptist grandfather refused to donate land for a large new Catholic church and insist that the whole family has lost its only chance for salvation. Sidda is from a mixed marriage because her father is not Catholic. Sidda agonizes over whether she is sinning or not, especially since the nuns say that thinking of something bad is a sin, even if you don't do it. Like wanting to see the movies that aren't approved by the Catholic Legion of Decency. She goes to confession so often the priest tells her to stop, these are just little things. He also suggests that her parents take her to a psychologist, which worries her even more. She is fascinated by the gory pictures in the Children's Lives of the Saints, although she is afraid that might be a sin, too.

Sidda loves to spend the night with her friend Marie Williams because her family is poor and therefore holy. They eat tuna loaf and drink powdered milk. Sidda enjoys walking on their icy floor in the morning, knowing that each pain shortens her soul's stay in purgatory by a few days. Still, Sidda cannot resist committing a real sin at the Williams', taking an extra slice of bread when she knows that there is only one per person. She is secretly thrilled when Marie's older brother Jude is punished for it.

Sidda is humiliated when her mother picks her up on Saturday. Mama has just had her hair done, and looks divine. When Marie's mother compliments her, Vivi tells her that she "shouldn't let herself go." Sidda is humiliated at her mother's implied insult. She avoids the Williams family for weeks. The next time Sidda sees Mrs. Williams, she has lost weight and has a chic new short haircut. Mrs. Williams tells Sidda her mother inspired her.

Chapters 6 & 7 Analysis

In Chapter 6, Big Shep's remark that Buggy made his wife crazy is particularly hurtful, although not entirely untrue. Buggy is probably mentally ill, and at least as dramatic and self-centered as her daughter, Vivi. In a particularly illuminating sentence, when Buggy is told that Miss Peppy's first and only litter of puppies has died at birth, she replies that one must consider the safety of the mother first. Buggy clearly means that her own comfort and safety is more important than anyone else's. Buggy clearly feels that she receives the love from her dog, that her daughter denies her. Both Vivi and Buggy refer to Miss Peppy being spayed as a hysterectomy, a term usually reserved for humans. in a sense, the melodramatic Buggy has rehearsed all her life to be the center of attention in some terrible event. Buggy's reaction in searching for the criminal who committed this crime shows that she does not have a firm grasp on reality. By the time Vivi returns home, Buggy seems to actually believe that Little Shep,and not Miss Peppy, bit her.

Little Shep's point of view illuminates his character, but it also sheds light on just how eccentric his maternal grandmother is. This partially explains why his mother is so self-absorbed and dramatic. Sidda shows an unexpected mischevious side when she remarks Shep's antics are a great idea because it will get them in a lot of trouble. Afterward, the whole event makes Little Shep feel like he is a born leader.

Chapter 7 presents a clearer picture of Sidda. She is a serious, studious little girl who obsesses over whether she might be committing a sin unintentionally. Sidda is shocked at her mother's behavior in insulting Mrs. Williams to her face. She doesn't understand why her mother cannot see that Mrs. Williams is too holy to worry about superficial appearance. Like many young people, Sidda is embarrassed by her mother. However, Mrs. Williams is inspired and embarks on a transformation. This reveals another facet of Vivi Walker's personality. Although she is caustic and often destructive with her own family, other people find the same behavior charming, amusing and even inspiring.

Chapters 8 & 9

Chapters 8 & 9 Summary

In Chapter 8, The Elf and the Fairy (Siddalee, 1963), piano lessons are the calmest part of Sidda's day. Despite her piano teacher's doubts, nine-year-old Sidda chooses The Elf and the Fairy to play for her fourth grade recital. The music is difficult, but it transports Sidda to a different land where it is easy to breathe and fairies watch over you like guardian angels with a good sense of humor. She believes that if she plays the song perfectly at her recital, Baby Jesus will forgive all her sins, like pinching her little sister Lulu in church.

Sidda has almost perfected the piece for her recital when Mama gets drunk at a big Ya-Ya party at Spring Creek, and slices her foot open stepping on a broken Coke bottle. The Ya-Yas take her to the emergency room for stitches, but Mama has to walk with crutches. The next night, Sidda has all her clothes, books and pencils laid out for school when her mother and father get into a huge fight, screaming at each other. Mama calls him a redneck and Daddy says that she is a drunk. Mama responds by calling him a coward, a dirt farmer and a loser. Mama tries to punch him, and Daddy pushes her away, causing her to slip and fall. With all four pajama-clad children standing terrified in the doorway, Shep tells his wife that she is not fit to raise the children.

Sidda helps her mother up. Vivi tells the children to grab their school clothes, they are going to leave. Wearing just her nightgown, Mama gets in the car. Sidda drops one of her favorite loafers in the driveway, but her mother won't let her retrieve it. Mama says they are going to Buggy's. Halfway there, Mama turns around again, screaming that she is not going to lose everything she deserves because Shep will claim she walked out on him. Sidda's school things are in disarray and she can't sleep all night.

The next day at piano lessons, Sidda does not play as well as usual. Sidda can't practice on Saturday, because they spend the entire day moving all the furniture out of the children's school room and moving Mama's stuff into it, so she can have her own room separate from Daddy's. On Sunday, when Sidda sits down to play at the piano recital, every note comes out horribly wrong. The piece does not sound at all like the magical music that Sidda had almost mastered.

In Chapter 9, The Princess of Gimmee (Lula, 1967) is the only chapter from Lulu's point of view. It takes place when Sidda's younger sister Tallulah, called Lulu, is just 12 years old, and already the most accomplished shoplifter in Garnet Parish, and perhaps in the state. Before Lulu started stealing, her mother called her the Princess of Gimme because she asked for so many things. She steals expensive cosmetics for Sidda and a cigarette lighter for her mother. She steals gun pellets for her brothers. Little Shep likes them, but Baylor would rather have a globe from the antique store.

Lulu decides to steal a new cowboy hat for her father.She dashes out the door with it when the two female sales clerks are not watching, but gets caught. Lulu bursts into tears and tells the two clerks a story about being an orphan named Corina Axel who stole the cowboy hat for her big brother Bucky. The two kind women give Lulu the hat. Even though the hat is too small for her father, she writes them a nice thank-you note for it.

Chapters 8 & 9 Analysis

In Chapter 8, although both of Sidda's parents drink and even get drunk almost every night, this is the first time that one has accused the other of being an alcoholic, a drunk in slang. The accusations they hurl at each other reflect their opponents deepest fear and insecurities. Big Shep, who never finished college, truly fears that he is an uncultured redneck dirt farmer, a coward and a loser. It is what his father always told him. Vivi is fighting very hard to believe that her use of prescription drugs and drinking is normal. She secretly fears that Shep is right, she is not a fit mother. The argument is devastating for both of them, and their marriage never recovers. The person each trusted the most has attacked at their most vulnerable point.

Sidda's inability to play the magical piano piece illustrates the trauma she is going through. Symbolically, Sidda has lost the fairies, a symbol of childhood and of her hope for a better life. Playing the piece, like wearing her favorite loafers, made Sidda feel like she was guaranteed a good future. The destruction of her parent's marriage ruins that feeling forever. Sidda feels lonely and isolated, even from her music teacher.

In Chapter 9, stealing is Lulu's way of acting out due to the chaos, abuse and emotional roller coaster of her home life. She is not actually a bad person. Most of what Lulu steals is for other people: perfume and nail polish for her mother, pricey cosmetics for her sister Sidda. When the two sales clerks comfort her, she bursts into genuine tears at the unexpected kindness and affection, emotional nurturing that she never gets at home. It is these emotional needs that create Lulu's thirst for material possessions. She believes that if she gives her family presents, they might show affection towards her. As Lulu astutely points out, she learned to be selfish and grasping from the Queen of Gimme, her mother.

Chapters 10 & 11

Chapters 10 & 11 Summary

In Chapter 10, Hair of the Dog (Siddalee, 1965) Mama and Daddy went to the only nightclub in Thornton the night before. Caro, one of the Ya-Yas, came home with Mama when Daddy got angry about how wild the Ya-Yas were acting and went to the duck camp. The next morning, Mama and Caro both have bad hangovers but they have to go back to retrieve Mama's high heeled shoe, left at the nightclub. They take all the children with them, even though they haven't had any breakfast and Mama hasn't fixed 12-year-old Sidda's beautiful, waist-length red hair.

Caro and Mama stop to buy the children a breakfast of sugary donuts and Coke. They stop by Teensy's house where Caro and Mama jump onto the bed where the Ya-Ya and her husband Chick are sleeping. The hungover couple refuses to get up, so Caro and Mama leave. They stop by the Abracadabra liquor store, which has a an angel of death on the sign, for vodka and V-8 juice to make bloody marys. Then the pair, with Vivi's four children still in tow, goes to see their friend Miss Lucille, an eccentric elderly artist who lives on the Cane River.

When Sidda's hair gets wet in a sudden downpour, Mama suggests that Caro cut it. Sidda loves her hair, and loves having it handled gently as Caro does, rather than brutally jerked, as her mother does. Sidda agrees to have her hair cut, partly because she enjoys the attention. Without another word, Caro cuts Sidda's hair into a crew cut, just a few inches long. Suddenly Sidda looks like a boy. In a panic, her youngest brother Bay asks if her hair can be put back, but the damage is done. Sidda finally consoles herself with the knowledge that her hair will eventually grow back.

The children eat crackers, anchovy paste and tonic water for dinner while the three women get drunk. They almost burn Lucille's plantation home down when Vivi dumps an ashtray into a trash can full of Sidda's hair. In their stupor, the three women can do nothing but fortunately Little Shep has the presence of mind to put it out.

In Chapter 11, Willetta's Witness (Willetta, 1990), is written from the point of view of Willetta, the Walkers' African American maid. Vivi Walker's petty nature is revealed in Willetta's perspective, when she reveals that Miz Vivi tore the gold "His" monograms off the towels and wrote "shithead" in permanent marker on them. Willetta remembers the Walkers' big fight. Vivi pulls the children out the

front door and into the car, driving away even though it was ten o'clock on a school night. Willetta remembers Siddalee standing next to her mother's Thunderbird cradeling her school clothes and crying. Later, the car came back and the crying children went back inside with their mother.

The next morning, Vivi insists that Willetta help her make a bedroom out of the children's schoolroom, and move all of Mrs. Walker's things in there. She will no longer sleep in the same room with Big Shep, after he accused her of being an alcoholic and an unfit mother. Afterward, Miz Vivi becomes more religious than ever, telling her husband that wearing cowboy boots is a sin and chastising four-year-old Baylor for the sin of smacking his lips when he eats. Vivi Walker stops singing and playing bourree, although she still drinks just as much. In fact, now she starts at breakfast time instead of after school.

Willetta tries to intervene by telling Vivi that the fight with Big Shep is scaring the children emotionally. Miz Vivi tells Willetta that she is nothing but a maid, and is to never give her advice again. Willetta tries to stay out of the Walkers' fights, to protect her job. Still, three or four times over the years Siddalee has a severe asthma attack when her parents are both passed out drunk. Chaney and Willetta take the girl to the hospital for treatment. Willetta sees the red welts on Sidda's legs and buttocks where her mother whipped her, but doesn't dare say anything. The doctors at the hospital see the welts, too but nobody in Thornton is going to interfere with a family as powerful as the Walkers.

A few months later, Vivi Walker goes on a religious retreat to Mississippi, where she did not drink for three days. When she returns, she looks so shaky, desperate and out-of-control that Willetta wishes Vivi was drinking. Vivi sends Willetta home. As usual, Big Shep is at his duck camp. Later that night, Willetta hears shouting and crying from the Walker house. Vivi is outside with all four children. They are stripped naked and she is savagely beating the "living daylights" out of the children, "like horses." Terrified and crying, the children just stand there and let their mother beat them. Willetta thinks that she should have taught them to run away.

Nine-year-old Sidda tries to protect Baylor, who is the youngest at just four years old. Willetta wants to stop Vivi, but Chaney disagrees. He is afraid they will make Big Shep mad and lose their jobs. Finally Willetta prevails. The two jump in their old truck and drive right up into the Walker's yard, on the grass. When Willetta tells Vivi to stop, the white woman strikes her with the belt. Chaney takes the belt away from her and tells her again that she has to stop. Vivi calls Chaney the n-word and says she will have him fired.

All the children and crying and bleeding. Sidda has wet herself. Her legs are raw from the belt. Baylor is blue in the face, from holding his breath. Willetta scoops him up and puts all four naked children in the truck. Willetta cleans the children's wounds and applies aloe to them. She dresses the children in clothes belonging to her daughters, even though Little Shep objects to wearing girl's clothes.

Meanwhile, Chaney calls Buggy to come pick up her grandchildren. When Buggy arrives, she blames Viviane's behavior on the stress of living with a husband who is Baptist. Willetta cannot forget that Miss Buggy never bothered to return her daughter's hand-me-down clothes. Both Willetta and Chaney fear Big Shep's reaction, but they are

surprised. When Siddalee's father returns, he gives Chaney a small raise and an almost-new gold El Camino, gestures of his unspoken gratitude.

Chapters 10 & 11 Analysis

In Chapter 10, Vivi Walker is jealous of Sidda for many reasons, and feels that she has to compete with her daughter. Vivi has such thin hair that she has to wear a strawberry-blond hair piece to fill in the balding spots. Vivi blames her thin hair on her four pregnancies. Still, Vivi is vain about her looks and hates for Sidda to outshine her in any way. Each day when she styles Sidda's hair, she jerks it painfully. The author uses irony in this passage. The reader is aware that Sidda's young body is sexy in her wet halter top, even though Sidda herself is oblivious to this fact. The sight of her daughter blossoming into womanhood invokes Vivi Walker's jealousy. Vivi knows how much Sidda loves her long hair, and depriving her daughter of this opportunity to outdo her mother is one of Vivi's main motivations for letting Caro cut Sidda's hair.

The Abracadabra liquor store's sign has an angel with a skull face and forked tale. The sign symbolizes the evil, death and destruction that alcohol abuse can bring to a family. Although Sidda blames herself for ruining everything including her hair, in reality it is her mother's addiction to alcohol that exacerbates Vivi's emotional problems, and sparked this chain of events. This section illuminates Sidda's character, but also that of her brother, Little Shep. Once again, as he did when Miss Peppy was in labor, Shep acts decisively and sensibly. He is much more mature and reliable than the adults around him, a trait very common in children of alcoholics.

In Chapter 11, although Willetta's voice is uneducated, she is far more sensible than either of the Walkers. She also shows more affection for the four Walker children, and does more to protect them, than Vivi or Big Shep. She argues with Chaney about whether to intervene in the Walkers' affairs, especially the abuse of the children. Willetta wants to interfere to protect the Walker children. Because she has cared for them since the time they were born, she feels affection towards them. Yet, both Chaney and Willetta stand to lose their livelihood and their home if they anger the Walkers who are their employers.

The Walker children were unaware of Willetta watching over them in the dark, and Sidda felt all alone. Yet, Willetta was there, doing her best to keep them safe. The symbolism here is unmistakable. The author suggests that like Willetta, God watches over all children, even when events cannot be changed. After the beating, Willetta decides that Miz Vivi is not just a drunk, she is also crazy.

Willetta's relationship to the Walker children underscores the issue of race. She spends many more hours each day with the Walkers than with her two daughters, Ruby and Pearl. In some ways, Willetta is closer to Siddalee and her siblings, than to her own daughters. She shows this by cooking special treats for the Walker children. Yet, on another level she resents the time away from her own children. Despite the African

American family's relative poverty compared to the Walkers, Ruby and Pearl have a much more secure childhood.

Chapters 12 & 13

Chapters 12 & 13 Summary

Chapter 12, Snuggling (Little Shep, 1990) is from Little Shep's point of view. As an adult, he remembers the times his mother molested him while he was in bed. She would snuggle up to him smelling like cold cream, wearing a cotton nightgown, and tell him that she would just die if she didn't get some snuggles. Then she would fondle him under the blankets. As a child, Shep believed that she would literally die if he did not let her do what she wanted. As an adult, he insists that his wife Kane never use cold cream and wear silk pajamas. Little Shep is not sure if the other children were also sexually abused, although it seems probable.

Finally, when Little Shep was in sixth grade, he developed a crush on Bibi Crowell. The girl dances with him, making him feel strong and powerful. When his mother comes into the room to "snuggle, Little Shep clamps his mother's hand in his grip painfully, and tells her to stay out of his room unless she is invited.

In Chapter 13, Catfish Creams (Baylor, 1990) Baylor still lives in Thornton, although everyone, especially Siddalee, wonders why. An attorney, Baylor has a good law practice and Willetta helps raise his twins. Thornton is struggling economically, and the new mayor Wascomb Belvedere has decided that the town will make a fortune in catfish. The municipal swimming pool is emptied and filled with water and minnows. A few weeks later, the catfish begin dying. According to Chaney, the city officials never cleaned the chemicals out of the swimming pool. Soon, all the catfish are dead, the pool reeks, and the mayor has a nervous breakdown. Belvedere believes that his ring gives him secret powers. He arrests a woman on the way to a bridal shower, saying her pantsuit is illegal. Soon, he has to leave the town for a long rest.

Sometimes Sidda will call Baylor crying, after attempting to talk to her parents. Bay admonishes her not to try to communicate with them because they are still drunks. Their conversation implies that like Little Shep, they were sexually abused.

Chapters 12 & 13 Analysis

In Chapter 12, When Viviane Walker was no longer sharing a bedroom with her husband, she uses her older son for sexual gratification. Vivi Walker's abuse of Little Shep has lasting consequences. As an adult, he is afraid to bathe his children or snuggle with them in bed, even for a moment. He has migraines but generally tries to pretend that nothing happened. Even as a child, Little Shep tried to act like the stoic man of the family. All of the Walker children show the after-effects of child abuse. Siddalee has been in therapy for decades, isolates herself from the family and still has asthma attacks when she is reminded of her mother. Lulu is barely mentioned but seems to have a problem with overeating. Baylor suffers the most, because he was

younger when the craziness began. He struggles with nightmares and impotence. Both Baylor and Sidda feel like they have survived an unnamed war. Although he remains in Thornton, his greatest hope is to become wealthy, so his children will never have to live there as adults.

The catfish story in Chapter 13 supplies some much-needed comic relief after the terrible revelations of abuse in the two previous chapters. It also provides a picture of the Walker children in 1990, and how they cope with the effects of their turbulent childhoods. Baylor finds great solace in his twins, Jeff and Caitlin, who are such happy children that they giggle in their sleep.

Sidda and Bay share a special bond. As Vivi Walker's oldest and youngest children, they arguably suffered the most at her hands. Vivi's intense jealousy of Sidda meant that she was beaten the most often and the most brutally. Because of her asthma, Sidda almost died several times when her parents were too drunk to drive her to the hospital. At those times, four-year-old Baylor was the one who phoned Willetta and Chaney to come get his sister. As the youngest child, Baylor was probably more traumatized by the insanity of the Walker household. At three or four years of age, he was much less equipped to handle his mother's hysteria than nine-year-old Siddalee. In turn, Sidda tried to protect Baylor when his mother beat all of them.

Chapters 14 & 15

Chapters 14 & 15 Summary

Chapter 14, E-Z Boy War (Big Shep, 1991) reveals more of the details behind Shepley Walker's emotional distance from his family at a time when his children needed his protection. In 1965, at the height of the Vietnam War, Big Shep was appointed to the draft board in Garnet Parish. The other board members were doctors and lawyers. The harder Shep tried to fit in, the less it worked. At first he assumed that the war in Vietnam was justified. Later, he began to have his doubts.

Nineteen-year-old boys come before the board, trying to avoid being drafted. In many cases, Big Shep personally knows the farm boys and their families. Still, the draft board has a quota of 400,000 soldiers for the year to meet, and most of the appeals are turned down. Then in 1967 Chaney's younger brother Lincoln Lloyd was drafted. Lincoln is a high-school dropout with intelligent eyes who stutters. He has worked for Big Shep on the farm and is a hard worker. Chaney personally visited Big Shep on a Sunday and asked him to excuse Lincoln from the draft, as a special favor.

The parole board excuses the sons of their friends and prominent local citizens, but not African Americans. Big Shep bows to their pressure and denies Lincoln's request to be excused from the draft. Big Shep convinces himself the army will teach Lincoln skills and be the best thing that ever happened to him. Lincoln had his jaw shot off and died during the Tet Offensive. It was more than three weeks before his family even knew he was dead. Chaney and Willetta quit coming to work. Big Shep went to the duck camp for a three-day drunk, the first time he missed work since his daddy died. Finally Little Shep came out to the duck camp to fetch him because there is a crop in the fields and the workers don't know what to do.

Later, Vivi drove Big Shep to the negro funeral parlor in town. He sees Willetta in her best hat and Chaney wearing a suit handed down from Big Shep himself. In an unexpected act of solidarity, Vivi slips into the funeral home to join him. Chaney is crying but tells Big Shep that he forgives him, and gives him a handkerchief to wipe his tears. A few months later, Big Shep resigns from the draft board and volunteers for the Levee Board.

Chapter 15, Playboys' Scrapbook (Chaney, 1991) retells much of the same story from Chaney's point of view. Chaney keeps a scrapbook of the exploits of the Walker and Loyd families. Chaney clearly remembers the day Big Shep's daddy, Mr. Baylor Senrior, died. Big Shep called Chaney to pick him up at the Savings and Loan. ?Chaney knew something horrible must have happened, because Mister Big Shep said "please." When Chaney arrived, Big Shep was in tears, unable to drive. He had just learned that instead of leaving him a sizable cash inheritance, his father had left him a $100,000 mortgage on the land.

Big Shep blubbers that he should have stayed in college and become a rich lawyer. Chaney wants to tell him to stop being such a "titty baby." Instead, he gives his boss a pep talk.

Chapters 14 & 15 Analysis

Chapter 14 illuminates the class system in Garnet Parish. Although Big Shep Walker is the largest landowner in the parish and a very successful farmer, the lawyers and businessmen on the draft board look down on him. Shep learns that he has not been appointed as a sign of respect, but only as a token representative of the rural area. This fuels Shep's insecurities, which were caused by his father's physical and verbal abuse. This class issue may in part explain why Big Shep does not put an end to his wife's abuse of their children. He is acutely aware that his wife belongs to the upper class, and is a graduate of Ole Miss, while he is a college dropout and the son of a farmer.

The family's financial problems also preoccupy Big Shep, as a hurricane wipes out the crops in 1965 and Vivi spends lavishly, using her charge cards. When he is at home, he is usually in the back room alone, in his recliner, watching TV. This means he is largely unaware of Vivi's cruelty to the children. Big Shep has empathy for African American farm workers, and respects employees like Chaney, but still calls them by the n-word.

Chaney's fears about having Lincoln drafted are well founded. Statistically, African American soldiers were far more likely to be sent to Vietnam, and to die there, than soldiers of other races. After a lifetime of working hard for low wages, this is the first and only time Chaney has ever humbled himself to ask a favor of his boss. Big Shep turns him down. The author foreshadows Lincoln's death in the frequent mentions of casualties in Chapter 14. Lincoln's death is Big Shep's greatest regret, even greater than allowing his wife to beat their children. Chaney's word choice implies that although he forgives Big Shep for Lincoln's death, many other people do not. In some sense, Big Shep's guilt is shared by all white Americans, and by the upper-class white politicians who start wars that are fought primarily by African American, Latino and poor white youths.

The word playboy in the title of Chapter 15 alludes not to womanizing, but to the fact that Chaney and Big Shep played together as small children. In Chaney's view, he grew up while Big Shep never fully matured. in that sense, Big Shep is still a playboy in many ways. The chapter also illuminates Big Shep's preoccupation with finances. Owing $100,000 in the early 1960s was comparable to owing $1 million today. Until his father's death, Big Shep had no idea that the family business was in debt. Although Chaney knows about the loans, Big Shep never reveals it to his wife or children. Vivi blithely keeps on spending money with the Ya-Yas while the children continue to think of themselves as well-to-do. This preoccupation perhaps partially excuses Big Shep from his frequent absences.

Chaney hates it when white people whine about missed opportunities. He thinks that black men never had any opportunities to miss.Despite all the land the Walkers own and

Shep Walker's privileged youth, Chaney doesn't envy his immaturity and insecurities at all. Big Shep's alcoholism is as bad as his wife's, and the dust from farming gives him asthma. Chaney is much more satisfied the life he has created with Willetta on the Pecan Grove plantation. Although they never had much money, the Loyds have provided a secure, loving family life for their daughters. Siddalee thinks of the Lloyds as her foster parents, and calls them more often than she calls Vivi and Shep Walker.

Chapters 16 & 17

Chapters 16 & 17 Summary

In Chapter 16, Looking for My Mules (Viviane, 1991), Vivi still sneaks cocktails all day but tries to hid it from Big Shep, who quit 6 months ago. One day near sunset she sees an elderly African American man wandering down their lane. The man says that he is looking for his mules, Sary and Mike. At first, Big Shep is angry at the trespasser. Then he realizes that the man has dementia,and Shep is respectful and kind. Shep phones the sheriff and asks them to send a black police officer to collect the man, who appears to have wandered away from a nursing home. As she walks back up the steps behind Big Shep Vivi thinks "Oh God...it's such a good life, but it hurts!"

In Chapter 17, The First Imperfect Divine Compassion Baptism Video (Siddalee, 1991) Sidda returns to Thornton to be godmother for her namesake, Baylor's younger daughter, who will be called Lee.Sidda's motto is "don't hit the baby", meaning that she should be kind to herself, especially when she's vulnerable and imperfect. Sidda constantly reminds herself that she does not have to take care of, or try to fix, her family members.

n the Our Lady of Divine Compassion church Sidda notices the stainedglass window for the first time. It shows Mary holding the infant Jesus up, with knowing yet adoring eyes. Vivi videotapes the baptismal ceremony, getting lots of footage of Sidda holding Lee facing out, so everyone can admire the beautiful baby. When the baby starts to howl, Sidda holds her close and comforts her. Vivi is furious, saying that by consoling the child, by hugging her, Sidda has ruined the video. All of the other videos from her grandchildren's baptisms are perfect, but this one is ruined. Later, a drunken Vivi accuses Sidda of deliberately defying her, just as she has since she was a child.

Chapters 16 & 17 Analysis

Chapter 16 reveals that Vivi still loves her husband, and is still sexually attracted to him, even though they have not shared a bed in decades. Vivi truly sees herself as the victim in the Walker family saga, as having put up with much from her husband and children over the years. In particular, the reader learns how much Vivi Walker gave up to become a wife and mother, in a time when working outside the home was forbidden for white women of her class. She still thinks condescendingly of her husband, a successful farmer, as a failure, a college dropout. The chapter indirectly reveals that Big Shep Walker has sold off much of the family's three plantations for housing developments, increasing their wealth and paying off all the loans, now that no family member wants to farm the Walker land.

Vivi Walker feels like nothing that happened is her fault. Sidda got asthma from riding her bike behind the DDT truck. Vivi drank and smoked when she was pregnant, but

back then everyone did. The doctor didn't even suggest that you stop. In her mind, Vivi is completely innocent and is the person who has had the hardest life. She considers Sidda's years of therapy just whining. Vivi feels superior to Joan Crawford because she never beat her children with a clothes hanger.

The African American farmer may be a vision, rather than a real person. He certainly seems like a relic from the past, far older even than Chaney, who is about to be a great-grandfather. He may symbolize a way of life that has been lost. In their own ways, Vivi Walker and Big Shep are also relics from the past. Their particular combination of social class, alcoholism, domestic violence and prescription medication is no longer in fashion. The ancient black man also symbolizes loss. After a lifetime of hard work, he has nothing left, not even his mules. Both Big Shep and Vivi feel that they have lost much.

In Chapter 17, after years of therapy, Siddalee has forgiven her mother. She realizes that Vivi was depressed after the death of Sidda's twin brother, and completely overwhelmed by having four babies in less than five years. In some ways, Sidda relies on Xanax to cope with her problems the same way her mother still self-medicates with alcohol and prescriptions drugs. Still, Vivi shows her essential selfishness when she berates Sidda for comforting the baby. Vivi considers whatever she is doing as more important than the child's emotional or physical needs. Sidda is able to accept her mother's character defects, and is content to have caused the first imperfect video, because it created a healthy environment for baby Lee.

Sidda is able to recognize the divine compassion of the stained glass window for the first time. She is also able to see her mother objectively but with compassion for the first time during this visit. It makes Sidda feel like a giant, all-knowing, all-caring mother is holding her up. This person who is far more kind and caring than Vivi Walker could ever be is god.

Characters

Siddalee Walker

The main character, Siddalee Walker ages from a school girl to a 38-year-old woman in the story. As a child Siddalee is studious and serious, with beautiful waist-length red hair. Sidda accepts her mother's abuse as just another fact of life, unpleasant but no more remarkable than her mother's affinity for bourbon with branch water.

Still, Sidda is deeply affected by the constant fights and psychological drama of the Walker household. This stress is the cause of her asthma. Sidda tries desperately to live up to her mother's expectations, and despite Sidda's intelligence, she always fails. This is partly because Vivi Walker has exaggerated her own exploits until they became legends, and expects her daughter to surpass them. Sidda also unconsciously buys into Vivi Wlaker's competitiveness with her, trying to outdo her mother.

Although Vivi Walker accuses her daughter of being defiant and melodramatic, neither is true. Sidda is a sensitive, anxious child who feels emotions deeply, disturbed by the chaos in her home. She tries her best to get along with her mother, and copes as well as she can with the devastating emotional situation in the Walker household. As part of that coping, Sidda spends a lot of time worrying about religion. She fears that her random thoughts and resentments are sins, or that she may be sinning unintentionally. Sidda is only truly happy when she is suffering, which her Catholic faith teachers her is the only atonement for sin. Sidda goes to confession so often that the priest chides her for bringing up such minor details, and urges her to tell her parents that she needs psychological counseling. The Walkers are highly unlikely to provide such care, of course, since they are the root of Sidda's emotional problems.

Sidda's one solace as a child is in books. They seem alive to her, allowing her to retreat into a special secret world. Sidda is devastated when she learns that other people have read a favorite book. She assumed that it was a special world, reserved only for her.

As an adult, Sidda realizes all of her mother's accusations. The overly dramatic daughter is now a sensible, controlled theatrical director, helping actors to be dramatic. She has had long years of therapy to overcome her childhood traumas, although she still take the occasional Xanax for anxiety. Sidda no longer worries about inadvertent sins, but finds solace in her divine compassion for her mother.She lives and works in New York, as her mother always dreamed, and seldom visits her family.

Viviane Walker

Siddalee's mother Viviane "Vivi" Walker is the most dynamic and complex character in the novel. A tiny, flamboyant woman who still retains her youthful figure, Vivi is proud of her small, firm butt and often wears orange stretch pants with an oversize sweater instead of the Girl Scout leader's uniform. She smokes nonstop, swears, drinks and tells

jokes with the Ya-Yas, her lifelong girlfriends. Vivi is so fetching that she manages to turn a defective eye into a way to flirt with college boys. Yet, there is a dark side to this charming, witty, fascinating woman. She is completely self-centered, believing for example that her nine-year-old daughter ran away just to inconvenience her. Although Viviane often accuses her daughter Siddalee of being overly melodramatic, in fact that is a trait more typical of Vivi and her mother, Buggy.

Vivi Walker's unhappiness has deep roots. Her own mother was self-absorbed, delusional and possibly mentally ill. Vivi has always been fun-loving and flamboyant. As a teen she was arrested with the other Ya-Yas at Spring Creek, for an undisclosed indiscretion. After college, Vivi lived in New York for a short time and did some modeling. Unable to succeed, she returned home to Louisiana where she quickly gained a reputation as a former New York actress.

Like many women of her generation, Vivi Walker is trapped in her life. She never wanted to be a wife and mother, she would prefer to be a model and actress. However, women in the 1960s had fewer opportunities, and in a small town the only option was for Vivi to marry and have children, whether she wanted to or not. Vivi feels trapped in a life that she would never have chosen. She takes out her deep frustration and resentment on her children, innocent bystanders in the tragedy of her life.

Despite her beauty, the tempestuous Vivi was on the verge of becoming an "old maid" before she decided to marry Shepley Walker, a farmer Viv'i's mother considers beneath her. Yet, Vivi's drinking and carousing are under control until she becomes pregnant. Sidda is born with an unnamed twin brother. The infant boy dies just days later, plunging Vivi Walker into depression, a condition not well understood in the 1960s. Vivi self-medicates by combining bourbon or gin and tonic with "harmless" tranquilizers and pain-killers prescribed by her doctor — a nasty and potentially fatal combination. Even decades later, Vivi has never addressed the loss of her first-born son and therefore cannot move beyond it

This loss also fuels Vivi's resentment of her oldest daughter, Siddalee. Vivi irrationally believes that she had to give up her beloved son for Sidda. She resents the girl's growing beauty at a time when Vivi's youthful good looks are fading. Like her mother, Vivi also resents the slightest show of initiative by Siddalee, labeling it deliberately defying her. Yet, for all her flaws, it is obvious that Viviane Walker loves her husband and children. The day when Sidda ran away is a much more traumatic event to Viviane than to Siddalee. For all Viviane Walker's faults, the reader, like Siddalee, is ultimately able to forgive her because of her love for her children, however, inebriated and misguided it may be.

Shepley Walker

The father of the Walker family is called "Big Shep" to distinguish him from son "Little Shep." Shepley Walker spanks his children, but he doesn't beat them raw with a belt the way his wife does. Big Shep has enormous problems that his family is unaware of. He

inherited a mountain of debt, along with a huge plantation that is no longer economically viable. Big Shep begins raising rice instead of cotton, to try to recoup the losses of the farm. Eventually, after the children are grown, he sells the land to developers who build subdivisions and strip malls, to pay back the loans his father left him.

Only when he is drunk can Shepley Walker find the courage to stand up to his wife. When his wife cuts her foot on a broken bottle, he tells her that she is a drunk. Even more insulting, he tells her that she is not a fit mother to their children. While both of these allegations are true, they create a permanent rift in the Walker marriage. Vivi Walker moves out of their bedroom and never returns.

Big Shep was a frat boy until he dropped out of college and has never really matured beyond that point. He still flees at the slightest sign of conflict or crisis. Rather than stay in the home and defend his children, Big Shep leaves for the duck camp, a country cottage a few miles away where he stays for weeks on end, avoiding his wife and children. When he is at home, Big Shep spends much of his time in the back room hiding out from his wife and children. Still, Shepley Walker shows some character growth. By the end of the novel, he has quit drinking, although his wife is still an alcoholic.

Baylor Walker Sr.

Shepley Walker's father Baylor Walker is dead before the narrative starts, yet he has left a powerful legacy. During the Depression, Baylor Walker worked hard to save his three plantations. Big Shep is proud of the fact that his father prospered when other prominent families in the area lost everything. Yet, by the time Big Shep is an adult, his father has heavily mortgaged the land. Instead of leaving Big Shep a wealthy man with a sizable inheritance. Baylor Walker leaves him a mortgage as big as the plantation.

Baylor Walker also started the legacy of violence in the Walker family, by brutally beating his son Shepley. From this behavior, Shep developed the coping mechanism of running away to the duck camp whenever he had a problem. Because of his father's constant disapproval, he also grew into a rather weak, insecure, immature man who was incapable of facing tough issues. Despite all these issues, Big Shep named his youngest son after his father.

Willetta Lloyd

The Walker's long-time maid, Willetta is married to Chaney Lloyd. She has been with the Walkers since Siddalee was born, and does her best to protect the children from their mother's physical abuse. Willetta teaches Bay how to dial her phone number when he is just four years old, so he can call her when the family is in trouble. Still, Viviane Walker makes it very clear that Willetta is just hired help and Willetta will be fired if she tries to interfere with the Walker family.

Chaney Lloyd

Chaney Lloyd is Big Shep Walker's right hand man. He is the supervisor and manager of the three plantations that Walker owns. Chaney is at least as knowledgeable about farming as Big Shep is. In addition, Chaney has the maturity to face his problems head-on, rather than run away and hide at a duck camp whenever anything goes wrong. However, because of the racial inequality in Louisiana during the 1960s, the hard-working, responsible African-American Chaney is virtually penniless. He cannot even afford to feed his family hamburger most nights, while Big Shep Walker and his family are wealthy. Despite this disparity, Chaney thinks that he would rather have his secure, loving family in their tiny rental cottage than live in the chaos that goes on in the big house.

Little Shep Walker

The Walker's second child, Shepley Walker Jr. is called Little Shep to distinguish him from his father, Big Shep. Little Shep is steady and reliable, and hides his feelings. Growing up in a chaotic family of immature, drunken adults, Little Shep tries to take on the role of a calm, sensible adult. He seldom shows the feelings of fright, insecurity and rage that lurk below the surface.

Lulu Walker

Tallulah "Lulu" Walker is the third child of Viviane and Shepley Walker, named after the flamboyant Tallulah Bankhead. As a small girl, Lulu perpetually twists her hair around her finger when stressed and bites it. This results in small bald patches all around her face. As a preteen, Lulu begins shoplifting from stores throughout the area, stealing cosmetics, magazines, clothes, cowboy hats and ammo for guns. She also has an overeating problem beginning as a toddler, due to the extremely stressful family situation.

Bay Walker

Bay Walker, named after his grandfather Baylor, is the youngest of the Walker children. Sidda tries to shield four-year-old Bay when Viviane takes them outdoors to beat them next to the brick wall of the house. In some ways, Bay suffers fewer physical affects of Viviane's alcoholism than his older siblings. However, the psychological effects are greater for him, because his mother was a raving drug user from his earliest memory. As a result, the adult Bay is impotent and finds it difficult to have a close relationship with his wife.

Bay is one of the most intelligent of the Walker children. When Sidda has asthma attacks while his parents are too drunk to notice, it is four-year-old Bay who phones Willetta to take her to the hospital emergency room. Bay is a rare combination of

intelligence and sensitivity that makes him especially vulnerable to the psychological problems created by the Walker house.

The Ya-Yas

The Ya-Yas are always mentioned collectively. They have been Viviane Walker's best friends since she was five years old. Their main hobbies are shopping, drinking and dancing. Unfortunately, they do little to mitigate Viviane's behavior since they are also alcoholics. The Ya-Yas are usually mentioned as "Caro, Necie and sometimes Teensy." Teensy's husband Chick is an honorary male Ya-Ya, as prone to outrageous behavior as the group of women.

Buggy

Viviane Walker's mother is called "Buggy" by her son-in-law and grandchildren. Buggy is extremely melodramatic, self-centered and perhaps a bit delusional. She regularly has conversations with fairies, which she repeats to young Siddalee over the phone — complete with the fairies' replies. Buggy also trains her dog, Miss Peppy, to treat a couple of baby dolls as if they are her puppies. It is easy to see why Viviane Walker developed a drinking and drug problem, after growing up with Buggy.

Charlene Parks

Seven-year-old Siddalee develops a crush on her glamorous dance teacher, Charlene Parks, a former June Taylor Dancer on TV. Sidda is thrilled when Ms. Parks befriends her, inviting the lonely little girl to her home. Still, despite her friendship, Ms. Parks ignores the welts on Sidda's legs, perpetuating the cycle of violence.

Aunt Jezie

Viviane Walker's younger sister, Sidda's Aunt Jezie, is in college at Ole Miss, the University of Mississippi. When Aunt Jezie returns home, she and Charlene Parks become good friends. At first Sidda is thrilled that her favorite aunt and favorite teacher are buddies. Then, she begins to feel left out. The situation becomes more complex when Sidda quietly enters Aunt Jezie's home one day to find the two women naked in bed together.

Edythe Spevey

Edythe Spevey is a fellow Girl Scout, an unpopular girl. Sidda is rude to her even though she has empathy for Edythe, because Sidda fears that if she is kind, she will lose her status with the most popular group of girls.

Lincoln Lloyd

Many people believe that Chaney's hard-working younger brother Lincoln is retarded because he stutters, but Big Shep Walker knows that he is not. When Lincoln is drafted, Chaney begs Shep to get the boy excused. Big Shep refuses, claiming that being drafted into the army is a great opportunity for Lincoln. Eventually Lincoln is sent to Vietnam and killed. Although Chaney eventually forgives Big Shep, he cannot forgive himself.

Objects/Places

Thornton, Louisiana

The Walkers are a prominent family in their hometown of Thornton, in central Louisiana. As an adult, Siddalee cannot wait to get away from Thornton but her beloved younger brother Bay stays, wanting to prove to the whole town that a son of the chaotic Walker household can be a well-to-do attorney.

Pecan Grove

The Walkers' large home and farm is Pecan Grove, a former plantation. The extensive land is eventually sold off after the children are gown to pay debts.

Spring Creek

The Ya-Yas have spent the summers at their vacation cottages in Spring Creek, Louisiana since they were children. Each family has its own summer home, which they call a camp, in one large compound. The Ya-Yas and their children experience total freedom at the camp, because their husbands are left in town, working.

The Duck Camp

Whenever emotions run high or there is too much conflict in the Walker house, father Shepley Walker retreats to his duck camp. The camp is actually a cabin or simple vacation home several miles away. Big Shep goes there ostensibly to hunt, but in reality just to escape the chaos of his four children and his wife's personality.

Books

Siddalee finds a little peace as a girl within the covers of books. Most of them are from the library or bookmobile.

The Bookmobile

When Sidda runs away from home due to her mother's cruelty, she flees to the safest place she knows, the bookmobile. It has shelves of books and a tiny reading niche. However, when the bookmobile is parked, temperatures inside soar and Sidda is lucky to be found alive.

The William's House

One of Sidda's best friends in school is Marie Williams. Sidda loves the Williams' house mostly because they are lower middle class, which Sidda regards as poor. Young Sidda has come to think of the Walkers as rich and sinful. Therefore, she reasons that the Williams must be poor and without sin. In fact, the different atmosphere in the Williams house is because the parents are not alcoholics.

Willetta and Chaney's House

The African-American maid Willetta and her husband Chaney, Big Shep's right-hand man, live in a modest but modern rented two-bedroom home on the Walkers' farm, Pecan Grove. It is within sight of the Walkers' grand house. Although their home is modest, Willetta is grateful for it because it has indoor plumbing and is far better than the humble shack the two shared early in their marriage, when Mr. Baylor Walker Sr. was still alive.

Prescription Drugs

After the death of Viviane Walker's first son, Sidda's twin, her doctor begins prescribing a variety of pills to her including Valium and Darvon. Viviane uses these like aspirin, even giving them to her children and combining them with alcohol.

Our Lady of Divine Compassion Parochial School

Sidda attends Our Lady of Divine Compassion Parochial School where the nuns despise her because her father is rich, and a Baptist.

Our Lady of Divine Compassion Church

Sidda returns to Thornton for the baptism of her niece, Lee, which takes place at Our Lady of Divine Compassion Church. The name of the church is symbolic. This is where Sidda is suffused with compassion for and love of her difficult, addicted mother, at last finding peace.

Cowboy Hat

During Lulu's troubled early teen years, she steals a cowboy hat for her father and is heartbroken when it is too small for him.

Themes

Race

The theme of race in Louisiana in the 1960s and beyond is prevalent in Little Altars Everywhere. While the white characters seldom think about it, the African-American characters are constantly aware of the effect race has on their lives and their interactions with others. Chaney Lloyd is Big Shep Walker's second-in-command, yet he is paid a pittance. He drives a truck that Walker gave him and lives in a tiny house rented from Walker. Chaney cannot afford to feed his family nutritious meals, and dinner is often cornbread with greens. His daughters wear the Walkers' hand-me-down clothes, and Chaney attends his brother's funeral in a suit that once belonged to Big Shep Walker. Despite the face that Chaney works harder, is more knowledgeable and is not a drunk, he is poor while Big Shep Walker is rich. This disparity in status makes Chaney reluctant to intercede when Vivi Walker beats her children. He is afraid his family will lose everything if he angers the Walkers.

By contrast, Big Shep Walker thinks of Chaney simply as a friend and coworker. It never occurs to him that he is not paying the many fairly, or that there is any inequality in their lifestyles. Shep simply accepts his affluence and Chaney's poverty as natural. Chaney's wife Willetta is in a similar position. She has worked side-by- side with Vivi Walker, raising the Walker children even when she had to leave her own daughters home alone to do so. Yet, Vivi makes it clear that Willetta does not have the right to comment on the children's welfare, even when Vivi beats them.

Another example of the disparity of race can be found in the way the African-American maid Jewel treats Charlene Parks. Jewel has worked for the family since Ms. Parks was born, and certainly feels affection for her. Yet, that is not the reason Jewel indulges Charlene's every whim. As Jewel clearly states, she takes such good care of Ms. Parks because she expects that Charlene's mother will provide for Jewel, when the maid can no longer work. This knowledge that the African-American employees' welfare depends solely upon the employer's good graces makes it difficult for affection untainted by resentment and fear to grow between the races.

Childhood

The Walker children present their perceptions of the world through their own eyes, separately, in subsequent chapters. Bay Walker illustrates the idyllic summers at Spring Creek. Siddalee recounts her fascination with the Williams family, and their modest home. She also recounts the Girl Scout camping trip. All of these scenes reflect the uncritical outlook of childhood, where events are simply accepted rather than criticized or analyzed.

It does not occur to Little Shep that his mother fondles him only when she has been drinking, partly because she is always drinking. None of the children thinks that their parents' drinking or use of prescription drugs is a problem, because to them it is not unusual. They have no frame of reference to compare this activity with a more normal existence.

Yet, the powerless of childhood is also illustrated. Siddalee is completely unable to stop her mother from beating her, no matter how much it hurts. Even worse, she is unable to stop her mother from beating her four-year-old brother, Baylor. When Vivi Walker wails dramatically that her husband is dead simply because he stays overnight at the duck camp, the children believe her. When Big Shep comes strolling in, Vivi welcomes him with open arms. She cannot understand why Sidda is shocked, or why the nine-year-old girl feels that her mother betrayed her. Sidda reacted by running away, which Vivi sees as a bid for attention.

In the early 1960s children were even more vulnerable than they are now. Laws against domestic violence had not been passed in many areas. Child abuse such as the Walkers' suffered was not unusual, and not considered a crime. There were no child abuse hotlines for young people to call. Because of the Walkers' prestige, the police would not have arrested their parents even if there had been such laws.

Addiction

Little Altars Everywhere paints an effective, fair portrait of the destruction caused by addiction. Vivi Walker is an unrepentant alcoholic and remains one throughout her life. Her husband Big Shep Walker is also an alcoholic, although by the end of the story he has recognized his problem and quit drinking for six months.

Vivi Walker's substance abuse problems began when her first son, Sidda's twin brother died unexpectedly when he was just a few days old. She probably became depressed at that point, with the combined weight of grief and the stress of caring for the infant Sidda. It was very common in the early 1960s for doctors to prescribe tranquilizers, sleeping pills, amphetamines and pain killers at the slightest provocation. Most doctors at the time believed that it was impossible to become addicted to pills, and saw them as harmless. Vivi Walker began using the drugs whenever she felt she needed a little lift, often combining them with alcohol. Of course, it is now known that Valium, Darvon, diet pills and the other drugs that Vivi Walker was taking were addictive. In addition, they had harmful effects and could even be fatal when combined with alcohol, which Vivi did constantly. The combination of Valium and alcohol, one of Vivi's favorites, is known to produce especially ugly personality traits.

Alcohol was also considered benign in the 1960s. In fact, cocktail parties, even with slightly risque or inappropriate behavior, were considered a sign of suave sophistication, rather than evidence of uncontrolled intoxication. Society in general accepted excessive drinking and alcoholism much more than today. It is easy to condemn Viviane Walker

and her doctors for this behavior, until one reflects on the fact that as an adult, Siddalee often controls her anxiety by popping a Xanax.

Motherhood and Feminism

The core of Vivi Walker's misery is her deep discontent with her life. Vivi wanted to be a model and actress in New York, not a wife and mother in Central Louisiana. Yet, opportunities for middle-class women were extremely limited in the 1960s. There were very few job prospects for women, even women with a college degree like Viviane Walker. When Vivi was not instantly successful, she really had no choice but to return to Louisiana and find a husband to support her. She settled on sexy Shep Walker because she believed that he was wealthy. Soon, Vivi was pregnant, although she was completely unsuited to motherhood.

After having four pregnancies and five children in five years, Vivi was completely stressed. She turned to alcohol and drugs when she was unable to meet the demands of a horde of infants and toddlers, and an immature, emotionally distant husband. It is probable that Viviane Walker would have been a happier person if she had never married or had children. She constantly longed for positive reinforcement, to live her life on a wider stage than central Louisiana. Her close friendship with the Ya-Yas could not overcome the fact that her talents and intelligence were severely underutilized. Even most of the childcare and housework was done for her, by her African-American maid Willetta.

Style

Point of View

Author Rebecca Wells uses varying points of view to illuminate unexpected facets of character and reveal the whole story in Little Altars Everywhere. Each chapter is told from a different point of view. The point of view and year are indicated in brackets after the chapter title. For example, the first chapter, entitled Wilderness Training (Siddalee, 1963) occurs in 1963 and is told from the point of view of Siddalee Walker. The voice and events reported reveal a great deal about Siddalee, including her need to be as popular as her mother, her extreme empathy towards Edythe, and the reasons behind her eventual rejection of Edythe. Yet, without intending to, Sidda also imparts a great deal of information about her mother, the hard-drinking Girl Scout leader who wears orange stretch pants instead of a uniform.

The alternation of points of view provides similar insights in each chapter. The reader learns that Big Shep Walker does not oppose his daughter's eye surgery because he is cold or cheap, as his wife contends. Instead, he flees to his duck camp because he is terrified that something will happen to his tiny daughter.

The prologue and first two chapters are from Siddalee's point of view firmly establishing her as the main character. In the first section of the book, Part One, each Walker family member gets one chapter from his or her point of view: Big Shep, Taylor, Viviane, Little Shep and Lulu each have one chapter. Three additional chapters are told from Siddalee's point of view. In Part Two, Willetta and Chaney each have a chapter from their point of view, as do Baylor, Big Shep, Little Shep and Viviane. The final chapter from Siddalee's point of view reveals her character's growth from troubled, anxious child to an adult who forgives and understands her mother.

Setting

The novel is divided into two portions, both set in and around Thornton, Louisiana. The distinctive location of central Louisiana is evoked through description, language, dialogue and scene. Oppressive heat is a constant factor, as it never seems to be winter in the novel. The family enjoys idyllic days at Spring Creek, their summer home. Mosquitoes are a constant threat, with Viviane Walker worrying about malaria and encouraging her children to bike as close as they can get behind the truck spraying poisonous DDT to kill the mosquitoes. The Walkers' hard-partying boisterous ways seem rooted in this unique location with Mardi Gras traditions and proximity to Bourbon Street in New Orleans.

Time is as important as place in the setting of the novel. The first section of the book is set in the early 1960s, from 1963 to 1967. The decade influences the story, especially when Big Shep Walker is appointed to the draft board and must select the boys sent to

fight in Vietnam. Initially Big Shep believes that his actions are justified by an honorable war, but eventually he loses faith in politicians and realizes that he has sent thousands of young men to die pointlessly. The limited opportunities for women and racial tension of the 1960s also lend drama to the story.

The last section of the book is set between 1990 and 1991. It includes many flashbacks, where characters consider the events of the first section in more detail. Yet, it also includes important information about the 90s in Louisiana, such as the depressed local economy and the Thornton catfish fiasco. Many of the events that occur in the book would not have been possible in any other decade or location. For example, it is hard to imagine the child abuse the Walker children suffered going unreported in the 21st century, and Big Shep Walker would almost certainly have been given a ticket for driving drunk in any other time or place.

Language and Meaning

Much of author Rebecca Wells' genius lies in her deft use of language and internal dialogue to create believable, full-rounded characters. Siddalee, Viviane, Big Shep, Willetta, Chaney, Little Shep and every other point-of-view character has his or her own distinctive voice that allows the reader to recognize and ultimately empathize with that character. Willetta's voice is untutored yet insightful, kind and wise. Her husband Chaney's voice is more practical, but also more fearful as he recognizes the risk to his family of interfering in the Walkers' private life. Viviane's is full of self-centered grandiosity and wit, while Little Shep's is controlled and unadorned.

The reader is privy to the characters' innermost thoughts, as when Willetta thinks that all white people are crazy, while Viviane Walker is completely oblivious to race and believes that she is always witty, charming and fascinating. Wells accomplishes this partly by almost eliminating the use of quotation marks in the text. The reader is so far inside the characters head that one does not hear the actual words spoken. Instead, one hears the point-of-view character's interpretation of the words spoken by someone else, which can carry a very different meaning. This often results in hilarious passages, as when nine-year-old Siddalee narrates the scene of Necie,one of the Ya-Yas, supremely unconcerned about running over the flagpole at the scout camp while drunk, and the Ya-Yas being subsequently dismissed as leaders by the Scout conference.

Structure

Little Altars Everywhere is divided into 17 chapters plus a prologue. The prologue serves a very important purpose in the narrative. Written in Siddalee's point of view in New York in 1991, it lets the reader know immediately that Sidda survives her tragic childhood intact, and that no matter what hardships she encountered as a child, she managed to emerge a strong, vibrant adult.

Part One contains ten chapters, with each member of the Walker family having his or her say as point of view character. It is 110 pages long, with most chapters averaging 12

pages. Only the chapters from Viviane's point of view and Lulu's point of view break this mold. the fifth chapter, Bookworms, from Viviane's point of view, is 16 pages long, partly because it recounts the pivotal event of Siddalee running away. The eighth chapter, The Elf and the Fairy, from Siddalee's point of view, is only eight pages long. Yet, those eight pages contain another pivotal event, as Sidda recounts the gigantic fight that caused a permanent rift in the Walkers' marriage.

Part Two contains seven chapters, a total of 78 pages. There is more variation of chapter length in this section, with chapters from eight to 16 pages long. Each chapter in Part Two, as in Part One, is told from a different character's point of view. Chapters are identified with both a title and the point-of-view character's name, as well as the year of the main events. There are frequent flashbacks that recount relevant events from earlier times. The chapters are not in sequential order, with 1961 and 1962 occurring between two chapters set in 1963.

Quotes

Every single part of me dances. And that 45-rpm record plays over and over and over, and we're singing with Little Richard now, we're blowing saxophones! And if Daddy drives up in his pickup, you know he'd yell at us, white women dancing like taht, you know he would! But Daddy doesn't drive up, and me and Mama go on dancing and all the Ya-Yas and the rest of the kids are yelling and clapping for us! Oh, they yell and clap and hoot and holler." pg. xii

"You have to start earlyif you plan to be popular. Mama was extremely popular when she was growing up." pg. 5

"One thing Mama will not stand for is deliberate cruelty. Deliberate cruelty is the reason I got belt-whipped last Thanksgiving and couldn't go to dance class for two weeks because of the marks on my legs." pg. 12

"We are swinging high, flying way up, higher than in real life. And when I look down, I see all the ordinary stuff — our brick house, the porch, the tool shed, the back windows, the oil-drum barbecue pit, the clothesline, the chinaberry tree. But they are all 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. " pg. 14

"It happens overnight, the way Aunt Jezie and Charlene become bet friends. One day they barely know each other, and me and Aunt Jezie are having a good summer together and Charlene is teaching me to dance and letting me visit." pg. 22

My fact is all hot and I feel twitchy like I have to go to the bathroom or something. i want to go find Buggy and Mama and Charlene's mother and the man who runs the Community Center, and tell on they! They shouldn't be doing this! And I also want to climb up there in the bed with them and have them kiss me tookk and I want them to let me suck on Aunt Jezie's nipples and to bury my face in Charlene's hair!" pg. 25

"Pap had opinions on everything. And in between being a good man, he could be the meanest sonovabitch you ever saw. Used to pop me upside the head so hard I didn't know what hit me. My kids think they get whipped? Hell, they don't even know what a whipping is." pg. 28

"I never gave the driking a second thought. It was normal as eating in Pap's house. Everybody in the state of Louisiana drank like that, far as i knew. Never thought one way or the other when Mama used to take her "naps" in the middle of Christmas or Thanksgiving dinner.Never said to myself, Mama's not napping, she's passed-out drunk." pg. 29

"Which is fine with me, because Mama and the Ya-Yas are lots more fun without the men around. tehy don't wear makeup when we're at Spring Creek, just a dab of lipstick

and toenail polish. And they don't use hairspray at all. They wear men's big shirts and short-shorts and ratty old tennis shoes, and at night they sleep in tee-shirts and panties. They only cook when they feel like it they read tons of paperback books,a dn if one of them farts, they laugh their heads off and yell out: Kill it! Step on it! Don't let it get away! When Mama is at Spring Cree, she does only what she wants to." pg. 40

"My twin boy would have made everything work out. He is the one who would have given it all back to me, everything I have lost. And I would have done anything for him." pg. 59

"My grandmother always drives with the windows up, whether her air conditioner is working or not. She says it is trashy to drive around in public with rolled-down windows." pg. 68

"it wasn't too long after Miss Peppy got spayed that Buggy started up with the baby dolls. Her mission in life became to train that dog to treat those dolls like they were her own puppies. We watch Buggy do it all the time. She spends whole afternoons teaching Miss Peppy to carry those baby dolls around in her mouth." pg. 70

"Daddy says they sicced every fast-talking priest and monsignor they could find on Pap. When Pap finally decided it was too much land to give away to a church he didn't even like, the bishop told him he had blown his one shot at heaven — and that went for his whole family, too. He told Pap this over a big country breakfast my grandmother had prepared for them out on her porch. Daddy loves telling the story of how his mother snatched one of her angel biscuits right out of that bishop's hand and said, You better get yourself up from the devil's table and get offa my porch." pg. 70

"My grandmother Buggy talks to fairies frequently. She calls me on the phone and tells me about her conversations with them. Fairies aren't strange to me at all. They're sort of like midget guardian angels with a good sense of humor." pg. 92

"I am — bar none— your best shoplifter in the town of Thornton, Louisiana. i would go so far as to say in all of Garnet Parish. Maybe even in the entire great state of Louisiana. But to be perfectly truthful, I haven't spent enough time in New Orleans, our biggest city, to say that is definitely true. But I bet if you gave me one good weekend down there on Canal Street, I could ace out anybody in that city when it comes to five-finger discounts. I'm not bragging, I'm telling it like it is." pg. 99

"The thing is, Carol says, Shep gets so burned up when the Ya-Yas get together. It makes me want to kill hi, the way he talked to you last night. Saying: "You have never known how to act in public, Vivi." pg. 115

"I stand by the fan and try to get used to the new me. Why did i lie and say I was tired of my hair? When really, it was the main thing about me that I loved? I ruin everything, I think. I ruin it all." pg. 126

It was back when Chaney still smoke those devil L&Ms — for I give him the ultra-tomato. Fore I tole him: You drink and smoke anymore round here, you can find your ten-cent self another bed to sleep in, you hear me, peckawood?" pg. 131

"No, ma'am, Miz Vivi be jerkin her child around just to make her cry. Just to be mean. She jealous of that girl's hair, always has been. her own hair got all think-like after she had them four babies — five, countin the twin that the Lord done took. She used to get her head fixed at Mister Julian's over by the City Park, but he quit using her hairspray. Say it cause cancer. So she switch to Mix Jeannine, who she just love-love-love, but you know that don't last long. Mix Vivi in love with you one day and drop you like a hot potato the next." pg. 133

"All four of my babies lined up against the wall of that brick house and every one of them buck naked. Mix Vivi out there with a belt, whupin 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. Standin there, lettin her beat the livin daylights outta them like there be some big invisible wall round them. Why they not runnin away?! I shoulda taught them to run!" pg. 141

"Any time my mother wanted anything, she'd say, I need it. Theh she expected people to give it to her. Like it was her fucking right." pg. 147

"But now I tell her: Because there's nothing in the world that compares to the goings-on in the "Gret Stet of Loosiana," like the Cajuns call it. This is a place apart. Man, politics and theater simmering in the same pot here, and the gumbo that results is mixed up with the past in a way that I've been hooked on since the day I was born. Where else are you going to find a place that's one-third black, one-third Cajun, and one-third Bible Belt Baptist?" pg. 153-154

"Sometimes she'll call up crying her brains out, and I know immediately that she's tried to talk to Mama and Daddy. I tell her, Get off it, Sidd! Just leave it alone. They'll never change. They're drunks. They're goners. Don't talek to them about anything but the weather and what's on sale at Wayland's." pg. 159

"You rgot to really love farming to grow cotton. Because you got to baby it, watch it every day, give it what it needs at every different stage. Keep the weeds out, watch for the boll weevils and bollworms. You can get emotional with that crop, I tell you. Sometimes I wonder if I wasn't better raising cotton than I was with my own children." pg. 172

"This si what I got to live with. I didn't do a goddamn thing to keep Lincoln out of the draft. McNamara said the army was the best thing going for your disadvantaged Negro youth. The man stood up there with those glasses on and explained how they were going to give boys like Lincoln special classes to bring them up to par, Teach them skills so they could land jobs they'd never get without the army." pg. 178

"He say, Don't ask me no qustions now, podnah. Just get your butt down here. Please." pg. 186

"The man be suckin on the juice since he was a teenager. I can't talk, cause I used to be sippin my cold Jax beer back then myself. But Mister Big Shep, he talk about a drink the way some men talk about wantin a woman." pg. 187

"I bet there ain't no more peaceful place on the Good Lord's earth than here at Pecan Grove. Ain't no violence, no noise, no shootin, no drugs, like up on Miami Vice. I watch the TV, I know what's goin on. No drugs here. just my blood pressure pills and what etta take for her iron. Things might be different up at the Walker house, but I be talking bout my Pecan Grove." pg. 191

"If I miss a sunset, I have to consult the Ouija board. I've done that religiously ever since the kids left. It's part of my schedule. That's the reason I had so much trouble when all four of them were still at home: I couldn't stick to my schedule. They can laugh — but between Mass, sunsets, Ouija board, cocktails, and maybe a snippet of a prescription pill, I do fine. I've put together my own package. Anybody says something to me about it, I tell them: Don't knock it if you haven't tried it." pg. 199

Topics for Discussion

In what year does the prologue take place? Is Siddalee 38 years old or 5 years old in that chapter?

What is the symbolism of the expression "Little Altars Everywhere"?

Why is Sidda rude to Edythe Spevey on the Girl Scout camp out?

How does Sidda's father usually react when he is angry or highly emotional?

Why did Sidda's father, Big Shep, not want his daughter to have an operation to correct her wandering eye? How did he react to this problem?

Why does Vivi Walker want her daughter's beautiful, waist-length red hair cut as short as a boy's?

Willetta and Chaney's daughters Ruby and Pearl are poor, and have few of the toys and clothes that the Walker family has. Yet, they are safe from being abused in their own home. Which do you think is more important, and why?

Even though the doctors at the hospital see the welts on her legs, clear evidence that Siddalee Walker has been abused, they do nothing about it because the Walkers are a prominent, wealthy family. Today, law in most states would require the doctors to report the family to child protective services. Do you think these laws are good or not? Explain your answer.

What operation does Sidda undergo when she is a small child?

Frightened by his toddler daughter's impending eye surgery, Big Shep Walker flees to the refuge of his duck camp. His wife assumes this is because he is too cheap to pay for the surgery. What is the real reason?

If Vivi Walker was 25 years old today, instead of in the early 1960s, how might her life be different? What occupation might she choose? Would she be married and have children?

How does the death of Sidda's twin brother when he is just a few days old affect her mother? How does it affect the rest of the family?

In the end, does Sidda forgive her mother for her terrible childhood?