

Sister secrets

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

My aunt, who died earlier this year, was a woman of great strength and a raucous sense of humor. But despite having three children who loved her dearly, there was clearly something missing in her life, something that revolved around an arduous marriage to a man who was often angry. Even 20 years after he died, this gap still manifested itself. Though she could be sweet and loving (she never forgot a birthday), she could also be petty and unforgiving.

When I was old enough to notice the melancholy in my aunt's life, I asked my mother (my aunt's younger sister) about it. She told me that my aunt had been deeply in love with a young man who had been killed in World War II. Ten years later, my mother said, my aunt married my uncle, after he had pursued her relentlessly for many years. My father believes that my uncle was humiliated at having to wait so long for my aunt's hand, and made her life difficult as a form of unconscious punishment.

I thought of this family saga during the final credits of *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, Hollywood's latest big-budget "chick flick," based on two best-selling novels by Rebecca Wells. For all the screaming and hand-wringing, southern-fried aberrations and family angst, this film is basically the story of a woman whose life never turned out as she had hoped, in large part because the man she adored, a dashing pilot with a killer smile, was shot down and killed during World War II.

The plot is surprisingly simple. Sidda Lee Walker (Sandra Bullock), a successful New York playwright, is interviewed by *Time* magazine, and proceeds to gleefully mock the lifestyle of her dramatic mother, Vivi (Ellen Burstyn), and criticize her parenting skills. Vivi, who still lives in the bayous of Louisiana with her silent but supportive husband, Shep (James Garner), is so distressed by this "attack" on everything she stands for that she begins a long-distance feud with her daughter. Sidda is only too happy to find the time and energy to perpetuate the feud, despite the fact that she is within weeks of marrying her long-suffering boyfriend, Connor (Angus MacFadyen).

Enter the Ya-Yas, Vivi's best buddies from childhood (Maggie Smith, Fionnula Flanagan, Shirley Knight) who fly to New York to kidnap Sidda, and haul her back to Louisiana to educate her about the many trials and travails that are at the core of Vivi's idiosyncratic lifestyle. To do that, they must crack open the sacred "Ya-Ya scrapbook," which is loaded with memories of their shared lives.

The scrapbook leads to an extended series of flashbacks, where we see Vivi as a young girl (Caitlin Wachs) and a young woman (Ashley Judd). The other Ya-Yas are also portrayed by matching pairs of actresses.

What is remarkable about the film (and the reason it is bringing female audiences to tears across the country) is the plethora of moral themes and ethical dilemmas that the filmmakers manage to cram into it.

First and foremost is the mother-daughter story, which has been a staple of high drama since Clytemnestra first tried to marry off--and later seek revenge for the death of--her daughter, Iphigenia. The message the film imparts is one of understanding: it is never easy to appreciate your mom's long and trying journey unless you've walked it in her fashionable pumps.

It is also a tale of friendship (known in Hollywood circles as the "Damon and Pythias" story), except here there are four friends instead of two, and they are female instead of male. But as in other tales of bonding, these friends are willing to go that extra mile to protect and even preserve the foibles of their goofy soulmate.

Mostly, though, *Divine Secrets* is a tale of forgiveness. Vivi tries to forgive Sidda for attacking her, while Sidda tries to forgive Vivi for leading a life that warrants attack. Unless they can call off the name-calling and learn to accept and appreciate each other, the women will create a daughter who follows in her mother's footsteps and loses the love of her life, maybe without having realized that this man is that great love.

Much of the strength of this witty film lies in the panache and experience of its actors, most notably the trio of interventionist Ya-Yas, who are a Greek chorus of stylish southern matriarchs. Maggie Smith is particularly amusing as she carts around an oxygen tank and whips off one-liners.

Sandra Bullock and Ashley Judd are serviceable, though neither of these young actresses has lived up to her potential.

As for Garner, the consummate old pro, he has reached that minimalist stage in his long career when his cinematic persona is so powerful that just showing up is impressive.

The film is directed by Callie Khouri, who also penned the adaptation, after Mark Andrus (he coscripted *As Good As It Gets*) took an initial crack at it. Khouri is best known for the Oscar-winning script for *Thelma and Louise*. Both films contain meaty parts for female actors, and while her direction here isn't sterling, it's not embarrassing either. She wisely lets the old pros go at it, and although a sizable amount of scenery-chewing goes on, it is gnawed at with such gusto that we can't help admiring the teeth marks.