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SECONDS

By Lois Wyse

336 pp. Crown.

Leave the tough times to the first wife, Lois Wyse's contemporary fairy tale asserts. Let her suffer his arduous climb to the top. Then, when she exits, move in and pick up his wealthy pieces. The smart ones are the "Seconds." Here they are Sienna, Anne and Bronwyn, second wives of men with \$7 billion fortunes and hopes of becoming ambassadors. These fortysomething women learn that "the best job for a very smart woman [is] marriage to a very successful man" from their doyenne, widow Virginia Payne North, who has adopted them as her protégés in social climbing. Each is enterprising and grows wealthy in her own right. The Seconds, however, share a haunting guilt over a tragedy occurring 29 years earlier when they met at a camp for troubled teens. The camp's director, Gregory Sawyer, has "made a living out of being sensitive to rich women's needs," and re-enters their lives to prey on Virginia with blackmail of her Seconds in his dark and stormy heart. Will Gregory wreck their new opulent lives? Can they continue to reign at New York's most chic charity luncheons? Unless you're fascinated by the lifestyles of the rich and liposuctioned you may not want to know. But just when you're ready to hurl this paean to ulteriority and the Junk Bond Generation aside, redemption seeps into it in the form of love. Sienna does love her husband, the only worthy man in the book. Anne, whose children were taught "not to expect their parents more than twice a week," begins to nurture them. Bronwyn pursues a dream of romance. And Ms. Wyse, an advertising executive about to become a Second herself, provides a warm, if slick and predictable, turn to this soon-to-be television movie.