



Opening Belle: A Novel

By Maureen Sherry



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Maureen Sherry’s funny insider novel about a female Wall Street executive also trying to be a mother and a wife is a “compulsively readable...cheeky—and at times, romantic—battle-cry for any woman who’s ever strived to have it all and been told by a man that she couldn’t” (*Entertainment Weekly*).

It’s 2008 and Isabelle, a thirty-something Wall Street executive, appears to have it all: the sprawling Upper West Side apartment; three healthy children; a handsome husband; and a job as managing director at a large investment bank. But her reality is something else. Her work environment resembles a frat party, her husband feels employment is beneath him, and the bulk of childcare logistics still fall in Belle’s already crowded lap.

Enter Henry, the former college fiancé she never quite got over; now a hedge fund mogul. He becomes her largest client, and Belle gets to see the life she might have had with him. While Henry campaigns to win Belle back, the sexually harassed women in her office take action to improve their working conditions, and recruit a wary Belle into a secret “glass ceiling club” whose goal is to mellow the cowboy banking culture and get equal pay for their work. All along, Belle can sense the financial markets heading toward their soon-to-be historic crash and that something has to give—and when it does, everything is going to change: her marriage, her career, her bank statement, and her colleagues’ frat boy behavior.

Optioned by Reese Witherspoon who called it “smart, biting, and honest,” *Opening Belle* is “funny, relevant, and often shocking....Even if your own life is far from a fairy tale, it will allow you to laugh, learn, and maybe even lean in—to hug your own family a little closer.” (*The Washington Post*).

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Editorial Review

Review

"Compulsively readable...a cheeky—and at times, romantic—battle cry for any woman who's ever strived to have it all and been told by a man that she couldn't." (Entertainment Weekly)

"Funny, relevant and often shocking.... Even if your own life is far from a fairy tale, *Opening Belle* will allow you to laugh, learn and maybe even lean in — to hug your own family a little closer." (Washington Post)

"Maureen Sherry's comic novel unspools like a movie...I can just hear Cyndi Lauper's version of 'Money Changes Everything' on the soundtrack." (Dallas Morning News)

"Corporate sexism and the mortgage crisis are a laugh a minute...in this delightful comic novel, at least....So much fun, and educational too." (Kirkus Reviews, starred review)

"A smart, biting and honest peek into what it means to be a woman on Wall Street. I loved this book." (Reese Witherspoon)

"*Working Girl* meets *Wolf of Wall Street* in this in depth, behind the pinstripe peek inside a temple of elite finance, navigated by a sharp, smart woman in an old boys' world." (Jill Kargman, author and creator of *Odd Mom Out*)

"Wow. This is the inside story we've been waiting for. Wall Street women never talk because their silence has been bought. Not Maureen Sherry. She tells her story of a working mother's battle against outrageous sexism and financial recklessness with laugh out loud insight and winning panache. Shocking and hilarious, *Opening Belle* is one woman's glorious revenge on the unreconstructed Tarzans of the corporate jungle. I don't know how she does it, but I'm really glad she did." (Allison Pearson, author of *I Don't Know How She Does It*)

"*Opening Belle* is an irresistibly Zeitgeist y novel about motherhood, marriage, misogyny, lust, ambition, discovery, disappointment, entitled nannies, and Goldfish crackers on the floor that (and this is big) rings true. But that's not all. Sherry's novel is also a delightfully funny and frequently damning participant observer's dissection of the secretive codes and practices of an elite, socially antediluvian tribe of men who, in a very real sense, run the world. For them, the bell has sounded." (Wednesday Martin, author of *Primates of Park Avenue*)

"Rooting for our girl banker/mommy/wife Isabelle is not tough; she is so brilliantly breezy. This book reveals the honest reality of a woman working in a man's world and still being treated like she's in an updated version of the cult classic *9 5*." (Lucy Sykes, author of *The Knockoff*)

"Maureen Sherry reveals what it's like to be a woman working in the adrenaline fueled, complex, exciting, rewarding, and demanding culture of Wall Street. You won't be bored on this roller coaster ride." (Amy Goodfriend, CEO Goodfriend Partners, former Partner, Goldman Sachs)

"This funny and fast paced romp is sure to entertain." (Booklist)

"This workplace novel that takes a fun look at Wall Street and the Park Avenue set is filled with humor and heart." (Library Journal)

About the Author

After twelve years on Wall Street, Maureen Sherry—formerly, the youngest Managing Director at Bear Stearns—switched gears to earn her Masters of Fine Arts at Columbia University, to write, and to tutor at inner city schools. *Walls Within Walls*—her first book, a mystery for middle school audiences—has been awarded curriculum prizes by the states of Texas and Connecticut, and she was named one of the Best New Voices by the American Library Association. Maureen is also an active board member of numerous charities. She lives in New York City with her husband and four children.

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Opening Belle

CHAPTER 1

The Trouble with Barbie

I'VE BEEN to this holiday smackdown nine times. I know the drill: drink one glass of wine and lots of water. It's not the place in 2007 where a thirty-six-year-old should be seen shaking her groove thing. I'll swerve around the room, chat up some partners I don't speak with often, then head for the door and be gone—slipping on home to Bruce and our diaper-clad chaos.

Steps from the entrance I instinctively pause, summoning a more impressive version of me, trying to get her to show up tonight. I stand taller, trying to find inner fabulousness, while I mentally tick off names of men, because they are all men, who will determine my fiscal year-end bonus. Which of the graying white guys on the executive committee have I not spoken with in the last few weeks and how can I casually remind them of my biggest deals?

I rehearse before the curtains rise. I think potential drama through and summon a false calm, just the way I do when my four-year-old's shrieks threaten to shatter glass. I search for that kind of counter-Zen that gets the men to lean forward and listen. Avoiding the hysterical-female role—the stereotype men I work with have of women—is the key. Staying cool and professional and never slipping into some gossiping, pretty-girl mode is a strategy that's gotten me places.

I mentally list the men with whom under any circumstances I shall not, will not, no matter what they can do for my bank account, dance with tonight. The inner caveman comes unleashed when all of us are together with an open bar and a closed stock market. I imagine every place of employment has a list of suspects to avoid at a party, but the problem with Feagin Dixon—or the problem with men making big money anywhere—is that they can get casual with wedding vows. It's not that they don't love their wives—I think they do—but the headiness of that money sucks the scruples right out of them. Any guy who was perhaps a geek in another life, hears the call of his near-celebrity status, and it makes him horny. If ever there was a time of year these men are in heat, it's now, just a few months before bonus season.

Professionals on Wall Street get salaries to envy. Administrators get \$50K to \$200K a year; vice presidential salaries are about \$250K, and mine at the managing director level is \$500K. While that's terrific, what comes next is the mind blower. At the end of our fiscal year, in just a few months, commissions will be

divvied up and paid out to the people who reined them in: bankers get the commissions on investment banking deals, traders get the cents per share paid to them by the buyers and sellers of stocks and bonds, and nonproducing executives pilfer from every department they ever set foot in. These bonuses put us in the economic stratosphere, usually doubling, quadrupling, or making irrelevant the actual salary. By staying at the top of my game, I hope to work until I never have to work again, cashing in stock options in my wake and being young enough to do something meaningful. I'll take my tribe of three kids and mostly nonemployed husband and go live in some suburb with cul-de-sacs where I will even enjoy using that word. I'll join the PTA, put my kids on a school bus, give sizeable chunks of money to great causes, and learn how to be reverential to my husband and his esoteric interests known to him as "work." But for now, I'm paying for three private school tuitions, a nanny salary, a dog walker, a housekeeper who only shows up on occasion, rental space to park our car, a mortgage on a family-sized apartment, and the rent on a Hamptons house we run to each weekend to exhale, all with after-tax dollars. I need to work the room tonight.

I stand at the top of the restaurant steps, inhaling the crisp December air, catching sight of myself in the glass doors. I'm not exactly a photo-ready hotshot. I'm an expensively dressed bag lady. Everyone else walking up the steps has primed for this moment. They smell good and their faces glow expectantly. If they've Christmas-shopped their way here, they hold elegant, quadruple-weighted shopping bags that scream the worth of the contents: Hermès, Mikimoto, Takashimaya, and Prada. I, on the other hand, have garbage bag-sized Toys "R" Us sacks that contain the plastic Rescue Bots figures, a giant Haircut Barbie head (think CPR mannequin head with blond wig), and oversized Fisher-Price Peek-a-Blocks. The whole spectacle doesn't weigh much, but the bulk destroys my attempt at holiday elegance—the dress code for tonight. To add to my distress, I've managed to knock my Peek-a-Blocks into full song several times. They are possibly the first battery-included toy ever sold. Each time the sack bangs against my knee, I hear a rousing electronic rendition of "Open, shut them, open, shut them, give a little clap, clap, clap."

I'm wondering just how far the public walk to the coat check will be when Ballsbridge swoops in behind me.

Marcus Ballsbridge, most often referred to as Ballsy, is a thirty-nine-year-old father of two. He has the sort of thick, dark hair women just want to tousle. Of course, if one of us ever were to do such a thing, it would be interpreted as some call-to-mate move. The news of her flirtation would be broadcast across the trading floor in minutes. A girl can think of tousling but she dare not do it. He has angular features and a southern drawl laced with charm that quiets the cackle of sales assistants and he's probably the closest thing I have to a work friend. Ballsbridge and I sit back to back on the trading floor. We exchange work-related barbs for much of the day in sibling fashion. The second the market closes we don't speak until the following morning. All our conversations occur between the opening bell at 9:30 a.m. and the close at 4 p.m., which makes this moment officially off-limits. Tonight he surprises me.

"Hey, darlin' Isabelle, you and I hitting all the hot spots, huh?" He grins and holds up a sack that looks like mine only with more expensive packaging.

"We're far more evolved," I say, noting he talks more slowly when time isn't money. From all appearances, Marcus is single-handedly keeping FAO Schwarz out of bankruptcy.

"Are you still in that purple dinosaur stage?" Ballsbridge has an unhealthy fascination with Barney the Dinosaur. He draws him into conversation noticeably often. It's weird.

I proceed to reel off my kids' Santa list, as if my life depended on it. "Bionicles, Peek-a-Blocks, Haircut Barbie, Transformers, and Yu-Gi-Oh! cards, plus baby books. I know I'm going to forget something and break someone's heart," I say, and I mean this.

“Honey, you’re actually reciting that alphabetically.”

Ballsy is happy, Christmassy. Usually when I overhear him talking to his wife on the phone he is fuming. His concerns stem from the fact she just bought something unnecessary, or had some enhancement or spa procedure that perhaps was necessary, but costly nonetheless. Tonight he’s different; he’s light and fun, while I’m feeling a tinge of panic. Tonight is important and I look bedraggled.

“Hide me, Marcus. I look like a mother, for God’s sake.” I nod toward my bags.

Without missing a beat he grabs my sacks, banging the Peek-a-Blocks hard, and we enter to the tune of “Triangle A-B-C, triangle 1-2-3.”

“Thanks,” I exhale, and watch his back disappear into the coatroom with our wares, and I wonder why he’s proud to carry toys around and why I’m not.

Metronome is a ten-thousand-square-foot restaurant that has been transformed into a dance hall this evening. It’s the early side of the party, when people get liquored up for confidence, so most are hanging around the bar. The DJ spins innocent tunes, wedding tunes: “Celebrate good times, come on!”

Will that song ever just curl up and die already?

A few women dance with each other, hoping to get the party started, but nobody is cutting loose just yet. The evening hangs in an awkward state of sobriety.

The trading floor, the place most of us work, sets the stage for a mating dance. Daily. A grid of attached desks sits in a space a quarter the size of a football field. There are no walls and no cubicles to separate us. During work hours, everyone is either on the phone or flirting. A trading floor has everything to keep adrenal glands pumping cortisol: breaking news, tragedy, money, racism, sexism, and a little less overt sex play than in the past. The blow-up dolls that floated around in the early nineties have been deflated, and the deliveries of erotic chocolates have ceased. As my closest friend, Elizabeth, says when she visits me at work, “I feel like you work in a nightclub.” She compares us to the technology start-up where she works and says that Wall Street’s just in a more evolved stage of lawlessness than her world.

So the holiday party, with its alcohol, low lights, and music, is a show waiting to start, a nostalgic one-night pass back to the old days, and it never disappoints.

I see my first target—Simon Greene, my direct boss. He’s a frumpy, oily, bald, hyperactive guy pushing sixty. He never talks to me unless it’s bad news. We haven’t spoken in ages, which is a positive sign for my pending bonus. But the time to let him know I’m expecting to be remembered is now. It’s time to talk to Simon.

“Merry Holiday,” I bumble out. I had started to say Christmas, did my millisecond correction because Simon is Jewish, and “Merry Holiday” was the result. I’m sure that cost me.

“Hey, Isabelle,” Simon says flatly.

“Cheetah Global is voting soon. I’d like to get you in front of them. Any chance we can visit them together?” I ask.

Who would I put my boss out in front of before payday but my best client? I envision the client singing my praises to Simon just as he inks my bonus check. I doubled the commissions Cheetah paid to Feagin this year. I shake Greene's damp hand and head toward King McPherson, head trader and member of the compensation committee.

King is an excellent second choice to rub shoulders with early in the evening. A striking six-foot-four former Duke basketball player, he quickly becomes the center of any party once a woman's inhibitions are numbed. In other words, if I don't talk to him early, I'm not going anywhere near him later.

"Isabelle!" he yells as I make my way over. He is leaning against the bar with Ballsbridge.

"Happy holidays, sweetie," King says while planting a kiss that includes a small lick on my cheek. I choose not to notice the lick. King is the kind of guy I dated before I took up the cause of the underemployed. He's dashing and funny with an intimate manner that sucks people in. It didn't take long to see a shiftiness I couldn't trust. To compare? When my husband, Bruce, says he didn't come home because an engine fell out of an airplane while he was flying home from a conference in St. Martin, and that he emergency-landed in St. Barths where the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition was being shot, and that he didn't call because he was sharing a room with [insert supermodel's name], whom he was just friends with, and that he didn't want to wake her, it is actually true. With a guy like King, it's just not true. I knew I could handle being the breadwinner, but I couldn't handle being the lied-to wife. I used to be the lied-to girlfriend and that life wasn't for me.

King shifts his hand to the lower-back part of my skirt and presses into the small of my back while turning me around to face the bar. Marcus reaches over and pulls the hand off me, like some self-appointed big brother. This should make me feel cared for, but I hate it. I know how to take care of myself.

"Check out what Ballsy bought for his kids!" he says, now hanging his thumb on the back of my skirt. It's distracting and infuriating at the same time but I just go with it and am glad that Marcus lets it go too. While I love his support, it sometimes feels patronizing, like he won't let me fight my own fights.

I turn obligingly to face a coveted, hard-to-find, four-part Greybeards Castle. I know because my seven-year-old wanted one and I told him Santa doesn't do \$289 toys. I may be wealthy but I'm not spoiling my kids like that. But Ballsbridge does. The men giggle as they insert the batteries and put the giant plastic keys in the fortress doors (oh please, house keys for a castle?) and hear the castle screech, "Intruder! Intruder!" Bells and sirens roar and King's hand heads farther south toward my ass, actually inside my skirt's waistband. Each time the sirens go off he laughs and with each laugh he fans his hand to brush my ass.

I have two thoughts: I'm disgusted at myself for not walking away, for putting up with this stuff just to talk business, and second, I think of me dumping my toys to hide my other life while Marcus wants to show them off. He's boasting that he went toy shopping, while King says, "That Ballsy, such a good family guy."

"Hey, golden girl." I'm pulled away from King, causing his hand to be caught on my skirt for a moment, by one of the guys on my Avoid list. This is the stuff I've rehearsed for.

He's Salvatore Brody, whom everyone calls Sally, co-head of the over-the-counter desk, and right now he's dancing like an Irish/Italian—a man bred from two cultures known for step-dancing and red wine, and from where I stand, he seems to be indulging in both. I try and follow his moronic motions, smiling all the while as I cross, hop, and 1, 2, 3, 4 while keeping my arms firmly at my side.

The song changes to House of Pain's "Jump Around" and jump we do. I briefly entertain the idea of asking him about a block of stock that traded away from me (someone else bought stock my customer was trying to buy) but realize I'd be screaming in his ear while jumping, and I just don't have that sort of energy right now and I don't want to get closer to him. The song is mercifully short, and I bolt for the ladies' room just to have someplace to go. It's there I run into Amy Yapp.

Amy and I sit about five feet from each other but rarely speak. She's slightly my junior and anxious to be promoted. She sneakily sniffs around my turf every time I have a baby so I usually keep my distance from her. Tonight, though, we stand together at the sink, awkwardly washing our hands in sync, and avoiding eye contact in the mirror in front of us. Her super-chic blond hair has been cut tight to her head, her average height raised significantly by tall, pointed heels, and her red cocktail dress tailored to within a millimeter of her skin. Everything about her is tightly wound. The sound of running water is too quiet and the absence of talk between us too weird. Why are we so uncomfortable with each other when there is no immediate business to discuss? Amy is recently divorced, childless, and seems to have no outside interests beyond work.

The voices of two sales assistants distract us. Sales assistants are support people who spend their day balancing trades. They match, buy, and sell orders for millions of dollars, which until a few years ago were physical tickets illegibly scribbled with account numbers. These assistants balance the piles of money moving around each day and pray they get it right. They are underpaid, abused women, constantly staring at the juicy carrot of a job like mine. It's unclear to me who of us works harder, but they seem to have more fun, and I make more money. That's the real trade between us.

Stall #1: "Did you see King pull me onto his lap?" [sighs.]

Stall #2: "Puh-leeze, those guys already gave me keys to the after-party."

The after-party is a notorious event held in a block of hotel rooms after the official holiday party. Think of the cool kids who went to the Jersey Shore together after the prom, while the rest of us went home. I was never invited to the after-party either. At this moment, Amy nods toward the stalls, where the conversation regarding Flirtation with Men Who Determine Bonuses continues.

Stall #1: "I can't believe how fresh you were out there!"

Stall #2: "They loved it. That King could give my Anthony a run for his money any day."

Stall #1: "Give him a little something tonight . . . Bonus season, ya know?"

Amy turns up the water stream, hard and loud to muffle the sound of their voices and remind them we can hear everything they say. I know her hands are already clean and I wonder why these women make her so mad? The water gushes loudly, but not loudly enough. Their voices just amplify. I expect to see Amy smirking. I expect to see her rolling her eyes in an "aren't-they-pathetic?" way. Instead she looks at me blankly, her piercing blue eyes looking into mine. What? I think. "What?" I say.

She seems mad at me. The water stops, the chatting from the stalls stops, and Amy, with one furious motion, snatches too many hand towels from the glass shelf. The extras flutter to the floor, moved by the wind of her anger as she turns on her heels and leaves.

When I reappear in the main room, the mood has changed from caution and anticipation to debauchery. I'm

looking at a frat party in good clothes. The bulk of men on the dance floor have their Hermès ties wrapped Indian-headress style around their heads like preschool boys. They body-slam each other, and sandwich women caught in their paths. The women shriek in mock horror but make no attempt to leave the floor. One could argue they're enjoying this, but maybe not. Maybe they also feel the need to please, the need to be the team player, to hang out with the big guys as they cling precariously to some piece of the banking pie. I might know that to be true if I ever had a real conversation with one of them, but I don't. Nobody ever really talks about this stuff, especially to me, one of the few senior women on the floor. I became a managing director at twenty-eight here, the youngest to ever do so. And now at thirty-six I am really comfortable in the role. It makes me so proud. It makes me so lonely.

The other thing to note about the dancing Injuns is that they're mostly older higher-ups. The younger ones stand timidly on the sidelines, unlearning every politically correct thing ever taught to them. Body-slaming women or removing pieces of clothing while moving in a sexually explicit manner would seem to be a bad choice in a corporate setting. The scene before them is confusing and they don't know how to act. They stand uncomfortably, shifting their weight and their drinks, trying to take in a subconscious lesson on being a big shot on Wall Street.

The professional women all stand at the bar, appearing slightly lost, as if they came upon this party by accident. They look as if they hardly know one another, because they really don't.

I've been visible enough already; I've been checked off the attendance list for the holiday party and it'd be fine for me to slip away now. Anything that will happen after this moment will not be good and the networking window for the evening has closed.

As I'm leaving I stop to notice a peculiar thing happening on the dance floor. The boys are giddy, slapping their hands in unison while tossing something to each other. Like square dancers, they form a fairly impressive circle and enthusiastically hurl the thing back and forth while clapping to the beat of the music. I catch a glimpse of the object they're throwing: a shiny and sort of hairy ball that catches the light for a moment each time it's thrown. I want to leave but am transfixed because something about the object seems familiar. The dancing, jumping, sweaty men cheer, and the circle grows larger. They shout each time someone catches the thing and I can't help but watch.

When I realize what they are throwing, I have a millisecond conversation in my head that goes something like this:

Logical Me: "Take a second. Do you really want to make a scene?"

Hysterical Me: "I'm going to kick King's bony ass."

Logical Me: "If you do this, you lose all respect; just intercept it, put it back in the Toys 'R' Us bag, and elegantly exit left."

Hysterical Me: "This is it, I'm going in."

Logical Me: "Back away, no confrontation, no fight. Status quo keeps your reputation."

Hysterical Me: "They are throwing around Brigid's Haircut Barbie head. My four-year-old's present from Santa, the one I just stood on a Toys 'R' Us line forty-five minutes for, the last one on the shelf."

I leap the two steps down to get to the dance floor. Marcus has the Barbie head pulled to his ear and releases her quarterback-style. I lunge and intercept and can't believe how well I just did that. I hold her by her tousled hair while some guys start whistling and I start shouting.

"You classless boneheads! This is my daughter's Christmas present. How could you? HOW COULD YOU?" I'm almost as loud as the music. The clapping misses the beats and I hear a few "whoa"s.

I look up to see the women at the bar holding their drinks, paused in midair. Stone Dennis, a young investment banker I've been helping train for our sales department, strides up to me. I remember him as a schmoozer: untalented with numbers, but desperate to be accepted. It's pathetic that he has to be the one to set these guys straight. The music blares on, but the dancing stops as everyone waits to see the next move. I want to tell Stone to not even try to apologize. He is new and young and I know he's not responsible. But instead of trying to talk to me, Stone smiles, leans toward my left hand, and in one motion swipes Barbie yet again and I, in turn, lunge for him.

"Dude," he says to me, "chill out."

Did he really just call me "Dude"?

Some foreign energy enters my body and I feel like I'm watching myself move like a crazy lady. I grab Stone by a wrist and twist him toward me, ending the motion only when Stone has turned 180 degrees and is now in a full headlock. Stone, in turn, lifts his arm and pulls his elbow back. Is this twenty-three-year-old guy trying so hard to be accepted that he's actually about to punch me? I feel more amazed than fearful.

"I am very chill," I hiss in his ear.

"WHOA!" shouts Marcus, and steps between us.

A big vein bulges in Stone's neck and his breath smells like pot. He hurls Barbie back to Marcus, who hands her back to me, even straightens her hair a bit as he does this and then goes so far as to straighten my hair too.

"Belle, geez, they're, like, \$19.99 or something. I'll buy you a new one tomorrow," he says, and looks truly sorry.

The crowd watching us grows and I feel my throat thicken. It's really time to leave before I get sobby and pathetic. I say nothing more and head to the coat check to gather my coat and whatever remains in my toy bags.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Mary Davis:

Now a day individuals who Living in the era where everything reachable by talk with the internet and the resources in it can be true or not involve people to be aware of each facts they get. How many people to be smart in acquiring any information nowadays? Of course the reply is reading a book. Reading a book can help persons out of this uncertainty Information specifically this Opening Belle: A Novel book because book offers you rich info and knowledge. Of course the knowledge in this book hundred per-cent guarantees there

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