



Open House by Elizabeth Berg

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Oprah's book club selection for 2000

Book Jacket Summary

In this superb novel by the beloved author of *Talk Before Sleep*, *The Pull of the Moon*, and *Until the Real Thing Comes Along*, a woman re-creates her life after divorce by opening up her house and her heart.

Samantha's husband has left her, and after a spree of overcharging at Tiffany's, she settles down to reconstruct a life for herself and her eleven-year-old son. Her eccentric mother tries to help by fixing her up with dates, but a more pressing problem is money. To meet her mortgage payments, Sam decides to take in boarders. The first is an older woman who offers sage advice and sorely needed comfort; the second, a maladjusted student, is not quite so helpful. A new friend, King, an untraditional man, suggests that Samantha get out, get going, get work. But her real work is this: In order to emerge from grief and the past, she has to learn how to make her own happiness. In order to really see people, she has to look within her heart. And in order to know who she is, she has to remember--and reclaim--the person she used to be, long before she became someone else in an effort to save her marriage. *Open House* is a love story about what can blossom between a man and a woman, and within a woman herself.

Reviews

Publishers Weekly

A middle-aged woman asks herself if there's life after divorce, then answers with a resounding yes in another of Berg's gentle tales of female self-discovery. When Samantha Morrow's husband, David, bails out after almost 20 years of marriage, Sam first goes into denial, then heads for Tiffany's and blows \$12,000 on a Limoges tea set, a silver flatware service for 10 and a diamond bracelet--which she gives away to a poor black woman she passes on the drive home. The one-time hippie has not built much of a life for herself outside marriage. As a stay-at-home mother, she cares for her 11-year-old son, Travis, and her relationships are mostly of the love-hate variety: with her ex-husband, her mother, Martha Stewart (who actually calls her on the phone) and herself. Forced to take in lodgers to pay the mortgage on her large suburban house--eventually there are three: 78-year-old Lydia; Edward, a gay hairdresser; and an eccentric girl named Lavender Blue--Sam finds a new friend in King, an MIT graduate-turned-laborer who helps Lydia move in. Though he is overweight, inexperienced and underemployed, King looks surprisingly appealing when compared to the disastrous men Sam's mother sets her up with. As King cooks, babysits and helps Travis with his math homework, gradually he wins Samantha's trust. And when David suggests that he and Samantha get back together, Samantha finally knows who she is, who she has become and what she wants..

Library Journal

Samantha (Sam) Morrow doesn't understand why her husband, David, wants a divorce. Suddenly, she finds herself with a mortgage to pay, job skills that extend only to lead singer in a rock band, a preteen son, and overwhelming grief. So she maxes out David's credit cards and calls Martha Stewart for help. Sam listens to advice from her mother and her best friend but doesn't necessarily take it; for the first time in her life, she is thinking for herself. The boarders she decides to take in give her a new viewpoint; she gets a job as a temp and sees the world differently after each assignment. Finally, she meets a man named King, who is completely different from her ex-husband, and she slowly realizes how different men can be. By the time Sam has regained her equilibrium, she is a new person. When David decides he wants to "come home," she does not hesitate to tell him that it is too late. Berg writes with clarity, accurately capturing the aftermath of an adjustment of the heart.

Kirkus Reviews

The eighth effortless novel from soft-pedaling specialist Berg is an emotional comedy featuring the newly separated mother of a near-teenaged son who finds the man of her dreams in spite of herself. What's a woman to do after her husband of 20 years packs a bag and walks out? Take a page from Martha Stewart's book, apparently, by getting dressed to the nines, making an elegant breakfast, and then trying to make the kid go along with the charade. Unfortunately for Samantha Morrow, she isn't Martha Stewart, and her son Travis is unflinchingly frank. So Sam goes to Tiffany's and writes a \$12,000 check for silver flatware instead, whereupon her husband, David, takes all the money out of their joint account, and she has to start renting out rooms.

Biography

Author's website <http://www.elizabeth-berg.net/>

(In the author's own words, updated March 2008)

I was born in St. Paul, Minnesota on December 2, 1948, in a hospital that has been torn down, which I'm pretty steamed about. When I was three years old, my father reenlisted in the Army, and I spent my growing up years moving around a lot—twice, I went to three schools in a single academic year. You can understand my dilemma when people ask me where I'm from. My usual answer is "Um.....nowhere?"



I've loved books and reading from the time my mother began reading to me, and I've loved writing ever since I could hold a pencil. I submitted my first poem to American Girl magazine when I was nine years old. It was rejected, and it took twenty-five years before I submitted anything again. Then, I entered a contest in a magazine and won. I wrote for magazines for ten years, then moved into novels and haven't stopped yet. I usually do a book a year. But I have to tell you, the prospect of retiring is beginning to sound better and better. I really want to live on a hobby farm with lots of animals, including a chicken, I'm dying for a chicken.

Before I became a writer, I was a registered nurse for ten years, and that was my "school" for writing—taking care of patients taught me a lot about human nature, about hope and fear and love and loss and regret and triumph and especially about relationships--all things that I tend to focus on in my work. I worked as a waitress, which is also good training for a writer, and I sang in a rock band which was not good for anything except the money I made. I was a dramatic and dreamy child, given to living more inside my head than outside, something that persists up to today and makes me a terrible dining partner. I was married for over twenty years and am now divorced. I have two daughters and two grandchildren. I live with my partner Bill and my dog Homer outside of Chicago and in Wisconsin.

Elizabeth Berg's novels **Durable Goods** and **Joy School** were selected as ALA Best Books of the Year. **Talk Before Sleep** was an ABBY finalist, a *New York Times* bestseller, and a national bestseller. **The Pull of the Moon, Range of Motion, What We Keep, and Until the Real Thing Comes Along** also were national bestsellers. In 1997, Berg won the NEBA Award in fiction.

Bibliography

- *Family traditions: celebrations for holidays and everyday* (1992, illustrations by Robert Roth)
- *Durable Goods* (1993, selected as ALA Best Books of the Year)
- *Talk Before Sleep* (1994, highlighting the fight against breast cancer)
- *Range of Motion* (1995)

- *The Pull of the Moon* (1996)
- *Joy School* (1997, selected as ALA Best Books of the Year)
- *What We Keep* (1998)
- *Escaping into the Open: The Art of Writing True* (1999, non-fiction)
- *Until the Real Thing Comes Along* (1999, about a woman's love for a gay man)
- *Open House* (2000, Oprah's Book Club selection)
- *Never Change* (2001)
- *Ordinary Life: stories* (2002)
- *True to Form* (2002)
- *Say When* (2003)
- *The Art of Mending* (2004)
- *The Year of Pleasures* (2005)
- *The Handmaid and the Carpenter* (2006)
- *We Are All Welcome Here* (2006)
- *Dream When You're Feeling Blue* (2007)
- *The Day I Ate Whatever I Wanted* (2008)
- A Conversation with Elizabeth Berg about *Open House*

Interview with the Author (from BookBrowse.com)

If you "could lift the roof--make for a real open house--and look in-side," what roofs would you lift? What do you think you would see?

Given my interest in things "ordinary," I would probably lift the roof of the people on my block. And what I would see are people involved in "ordinary" lives, which, for me, are extraordinary. I'm the kind of person who is entertained watching someone simply be themselves, whether they're putting their children to bed or making dinner or sitting at the table reading the morning newspaper. I like the myriad ways people reveal themselves, the great variation in the human species, as well as the remarkable similarities.

Is this what you're doing when you write--"lifting the roof"?

Yes. I look to find the heart and soul of people, of my characters. I look for the truth of them, and the truths about life that are presented through them.

Sam wants to "lift the roof" in a moment of isolation. Does writing allow you to ward off isolation? Or, is writing isolating?

Well, that's an interesting question. The answer is both. Writing is, of course, a solitary occupation. But for many writers, myself included, it's through writing that we make certain vital connections. Oftentimes I need to write about something in order to understand it. And it's on the page that I'm able to most accurately say the things I feel and believe.

Did this novel begin with a particular "roof" you wanted to lift or a character or a situation you wanted to investigate?

It began with an idea that I'd like to write about a woman who took boarders into her suburban home. I thought, hmmm, what might have to happen so that that occurred? And then it came to me that a divorce would do it: a woman gets abandoned by her husband, and wants to keep her house rather than selling it. And then the book became something else altogether, which often happens. You start out to write one book, and then another one takes over. In the case of *Open House*, it became a story of a woman finding her way back to herself.

Is this where or how your novels usually begin?

It depends. Sometimes it's an issue I want to explore, like the power of women's friendships

in *Talk Before Sleep* or changes that occur with menopause as in *The Pull of the Moon*. Sometimes a character's voice leads the way and makes the story emerge later: Katie in *Durable Goods* and *Joy School*.

What was unique to your experience of writing *Open House*?

Every novel is unique, because it makes its intentions known in its own way: at a certain point, it takes over and invents itself, and I'm just the typist. Every novel is the same for the same reason. One really different thing about *Open House*, though, is that after I turned it in, I decided not to publish it. It just didn't feel right. I kept it on the shelf for five years, then rewrote it, added a few things (the Martha Stewart thing, for example), and then let it be published.

The first sentence of the novel is "You know before you know, of course." Is it "of course"?

Seems to be so. Your heart knows before your head will let the information in.

Once Sam realizes that the divorce is really happening, she does some rather--well--extraordinarily embarrassing things. Do you ever--out of sympathy--want to stop a character from acting as she intends to?

I never want to stop a character from doing anything. I love when they "take over" and I feel like I'm just watching the show.

In a way, Sam isn't acting like herself. Is it difficult to write about a character who acts out of character?

No. Extraordinary circumstances make for different kinds of behavior. Part of a writer's job, I think, is to know her characters so completely that it's no more difficult to write them acting out of character than in it. It's that old thing about how you have to know much more about your characters than you ever present on the page. You may not ever write about what's in their refrigerator or their closet, or how they take a bath, or if they like poetry, or who their first love was, or how they would react in certain situations, but you should know.

In the moment that Sam tells Travis about the divorce, you write two explanations: the explanation we all know Sam should give, and the response she does give. When you began to write, did you know which would actually come out of her mouth?

No. I like to let the characters lead the way. When I write dialogue, it emerges on the page as is. I don't plan it.

Sam leaves a tough question in the novel unanswered: How much truth are children entitled to? Do you have an answer to that question?

Oh, I wish I did. It's a hard question. And there is no definitive answer, because children are all different. Some are well equipped to handle difficult truths; others need more protection. Some have a great deal of empathy and perspective; some do not. It's not always a function of age, either--a younger child may be more philosophical or calm or secure than an older one. Our job as parents is to try to know our children as best we can, and then support them in the ways that they need it. And it's a really hard job. It might be impossible. But we try. And when they know that we really, really love them, it helps.

In a difficult conversation between Sam and her own mother, Veronica tells Sam that "your children never really grow up for you." Is this true of a child's experience of her mother, as well? Is an adult child ever able to relate to her mother not as a mother, but only as another adult? Is Sam?

I think it is in that moment that Sam does begin to see her mother as a person. She believes she understands why her mother has this impenetrable cheerfulness and crazy behavior--Sam has begun to see the fault lines. That is to say, she has come to understand her mother's vulnerability, and her defenses against her own fragility.

Although her relationship with Veronica is difficult, Sam relies on the "truth" communicated across generations. Is there wisdom that can be communicated only across generations? Is there wisdom that only older women--like Lydia--possess?

Wisdom is a funny thing. I think some children are very, very wise, and some old people are not wise at all. It seems to me that, more than anything, wisdom is a gift some people are given.

Did you know, when you began to write, that David would ask to return? Were you afraid that Sam would take him back?

No. When he said he wanted to come home, though, I knew Sam would not take him back. Especially since the only way he could express appreciation of her was to note what she did for him.

Is there a moment when you knew Sam was strong enough to stand on her own?

Well, it was a slow evolution. But something big happened when she lay in the bathtub listening to Janis Joplin.

Does divorce always result in what Sam calls a "psychic limp"?

I can only speak from my own experience. I will always have a raw place inside me from that experience.

Where does a character like King come from? Does he just walk onto the page?

Actually he did just walk onto the page.

What did that feel like? How did it happen?

It felt completely natural. I have no idea how it happens. You're asking an "under the hood" question, and I'm a person who doesn't think very much about technique. In Escaping into the Open, I tried to explain all that I know and believe about the writing process. But it's mostly . . . I don't know, magical. I mean, how would you explain how and why people fall in love? Why we crave chocolate or salt? (Or, my favorite, chocolate and salt together?) Those things are just in us. I don't think about or try to manipulate or analyze the creative process when I'm writing something. For me, that would be death.

When did you know that King and Sam would be instrumental in helping each other find their way back to themselves?

Again, you're assuming I know what I'm going to do. I don't. I just get out of the way and let it happen. When Sam first met King, I didn't know who he was going to be for her.

As King helps Sam find her way back to herself, he asks her to remember a time when she "wanted to know everything." She remembers herself as a little girl. Why is it that she has to look back so far? Why do women so frequently seem to lose themselves during adolescence?

It's not that she has to look that far back. It's just the memory that occurs to her at the time he asks the question. To answer your other question, I think women often lose themselves in adolescence because of boys--because of our desire to shape ourselves so that they will be attracted to us, and because boys sort of take over in general. That has certainly been well documented!

When King explains to Sam why his job isn't astrophysics, he talks about the "limitations of words." Is this something that you know about through writing? Are there moments where you want to say "red" and come out with "chartreuse"?

As I mentioned before, the place I come closest to speaking the real truth is on the page. But I also believe that the deepest things are very, very difficult to express, no matter how articulate you are. The eyes hold so much. A touch. A sigh. The translation is so difficult and so often inadequate.

Do you ever stop writing for a while because, as King says, "when I'm away from it in the specific, I'm better able to see it generally"?

I never stop writing unless my life circumstances force me to. It has nothing to do with publication. It has to do with the fact that I must do it, and that I love doing it.

When and how did you learn that *Open House* had been selected as an Oprah Book Club book?

I was sitting at my desk on August 16 when the phone rang and a producer told me the good news that *Open House* would be the September selection. She said that Oprah said to apologize for not calling herself--she was in court that day. I thought, oh, man, Oprah doesn't have to apologize for anything.

What was your book club discussion experience like?

It was enormously gratifying. The women who appeared on that show were so honest and so giving, and I feel they helped other women who have been through or are contemplating divorce. There was such pain expressed, but also such triumph. Women laughed and cried during that discussion--who could ask for a richer emotional experience?

Discussion Questions (from ReadingGroupGuide.com)

- 1.** In the beginning of the book, Samantha is unusually obsessed with Martha Stewart. Why do you think this is? What do Martha Stewart and her products seem to offer Samantha? When they finally speak to each other over the phone, Samantha asks Martha Stewart if she fell apart after her divorce. Martha responds, "I didn't fall apart. I spent one evening with Bernstein's Kaddish and a bottle of 'eighty-six Montrachet. And then I got busy. Try it," (166). What do you think of this advice? Does Samantha end up taking it?
- 2.** Why does Samantha go on a shopping spree at Tiffany's with David's credit card? Do you think she was only motivated by revenge? Why would spending money be a good way to get back at David, as opposed to another means of revenge? Samantha says, "I don't know why I bought the bracelet... But I don't like fancy jewelry; I never have," (33). Why do you think she bought it, and if the bracelet was so expensive, why do you think she gave it away to the woman on the street? She goes on to say, "And the things I really like aren't fancy at all: old aprons and hankies. Butter wrappers from the one-pound blocks. Peony bushes, hardback books of poetry. And I like things less than that; the sticky remains at the bottom of the apple-crisp dish." What do all of these things have in common, and how do they help to understand what has real value and worth to Samantha?
- 3.** Samantha spends most of the novel wanting her husband back. In the end, she is the one who chooses to remain separated. Why do you think she changes her mind? At what

point in the novel do you think she would rather remain alone than get back together with him? Do you think she is making the right decision? What do you think causes her to change her mind?

4. Samantha posts a card on the community bulletin board that reads, ROOMMATE WANTED Large bedroom for rent in very nice house with single Woman and eleven-year-old son. No smoking. Pets or kids Okay. Must be employed and responsible. \$500/mo. What picture does this advertisement paint of her life? Is it accurate? What things are missing from the description? What do you really think Samantha is looking for in a roommate? What is the significance of her opening her house to make ends meet? Does she do it for only monetary reasons?

5. Samantha imagines Travis one day saying, "My mother changed wonderfully when my father left us. Our circumstances actually improved," (9). Do you think that Samantha changes in the novel? If so, how? Do you think their circumstances actually improve? Do you think Samantha would say about her changes? Do you the Samantha we read about in the beginning of the story would say about the Samantha we read about at the end? How does Samantha's conception of herself change?

6. Samantha experiences many different types of love in the novel, both platonic and romantic. How would you describe the love she has for David? Compare this with the love she has for King? How are they different and which one is more ideal? What elements do you think are lacking in her relationship with David that King is able to provide? What lessons in love do you think Samantha learns from Lydia and her boyfriend? How would you describe Samantha's relationship with her son Travis, and how is it different from the relationship she has with her own mother? Are there any examples of ideal love in the novel?

Suggestions for Further Reading

A. Manette Ansay. Vinegar Hill.

Ann Hood. Somewhere off the Coast of Maine

How I Saved My Father's Life (and Ruined Everything Else)

Luanne Rice. Blue Moon; and Stone Heart

Elinor Lipman. The Way Men Act

Anna Quindlen. Object Lessons; and Black and Blue

Jeanne Ray Julie and Romeo

Tawni O'Dell. Back Roads

Elizabeth Gilbert. Eat, Pray, Love