# Nellie Bly

*A Reading A–Z Level Z2 Leveled Book*
*Word Count: 2,084*

## Connections

### Writing

Research a notable figure from the women's suffrage movement in the United States. Write an essay detailing her or his contribution to the movement.

### Social Studies

As a class, invite a local journalist to visit your classroom. Prepare questions beforehand to ask the journalist about the work of an investigative reporter.



LEVELED BOOK • Z²

# Nellie Bly

Written by Mike Vago
Illustrated by Wesley Lowe

www.readinga-z.com


## Focus Question

What impact did Nellie Bly have on journalism?

## Words to Know

ambition
bankrupt
circumnavigated
column
corruption
dismissive
exploitation
foreign correspondent
incensed
journalist
persona
suffrage

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**Correlation**

| LEVEL Z2 | |
|---|---|
| Fountas & Pinnell | Y–Z |
| Reading Recovery | N/A |
| DRA | 70+ |


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## Riches to Rags

Elizabeth Cochran was born rich, but she didn't stay that way. Her father was a judge and a businessman who was so wealthy and powerful that their hometown of Cochran's Mills, Pennsylvania, was named after him. Elizabeth was born there in 1864, the thirteenth of fifteen children. Michael Cochran had ten children with his first wife, and when she died, he remarried and had five more children. As the wealthiest man in town, he had no trouble providing for his large brood. But when Elizabeth was six, her father died. He failed to leave a will, and the children from his first marriage inherited all of his money. Elizabeth's mother inherited nothing, and, after a year, had to sell her late husband's mansion to keep the family afloat.

Many women had a difficult time finding work in the 1800s, and the task was even more daunting when raising five children. Elizabeth's mother quickly remarried to gain some financial security for her family, but her new husband ended up treating them badly. Divorce was rare in that era, but Elizabeth's mother managed to split up from her second husband. Young Elizabeth herself testified at the divorce hearing, saying, "My stepfather has been generally drunk since he married my mother."

## The Quiet Observer

Teaching was one of the few careers open to women at the time, so Elizabeth went to a teacher's college when she was only fifteen. She changed her last name to Cochrane when she enrolled in the school. Unfortunately, her family ran out of money to pay for her schooling after only one semester, and she was forced to drop out.

Elizabeth and her mother moved to Pittsburgh and ran a boarding house. Elizabeth began reading the *Pittsburgh Dispatch,* a local newspaper. One day she read a popular **column** in the paper by a writer who called himself "Quiet Observer." He wrote that women belonged in the home, cooking and looking after children, and that working women were "a monstrosity." Elizabeth was **incensed**. Knowing from experience how hard poor women had to work to make ends meet, she wrote an angry letter in response.

As a girl, Elizabeth Cochran was nicknamed "Pink" because her mother often dressed her in pink clothing.



Elizabeth attacked Quiet Observer for being out of touch with common people, asking, "Can they that have full and plenty of this world's goods realize what it is to be a poor working woman?" She pointed out that girls of that era were rarely given the same opportunities as boys. "Let a youth start as [an] errand boy and he will work his way up until he is one of the firm," she wrote, meaning he would eventually end up as one of the people running the company. "Girls are just as smart, a great deal quicker to learn; why, then, can they not do the same?" If women were given opportunities, she added, "their lives would be brighter, their health better, their pocketbooks fuller, unless their employers would do as now—give them half wages because they are women."

Elizabeth argued that the world would be a better place if society heeded her advice. "Instead of gathering up the 'real smart young men,' gather up the real smart girls, pull them out of the mire, give them a shove up the ladder of life." Her letter impressed the newspaper's editor enough that he offered her a job, giving her the pen name Nellie Bly, after a popular song of the day.

### Do You Know?

Before she was given her pen name, Elizabeth Cochrane wrote her articles for the newspaper as "Orphan Girl."

## Nellie Bly

As Nellie Bly, Cochrane continued to stand up for women. Her first story was about how hard impoverished women had to work. Her next article attacked the state's divorce laws for unfairly favoring husbands over wives. She also wrote a series of articles about female factory workers in Pittsburgh. Even though she tackled weighty subjects, her editors were **dismissive** of her work and relegated her to the "women's page" of the newspaper. When Bly chose her subjects, she wrote about social justice. When her editors assigned her an article, they sent her to garden shows or to write about fashion.



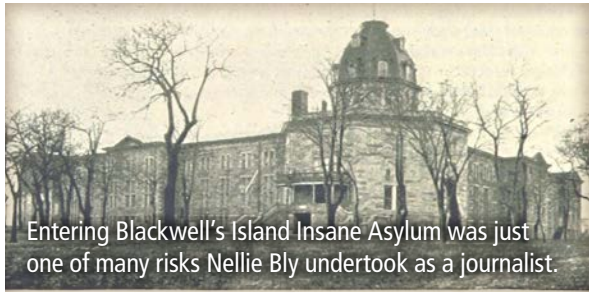
Frustrated with what she saw as lightweight assignments, she somehow convinced her editors to allow her to travel to Mexico as a **foreign correspondent**. While in Mexico, she wrote articles that captured the everyday lives of Mexicans and showed the struggles of people living in poverty. When she traced that poverty back to political **corruption** and started writing negatively about Mexican politicians, however, the country's government threw her out, and she returned to Pittsburgh.

Even though Bly had proved herself to be a serious **journalist** many times over, her editors still assigned her frivolous pieces. She feared they would never treat her with the respect she deserved. One day when she was twenty-three years old, she decided that she'd had enough. She left a note for her employers: "I'm off for New York. Look out for me. Bly."

## Look Out for Me

Nellie Bly didn't take New York by storm. She spent six months going hat in hand from one newspaper to another, looking for work as a writer—New York had more than a dozen daily papers in the 1880s—but her application was rejected again and again. Finally, she snuck into the offices of the *New York World* and cornered John Cockerill, one of the paper's editors. She touted her experience as a foreign correspondent and offered to sail to Europe for the paper and return by steerage—the cheap, cramped quarters all but the wealthiest ship passengers had to use—and report on the conditions aboard.

Cockerill countered her proposal by offering her an assignment he considered impossible: he asked her to get inside one of the city's biggest "madhouses" (what institutions for mentally ill patients were called at the time) and write about the conditions prevalent there. It's not clear whether he was impressed with her **ambition** or just wanted to get rid of her, but Bly rose to the challenge.



Entering Blackwell's Island Insane Asylum was just one of many risks Nellie Bly undertook as a journalist.



## Ten Days in a Madhouse

Blackwell's Island Insane Asylum sat on a sliver of land between Manhattan and Queens known today as Roosevelt Island. In this isolated location, across the East River and out of sight of most New Yorkers, the asylum staff were abusing their inmates. Bly pretended to be mentally ill and was convincing enough to be committed to the asylum. During the ten days she lived there, she saw how the staff mistreated the other patients—mostly recent immigrants—by beating them, giving them ice-cold baths, and forcing them to eat spoiled food. Many prisons treated their occupants better.

Bly wrote an article about her experiences in the asylum that became a citywide sensation. She tried to write "a plain and unvarnished narrative of the treatment of the patients," giving a frank account of the mistreatment they were subjected to. Her article outraged people all over New York. Readers were horrified that, far from helping mentally ill people, the asylum was doing them serious harm. "What, excepting torture, would produce insanity quicker than this treatment?" asked Bly. As a result of the article, the city vowed to devote more money to its mental institutions and provide better care. Facilities also took steps to make sure a healthy woman like Bly couldn't be admitted.

## An Investigative Journalist

At age twenty-three, Nellie Bly had become famous for creating a new kind of reporting—undercover journalism (called "stunt reporting" at the time). Instead of reporting the dry facts of a story, Bly pioneered a style of writing wherein reporters conceal their identities to get inside a particular community and write about what they experience as part of the group. She spent the next few years working as an undercover reporter, going to jail to report on how female inmates were treated and working in a sweatshop to write about the poor working conditions there.

Throughout her career, Bly stood up for the least powerful, most vulnerable people in society, and her readers loved her for it. In 1887, she turned her experiences at the asylum into a book, *Ten Days in a Mad-House.* The following year, she published *Six Months in Mexico*, a collection of articles about her experiences as a foreign correspondent. By the early 1900s, a whole new type of journalism had emerged. Its reporters were called "muckrakers" because they dug through dirty business like corruption, crime, and **exploitation** of vulnerable people. But the trend started with Nellie Bly.



## Around the World in Seventy-Two Days

Nellie Bly's exploits usually served to call attention to a great wrong, but in 1889 she embarked on a story that was pure adventure. Sixteen years earlier, novelist Jules Verne had published *Around the World in Eighty Days*, describing a speed of travel that was thought to be impossible in the days before airplanes. Bly declared she would prove that such a trip wasn't just fiction, and, with only two days of preparation, began a trek around the globe, taking only one suitcase and some money.

Bly had never been overseas before. At a time when only the richest Americans traveled abroad and few women traveled alone anywhere, twenty-five-year-old Nellie traversed land, air, and sea. She **circumnavigated** the globe, traveling by steamship, train, and even donkey, sending reports back to New York by telegraph as she went. Eager readers were fascinated by every detail of Bly's journey. The *New York World*'s subscriptions boomed. *Cosmopolitan* magazine even sent a rival reporter around the world—in the opposite direction—hoping she could beat Bly's speed.

On the journey, Bly visited England, Egypt, China, and Singapore. She even made a brief sojourn in France to meet Jules Verne, though history doesn't record whether or not he was jealous that she was living out what he had only written about. By the time she reached the west coast of America, she was several days behind schedule. Joseph Pulitzer, who owned the *New York World* (and later had U.S. journalism's most prestigious award named after him), hired a private train to bring Bly back to New York posthaste.

Nellie Bly sparked a craze that included this 1890 board game.

She finished the 24,899-mile (40,071 km) journey in 72 days, 6 hours, and 11 minutes, well ahead of the fictional characters in Verne's story (and 4 days ahead of the rival reporter), setting a real-life world record. The issue of the *World* announcing her return sold over 280,000 copies; someone even made a "Round the World with Nellie Bly" board game. She described the trip as "one maze of happy greetings," saying she was welcomed and congratulated everywhere she went. "It was glorious!" she said. "A ride worthy of a queen!"



## Iron Clad

When she was thirty, Elizabeth married Robert Seaman, a man more than forty years her senior. Seaman was a millionaire who owned several factories, and Elizabeth retired from journalism to run one of them: Iron Clad Manufacturing Co. She took to industry just as quickly as she had to journalism. The country was starting to move from using wooden barrels for storing and transporting goods to the metal drums her new company made, so sales were brisk. While she ran the prosperous business, Elizabeth also created several inventions, including a new kind of milk can and a stackable garbage can. When her husband died after nine years of marriage, she took over his businesses. Having seen firsthand during her time as a journalist how badly factory workers were often treated, she made sure to do the opposite, paying her workers well, providing health care, and even installing a gym and a library in her factories for her employees to use.

Her success didn't last forever. Despite her largesse toward her employees, some of them were embezzling, or secretly stealing money, from her businesses. Iron Clad Manufacturing went **bankrupt**. Elizabeth's days as an industrialist were over.

## Back to the Front Page

After her businesses failed, Elizabeth once again assumed her Nellie Bly **persona** and went back to reporting. Writing for the *New York Journal*, she continued to give a voice to the downtrodden. She chronicled the women's **suffrage** movement, correctly predicting years in advance that women wouldn't gain the right to vote until at least 1920 (the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified on August 18 of that year). She moved to Austria just before the outbreak of the First World War and spent several years there as a war correspondent for readers back home in America. She returned to New York after the war and continued to write for the *Journal* until 1922, when she got pneumonia. She died soon after.

When Nellie Bly died, the *Evening Journal* ran a tribute calling her "the best reporter in America."

She was only fifty-seven when she died, but in her lifetime Nellie Bly made a tremendous impact. She was a pioneer and role model for adventurous women, and her investigative style of journalism is still widely used today.



## Glossary

**ambition** *(n.)* a strong desire to achieve a goal (p. 9)

**bankrupt** *(adj.)* legally declared unable to pay debts; impoverished or ruined (p. 14)

**circumnavigated** *(v.)* traveled completely around, especially by sailing (p. 12)

**column** *(n.)* a portion of a magazine or newspaper devoted to a particular subject or the opinions of a particular writer (p. 5)

**corruption** *(n.)* dishonest or criminal behavior by those in power (p. 8)

**dismissive** *(adj.)* having or showing a lack of interest or respect (p. 7)

**exploitation** *(n.)* the act of using someone or something unfairly for profit or personal advantage (p. 11)

**foreign correspondent** *(n.)* a journalist who reports news from a foreign country (p. 8)

**incensed** *(adj.)* extremely angry (p. 5)

**journalist** *(n.)* a person who writes or prepares news for newspapers, television, or other media (p. 8)

**persona** *(n.)* a role or character that an author or actor assumes in his or her work; an image or personality that someone portrays to others (p. 15)

**suffrage** *(n.)* the right to vote (p. 15)