



NEW YORK, TUESDAY APRIL 26, 2022

BOOK CLUB KIT

Dear Readers,

Why Nellie?

As a fan of women's history, I had always had a vague knowledge about Nellie Bly, the daring Gilded Age reporter. She is the subject of many an inspirational "girls who dared" books for young readers, many of which focus on just one of her stunts—her solo race around the world to beat the record set in the Jules Verne book, *Around the World in 80 Days* (she made it in 72). But they rarely mention that that fascinating stunt is possibly one of the least interesting things about Nellie Bly.

Before Nellie was famous for racing solo around the world, she was famous for her other reporting work. She got her start writing for newspapers by penning an outraged letter to the editor in response to a father's lament about what to do with his five daughters. She parlayed that into a regular reporting job at her local paper, the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, which was an extraordinary achievement for a teenage girl, especially in the 1880s. She eventually talked her way into the offices of the *New York World* and walked out with assignment to fake insanity and get committed to the insane asylum for women at Blackwell's Island. It's the story that makes her career and a story that single-handedly changes the trajectory for all women in journalism. It is also the subject of *The Mad Girls of New York*.

"Mad" means insane. "Mad" also means anger—a feeling women too often turn against themselves instead of using as a force to change the world. "Mad" also means enthusiastic, exciting, great, and remarkable. To me, "mad" encapsulates a lot about Nellie and her work: she's mad about injustices women face; she's also doing great, daring, remarkable work to change it.

With her Blackwell's story, Nellie launched the era of "girl stunt" journalism, which meant embarking on undercover exposés. She did stories on the black market for buying and selling babies; she went undercover as a servant, as a showgirl, and as a hatbox girl and shined a light on the often dreadful conditions

for working women. Her stories weren't just fun or thrilling adventures—we now understand them as investigative journalism and take them very seriously. Nellie played a big role in creating this form of journalism.

But what Nellie really did was claim space for women on the front page and blaze a trail for other female reporters to follow. She also presented an image of a daring woman, doing interesting things, and becoming an authority—she did it all in such a fresh, lively, and captivating way that there was no stopping her and no going back to an era where women were only mentioned in the paper for their weddings or deaths. Her work changed how women were represented in the press and, thus, how women understood themselves at home and in the world. And it was sensational.

While Nellie was a pioneering journalist, she was also a twentysomething single woman in Manhattan. The biographies are vague on her personal life, but having been young in Manhattan once myself, I knew what fun was to be had. So while she didn't leave a diary, her newspaper writing hints at an ever-present sense of fun and flirtation. She comments on handsome doctors even when they're committing her to an insane asylum and shares her concerns about the state of her bangs after a few days in *Ten Days in a Madhouse*. She writes with a spunky and confident voice. She puts herself right in every story and we can't help but follow along with her.

I rediscovered Nellie in the spring of 2020, when quarantine had me dipping into my TBR pile desperate for an escape—in the time of “fake news” while journalists were risking arrest and danger to do their jobs, in a time where there was a hunger for truth, agency, and fearlessness and maybe even some fun and adventure. And I found Nellie, a young woman from the nineteenth century, armed with courage, pluck, and a pen who changed the world, got credit for her impressive work, and seemed to have fun doing it too. I knew I'd found the heroine I needed, one other readers might fall in love with too.

Maya

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The REAL Mad Girls of New York

The Historical Women who Inspired the Heroines

There is very little I made up about NELLIE BLY as she appears in *The Mad Girls of New York*—she is a novelist's dream. She was born Elizabeth Cochran in 1864, though her mother called her Pink. Her father died when she was six and her mother, Mary Jane, made a disastrous marriage to an abusive alcoholic whom she divorced when Nellie was just fourteen. Nellie began writing for the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* as a teen and spent six months reporting from Mexico before taking off to try to make it in New York. She had a hard time getting hired until the *World* hired her for the madhouse stunt. The exposé was a sensation and Nellie became a star reporter. In 1889, she embarked on her other legendary stunt—a solo race around the world in seventy-two days. After that, she wrote bad novels, continued her journalism career, married a millionaire, took over his industrial manufacturing business, lost the company and a fortune, reported from the front of World War I and returned to New York to write a column that matched orphans with forever homes. From beginning to the end, she was a fierce champion of women.



HARRIET is based on the real-life Harriet Hubbard Ayer, who ran the Ladies Pages of the *New York World* starting in 1896. She had a traditional life as a Chicago socialite before divorcing her husband due to his alcoholism (virtually unheard of in the nineteenth century), moving to New York City with her young daughters, finding employment selling antiques, and then launching the first million-dollar cosmetics company. There is no record that her path crossed with Nellie's at the *World*, but I like to imagine that it did. Fun fact: I've modeled another character on Harriet—Daisy Swan in my historical romance *Some Like It Scandalous*.



MARIAN is inspired by other girl stunt journalists, like Nell Nelson, Eva McDonald and Winifred Black. Winifred Black (pictured) served as a particular inspiration; she wrote for Hearst's *Morning Journal* and one of her first big stories was fainting on the street and writing about her experiences with the ambulance and hospital system. Marian's upper-class background is unique to the character—not taken from the lives of any of the real girl stunt reporters—because I wanted a character who could move between the wealthy and the working classes.

DOROTHY is inspired by Black journalists like Ida B. Wells, Victoria Earle Matthews, and Mary Church Terrell, all of whom wrote for the vibrant Black press. They were activists as well as writers and participated in the women's suffrage movement. Victoria Earle Matthews (pictured) also founded the White Rose Mission, a settlement house to help young Black women newly arrived in New York City.



The story of PRINCESS may seem far-fetched, but there are numerous recountings of perfectly sane women being committed against their will. Sometimes this was due to misunderstanding certain medical conditions. But many women, like Elizabeth Packard (pictured), a perfectly sane mother of six who was committed by her husband, were “inconvenient” women who were considered opinionated or assertive. Even Harriet Hubbard Ayer was forcibly committed and drugged by her unscrupulous business partner so he could take control of the business. It was a year before she escaped.

MRS. PARKHILL is inspired by the real-life Mrs. Elizabeth Gloucester, who was the richest Black woman in America at the time of her death in 1883. She was born Elizabeth Amelia Parkhill and built her fortune by operating a network of boarding houses. I discovered her fascinating life story in the *New York Times* overlooked obituaries. I wanted to take the opportunity to show a wealthy and successful woman of color in the Gilded Age, even though she predated Nellie by several years. Unfortunately there are no known photographs of her.

A RICH COLORED WOMAN.
Mrs. Elizabeth Gloucester, said to have been the wealthiest colored woman in America, died in Brooklyn Wednesday. She left half a million. She was born in poverty, and made a fortune by investments in real estate.
TRIP.

*Photos courtesy of the author,
Wikimedia Commons,
The Buffalo Chronicle.

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EXCERPT FROM

Ten Days in a Mad-House by Nellie Bly

In spite of the knowledge of my sanity and the assurance that I would be released in a few days, my heart gave a sharp twinge. Pronounced insane by four expert doctors and shut up behind the unmerciful bolts and bars of a mad-house! Not to be confined alone, but to be a companion, day and night, of senseless, chattering lunatics; to sleep with them, to eat with them, to be considered one of them, was an uncomfortable position. Timidly we followed the nurse up the long uncarpeted hall to a room filled by so-called crazy women. We were told to sit down, and some of the patients kindly made room for us. They looked at us curiously and one came up to me and asked: "Who sent you here?" "The doctors," I answered. "What for?" she persisted. "Well, they say I am insane," I admitted. "Insane!" she repeated, incredulously. "It cannot be seen in your face."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Nellie takes a big risk in leaving her life in Pennsylvania and moving to New York City to pursue a career as a reporter—as a young, single woman in the 1880s! Embarking on the madhouse story is another huge risk. Have you ever made such a bold move in your own life?
2. In the nineteenth century, women were committed to insane asylums for being “unfeminine”—too opinionated, assertive, or otherwise uncontrollable. They were committed for grief, pain, depression. Or they were merely “inconvenient.” Do you think our society’s understanding of women and tolerance for “uppity” women has changed?
3. Harriet tells Nellie, “Women have to look out for each other because no one else will.” How did it feel to see examples of strong female friendship on the page? What are some examples of times you have helped other women or another woman has helped you?
4. The word “mad” doesn’t just refer to insanity. It also means angry, or enthusiastic, exciting, great, and remarkable. How do Nellie and the other female characters embody or demonstrate different versions of “mad”?
5. What did you think of Nellie’s rivals, Sam Colton and Marian Blake? Do you think there is a difference in how they approach getting their stories compared with how Nellie does, or are they three of a kind?
6. What did you think of Prayer Girl’s coping mechanisms in the asylum? How do you think you would cope with being in a similar situation?
7. Let’s talk about romance! In the novel, Nellie has budding romances with both Hugh Grant, the mayor, and Sam Colton, a rival reporter. Who do you think is a better match for her and why?

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

8. Nellie Bly made a career out of undercover investigative reporting. She also spent the night in jail, explored the black market for babies, visited a free clinic (and almost got her tonsils removed!), and exposed an Albany lobbyist. If Nellie were alive and reporting today, what stories do you think she would be pursuing?
9. Nellie and her fellow girl stunt reporters often did things we now consider a violation of journalistic ethics to get their stories, like lying. Do you think the ends justified the means in order for them to get work, or expose dangerous conditions like those at the asylum?
10. Nellie says that, "Nothing sells like a crusade and a girl in danger." Do you think that is still true?