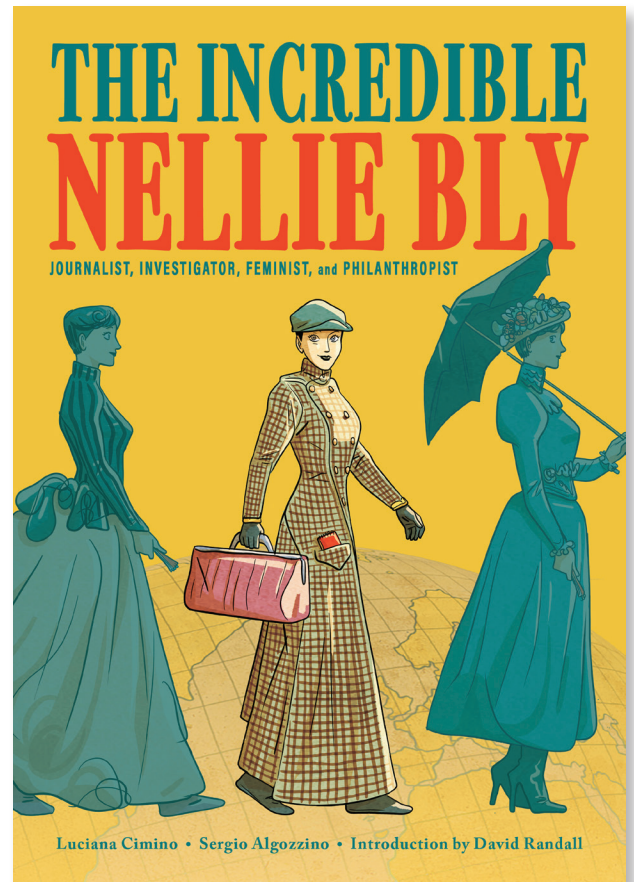


THE INCREDIBLE NELLIE BLY

JOURNALIST, INVESTIGATOR, FEMINIST, and PHILANTHROPIST

by Luciana Cimino • Illustration by Sergio Algozzino
Introduction by David Randall



BOOK INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

The Incredible Nellie Bly is the heroic story of a woman who was determined to not follow convention and to pursue her dream of becoming a journalist. Growing up in the late nineteenth century, Nellie Bly was aware of the limited options offered to women of her time, but that did not stop her. She was steadfast in pursuing a career that catapulted her to become one of the most famous journalists of the twentieth century who also paved the way for future female journalists. The graphic novel offers a historical account of the life led by Nellie that took her from orphan to world-renowned journalist to wife to entrepreneur. At every turn, Nellie had the ability to reinvent herself to create work that not only impacted women, but work that reflected the need for drastic changes in American society. Her investigative journalism helped change the plight of patients in mental institutions and women working in horrid factory conditions, and exposed the corruption of big business. Regardless of her ongoing struggle to change perceptions of women in journalism, Nellie also knew how to enjoy the freedoms she gained from her career. Being the first woman and person to break a world record for travel around the world, Nellie not only created spaces for women in the profession, but she also taught those around her the limitless potential a woman has, once given the opportunity. *The Incredible Nellie Bly* is a graphic novel that describes the tenacity of the human spirit and also the enduring nature of making society a better place by using the position one is given in life.

Supporting the national Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in reading informational text for high school curriculums, *The Incredible Nellie Bly* is an appropriate selection for grades 11–12 and early college level in language arts, social studies, or humanities classes. The following prompts provide for a critical analysis of *The Incredible Nellie Bly* using the CCSS for Informational Text.

“No young woman of today could possibly have a better role model than this versatile and resourceful journalist born more than 150 years ago.”

—David Randall

STANDARDS AND SKILLS

INDEPENDENT RESEARCH

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2

Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.



CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.3

Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

CRAFT AND STRUCTURE

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.2

Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.



“I have never written a word that did not come from my heart, I never shall.” —Nellie Bly

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

The fight for women’s equality in the workplace has been an ongoing struggle for decades. *The Incredible Nellie Bly* describes the many obstacles faced by women at the turn of the twentieth century. The introduction written by David Randall offers a synopsis of Nellie Bly’s life and also a deeper look at the societal restraints placed on women during her lifetime. Women at the time were not considered for professions outside the role of wife, mother, or domestic servant, and the other main alternative was marriage, which also determined a woman’s position in society. Ask students to discuss the rights women have today and what rights are still needed to create an equal society for all. Have students break into groups to pick one right that needs addressing and what they would do to make that right become a reality.

Women during the early twentieth century were restricted in their professions and also in their fashion choices. When Nellie decides to travel around the world, she had a special wardrobe made to make her travels easier. Have students research how women’s fashion changed over the years and debate if the changes made women’s lives easier or more difficult.

The Incredible Nellie Bly discusses how the death of her father was a turning point in how she wanted to lead her life without depending on her husband for her livelihood. Allow students explore the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to discuss what rights were addressed in the act. Using that information, have students debate the evolving and difficult journey taken to pass the ERA.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The story begins with a man on television, declaring March as Women’s History Month. Who is the man on television? Research as to why March was dedicated as Women’s History Month.
2. Columbia University is a prestigious institution with a respected journalism school. What obstacles in the 1920s did it impose on women who were interested in a major in journalism? Why would it create such obstacles?
3. How did Nellie Bly get her start in journalism? Have you ever used a public platform to bring attention to issues that are important to you?
4. Did her mother’s fate influence how Nellie chose to live her own life? How were women’s lives determined by their husbands during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century?
5. What role did Nellie’s editor, Wilson, play in her growth as a journalist?



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6. Why was investigative journalism not a role given to women?
7. The first investigation given to Nellie was of the conditions of female factory workers. How was she able to gain access to the women in the factory? What was the perception of women who worked in factories during the 1800s?
8. After the investigation was published in the newspaper, factory owners were not happy with the report. How does the reaction of the owners give an idea of how much power they had in society? Do you believe factory owners are responsible for the well-being of their workers? Explain.
9. Why did Nellie decide to go to Mexico? What was the perception of the Mexican people according to the graphic novel? What can be learned about freedom of movement for women during Nellie Bly's time?
10. Joseph Pulitzer: Create an infographic that examines the role Pulitzer played in modern journalism.
11. What did Pulitzer believe was the best motivation for journalists? Does this still exist in our modern version of journalism?
12. Would Pulitzer approve of the changes journalism has taken over the years? Explain your rationale.
13. Early twentieth-century American society was not as progressive as today. Mental institutions were places of harsh treatment and an easy way to get rid of someone who caused anyone trouble. Why did Nellie want to investigate mental institutions? How was she able to free herself from her undercover disguise? How did her report change the way mental institutions were being operated?
14. Nellie Bly tackles many societal issues in her role as an investigative journalist. Create a chart or timeline that shows the changes made in the following areas and how they improved the lives of Americans:
 - Mental institutions/asylums
 - Factory work conditions for women
 - Rights of workers and development of unions
15. What made Nellie Bly unique? How was she different from all the other female reporters she worked with at her office?
16. Nellie Bly believed that there still were many changes that needed to be made for women. What was Nellie able to expose from the Edward Phelps scandal? How did that create larger change?
17. How did Nellie's determination help her gain the ability to take a trip around the world and create a new world record?
18. What did Nellie learn from her travels abroad? What advice from her own travels did she give to women? Was she well received when she traveled from country to country?
19. What praise did she garner from her world trip? What criticism was given and why?
20. Describe the relationship between Miriam and Nellie. How were their lives similar? How did they differ?
21. By the early 1900s, Nellie was an accomplished journalist and traveler. How did her gender play a role in some of the decisions she made in her life? Was she truly able to define herself in 1900 society? What role do you believe gender plays in how people make decisions today?
22. The 1900s were a time of drastic societal changes that impacted American workers and political ideas up to today. Choose one of the ideas below and discuss how it had an impact on America today:
 - Emma Goldman: Anarchist
 - Eugene V. Debs: Socialist
 - Pullman factory strike
23. World War I is also called "the Great War." Nellie said of the war: "I try to realize all it means—the untold, indescribable suffering of millions of the world's best men. And when I say millions of men, I must multiply those men by ten to count the wives, children, parents, and sweethearts and relatives who are suffering untold mental agony." What does this tell you about World War I from her perspective? Research various statistics from the war. Would you agree with Nellie? Explain.
24. The introduction explains Nellie's marriage later on in her career. Why do you think that aspect of her life was not given much detail in the graphic novel?
25. The end of the story comes full circle with the same news report that was at the beginning of the story. Would you consider Nellie Bly a trailblazer for female journalists?
26. If you had to use three words to describe Nellie Bly, what would those words be and why?
27. Using information from the reading, create an obituary for Nellie Bly that highlights her career and personal life.
28. If Nellie Bly were alive today, do you think she would be satisfied with the role women play in journalism? Support your answer with information from the reading and your own research about modern female journalists.
29. David Randall in the introduction states that Nellie was "forever the author of her own destiny." After reading about her life, would you agree with his statement? Explain using information from the reading to support your claim.

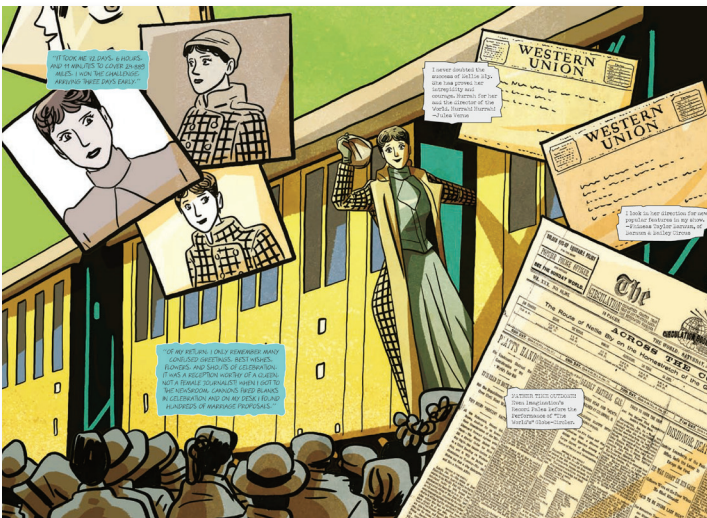


- Margaret Bourne-White
- Lydia Cacho
- Katharine Graham
- Amira Hass
- Ann Leslie
- Anna Politkovskaya
- Ethel Payne
- Dorothy Thompson

Nellie Bly fought to make a space for women in journalism, which was thought to be a male profession. The conversations between her and Miriam throughout the novel reflect the mentorship between them that helps Miriam navigate the world of journalism in the 1920s. Students should reference ideas, topics, and conversations between Nellie and Miriam from the graphic novel to guide their research on how women have worked to change the perception of women in journalism. Have students read the article [*Women Changing Journalism in 2019*](#) to examine how women have been able to create change in journalism. As students conduct their research, have students use their information to answer the essential question: Have women “made it” in the workforce, especially in journalism?

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SUPPLEMENTAL READING



ONLINE SOURCES

- [Women in News: A Collection of Research](#)
- [101 Female Journalists We Admire](#)
- [These Women Reporters Went Undercover to Get the Most Important Scoops of Their Day](#)
- [Measuring Progress: Women as Journalists](#)

ABOUT THIS GUIDE'S WRITER

Abeer Shinnawi is a middle school social studies resources teacher with more than 18 years of teaching experience. Shinnawi is the program lead for a non-profit called Re-Imagining Migration and has developed curriculum and professional development for museums such as the Reginald F. Lewis Museum in Baltimore, and she is also a member of the teacher advisory group for the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC. A mother of three daughters, Shinnawi resides in the Baltimore area.