Nellie Bly was one of the most rousing characters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1880s, she pioneered the development of “detective” or “stunt” journalism, the acknowledged forerunner of full-scale investigative reporting. While she was still in her early twenties, the example of her fearless success helped open the profession to coming generations of women journalists clamoring to write hard news.

Bly performed feats for the record books. She feigned insanity and engineered her own commitment to a mental asylum, then exposed its horrid conditions. She circled the globe faster than any living or fictional soul. She designed, manufactured, and marketed the first successful steel barrel produced in the United States. She owned and operated factories as a model of social welfare for her 1,500 employees. She was the first woman to report from the Eastern Front in World War I. She journeyed to Paris to argue the case of a defeated nation. She wrote a widely read advice column while devoting herself to the plight of the unfortunate, most notably unwed and indigent mothers and their offspring.

Bly’s life—1864 to 1922—spanned Reconstruction, the Victorian and Progressive eras, the Great War and its aftermath. She grew up without privilege or higher education, knowing that her greatest asset was the force of her own will. Bly executed the extraordinary as a matter of routine. Even well into middle age, she saw herself as Miss Push-and-Get-There, the living example of what, in her time, was “That New American Girl.” To admirers,
she was Will Indomitable, the Best Reporter in America, the Personification of Pluck. Amazing was
the adjective that always came to mind. As the most famous woman journalist of her day, as an early
woman industrialist, as a humanitarian, even as a beleaguered litigant, Bly kept the same formula for
Consequences. Move on.

It is baffling that a life of such purpose and accomplishment—still daunting, even by the
contemporary standard—did not incite the passions of any number of serious authors over the years. Even
if none of the more commercially successful biographers sensed the essential universality of Bly's
dramatic story, at least it should have snared the imagination of a feminist scholar or two, a doctoral
candidate, perhaps. And yet, the Library of Congress catalog is without one documented biography of Nellie
Bly. There isn't a single doctoral dissertation about her listed in any of the national computer registries.
More disturbing is the puny place she occupies in journalism histories, which dismiss her with a
sentence, maybe a paragraph.

Biographical sketches still appear in academic works and in literary and women's biographical
dictionaries, however, and Bly's exemplary story has inspired over the past half-century at least a score of
juvenile books. As a girl of ten, I happened to read one of them. Bly's story had greater impact on my life than
that of any other nonfiction heroine.

I hadn't thought about Bly in years, but when my
daughter, Brett, turned ten in 1986, I wanted to
introduce her to the real-life character who had
affected me so deeply. We had moved to New York
two years before, and I thought a book-length
encounter with Mother's patron saint would help her
make sense of the hopscotch childhood she had been
subjected to between the ages of three weeks and
eight years. In that time, Brett had lived in Brussels,
London, Tel Aviv (with weekends in the occupied
Gaza Strip), and London again. It suddenly became
very important to locate that book and share it with
her.

That is when I first became conscious of Bly's
near invisibility. Judging from what was available in
the bookstores, nothing had come along to replace those early biographies. From the reference librarians at the Library of Congress, I learned of the two Bly biographies that had been published in the 1950s in addition to the one I had read as a child, and that numerous others had come out since.

Through a search firm, I obtained a 1971 reprint of Mignon Rittenhouse's *The Amazing Nellie Bly* and Jason Marks's *The Story of Nellie Bly*. In the main branch of the public library in Kansas City, I found the other two from the 1950s, Iris Noble's incorrectly titled *Nellie Bly: First Woman Reporter* and Nina Brown Baker's *Nellie Bly*. I also found two fairly extensive juvenile biographies written as recently as 1989: *Making Headlines: A Biography of Nellie Bly* by Kathy Lynn Emerson and *Nellie Bly* by Elizabeth Ehrlich.

Brett and I read the books. She grew interested enough to turn Bly into a research project for school a few years later. We found that though all these books covered much the same ground, none of them agreed on any of the most basic facts of Bly's life, right down to the dates, ages, and spellings of important names, including hers. None seemed to have been based on much primary material. I began to think there wasn't much primary material. Brett thought I should find out.

She finished her project, a clever board game based on one of Bly's trips around the world, although Brett's version tracked Bly's whole life history with dice, markers, and squares ("*The Pittsburg Dispatch* offers you a job at $5 a week—advance two spaces!"). I began mine.

In the years since women's studies emerged as an academic discipline in the 1970s, specialists have scrambled to create a comprehensive feminine historical record, seizing on the most remarkable characters in history as their subjects. Hundreds of women's lives have been reclaimed in this period to fill what was an unconscionable void—what the historians refer to as the marginalization of women's achievements. Literary and other major luminaries whose fame endured, understandably, have turned up as subjects again and again. But the shelves of libraries and feminist bookstores also include fully researched works on the lives of the less well-known:
obscure painters and composers, authors and orators, abolitionists and feminists, educators and actors, humanitarians and adventurers—even some of the women journalists (Margaret Fuller, Fanny Fern) who preceded Bly by several decades. The deterrent to Bly getting her due, then, does not appear to have resulted from deflation in the magnitude of her achievements with the escaping helium of passing time.

Bly's error seems to have been not leaving behind a substantial written record to which there would be ready access. Given her circumstances at the end of her life, this probably was not by design. But the fact is, no diaries or journals of hers have surfaced. When I began this project, there were only seven known letters of hers—six at the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh and one in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College. The only family memorabilia, assembled by her grandnephew, James Agey, disappeared after his death in 1981.

The sheer volume of Bly's newspaper writing—long stories, always in the first person—could have helped make up for this deficit. In spurts over nearly four decades, Bly produced hundreds of newspaper articles for her three newspaper homes: The Pittsburgh Dispatch, The New York World, and The New York Evening Journal. Unfortunately, none of the publishers of these newspapers had the foresight to provide an annual subject or writer index to their publications, in the wise manner of, say, The New York Times or The Wall Street Journal. To compile a comprehensive file of Nellie Bly's work required months in libraries in three cities, wading through more than 100,000 pages of infinitesimal typeface on what used to be crumbling pages of yellowed newsprint. These have been reproduced on scratchy reels of microfilm, which must be viewed on eye-straining mechanical readers that break down or refuse to print with exasperating regularity. Other historical figures have warranted such tedium over the years, but apparently, without the guarantee of a substantial body of additional available resource material, not Bly.

The result of this situation has been that whenever the known details of Bly's life have been summoned for those passing references in journalism
histories or for sketchy biographical profiles, they have always derived from the same anorexic body of sources:

- the relatively few known newspaper stories by or about her clipped by libraries in Pennsylvania, where she grew up; or those retrieved and mentioned by previous researchers. These include brief biographical sketches by The New York World and The Pittsburg Commercial Gazette in 1890, and by The World in 1895
- the three nonfiction books she wrote: on her assignment to Mexico, her madhouse exposé, and her round-the-world race
- the entry on Bly in the 1893 encyclopedia A Woman of the Century by Frances Willard and Mary Livermore
- whatever articles appear under her name or her company’s name in The New York Times Index
- her obituaries in various newspapers
- the seven known letters, available since the 1960s
- personality sketches of Bly included in Ishbel Ross’s 1936 tome, Ladies of the Press, and in her 1965 book of profiles called Charmers and Cranks—largely based on the previously named sources
- a brief but informative text about Bly prepared by Jason Marks as a promotional gift from the American Flange Manufacturing Company in 1951
- the three undocumented biographies of Bly written in the 1950s for juvenile readers, all partly fictionalized
- glimpses of her in interviews conducted long ago with people who still remembered Bly.

The problem with Bly’s legacy, then, was poor planning for posterity. Guaranteeing a place in history, it seems, takes more than living a phenomenal life. In most cases, it takes careful attention to creating a documented record of that life that isn’t too hard to retrieve. Something like: I squirreled; therefore I was.

It began to make sense why the life of Nellie Bly had been relegated to the fascination of little girls—
and fewer and fewer of them as time passed, with the limited circulation of those juvenile books. Bly's was an amazing story, but as a subject of serious inquiry, simply not cost-effective. Scholarship, then, was not going to be the impetus for her historical rescue. Alternative motivation was required: a quirky, even maniacal devotion to her memory, perhaps; and an intuitive belief that, in the end, she would turn out to have been worth the bother.

By tracing Bly's life trail backward through the layers of accepted lore and faulty secondary information, drilling for the closest primary source, I attempted to eliminate all the confusing "factoids" about her. Most of these had emerged from incorrect information in books and newspaper and magazine articles over the years, which had gained credence through repetition. Some came from fictions the early biographers supplied to fill in gaps. Census records helped clarify dates and family circumstances, as did old county and family histories, however flawed. I found enlightening paragraphs about Bly in the memoirs of some of her colleagues and in biographies of them.

Combing through all those old newspapers on microfilm, page by page by page, I have compiled as complete a record as possible of Nellie Bly, Working Reporter, and have copies of all those stories. This effort was ably supplemented by dogged helpers in Washington, Austin, Chicago, and Harrisburg, who receive more fitting tribute in the acknowledgments.

Several hunches paid off: For example, I located Bly's baptismal record, which put the confusion Bly herself had caused on the question of her birth date to permanent rest. Thankfully, she was highly litigious. There was court testimony of hers on record from the time she was fourteen years old and records of lawsuits filed into her final years. National, county, and municipal archives in all the places she lived, including Vienna, Austria, yielded information I only dreamed I would find, as did libraries, special collections, and historical societies all over the United States.

Although the numerous books on journalism and newspaper history tend to slight her, many have provided or confirmed important background information or inspired new ways of looking at Bly's
life, as have biographies of editors and publishers such as Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, John Cockerill and Arthur Brisbane.

I traveled to all the key locations. I met and got to know just about everyone alive who has expressed serious interest at any time in Bly's life. Several of these people, whose names appear in the acknowledgments, made indispensable contributions to this work.

Of the traditional sources on Bly, I have used only a few: the 1890 and 1895 biographical sketches that appeared in the newspapers, because she was likely the source for them; a 1936 profile in The Pittsburgh Press based on interviews with people who knew her growing up; the 1893 sketch in Willard and Livermore, again because she was a likely source; and Bly's three nonfiction books, plus her one novel. In addition, I amassed reams of court and archival documents, relevant birth, military, military intelligence, and death records, more than 600 newspaper or magazine articles by Bly and 1,000 others either about her or of direct relevance to her story. From the original 7 pieces of personal correspondence, my collection has grown to 130. I have interviewed her few last living links, some, by this point, frustratingly tangential, others of great assistance.

I realize that, compared with the collections most biographers work with, what was assembled for this effort may sound paltry. The story may not be as complete as I would have liked, but it is infinitely more complete than I thought would be possible when I began. Given what was available when I started, I rest pleased.

Some cautionary notes:
Throughout the text, the use of qualifiers will alert the reader to places where some informed speculation supplements the facts available, facts being what they are in the writing of a life. I have notated this work heavily so that the sources of information about Bly can be known and evaluated on merit, once and for all.

The city of Pittsburgh underwent several decades of confusion with reference to the spelling of its name. According to the Carnegie Library, from 1758 to 1890, *Pittsburgh* was spelled with an *h* at the end, as it is
today. In 1890, the U.S. Board of Geographic Names decreed that every city keeping an *h* at the end of *burg* had to drop it. Pittsburgh, however, kept the *h* anyway and in 1911 petitioned to have it officially reinstated. That request was granted on July 22, 1911. During Bly’s period there, 1880-1887, the newspapers spelled *Pittsburg* without the final *h*. I have handled this by spelling the city’s name with the *h* everywhere except in the titles of the newspapers or in quoted references where it is spelled the other way.

My account of Bly’s long legal entanglement is re-created from a combination of court records, transcripts where available, and reports carried in several New York newspapers during high points in the proceedings. If the result leaves a few slight unclarities in the text, my apologies.

Where information is sketchy—about her love life and her marriage, for example, as well as about the five years in Pittsburgh before she went to work for *The Dispatch*—it has not been for want of trying to obtain it.

Ishbel Ross’s *Ladies of the Press* is the most complete reference on American women in journalism up to 1936, and I have referred to it several times for information on other women reporters of the era. Ross let most of the old saws about Bly stand uncorrected, however—which opens the question of how reliable her accounts of other early women reporters may be.

As for the weekly magazines *The Journalist* and *Town Topics*, they are quoted often enough in this book to give them an authoritative standing in Bly’s life I am sure they do not deserve. Both were essentially gossip publications, largely reflecting the commercial and editorial biases of their proprietors. They were, however, well-regarded and well-read publications in their time and appeared without interruption during relevant periods in Bly’s life. They provide, I believe, a reasonably fair representation, a baseline indication, of how Bly’s glib journalistic colleagues and social peers perceived her life as she was living it. They also make for wonderful reading. Given the paucity of reliable, surviving, contemporaneous information about Bly, I made full use of these magazines’ every reference to her. Although neither publication was indexed, it was
possible to go through them for the relevant years from complete sets of neatly bound volumes. The Library of Congress has a full collection of The Journalist and the New-York Historical Society, Town Topics. Again, the same story: Whoever keeps the best and most accessible records gets the last word.

Now that the work is done, I remain convinced that Nellie Bly was worth the effort. She is an example of possibility, even still. Bly viewed every situation as an opportunity to make a significant difference in other people’s lives as well as her own. Not wealth or connections or position or beauty or outstanding intellect eased her way to greatness. She never dwelled on inadequacy or defeat. Bly just harnessed her pluck, her power to decide, and then did as she saw fit, to both impressive and disastrous ends.

My immersion in Bly’s life has triggered a dozen reactions—from delight to distaste. Her story is fascinating. She deserves a full and lasting legacy. I hope this book renews her license to provoke and to inspire.