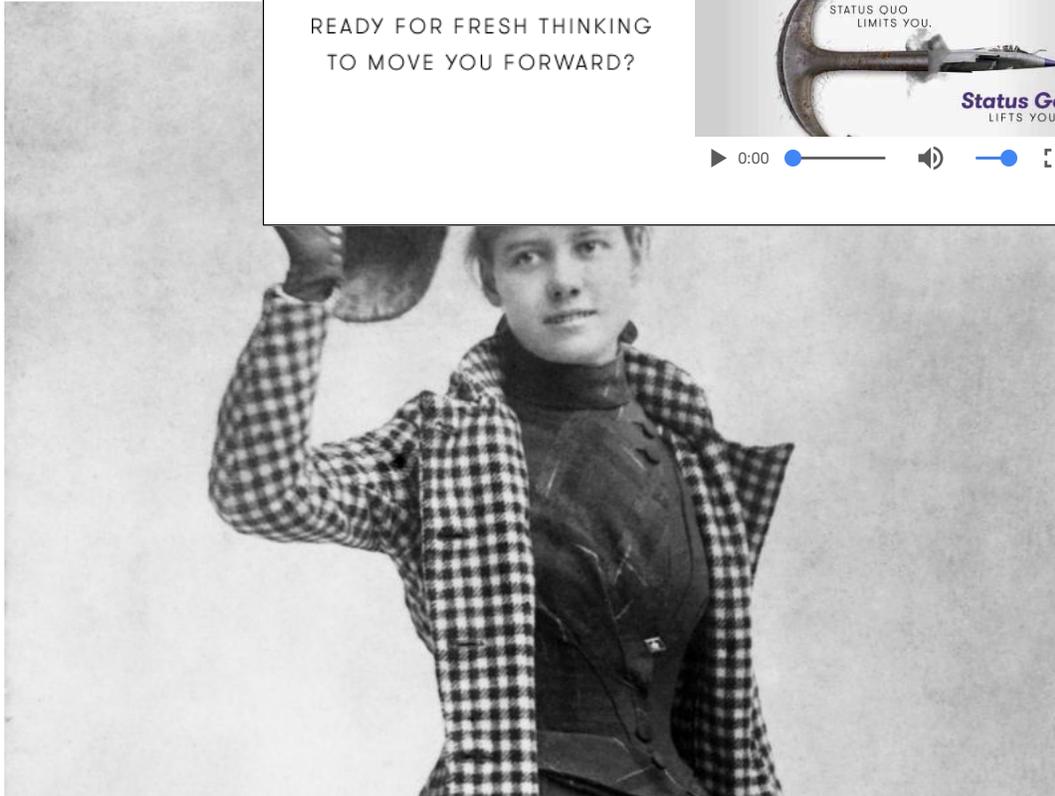


## Nellie Bly's Record-Breaking Trip Around the World Was, to Her Surprise, A Race

In 1889, the intrepid journalist was competing against a record.



Nellie Bly in a photo dated soon after her return from her trip around the world. (CORBIS)

By [Marissa Fessenden](#)  
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American journalist Nellie Bly, born Elizabeth Jane Cochran, is arguably best known today for spending ten days in a "mad-house," an [early example of investigative journalism](#) that exposed the cruelties experienced by those living in the insane asylum on New York's Blackwell's Island. Bly was a journalism pioneer, not just for women, but for all reporters. But in 1889, another one of her projects attracted even more attention: a trip around the world by train, steamship, rickshaw, horse and donkey, all accomplished in 72 days.

Bly's goal was to beat the fictional Phileas Fogg's 80-day odyssey, as written in [the 1873 novel by Jules Verne](#), but her courage and determination helped her circumnavigate the globe in just 72 days, setting a world record, besting her own goal of 75 days and—unbeknownst to her—beating out her competitor, Elizabeth Bisland of *Cosmopolitan* magazine.

Though at the conclusion of her journey, [on January 25, 1890](#), Bly was greeted at a New Jersey train station by a crowd of cheering supporters, her editor at Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* initially resisted sending her. He told her that her gender would make the trip impossible. "No one but a man can do this," he told her. "Very well," she replied, "Start the man, and I'll start the same day for some other newspaper and beat him." He eventually conceded.

Bly's record of her trip is as lively as that quip. Her observations during her travels are astute and frequently humorous, though some of her characterizations will seem racist by today's standards. Her journey began on the "Augusta Victoria," a steamship [heading from Hoboken, New Jersey to London, England](#). She writes of a conversation just as the ship embarked:

"Do you get sea-sick?" I was asked in an interested, friendly way. That was enough; I flew to the railing.

Sick? I looked blindly down, caring little what the wild waves were saying, and gave vent to my feelings.

She endured the seasickness and made it to London in seven days. A train then bore her to Paris, where she took a short side trip to Amiens to meet Jules Verne, himself. He wished her luck, saying, "If you do it in seventy-nine days, I shall applaud with both hands."

As Bly continued through the continent of Europe and on to Egypt and the Suez Canal, she was completely unaware that she was in a competition. On the same day as she departed to London, Bisland left New York headed in the opposite direction, under the auspices of *Cosmopolitan*.

Bisland serves as a good contrast to Bly. The literary editor of *Cosmopolitan*, she "reveled in gracious hospitality and smart conversation, both of which were regularly on display in the literary salon that she hosted in her small apartment, where members of New York's creative set gathered to discuss the artistic issues of the day," writes [Matthew Goodman for \*Public Domain Review\*](#). When her editor asked her to race, she said no because she had guests coming for dinner and nothing to wear on the journey. But the real reason she refused was that she had no desire to cultivate the notoriety that she was sure would come with such a race. But her editor corralled her into going on the trip.

Bisland's account of her journey was filled with "highly lyrical, impressionistic" writing. "Sapphires would be pale and cold beside this sea," she wrote of the Pacific Ocean, "palpitating with wave shadows deep as violets, yet not purple, and with no touch of any color to mar its perfect hue."



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If it seems unlikely today that there were two female reporters embarking on such a trip during the turn of the 20th century, that's because the story of intrepid daredevil "girl reporters" has faded from history books. During the heyday of yellow journalism, papers and magazines hired number of such reporters, writes [Jayne Garrison for a 1994 story in the \*Los Angeles Times\*](#). They were "stunt girls," intended to boost circulation numbers, as Tom Leonard, a professor of journalism history at the University of California, Berkeley, tells Garrison. Bly's own considerable pedigree still may have had an outsized-influence in making the story happen. "I can't imagine the editors of her day were excited about the idea of throwing a woman onto the front page as often as she got there," journalist Brooke Kroeger, who wrote [a biography on Bly](#), says. "But she got there nearly every time she wrote, which in itself is astounding. It's hard to understand today what that really meant in its context."

During the journey, Bly sent brief dispatches to her paper by cable, writes [Roma Panganiban for \*Mental Floss\*](#). Longer, more detailed reports traveled by ship and slowly, so the *World* would "string out the story to maintain the public's interest." Her editors began taking bets on the time Bly would arrive back home, down to the minute. They also reprinted accounts of Bly's journey from papers in the countries she visited.

When Bly arrived in Hong Kong on Christmas day, she reported to the office of the "Oriental and Occidental Steamship Company" to set up her departure for Japan. There, the man in the office told her she was going to lose her race. Bly writes:

"Lose it? I don't understand. What do you mean?" I demanded, beginning to think he was mad.

"Aren't you having a race around the world?" he asked, as if he thought I was not Nellie Bly.

"Yes; quite right. I am running a race with Time," I replied.

"Time? I don't think that's her name."

"Her! Her!!!" I repeated, thinking, "Poor fellow, he is quite unbalanced," and wondering if I dared wink at the doctor to suggest to him the advisability of our making good our escape.

"Yes, the other woman; she is going to win. She left here three days ago."

Bly was shocked to discover that Bisland was traveling, as well, but she pressed forward, toward Japan (but not without a small detour to buy a monkey, while she waited for the steamship to be ready). After the long journey across the Pacific to San Francisco, she was greeted in America with celebration. The *World* chartered a single-car train to speed her across the country, a trip she wrote was "one maze of happy greetings, happy wishes, congratulating telegrams, fruit, flowers, loud cheers, wild hurrahs, rapid hand-shaking and a beautiful car filled with fragrant flowers attached to a swift engine that was tearing like mad through flower-dotted valley and over snow-tipped mountain, on-on-on! It was glorious! A ride worthy a queen."

Meanwhile, Bisland's rough crossing from England back to America ultimately made her lose the race, as she would come in four days behind Bly. Much to Bisland's dismay, she arrived home famous, as well. But unlike Bly, who promptly began a four-city lecture tour, Goodman writes for *Public Domain Review*, Bisland fled the attention and lived for a year in Great Britain. She never spoke publicly about the trip after the first day of her return.

About Marissa Fessenden

Marissa Fessenden is a freelance science writer and artist who appreciates small things and wide open spaces.

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