

BLY

a true story

treatment by

Christopher & Kathleen Riley

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LOGLINE: The true story of Nellie Bly, a penniless young woman in 1890s New York who claws her way up from obscurity to revolutionize journalism and then becomes her own biggest story when she races around the globe to shatter the record of Jules Verne's legendary hero in *Around the World in 80 Days* – a feat which makes her the most famous woman on earth.

Act One

Nellie Bly arrives on the scene a hundred years too soon. In a Victorian world of browns and grays and modesty and manners, her mother has taught her to dress in pink, grab all the attention she can and never let it go. Nellie craves the spotlight but has no way to get there. She's a natural-born celebrity in a world that hasn't yet invented celebrity.

Worse, Nellie's been left destitute by a wealthy father who died without mentioning her in his will. She's watched her mother remarry an abusive drunk, a disastrous attempt to keep the family afloat. Toiling in a crowded Pittsburgh boarding house and without a penny to her name, Nellie swears that she will make her mark on this world and she'll do it alone. Never will she let herself need anyone. She'll make her own way in this all-male world that has no place for a beautiful young woman possessed with fearlessness, a knack for self-promotion and a fiery passion for something she has yet to discover.

The spark that ignites Nellie is an article in a Pittsburgh newspaper titled "What Girls Are Good For." The article argues that a woman – like Nellie – who works to make a living outside the home is "nothing less than a monstrosity." Those words enrage Nellie. If she had been raised to know her place, she might let it go. Instead, she writes the editor a blistering response short on spelling and grammar but long on passion for the plight of the working woman. To her astonishment, the editor offers her a job.

Nellie goes straight for the throat, venturing into factories and slums, talking to real working people. She uncovers stories no one else is telling, gritty, human stories of poverty, child labor and divorce. She discovers she has an extraordinary ability to make people trust her and talk to her. And she works herself into each of the stories, making herself the star.

Nellie's stories sell papers and win her the attention she craves. But they also terrify her publisher, who fears this kind of reporting is far too dangerous for a woman. Nellie finds herself suddenly restricted to the ladies' page, forced to write about flower shows, fashion and rubber raincoats. She can't stand it. She disappears from Pittsburgh without saying a word. A co-worker finds a note left behind on her desk: "Dear Q.O., I'm off for New York. Look out for me. Bly."

Act Two

Nellie arrives in New York to find a journalistic Wild West where papers compete furiously for readers. It's an environment perfectly suited to her fresh, sensational style. She sets out to take the town by storm, blitzing every newsroom in the city. To her dismay, Nellie is laughed out of every one of those rooms.

Nellie fights back, reinventing herself. She fast-talks her way into the office of Joseph Pulitzer and offers him a dare. She'll go undercover in New York's notorious Blackwell's Island asylum. If she comes back with a story worthy of publication in Pulitzer's *World*, he'll have to give her a job. Pulitzer can't resist the offer. Nellie creates a new identity, acts crazy enough to get herself hauled into court and declared insane, then spends 10 harrowing days inside the asylum before Pulitzer sends an attorney to rescue her. Nellie's resulting exposé creates a sensation in New York, sparks investigations – and wins her the job. More than that, it introduces a new kind of investigative reporting that comes to be known as “stunt journalism.”

Nellie keeps pushing. Always the consummate actress, she poses as an unwed mother trying to sell a baby to expose the baby-buying trade. She pretends to be a thief to experience a night in jail. She plays the town reformer, the town flirt, a chorus girl, and always, she is the main character in her stories. Her name becomes part of the headlines. She is the object of more attention than she ever could have imagined.

Much of that attention comes from men. Nellie finds herself drawn to an industrialist named Robert Seaman. He's older, he's handsome, he's rich, he worships Nellie and he wants to give her the security she's never known. But that makes him the worst kind of threat to her determination to go it alone.

At the same time, Pulitzer hires other women to copy Nellie. Rival newspapers follow suit. One pays a woman to strap on an early bulletproof vest and get shot in order to write about the experience. Suddenly, Nellie is sharing the spotlight with dozens of women.

Desperate not to be upstaged – and frantic to distance herself from the man she fears she's falling in love with – Nellie hatches a plan. She'll achieve something no human has ever attempted or die trying. Her plan is to leave New York alone and circle the globe in less time than Phileas T. Fogg, the fictitious hero of Jules Verne's wildly popular *Around the World in 80 Days*. She'll cable back stories chronicling her journey. Pulitzer loves the idea – and immediately decides to send a man, who won't need a chaperone. Or so much luggage. Furious, Nellie counters, “Fine. Start your man and I'll start the same day for some other newspaper and beat him.” Pulitzer, knowing this is no idle threat, agrees to send Nellie. She sets sail without a word to Robert, leaving him brokenhearted.

Her audacious stunt becomes one of the most publicized journeys of all time as she sets out by steamship with a single small bag and a pledge to her readers, “If I fail, I will never return to New York. I would rather return dead and successful than alive and behind time.”

Nellie travels by train, carriage, donkey, ricksha, sampan and catamaran. When she reaches France, she makes a breathless detour to visit Jules Verne, who is charting her course alongside that of his own fictional Phileas Fogg. In Egypt she is taken hostage by extortionists. In Sri Lanka she is arrested by corrupt policemen. In China she is threatened with stoning. And everywhere she goes, she turns the heads of countless would-be suitors, an activity she turns into a kind of sport. Aboard one ship, she spreads the rumor that she's an eccentric American heiress traveling with nothing but a checkbook and a hair brush, and an English nobleman promptly proposes. Aboard a second ship, she's forced to save herself from a deranged stalker who wants to prove his love by drowning with her in the sea. And all the while she's cabling back sensational accounts of her adventures to Pulitzer in New York. The whole world follows her progress as she speeds triumphantly toward her goal.

It's too good to last.

Nellie reaches Hong Kong on the thirty-ninth day of her journey, two days ahead of schedule. She's ecstatic and takes the opportunity to visit nearby Canton. Ignoring the warnings of her guide, she makes her way to the infamous execution grounds to see the place where criminals are beheaded daily and women are tied to crosses and butchered for the pettiest offenses. At this moment, a man is being suspended by his arms which are twisted around behind him. A crowd has gathered to watch him die while his children beg the magistrates for his life, offering the few coins they possess.

Without asking the condemned man's crime, Nellie wades into the crowd. She steps in front of the magistrates, empties her handbag and thrusts all of her remaining money at them. After a heated discussion, they divide the strange money, cut down the prisoner and walk away. The prisoner disappears with his children without a word of thanks. That leaves Nellie standing alone to face a disappointed and hostile crowd. She's energetically talking her way out when a squad of British troops rushes in to rescue her. Nellie loudly protests that she doesn't need to be rescued, that she was doing just fine on her own, thank you.

At this moment, a British officer gives her the most unexpected news. "You're going to lose your race. You're going to be beaten." Nellie doesn't understand. The officer shows her an autographed copy of *Cosmopolitan Magazine* and explains that another American reporter, a woman, was here just yesterday. She left New York the same day as Nellie and has been racing her around the globe for *Cosmo*. She left Canton this morning for the port in Hong Kong.

Nellie races through the night back toward Hong Kong. She arrives at dawn to board the steamer that will carry her to Japan – only to discover that it has sailed without her. The woman from *Cosmopolitan*, it turns out, is carrying letters promising any amount of money to get ships to leave ahead of schedule and speed her on her way. The next ship sailing for Japan won't leave for a week.

Nellie finally has what she's always said she wanted. She's completely alone. But she's stranded in Hong Kong, she's lost her race and the whole world is going to know.

Act Three

Nellie Bly reinvents herself for the final time. She does what is for her the most painful and impossible of things. She asks for help. Desperately working her way along the waterfront, she is repeatedly turned away until she finds an Australian freighter leaving for Japan. She pulls out all the stops, trying to cajole her way aboard even as hands are casting off the lines. The Aussie captain refuses her – until he learns that this is the famous Nellie Bly. Eager to be immortalized in one of Nellie’s stories, he finally welcomes her aboard.

Nellie reaches Yokohama just as the American steamer *Oceanic* is coming into port. She makes her way aboard the ship and finds the captain, who informs her that he isn’t scheduled to sail for San Francisco for a week. Nellie replies that she needs him to turn his ship around immediately. She needs him to sail for San Francisco tonight. And she needs him to make the trip in record time. She needs his help. But she has nothing to offer him.

To Nellie’s amazement, that simple, passionate plea works a magic she could never have imagined. This dashing young captain and his crew are eager to help. They do everything Nellie asks and more. They turn their ship around and race toward California, steaming through a storm that grows worse every day until it threatens to sink them. They run the engines harder than they’ve ever been run, desperate to make up for lost time. They paint over the ship’s giant engines the words, “For Nellie Bly, we’ll win or die!”

That gesture shatters Nellie and everything that has held her apart for so long. From this moment she is forever changed. The race is no longer hers alone. If she wins, she’ll win it for them all.

Incredibly, the crew of the *Oceanic* delivers Nellie to San Francisco before Nellie’s *Cosmopolitan* competitor. There is still a chance Nellie could win. Then the purser makes a terrible discovery. The ship’s bill of health has been forgotten in Japan. No one will be allowed to land until the next ship arrives in two long weeks.

Nellie can’t wait. With the captain’s help, she arranges for a tug to come alongside and smuggle her ashore. She races to the train station. And then realizes her money is gone and she has no way to pay for her ticket to New York.

Joseph Pulitzer has already solved that problem. The story of Nellie’s journey has become such a phenomenon, and sold so many papers, he’s arranged for a special train to speed her across the continent. As the locomotive races her toward the finish line, huge, cheering crowds turn out along her route. She arrives in New York to booming cannons and a massive ticker tape parade in a record-shattering time of 72 days, six hours, eleven minutes and fourteen seconds. She has defeated both Phileas Fogg and her competitor from *Cosmopolitan* who has fallen hopelessly behind.

But Nellie’s journey isn’t finished. Not until she leaves the parade and the attention of the cheering crowds to make her way to Robert.

At the age of 25, Nellie Bly has become the most famous woman on earth. She goes back to work at the paper, writing the stories no one else is writing. But she is no longer alone.

Get help writing a script that grabs
Hollywood's attention – from writers who've
done it.

Arrange for a professional script consultation from Christopher and Kathleen Riley, the screenwriters behind *Bly* and the multiple-award-winning film *After the Truth*, at www.scriptHollywood.com.

“The Rileys constantly made me dig deeper into the characters and go for the emotional truth. Thanks to their input I now have a fellowship at Disney and a script that gets managers and agents to call me.”

*Amy Snow
Winner
2004 Disney Screenwriting Fellowship*

Find out more about how a consultation with the Rileys can help you by visiting www.scriptHollywood.com.

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