

EPISODE TITLE: The ‘Stunt Work’ That Launched Women Into Investigative Journalism

EPISODE DESCRIPTION: Women including Ida B. Wells and Nellie Bly were on the front edge of investigative journalism in the 1800s. But even with these historical trailblazers, why were women excluded from reporting hard news until recent history?

Producer Jordan Pettiford sits down with author, journalist and professor Brooke Kroeger to find out. Brooke has authored six books and her most recent book is “Undaunted: How Women Changed American Journalism”.

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(THEME MUSIC IN)

GABE HOSTIN, HOST:

You're listening to Untextbooked. This is a history podcast for the future that gives young people like us agency and voice in our education. I'm your host, Gabe Hostin.

JORDAN PETTIFORD, HOST:

I'm producer Jordan Pettiford.

GABE HOSTIN:

Follow UnTextbooked on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you listen, so you never miss an episode.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

This week on the podcast, we talk about the historical struggles of women in journalism.

BROOKE KROEGER, GUEST:

I'm Brooke Kroeger, longtime journalist, author of now six books, and a recently retired professor called Professor Emerita at NYU Journalism.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Brooke's most recent book is *Undaunted: How Women Changed American Journalism*, but she's worked in the industry for decades. So when we met for an interview, we immediately clicked on our shared love of journalism and reporting.

BROOKE KROEGER:

And you work at *The Spectator* also, right?

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

I do.

BROOKE KROEGER:

All right. Love that.

(THEME MUSIC OUT)

GABE HOSTIN:

So Jordan, clearly it seems you want to be a journalist after you graduate. Why is that?

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Well, there are a few reasons. One of the main ones is a woman who appears in *Undaunted*, Ida B. Wells. She was an investigative reporter from the late 1800s. I remember being a little kid and picking up a chapter book about her. I learned that her parents met after being enslaved in the same house. They raise to prioritize her education, but by the time she grows up, reconstruction is over. She can't vote, she can't hold office, but she starts reporting.

GABE HOSTIN:

And what did Ida B. Wells investigate?

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

She mostly reported on lynching, which she started after the lynching of her friend, a local business owner. She documented the number and location, and importantly, the real reason why lynchings were happening, namely white people were murdering black people for things like opening businesses, registering to vote, or in the case of her friend, a petty dispute between kids.

GABE HOSTIN:

That's seriously important work. I can see why she would inspire you.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Absolutely. Brooke was also inspired to enter journalism because of a historic childhood hero. A specific story really stuck out to me from around the turn of the century, Nellie Bly in the insane asylum. And I was just-

BROOKE KROEGER:

Jordan, that does not make you unique because that is the story that everyone likes to talk about, about Nellie Bly.

GABE HOSTIN:

Wait, what? I need to know more about this Nellie Bly.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Well, I couldn't believe what I was reading. It was the late 1800s. She's just wrapped up two years at the Pittsburgh dispatch. She went to Mexico for six months. She arrives in glamorous, exciting New York City.

BROOKE KROEGER:

She thinks the world is waiting for her and nobody wants to hire her.

GABE HOSTIN:

Ouch.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

But for a young journalist, this might be relatable.

BROOKE KROEGER:

And so she starts, and this is so clever, this is really great career advice, she does a story with every big editor in town about what they think of women journalists, what place is there for women journalists. And the year is 1887, when there isn't a lot of place for women journalists, and that's what the editors tell her. But when she asks about how they might, they give her some pretty good ideas. And one of them was that when you apply for a job, you should come with ideas. At least in journalism, you should come with ideas. So she does that.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

She eventually does get hired, and she comes with these pretty bold ideas to pitch to her editor at the New York World.

BROOKE KROEGER:

She suggests that she travels steerage across the ocean, the least expensive way to get across, and write about that experience because, of course, this was 1885, was a period of great migration to the United States, especially from Ireland and Italy and places like that. And so she suggests this, but they think it's too expensive and too dangerous. So they suggest instead that she [inaudible 00:04:04] insanity and get herself committed to the women's insane asylum on Blackwell's Island, which now in New York is called Roosevelt Island. She successfully manages to do this by checking herself into a boarding house and acting insane. And the matron gets concerned and calls the police. And from there, she, over a course of about two days, makes her way, under escort, obviously, to Blackwell's Island and gets committed where she remains for 10 days undercover, witnessing all sorts of abuse and circumstances where women really shouldn't have been there. Either they didn't speak the language and were sent shockingly, or relatives had sent them away to keep them from inheriting, things like that, and writes these extraordinary expose that appears over two issues.

GABE HOSTIN:

So this was more than just a stunt.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

She was exposing the terrible conditions of a public facility. This reporting really puts her on the map and makes her famous.

BROOKE KROEGER:

Why she becomes so extraordinarily famous, besides the quality of the work, which was exciting and new, and I was there, you can believe me, it has this wonderful quality, but in addition to that, during the 10 days, all the other newspapers in town are covering, who is this insane girl? So that made her even more famous, because when it was revealed, she became a character, and then she has the good sense to push it. So week after week after week after week, for the next two and a half years, she is often doing exposes of the prisons, of treatment centers for alcohol, of the baby buying trade, of lobbyists who are taking bribes in Albany. She just does thing after thing after thing, and becomes extremely important.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

So she kind of took this technique of investigative undercover type thing, which to me, it felt like in the book, that there were maybe two explanations for this, of women at the time period just being innovators, but also the pressure being put on women to maybe not take some of the more hard news assignments. And so I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what may be inclined women at the time period to do this more investigative work and sort of focus on some of the problems of the progressive era.

BROOKE KROEGER:

Okay. Well, that's really well put. And I think you're on the nose that women were doing something they hadn't done before. By the time the 1880s, the mid-1880s rolls around, women have found a place in news work. They found a place on the women's pages. They're writing about garden shows, society, gossip, new products, hairstyles, things like that. And suddenly, as a circulation building gimmick, we could say gimmick or strategy, the publishers and editors come up with this idea. It's not coming from the women. But the women who are young and daredevil in attitude find they have place to do what was called stunt work. I would call it kind of a precursor to serious investigative work that you'd verified. This was a place that young girls without a lot of training, but some ability to write well, and willingness to subject themselves to scary situations found platform on the feature pages, or even on the front page.

GABE HOSTIN:

So Nellie wasn't the only woman doing this type of stunt work?

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Nope. She was not alone in this. Basically every paper had a woman covering stunt work, but that's the only time you'd see a woman's byline, except for in the women's pages, covering homemaking, gossip, and fashion. We talk a lot about women being relegated to the women's section, but there was also certain demographics of women that never really got into the women's pages, right? And somebody I specifically wanted to bring up, who I would say, like the way you were talking about, being a childhood fan of Nellie Bly's, a childhood fan of Ida B. Wells. So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit just about her work, and also about sort of what the barriers to entry looked like across different demographics.

BROOKE KROEGER:

Sure. So we could start by saying one of the things that white women were doing in the 1840s and fifties, not many, but a few were working for the abolition press because the abolition press didn't have a lot of money, right? So they were willing to hire women in ways that more established big picture organizations would not have been. That opportunity, if they were good enough, put their work before the people in the mainstream. I'm talking about Grace Greenwood, Gail Hamilton, Lydia Maria Child. They were women who then advanced in almost a man-like way in the 1840s and 50s. By the time we get to Ida B. Wells, now we're in the 1880s and 1890s, she's of Nellie Bly's era, as is Ida Tarbell. These two women are serious, bonafide investigative reporters. Where Nellie is more of a narrative storyteller, these are women with training, with schooling, who verify their work, who document their work. And so we know that Ida B. Wells starts as a journalist writing for the black press and gains a reputation, and then buys into a paper in Memphis, and they're doing great

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

At this point, Ida is 29 years old. She's gone to college and become a teacher to help raise her siblings after her parents died of yellow fever. But she's opinionated and discerning. She's been writing for the local black press. She decides she wants to become a co-owner of a newspaper in Memphis, Tennessee, was named The Free Speech and Headlight.

BROOKE KROEGER:

She starts to cover lynching in a really serious way, with names and dates and cities and states, and really, really well, goes on a vacation to New York, and marauders come in and ransack the press and burn her offices.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

And they told her, "Don't come back," the implication being that if she did, they'd kill her.

BROOKE KROEGER:

And so from New York, she writes her major piece, 6,000 words, really detailing this entire subject, and her colleague, Timothy Fortune, publishes it. And from there, she really, really builds this huge and important reputation across race lines, which, of course, at the time was not easy to do.

GABE HOSTIN:

Wow. So Ida is doing some really serious and impactful work around lynching, Nellie Bly is reporting on conditions and asylum and factories. I would think this opened up a whole world of opportunities for women working in journalism, right?

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

I wish.

BROOKE KROEGER:

I think that to me, that was a really fascinating discovery. You could see that women as early as 1840, when mass media starts, are trying to find ways to write seriously, and that was exciting to me.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

After the investigations and stunts of the progressive era, these women were still pigeonholed in what they could cover.

BROOKE KROEGER:

And then after that dies out, in about six or seven years, it's really finished from over exposure. The next big move where women found place was what we call the sob sisters. And that's not the most attractive era in women getting off the women's pages, but it did do that. These were women in the courtrooms. So if you've ever seen the musical Chicago, it's Mary Sunshine.

Speaker 5:

Her name's Mary Sunshine.

BROOKE KROEGER:

That's the role, these women who are wrenching every tear, every piece of emotion, out of a courtroom drama, usually big murder cases, things like that. And then that dies out pretty quickly. And then the next era is the really important one where we really see women, they've been down the shoot into the mainstream, but now they're really going to get there. And that is the front page girls of the 1920s. So again, it's one per paper. There's not a lot of opportunity. But if you could be a newspaper man's idea of what a newspaper woman should be, you might get that job.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Editors also gave women a shot as war correspondence during both World Wars and Vietnam.

BROOKE KROEGER:

We had radio in the 40s during World War II, but you see how badly women were being treated. At CBS, if you were a woman covering the battlefield in Greece, a man was reading her copy because they thought her voice wasn't authoritative enough. And then women who were part of that CBS group in Europe, when Edward R. Murrow reconstitutes his crew back in New York, guess how many women were in that crew? Zero.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Brooke says women made up 10% of the foreign correspondence up until Vietnam.

BROOKE KROEGER:

So in terms of at home, and this was straight through to Vietnam until the draft ended, men would get drafted, jobs would open up. Women got opportunity. Did all of them remain in journalism? No. But others found their place and made the most of it. So that was one way.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Something you talk about still well into the 50s and 60s is this kind of attitude that was held towards women that were being hired, especially at magazines where women would start in research, and men would start in reporting. At one point in the book, you essentially say that men were hired on the strength of their potential, and women were hired based on their experience. They had to be brilliant to a certain degree in order to progress into reporting.

BROOKE KROEGER:

Yeah, I think it's true all along. Women who were a plus, plus, plus exceptional have never had a problem in journalism all the way back to Margaret Fuller. They have never had a problem. But those are once in a generation sort of people. That isn't the norm. An A woman, or even an A plus woman would not have the opportunity of a B plus guy. That's just how it was for a very long time. Well into the 70s, this is true.

GABE HOSTIN:

Wow. So what changed? What allowed women to finally enter these newsrooms, but not as front page girls, sob sisters, or research assistants?

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Legislation was a big help. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 came into effect, and it prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Workplaces could no longer legally discriminate, but change didn't happen overnight. Women working at major publications had to start suing their employers.

BROOKE KROEGER:

The sad part is that women as women, it took them about six or seven years from 1964 to figure out that the civil rights legislation, equal opportunity legislation also applied to them, that it was a tool they could use in approaching their employers about changing the conditions and the denigration they experienced. But imagine how ingrained your own wanting sense of self was that you didn't even understand that you qualified under these new options. They couldn't even see that because the conditioning was so strong about who a woman was. And that was centuries worth of attitude that had to be undone, and still isn't quite undone.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Yeah. The first lawsuit that you mentioned in the book is 1970 Newsweek lawsuit. So I was wondering if you could just outline a little bit of detail about the Newsweek lawsuit and sort the effects that lawsuits in general had. And also, just a question that's tied to that is, do you think that it was the litigation that forced employers hands in terms of being more inclusive in the newsroom, or do you think that women had just reached a critical mass in the industry at that point?

BROOKE KROEGER:

The answer is yes and yes. I think both are true. And I think there was a confluence of factors. Remember the Feminine Mystique came out and I think what, 1963 or 64, which was like a mind exploder for women. When I was in college, which was from 1967 to 71, the women's movement was flourishing, so we had a lot of feeling that we had possibility. The law was also there to help. People often ask if I felt like I was blazing trails. I was absolutely not. I was riding a wave of possibility that it happened in the wake of all those suits. So Newsweek was first, but right on its heels come Time Life, and then the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Detroit Free Press. There were a slew of them, maybe 10 or 12, around the same time, within a couple of years. Many took a long time to settle.

But when that's going on, companies are on alert. So they start looking at, "Oh gosh, what are we doing that is a problem, and how can we address this?" And then there's the change in the zeitgeist where people are feeling differently, much as men started to feel during the suffrage movement, where they're understanding that through the passions of their wives, and their daughters, and their lovers, that they can help and change could happen. And of course, change was having to come mostly through men because there weren't that many women in positions of power to do this, though there were a few, and they were very instrumental.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

So I would say it seems, for the most part, the first half of the book is very print focused because that's just the medium that journalism primarily was in at the time.

BROOKE KROEGER:

That's all there was.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Yeah. In 60s, 70s, you sort of start bringing in broadcast. Kind of connected to what you were talking about, people not thinking that a woman's voice could be authoritative enough to report on the radio, is that on television, women were faced with a type of scrutiny that I feel like is different than in print in terms of looks and expectations of what it meant to be a woman in television. So I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that, and specifically women news anchors.

BROOKE KROEGER:

Sure. And you forgot about age, which was the other factor, a really big one. So it wasn't only appearance, which was huge, but also age. And so women were considered to be aging out at around 39. Imagine that, that you would already be under scrutiny for your appearance, not only your beauty or your attractiveness, or what is perceived as attractiveness. And then of course, for African-American women early in the field, of whom there were some great ones, there was the question of hair. There was that. So the things that women were subjected to were just... I'm trying to imagine someone in your cohort having to address those kinds of issues today. I think it would be just so unacceptable. I think appearance still reigns pretty strong in ways for women that it doesn't quite for men.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

I will say. I was personally shocked when you were talking about Barbara Walters, and frankly how much money in the... Is it the 80s, that ABC paid to get her? And honestly, I was just kind of, A, impressed, and B, kind of thinking about in the face of those kind of ageist and sort of sexist things, she just commanded so much respect that she was such an asset to a station in order to be able to work.

BROOKE KROEGER:

Yes. And Katie Couric also commanded huge money some years later, even as late as 2006 when she became an anchor in Walter Cronkite's old chair. So those are women who surpassed expectations in the most extraordinary ways, and I think that's why they continue to garner so much respect, because they were able to break those barriers. Did they break them for everyone? No. They broke them for themselves. But that was important in and of itself. But I'm with you, super impressive to be able to command that kind of money, because money's always been the problem. As we know today, women earn some percentage less all the time.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Something that also fascinated me in terms of things that the book does talk about is I feel like maybe now I know every editor of the New York Times from the 60s till now, but I was shocked as I kept reading, and I'm like, there's still no woman executive editors until we're basically in the epilogue of the book, in the 2010s, right?

BROOKE KROEGER:

Yeah, 2010 to 2013, I think is right. Yeah. So the New York Times is the pinnacle. And as my friend Jannie Scott said, there was probably an attitude of if it's not broke, don't fix it. And so by the time Jill Abramson becomes the executive editor of the New York Times, the AP has had an executive editor who's a woman for a decade, the Daily News has had one for a decade, the [inaudible 00:21:33] Tribune for even longer than that. It's sort of like, well, where were you? What took you so long? And partly, it's men in queue that have been cultivated and nurtured and brought along with the idea that someday they might. And then I think what the book says, and I believe to be true, is that the women who first got to the associate managing editor position, two women in the 90s, neither of them even saw themselves as prospects for the top job.

They were wonderful editors, respected, and even loved by the staff, but not seen as contenders ever, either by themselves or by anybody in charge. No one thought of them that way. So the only women who'd even got put into the channel into the queue were not prospects. They were not. So how is that going to happen if you aren't cultivating? I asked this question of Max Frankel, four editors back, I guess now. He's a man in his 90s, still quite with it. And he didn't really respond to it. I said, "Gosh, in the 1980s, when that's happening, I was running a third of the world for United Press. If you're saying that The Times had a third of his staff as women by the end of your reign, which was, of course, really great considering where they had started..." Bravo and salute. Chapeau.

But I said, "So that means 300 women, at least." I said, "So 30, there must've been 30 to choose from. How is it possible that there was no one being put into the queue?" So that's not a question I got an answer to, but I think it's a good question, and it says a lot

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

As of 2023, and the 2020s, you talked about in a lot of outlets, the amount of journalists in the newsroom that are women is almost at parody-

BROOKE KROEGER:

Correct.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

... and sometimes even-

BROOKE KROEGER:

Above.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

... female dominated. And at the same time though, journalism is an industry that is rapidly changing. And so I was wondering what sort of advice you would give to women who are looking to

get into journalism now that's kind of, I guess, influenced by the legacy of all the women that you've written about in your book, about how you would approach going into such a, I guess you could say turbulent industry at the moment.

BROOKE KROEGER:

So this part is an epilogue on purpose because it's not long enough ago, the 2000s to the 2020. This 20 years is not really history yet. It hasn't coalesced in a way that we can really talk about it as history. I hit some main points of things that have happened in this period that I thought spoke to the moment, and I included them. And so one thing you notice, and I talk about this a little bit, that theory of job cues, gender cues, where when a field loses prestige, the white males go away, and then the women come next, and then people of color after them. And that's kind of how a field changes. There was a picture not long ago. I think it was one of the business magazines, did a grid of 12 women all leading major news organizations. That's where we are now, including the New York Times, which has a woman president. And I see that, and having done this 180 year history, I get worried because I go, "Oh gosh.

"When women are coming to the fore, we've seen in the 1930s and other places, suddenly a woman becomes city editor, suddenly a black woman gets to be, in the 1950s, a full-fledged reporter on a mainstream New York City newspaper. And a year later, these organizations fail. So I get really concerned when I see women coming up in this preponderance, because I'm saying, "Oh my God, what does this mean for the field if history's lessons hold?" Gosh, I hope not. But I would say what I would say when I wanted to become a journalist, I got it from Nellie Bly, when that happens to you, you really don't have a choice. This is what you want to do. And reading books like this one and others of its kind help you to understand the field. It's understanding what you can do to start to make a difference, to see where these cracks are, and to address them. We're concerned now about local news, so much, just this desert of local news, which is so depressing. We're concerned about the way women are treated on social media, women journalists. This is terrifying.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Well, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. I'm not going to lie, when I emailed you and you were immediately like, "Yes," I was so excited.

BROOKE KROEGER:

Well, that just absolutely thrills me. And lots of luck with this project. It's great to talk to you.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

It was great to talk to you.

BROOKE KROEGER:

Bye for now. This was really fun.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

That was Brooke Kroeger, journalist, professor, and author. Her most recent book is *Undaunted: How Women Changed American Journalism*. If you enjoyed this episode, you have to pick up her book. As a student journalist, I learned so much. She's also written other books about journalism and history, including a book all about Nellie Bly.

GABE HOSTIN:

So Jordan, what did you learn from putting together this episode?

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

So many things had to change over such a long period of time, I think, to create a cascade effect for the industry to be where it is now, because you have these women who are just excellent, extraordinary, once in a generation talents, as Brooke mentions, like Ida B. Wells, Nellie Bly, Ida Tarbell, Margaret Fuller, and they're kind of existing outside of this hierarchy where they just were able to be prolific journalists even in their time period because they were once in a generation talents. And for everybody else, we sort of had to push into the industry slowly.

GABE HOSTIN:

Wow, that's amazing. And just hearing that, it gives me so much appreciation for these once in a lifetime talents. They really paved the way because they follow their passion, and that's something that really inspires me.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

The last thing that I learned was the importance of local reporting. If we're talking about Ida B Wells, for example, she focuses on the localization of the South when she's reporting on lynching. And other people, Ida Tarbell focuses on the oil industry, Nellie Bly focuses on public institutions, mostly in New York City. Something that Brooke and I discussed that I found to be really interesting is how local newsrooms in 2023 basically don't exist, and the ones that are surviving are doing very important work, but that work is being limited by how hard it is to exist as a local newsroom and remain solvent. And so there's deserts of things where you have to wonder what's going on in certain regions, areas.

GABE HOSTIN:

People are left without knowledge about what's happening in their town. What if there's a serial killer on the loose and no one knows because no one's covering it? That's important. We need more newsrooms.

JORDAN PETTIFORD:

Things like misappropriation of funds, maybe a problem that's happening in local schools, local environmental problems, these are things that affect people's everyday lives, but they aren't the

sort of things that'll make national news, though. Some stuff kind of just gets lost. That's all for this episode of UnTextbooked. I'm producer Jordan Pettiford.

GABE HOSTIN:

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