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THE NELLY BLY YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

Eve Kahn, the biographer of Zoe Anderson Norris, a.k.a. the "Queen of Bohemia," tours the late writer's downtown haunts.

By Hannah Goldfield

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The historian Eve Kahn met a reporter on the stoop of a building on the outskirts of the East Village recently. "So, you're writing about a writer who is writing about a writer who wrote about writing," Kahn said. The first writer was Kahn herself, who is at work on a biography of the second writer, Zoe Anderson Norris, also known as the "Queen of Bohemia," or, as Kahn likes to call her, "the Nellie Bly you've never heard of."

Norris was born in 1860 in Harrodsburg, Kentucky, one of fifteen siblings impoverished by their father, an evangelist and an abolitionist who devoted much of his life to translating the New Testament from the ancient Greek. In 1901, three years after her first divorce, she moved to New York, where she scraped by as a novelist—many of her heroines were writers living in Manhattan boarding houses—and as a journalist for publications including the New York *Sun*, interviewing zoo animals and reporting on living conditions in the slums. In 1907, she made headlines herself when she took up residence in one of those slums, in an apartment on East Fifteenth Street.

"I've weaseled my way in twice," Kahn, who is sixty, said, of that building. Once, she'd set up an appointment on StreetEasy to see an available unit: "I was pretending to be renting an apartment for my niece." Another time, an N.Y.U. student happened to be moving out. Now the building's front door swung open, and a stranger held it open. "See? The research gods are looking out for me," Kahn said.

Standing at a west-facing window in a seventh-floor hallway, Kahn explained that the view was a fraction of what Norris would have seen from her flat, where the décor had included a gargoyle made by Gutzon Borglum, the Mount Rushmore sculptor. “I call them witness buildings, the ones that would have been here when she was,” Kahn said, pointing out the old Stuyvesant High School. In front of a door marked 7C was a mat that read “COME THE FUCK IN OR FUCK THE FUCK OFF.” Kahn laughed.

From what she called her “Literary Sanctum,” Norris wrote every word published in her bimonthly magazine, *The East Side*, which she created to plead for political and social reform and charity aid; its articles were syndicated by hundreds of newspapers across the country. She reported—sometimes undercover, dressed as a beggar with an accordion, playing “My Old Kentucky Home”—on toxic muck in the streets and unemptied, typhoid-spreading trash cans. “She went into many of these tenements when they were in terrible shape, broken windows stuffed with trash,” Kahn said. “She writes vividly about seeing little girls dangling from fire escapes, washing the windows. She saw abusive husbands and fathers, in action, silhouetted. She saw at one point what appeared to be a happy, companionable couple, reading back-to-back, and she realizes they’re happy and companionable because they’re actually in separate apartments.”

Kahn first encountered Norris when, in 2018, she noticed issues of *The East Side* in the private collection of a fellow-member of the Grolier Club, a society for bibliophiles on the Upper East Side. Norris’s name was listed beside every job on the masthead, including “The Bootblack,” “Pooh Bah,” and “T’Whole Cheese.” Kahn became obsessed, collecting copies of all twenty-nine issues of the magazine, which are now included in an exhibit that she curated for the Grolier, called “To Fight for the Poor with My Pen.”

At 203 Second Avenue, currently home to the Ukrainian National Women’s League of America, Kahn peered through a glass door and pointed out letters on the floor which read “People’s Hospital.” “This is where Zoe died,” Kahn said. Not wanting to “be pigeonholed as a shrill reformer,” Kahn explained, Norris founded the Ragged Edge Klub, a rowdy society for writers, artists, physicians, and lawyers that met weekly at restaurants, including one called Pokol, Hungarian for “Hell.” “They dance like dervishes,” Kahn said. “They inhale cigarette smoke and spaghetti simultaneously.” She pointed across the street. “Where the Chase Bank is, I believe that was where Café Boulevard was, later called Café Boheme, where she went to one last dinner, and felt horrible.”

Weeks before, Norris had predicted her own demise: in the final issue of *The East Side*, she wrote that her late mother had visited her in a dream and warned her that death was imminent. She was fifty-three, and basically destitute. On Avenue A, Kahn approached No. 101. The building, which then housed a bowling alley and a saloon, had been used during Norris's funeral. "The coffin, the lilies, the songs by the German oompah band, were here," Kahn said. "This became the Pyramid, one of the great avant-garde clubs in the eighties. Zoe would love that." Again a door was swung open, this time by a construction worker hauling debris. "See how the gods love us?" Kahn said.

Next to the bar was a plaque with a relief of a man's face and a quote. It was Theodore Roosevelt, and the quote was from an 1899 speech called "The Strenuous Life." "I wish to preach," it read, "that highest form of success which comes . . . to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph." ♦

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