STRIKING A BALANCE BETWEEN THE RESONANCE OF FAMILIARITY AND CLICHÉ: A CASE STUDY OF "CHASING BAYLA"

By Paige Blankenbuehler

In the late 1960s, Marshall McLuhan and Wilfred Watson collaborated on a now famous book called "From Cliché to Archetype." The work is a mosaic of sharp reflections that examined how humans have interacted with messages over the past several decades. I like to imagine McLuhan and Watson, smoke pouring from the cigarettes teetering between their fingers in a dark room with television static piercing the atmosphere in the jarring medium-is-the-massage style, arguing about the most difficult questions that besiege message-makers today. What is a cliché? Is it negligent if a journalist uses one? Why do the media try to avoid them so aggressively and regard clichés so pejoratively? Is it possible that a writer can use pre-established and familiar frames and structures effectively to resonate with readers? McLuhan defines a cliché as a word or phrase that becomes so often used that readers of the message are numbed by its effects, but he also theorizes about their value as a "perceptual probe" into understanding our culture that has the power to awaken our cognition by recognizing the familiar, the safe — the cliché.

As McLuhan alludes, journalists are successful when narratives strike a balance between cliché and familiarity that resonates with a reader. "Chasing Bayla," a 2015 Pulitzer Prize finalist for feature writing published in the *Boston Globe*, serves as an interesting case study for how to achieve that balance. Because the story uses a traditional "quest" plot structure and relies heavily on parallels to Hermann Melville's "Moby Dick," it was more vulnerable to coming off as contrived. Whether the writer and editor achieved that balance is a matter of perspective.

"Chasing Bayla" is a 6,835-word magazine-narrative feature that appeared on the front page of the *Boston Globe* on October 24, 2014. It's a story about a man's quest to save a species written by Sarah Schweitzer and edited by Steve Wilmsen. Its central character, Michael Moore, a biologist at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, vowed as a young man to keep the endangered North Atlantic right whale from going extinct. The species' biggest foe is the commercial fishing industry that extracts lobster using large cages and thick, metal fishing lines that scrape the ocean floor for crustaceans that congregate within right whale migration zones. After Moore saw a beached whale entangled in the fishing wire on a New England shore – a scene in which Schweitzer described as a whale "cut open in places, as though by cheese wire" – he sought to prevent such abuse of the endangered species. "(The whale's) back sloped alarmingly, a sign of emaciation from hauling rope more than 10 times her length, possibly for months. It was like she had been swimming with an open parachute."

Schweitzer's feature tells us how Moore dedicated much of his career to saving the right whale and his ultimate failure, epitomized by the death of a right whale that Moore has followed since its birth. Moore serves as a vector through the action as Schweitzer uses a chronological narrative structure that follows Moore's career and incorporates a parallel narrative of a right whale named Bayla. Schweitzer worked with scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and obtained documentation of the whale's life, from its infancy until its death. The completeness of that story juxtaposed upon Moore's ardent ambition to save the whales creates an emotional tale of failure and death. When the calf died, "there would be no decorous burial for Bayla; her size defied it." This particular endangered species story stands apart from other stories like it because of the complete plot lines of two powerful characters, Moore and Bayla, that Schweitzer weaved together. Schweitzer's timing for the story was also fortuitous.

Had she come into this story before Moore's moment of failure to save a species from the looming threats of extinction, a pinnacle scene and resolution of the story arc would have been absent.

Before Schweitzer embarked on reporting, her editor suggested an idea: Wilmsen wanted, in a general sense, a story about a whale. "It may sound a bit odd, but I was intrigued generally by questions about the human relationship with the natural world," Wilmsen said. Schweitzer and Wilmsen discussed the possibilities, and then she called a number of research institutes that she was familiar. As she began her journey of reporting and writing "Chasing Bayla," Schweitzer fell into a cascade of fortunate circumstances.

Her luck struck when she called the media relations woman at Woods Hole. Schweitzer had long been reporting in the Boston area, and her reputation with the center had built trust with the spokesperson. Schweitzer says that call lead to a "completely unusual chain of events." She said she sought to write a story about whales and the spokesperson passed her to Moore. It was her first call, and it led her directly to the man who would become her main source. "Often (media relations specialists) don't grab onto this idea of narratives, and they have their different ideas of what might work," Schweitzer said. "I don't know that she knew where Michael Moore was at emotionally. She just knew that he does this whale work, so there was that piece of luck." The second piece of luck was Schweizter's timing. "He was at a point that was an emotional journey point for him. I was just the person who called. When I asked that question, he was ready to talk," Schweitzer said. Throughout her initial conversation with Moore, she learned, broadly, about his work. It wasn't until the end of her conversation, however, when she was about to thank him and move on, that he said something that really struck a chord. "I said as a wrap-up, 'gosh you've had a great career. It must be wonderful to accomplish so much.' He said,

'oh no, no. I have totally failed.' … I just completely jerked out of my seat … I knew exactly what the story was."

As she gathered information during her reporting, Schweitzer and Wilmsen worked closely to narrow the focus and develop the story arc. As the reporter on the story, Schweitzer placed a lot of value on Moore's admission that he had failed. At that point, she based her entire structure, plot and frame on a slice of her initial interview. Moore's cue to Schweizter about his failure was all she and Wilmsen needed to know. From that point forward, they developed a story with a hero's quest plot structure. David Leach, a professor of narrative magazine writing at the University of Victoria, said the quest plot is one of the most common structures used in fiction and literary nonfiction. The "quest" is a common structure that a reader can easily identify, and, as a result, becomes invested in finding out whether or not the hero succeeds. Wilmsen said it was clear, from early in the process, that the essential ingredients of story were there. "We knew fairly quickly that Dr. Moore on this particular mission was not only trying to save a particular whale, but that the stakes were really high for him. … So once we knew that sort of framework, then the basic arc was there, the rest was understanding how Dr. Moore got to that place," Wilmsen said.

Throughout that process, Wilmsen said he and Schweitzer worked tirelessly to avoid cliché because the arc in and of itself was not innovative, and any story about whales runs the risk of adopting a bit of an "Ahab quality" that Wilmsen describes as the tendency to echo themes from Herman Melville's "Moby Dick." Moore, as the story central character, had the quality of a man's tireless pursuit of a whale. "Biologist Michael Moore had waited all day — really, all his life — for the whale to surface, the suffering giant he thought he could save, that science had to save. It had come down to this." Schweitzer described Moore's pursuit as a bit of

an “Ahab in reverse.” Wilmsen said that in avoiding cliché, he and Schweitzer determined the next steps for the reporting as a team. “My role is as a collaborator and someone who can maintain a little bit of distance from the story,” Wilmsen said. But regardless of the style of an editor, Wilmsen said the key to avoiding cliché is maintaining a process of discovery. That process, he said, was Schweitzer’s strength. Cliché, he said, is something *once* powerful that’s become used too frequently. “You have to discover something again, and Sarah is very gifted at keeping both her language and her understanding of a situation extremely fresh and extremely new, and both of us worked at that to make sure that you don't fall into … the overly familiar.” Schweitzer said she trusted her own instinct and reported true to her individual lens to prevent the story of Moore and the right whales from feeling too reminiscent of other narratives on whales and of the quest plot structure. Those instincts began with her knowledge of the general topic; she knew her editor wanted a story on whales, but Schweitzer wasn’t a science writer and wasn’t approaching the story from that perspective. In this case, it allowed her to react to the story in the way her audience would. “You can't avoid redoing what's already been done out there to some level, but everyone brings to the story your own viewpoint and your own experience … you’re just telling a reader what you saw in the best way you can. By doing that honestly, you avoid a cliché because doing a cliché would be what everybody said before,” Schweitzer said.

However objectively Schweitzer maintained a diligent process of discovery in her reporting of “Chasing Bayla,” she was searching for the information and imagery that fit onto her established frame of the scientist’s quest that she was building. The ultimate message is the journalist’s and, ultimately, the editor’s decision, and in Schweitzer and Wilmsen’s collaboration on the *Boston Globe* feature, their process was very deliberate in fitting the narrative onto the

quest plot structure. Clichés are the products of the frames in which they exist, and in this example, some of the most evocative imagery echoed scenes from Melville's "Moby Dick." Take, for example, the scene that Schweitzer recreates the Moore's dart with the sedative-filled syringe. "*Don't miss.* Moore thought as he gave the command to shoot. The report was a sharp crack. A splash erupted at the waterline next to Bayla's torso. An orange buoy tied to the syringe for tracking fell to the water. The buoy jerked, then began moving. The dart was traveling with Bayla," Schweitzer writes in the feature. The climax of this story nods to the scene in Moby Dick when Captain Ahab, after days of pursuit, at last reaches the White Whale and strikes it with a harpoon.

But in deliberately avoiding another rendition of the "Moby Dick" cliché, as Schweitzer reported "Chasing Bayla," she intentionally left out pieces of Moore's story to fit onto her pre-established notion of the plot and frame she and Wilmsen selected. From Moore's perspective, Schweitzer's portrayal of him in her article was narrow. "The story she wanted to tell was much more limited than what I though was coming down the pipe," Moore said. "(Right whale research) is a very small part of what I do." As a journalist structures a story, inevitably, some aspects of that character's life will be dropped onto the cutting room floor, never making it out to the public. Schweitzer says the character development stages of reporting is the most difficult for her. "It's just a messy process," she said. "It doesn't always feel right in the moment, but if you do keep on the arc, it is going to come out better than if you stray." Schweitzer said her first draft included more of the big picture and complexity of that brought out the nuances in Moore's character. "That's why I have an editor to come along and say 'Sarah, you just have to tell the story.' … It's a brutal process, right?" she said. "You're losing all this stuff that you saw and that

matters to that person and they said it was important and you have to decide that it's not important to the story."

In the end, though, cliché is a matter of perspective. Orin Hargraves, media theorist and author of "It's Been Said Before: A Guide to the Use and Abuse of Clichés," writes, "the difficulty that arises in the very definition of cliché is that its principle characteristics — overuse and ineffectiveness — are not objectively measurable." Both Schweitzer and Wilmsen say "Chasing Bayla" was successful in avoiding cliché, but that opinion contrasts Moore's reaction to the story and Leach's assessment. Leach said Moore's character came off as unbelievable, but it resonated with the readers nonetheless. "Certainly a newspaper feature article is going to be two dimensional compared to the real Michael Moore. That said, because it's so focused just on him, he becomes compelling in that way," Leach said. "It's got this intensity of focus, but obviously, she's highlighted certain qualities and there's a vast amount of other things about his character that we will never know." Leach said there were points that the character came off as contrived. "I know a lot of scientists and they kind of like, plug away at their little things, and they don't have an all-or-nothing mentality. I've never met a scientist like that. So, that was the note that didn't ring true for me. It was obviously just raising the stakes for the reader more than anything else."

As Leach describes, "Chasing Bayla" was contrived — both in its development of the main character and in its emphasized imagery of the quest after the whale — but that familiarity resonated with readers. Particularly when Schweitzer described the behavior of mother right whales when they've lost a calf. For Bayla's mother, Picasso, "the death of the baby had to have been wrenching. Right whale mothers are known to swim frantically for days after the death of a calf, searching for the little one no longer at their side." It was that sort of descriptive passages in

Schweitzer's narrative that resonated with the *Boston Globe's* readers. If the story's readers' reactions serve as a measure of success, then "Chasing Bayla," has done quite well. One commenter wrote: "Tears are streaming down my face. Michael Moore - you restore my faith in humanity. People are not the only creatures on Earth that deserve to live a safe and fruitful life. I never knew why they were called the right whale until I read this — so sad. How can I help?"

The feature has also had a lasting impact on the people inside the process. Even though Moore said the story focused on a small part of his work, he says the experience was "a gift" because the *Globe* put a front-and-center photograph of an entangled right whale above the fold on the Sunday paper. "It was huge," Moore said. "The fact that we're having this conversation today is testament to the fact that she wrote a pretty powerful piece." The story was submitted to the Pulitzer prize judges by Brian McGrory, an editor and 23-year veteran of the *Boston Globe*, who called the story a "parable of a man trying to live up to a youthful vow and a moving examination of a species struggling to survive just outside our view." The story ultimately fell short to Pulitzer winner Diana Marcum of the *Los Angeles Times*, whose stories of the California Central Valley offered "nuanced portraits of lives affected by the state's drought," according to a press release from the Pulitzer Prize committee.

Merrill Perlman, a contributor to the *Columbia Journalism Review* who has written frequently about the use of clichés in media, defines the term as "an expression or idea that has become trite," adding, "that doesn't mean a cliché has no value: An appetizer of beets and goat cheese is a restaurant 'cliché,' but that doesn't mean it's not delicious. It's just not very original." Perlman's point punctuates the notion that the term "cliché" should not be used in a pejorative way, but that clichés should be approached with great caution by journalists. In equal weight, though, McLuhan also explains that one generation's cliché can evolve into a comforting and

familiar frame to the next generation. “There’s a paradoxical shift from cliché to frame as 'past time are pastimes.' The dominant technologies of one age become the games and pastimes of a later age,” he wrote. Although Schweitzer modeled her story on a well established structure and emphasized drama in the feature through a clichéd narrative that echoed “Moby Dick,” she told the story through a fresh lens, Moore’s personal quest. And, as Perlman advises in an article in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, we shouldn’t give clichés the boot — we should enliven them with new souls.