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Return of the Sob Sisters

Newspapers have fallen in love with long narratives about fatal illnesses and disfiguring ailments, particularly when they involve children. Many readers respond powerfully to these emotional sagas that, like the work of the sob sisters years ago, often offer lessons in spiritual stamina and redemption.

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 By *Stephanie Shapiro*

In June 2005, the Boston Globe ran a three-part, 10,000-word series about a Harvard University freshman who as a child was left legally blind and partially paralyzed by brain tumors. In December, the Denver Post devoted 11,500 words in a special section to the saga of a young boy with cerebral palsy whose parents made the choice to let him die. In January, the Los Angeles Times ran a 4,400-word story about a mother who gave birth to her son knowing he would only live for a matter of hours.

Newspapers can't resist the urge to go long when it comes to tales of fatal illnesses, disfiguring ailments and accidents, particularly when they strike children. In recent decades, the drama underlying these anguishing accounts has led to the creation of a subgenre of narrative journalism that often vies with hard news for A1 recognition in the country's most prestigious newspapers.

Such human interest stories, molded by the techniques of fiction, put a face on the bewildering universe of medical ethics, risky procedures and end-of-life choices. Like the harrowing tales that yellow journalism's Nellie Bly and her sob sister descendants became known for, they also are calculated to snag readers by the emotions and not let them go until they burst, on cue, into tears.

Reader responses such as this one are typical: "Thank you for your magical story about Dylan," wrote a Denver Post reader regarding Kevin Simpson's account of the little boy with cerebral palsy. "I broke into tears several times reading it. The mystical connections were stunning and, as the mother of a handicapped child, comforting to me."

Ambitious newspaper narratives showcasing "coping with adversity" themes are hardly a recent innovation. But the expanding role played by these narratives merits scrutiny, particularly in a climate in which news stories double as infotainment and in which the James Frey "memoir" debacle highlighted the vanishing line between truth and fiction.

When does a news story become less about providing information and more about manipulating emotions? When does it become more voyeuristic than revealing? At what point does an effort to elucidate slide hopelessly into pathos? And are such stories as much about reinforcing cultural and religious beliefs as about shedding light on medicine's triumphs and limitations?

These narrative stories are lengthy by design, often warrant a dedicated editor and photographer, and receive top billing in newspaper promotions. They usually are worth the effort, as far as recognition goes. Such touching tales routinely receive plaudits and Web visitors galore and frequently nab illustrious prizes. A study of trends in Pulitzer Prize-winning feature stories, published in the Winter 2005 edition of the *Newspaper Research Journal*, found that "a significant number of winning stories involved a death by murder or illness." Authors Chris Lamb at the College of Charleston in South Carolina and Jeanie McAdams Moore, who completed the study as a graduate student at American University in Washington, D.C., continued: "A second review indicated that 10 of the 31 winning stories – nearly one in three – involved a death."

Poignant newspaper accounts of children facing life-threatening conditions or challenging odds often have been expanded into books. Tom Hallman Jr.'s "Sam: The Boy Behind the Mask," based on his Pulitzer-winning series in Portland's *Oregonian*, appeared in 2002. Boston Globe reporter Mitchell Zuckoff's "Choosing Naia," a series about a married couple who decide to have a child with Down syndrome, was published in book form in 2002. Mark Patinkin's "Up and Running," based on his Providence Journal series about a boy who lost his legs to bacterial meningitis, appeared in 2005.

Garnering grateful responses from readers and laurels from professional organizations, such stories have become largely impervious to criticism. Even the most cynical of editors may consider it impolitic to question heartrending accounts of illness and death. (Moore says she was accused of being "overly critical" in her Pulitzer study.) And yet, in the search for emotional copy, writers may neglect the nuances that fully describe a story if they appear to detract from its narrative flow.

Prior to her analysis of Pulitzer winners, Moore says she had planned to become a feature writer. But the fact that many of journalism's most highly lauded human interest stories dealt with death helped lead to her disenchantment with the field. "I was disappointed by the tone in the articles and by the general impression I had that to be successful, I had to focus on that kind of story," says Moore, now a public affairs consultant for a Washington, D.C., defense contractor.

"It's very easy to go out and find a sad story," she says. "But that doesn't really stretch the author [as would] an issue that's really worthy of explaining in detail and putting before the public."

Emotional journalism didn't always prevail in the elite press. By the end of the 19th century, the sensational and mawkish tales of misfortune that were a hallmark of yellow journalism were yielding to the refined sensibilities of those such as Adolph Ochs, owner of the *New York Times*.

In his book "Just the Facts," David T. Z. Mindich writes that Ochs and other members of the elite press dismissed "the yellows" as newspapers with "little breeding or dignity." Ochs' insistence in the late 1890s on aloof, impartial reportage set the standard for decades to come.

As recently as 30 years ago, "Newspapers used to be a lot more macho," says Kyrie O'Connor, deputy managing editor for features at the *Houston Chronicle*. When she entered journalism in the late 1970s, "There wasn't any appetite for that kind of emotional story. It was all facts." Editors said, "'Write about the town sewer board meeting.' You couldn't really tell the story of someone who has just had a double mastectomy."

As literary journalism came into vogue in the 1960s and '70s, though, the standards of dispassionate journalism were loosened, and feature stories were released from the purgatory of the "women's pages." Legitimized by Pulitzer recognition in 1979, features, including increasingly graphic accounts of illness and disability, gained traction in much of the daily press.

The long-form chronicle of disease or disability is one legacy of New Journalism's stylistic verve. The work of Tom Wolfe and others made the narrative form

"acceptable and useful again," says Carolyn Kitch, associate professor of journalism at Temple University in Philadelphia. "Now what we have been left with is narrative form without the deeper stuff it was used for in the 1960s and '70s."

In her book "Everyman News: How and Why American Newspapers Changed Forever," set for publication in 2007, Michele Weldon argues that since 9/11, personal features have transformed front pages across the nation. In an analysis of 20 daily newspapers, the assistant professor of journalism at the Medill School at Northwestern University measured a 43 percent increase in A1 features from 2001 (pre 9/11) to 2004.

The rise stems in part from what Weldon calls the "post 9/11 sensitivity" that engendered the Pulitzer-winning "Portraits of Grief" series in the New York Times. She also speaks of the "cultural sanctity of stories." Whether found in blogs, documentaries, reality TV, advertising or any other form of communication, personal stories are the perennial vehicle of choice for conveying information and compelling belief.

As new media play to their strengths, including 24-hour news coverage, one of the sole remaining roles for newspapers is to tell stories, Weldon says. "I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that a consumer can find the news anywhere else faster, so newspapers must deliver a product that's different."

But critics say that in capitulating to the demand for personal stories, newspapers have surrendered to the competition. "Journalism today is built on these kinds of stories," Joe Saltzman, director of the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture project at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication, said in an e-mail interview. "There doesn't seem much room left in the newspapers and on television for news coverage on the major events and trends unless that story can be cloaked as an article on an individual braving great odds or suffering great misfortune or achieving superhuman success."

Tales of sorrow and woe are primarily motivated by "the desire of print to get readers any way they can, and one way to do it is to tell stories the way TV does," New York Times op-ed columnist Frank Rich wrote in an e-mail interview. "I can't say strongly enough that the triumph of television over print has brought about many of these changes – newspapers need to compete, and this is one way to do it." Whether award-winning feature writers are "more like yellow- journalism sentimentalists of old than the New Journalist ideal" may have to be determined on a case-by-case basis, Rich says.

Matthew T. Felling, media director at the Center for Media and Public Affairs, also attributes the trend to a "weep creep" from television to print. The "sob stories that have become standard fare in the electronic media and People magazine knockoff shows have conditioned news consumers to look for them in every news product," he says.

These features have the power to lure readers indifferent to dry subjects such as farm subsidies but who may think, "That pregnant mother breaks my heart," Felling says. "Newspapers were not constructed to attract the less interested reader, but now they are, to maintain profit margins."

Such narrative accounts of suffering characteristically make readers privy to intimate secrets, explicit physical details and excruciating deliberations that inform life-and-death decisions. In stories about ailing or injured children, writers also tend to accept without question their subjects' religious faith, the supernatural portents they see in ordinary occurrences and the meanings they struggle to find in their trials.

The analysis of Pulitzer features by Moore and Lamb notes "the frequency with which Christian references appeared, while other religions were almost completely absent. It seemed that Christianity often served as a reader's guide to right and wrong," the researchers observe. They single out "Angels and Demons," the 1998 Pulitzer winner by Tom French of the St. Petersburg Times, for the headline itself, which "told the reader to expect a battle between good and evil, with clearly

defined heroes and villains." In French's account of the murder of three Ohio tourists, including a 13-year-old girl, Christian imagery was "used consistently as a tool for pointing out 'good' forces," Moore and Lamb write.

The researchers suggest that "Christian symbolism has become inextricably woven into the fabric of American metaphor and has become an easy means of painting a picture without requiring the audience to think too hard. Thus, although the stories are highly readable and beautifully written, readers learned nothing new; accepted values and plots are simply recycled because they confirm the readers' own views and beliefs."

As did sob stories more than a century ago, today's sentimental tales offer lessons in spiritual stamina and redemption, particularly comforting in a period of anxiety. "It seems like Americans have been experimenting with redemptive stories for a long time," says Dan P. McAdams, a professor of human development and social policy at Northwestern University and author of "The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By."

"The recent flap with James Frey – that was a redemptive narrative about recovery. It's almost like we've played out every possible redemptive narrative out there," McAdams says.

Perhaps stories about the loss of children – "the worst thing that could possibly happen to you" – are the ultimate spiritual test, McAdams suggests. "If you can find meaning in that, [that would constitute] the last bastion of redemptive hope."

In a scene from Denver Post reporter Kevin Simpson's account of how parents Kerri Bruning and Dave Walborn grapple with whether to withdraw life support from their son, Dylan, God becomes an active character:

A little past 8 a.m. Oct. 18, Pastor Buddy Conn came calling at Kerri's apartment.

Together, they prayed.

Pastor Buddy, on the staff of a large non-denominational congregation, knew Kerri and Dave from previous hospital visits in which he'd prayed with them and Dylan. This time, he asked the Lord to give the parents clear understanding of what they were supposed to do later that day; he did not presume to know the answer.

He prayed for Dylan's healing – whether on earth or in heaven.

"Mom just wanted to know, 'Boy, have I fought the good fight, have I finished the race?'" the pastor says. "She felt she had. She's a believer, so she leans on God for her day-to-day guidance. I believe God gave her an answer in the afternoon."

Seeking solace in one's religious beliefs, particularly in the aftermath of a death or other tragedy, was once a private matter, McAdams notes. Now, "there's more leeway" for journalists as prayer and proclamation of one's faith have become commonplace in public discourse. "More people want to hear this," McAdams says. "We sort of value this talking about our pain much more than we used to. When stories get told, it gives them a reality they didn't have before. In the telling, they get expanded."

The "need to find positive meaning in suffering is so strong, sometimes we can go overboard on it," he adds. "Sometimes you're deluding yourself if you're going to find meaning in the Holocaust, 9/11 or when a child dies."

And yet Americans, staunchly pragmatic in their faith, live by such stories, McAdams says. "We want something to come out of suffering. We have a really difficult time with the idea that we wouldn't be able to move forward. The idea that some things are so bad that we would not be able to find meaning in them is anathema. It's something Americans don't want to think about."

The spiritual dimension underlying Kevin Simpson's story about Dylan was impossible to ignore, says Denver Post Editor Gregory Moore. "I think any time you're talking about life and death, then religion and faith and God come into play," he says. To give up hope that their son's life would improve if he were kept

alive was a "tremendously difficult thing for [Dylan's parents]. To the extent that they could do it, their faith had a lot to do with it," Moore says.

He has no plans to run similar stories simply because they evince sympathy and compliments from readers. "The key to this type of narrative journalism is to find the right story that's worth telling," Moore says. "They don't come along every day or every week or every month. I see us as having the commitment to do these stories when they present themselves."

But others argue that these types of pieces gloss over thorny details. "In struggling to make real stories fit the conversion/redemption narrative, all sorts of inconvenient facts get left out. Like the fact that autism isn't a 'disease' and can't be 'cured,'" says Mitzi Waltz, an American lecturer in journalism and media studies at the University of Sunderland in Great Britain who is completing a dissertation on the cultural history of autism. "Parents whose own experiences don't match these well-retailed tales feel a huge amount of guilt," she wrote in an e-mail interview.

The author of numerous books about developmental disorders, Waltz also studies how people with disabilities are portrayed in popular culture. Articles that give the impression that autism is curable are partly to blame for the dearth of services available to adults with the disorder, Waltz says. And yet "editors will buy a cure story, but have little interest in the less dramatic 'muddling through' story that's far more common."

In a 1998 paper, Beth A. Haller, an associate professor of journalism at Towson University in Maryland, found that inspiring narratives about people with disabilities often earn prizes. The evergreen "coping with adversity" theme allows for "easy cultural cues" that convey the impression that disability and chronic illness are by definition tragedies, Haller says. "A lot of people don't define these things in their lives as tragedy; a lot of people say their lives turned out differently after disability or a car accident."

Many of these accounts are "very, very well-written pieces," Haller says. "It's hard not to have these things affect you emotionally and feel the pull of the story. [Readers] don't realize it's the good writing. The story's the same story. It's been told over and over. You're not really learning anything new."

A story's poignant subject matter doesn't automatically consign it to the sob sister files. With astute editing and a willingness to defy literary conventions by incorporating sometimes messy nuances and other narrative anomalies, such tales can be both enthralling and informative.

If editors were to "turn it around and demand that reporting be at the core of the story as opposed to the writing, it would be a totally different style of story, and well-written as well," Haller says.

With health care becoming an increasingly prominent issue, the proliferation of illness-related stories can serve a purpose, the Times' Rich wrote in an e-mail interview. "Health care – and medicine in general – are far bigger issues now than they ever were in American history, especially as Americans live longer and longer. Today – as was not the case in the '30s or '50s or even '60s – journalists can cover disease candidly, without euphemisms (even the word cancer was once verboten), and personal narratives are a way of breaking through or explaining the science."

People's "struggle with illness and the medical system may be of more interest to readers than any other single issue," Rich says. "In this sense, the assignment of these stories and their proliferation reflect the news, because the medical system is in an intractable crisis that affects nearly every American and business."

Dylan's story departed from pure melodrama because it addressed crucial ethical questions that influence end-of-life decisions, says the Denver Post's Moore. "I think the thing that made this story different was the commitment these parents had and the decision they made in a post-Terri Schiavo world," he says. "There

was all this hullabaloo over Terri Schiavo, and every day hundreds of lives are ended, and we don't know much about that."

Whether such stories serve an important social function or are merely crowd-pleasers must be decided story by story, says Felling of the Center for Media and Public Affairs. In part, intent can be determined by tone, he says. "How is the story written? Is it maudlin or straightforward? What is the adjective per 100 word rate? How often does the journalist imagine what might be going through someone's head?"

"The Providence Journal's Mark Patinkin was mindful of the potential pitfalls when he wrote the series that became "Up and Running: The Inspiring True Story of a Boy's Struggle to Survive and Triumph."

"I didn't want it to just be one more inspirational, dramatic story about overcoming an illness, and so the approach I actually took was to bend over as far as I could in the direction of understatement," says Patinkin, who is a columnist. "I found it was an interesting exercise as a journalist. So often when we're trying to find the drama in stories, I think readers pick up that you're forcing [the story] when you're doing that."

The "kind of drama that came out of that understatement was even more powerful," Patinkin says. He didn't shy away from addressing the role faith played in the lives of his subjects. "I decided to ask a question I almost never ask: 'Did you pray?' And I asked that of everybody, including the doctors. Some of them thought it was a question out of left field," he says. "In a case like this, it's just as important to describe the patient as being anointed as being intubated."

As the media turn dying children and cancer victims into heroes, it is "not necessarily a sign that journalism has gone bad. It's a sign that journalism has been moving toward 'public journalism,'" Temple's Kitch says. "The ordinary person, meaning the reader, has become a symbolically elevated figure in the news as [important as] the president or official sources."

In a similar vein, Northwestern's Weldon says that as more ordinary people become the sources quoted in news coverage, readers increasingly regard them as just as credible as public officials. A greater number of stories tend to revolve around individuals as well and take on a more intimate tone, she says. Today, readers want news "up close and personal, humanistic."

Editors are mindful that personal stories can be a boon for newspapers languishing in the new-media climate. A 2005 series by a young San Francisco Chronicle copy editor, Alicia Parlette, about her cancer diagnosis generated thousands of mostly favorable responses that have vindicated the paper's venture into pathos, says Managing Editor Robert J. Rosenthal. "We can be the glue or the connector for communities and stories about triumphs and tragedy, and sometimes they are very mundane. But they really resonate with people," Rosenthal says. "They can see themselves in these stories."

The steady stream of inspiring yet depressing stories can leave the impression that joy and humor are scarce commodities. In the view of the Houston Chronicle's O'Connor, that is unfortunate. "Making people cry seems a lot more serious than making people laugh," she says. "I'm really fond of humor, and I love stories that make people laugh. But those don't seem to have the same intellectual heft in the eyes of a lot of people."

If the press persists in running stories about disabilities, it is possible to tell them in fresh, unpredictable ways, O'Connor says. Now that "newspapers have somewhat belatedly caught up to the idea that emotional stories and stories that speak from the heart are a way to connect with the readers, the challenge for an editor and a writer is to find a way to tell the story that appears to be going in one direction and make it go slightly to the left or to the right, to take a person to an unexpected place."

She cites a story by Chronicle reporter Jeannie Kever about a high school student with Down syndrome elected homecoming queen. Kever "did not pump up the

emotional value, didn't inflate it," O'Connor says. "But the story was very sweet and had no villains, no nothing. It was a lovely story. What it turned out to be about was this generation of high-school kids and how it's no big deal to them, about her complete acceptance. This was not a story of tragedy at all; it was more a story of kids who are mainstreamed their whole life, and this was fine."

The "deeper you go into one person's unique story, the more the uniqueness of the story emerges," O'Connor says. "You can have a hypothesis, but if the hypothesis isn't overturned, you've failed," she says.

"People rarely conform to some type. It's not a question of sneering or trying to find an edge; it's a question of really, really trying to find the story."

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