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Sarbi



The Australian Army recruited Sarbi in 2004 when she was only two years old. At that time, the black labrador had had no specific training, but the army felt that she had both the intelligence and the temperament to be of use to them.

The army put Sarbi to work straight away, assigning her a handler and putting her through a rigorous training program. Within a few months, she was a fully trained explosive detection dog. She was used in a number of operations across Australia, including at the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne, before being given her first tour of duty overseas.

In her second deployment to Afghanistan in 2008, Sarbi was given the very dangerous task of sniffing out landmines. While on a routine patrol one day, the unit to which Sarbi was attached came under fire. Sarbi's leash snapped when a bomb blast tore through the unit, and Sarbi and

her handler became separated. With no sign of the dog after the battle had ended, Sarbi was officially recorded as being missing in action.

Fourteen months later, an American soldier made an unusual discovery in a remote area of northern Afghanistan. A local farmer had befriended a black labrador and had taken it in. The soldier, having heard the story of Sarbi, gave a series of army voice commands to the dog. The dog responded as the soldier had anticipated, and the soldier knew instantly that the dog was indeed Sarbi.

Sarbi was put on a flight to the Australian Army base in southern Afghanistan, where she was later reunited with her handler. In 2011, Sarbi was awarded the Purple Cross medal for bravery. No-one knows what happened to Sarbi during her time alone in the desert, but if dogs were able to talk, Sarbi's story would make any soldier proud.



The bundle arrives

That was the third night it had rained. Thunder echoed a long way off, booming out of the high valleys like the brawling of giants. The white flicker of lightning cast the shadows of the nearby peaks onto the long lake near my hut, shadows as angry and sharp as the crags themselves. I fed the fire and stirred the beans in the pot.

I'm used to my own company. People don't come to my lake. It's too far away from any towns, it's a steep hike up the hills, there's nowhere to stay and it's not very pretty. There are lots of other places with better views and easier access. Truth to tell, I don't make any effort to maintain the little goat path that leads here. I like being on my own. Other people are trouble.

That's why the pounding on the door startled me. The rain had smothered any sound of footsteps on the gravel path, and the shutters on the windows had been closed against the weather. The pounding came again, louder this time. I gave the beans another stir and pulled the pot off the fire and onto the little stand by the hearth, then got up and moved towards the door.

I needn't have bothered. It burst open and a huge man, carrying a bundle in his arms, staggered in. His shirt was stained like a rose, deep red where the wound still bled, fading to pink where the rain had washed around it. His face was almost devoid of expression, pallid and staring. He fell to his knees, still holding onto the bundle.

I'd seen enough to know that this man was a goner. He'd lost too much blood and had come too far in that hard, chill rain. I shoved the door closed and went to him, touched his shoulder. He turned his face to me, white as wax. There was a gash in his scalp, and his coarse black curls leaked runnels of crimson down his face. He lifted the bundle in his arms up to me and said, 'Here.'

I caught the bundle as he fell. It was a child.

Multi-tasking



Multi-tasking – a feeble excuse for laziness, or a valid justification of a twenty-first century way of working?

Perhaps the latter. Increasingly, the adult world of work is calling for people who can ‘demonstrate flexibility’ and ‘respond creatively to a range of competing demands’.

To prepare for this, you probably feel that you have to fall into line – that you have to multi-task. You could always tell a potential employer that you don’t work this way, that you need to be left in peace to doggedly complete one task before beginning the next. But then your potential employer will perhaps remain just that – potential. Silent, dedicated absorption in a single task was all that was needed in the past, but today a frenetic clicking on multiple windows on a computer screen is more in sync with our fragmented, furiously expanding universe of knowledge.

However, one section of this same expanding universe of knowledge – research into the workings of the brain – tells us a different story: we should slow down, shut out distractions and focus.

How does the brain deal with simultaneous tasks? It doesn’t. According to Dr Edward

Hallowell, director of the Hallowell Center for Cognitive and Emotional Health (in the USA), ‘What people really do is shift their attention from one task to the next in rapid succession. That reduces the quality of the work on any one task because they’re ignoring it for milliseconds at a time.’ This is why it is dangerous to talk on a mobile phone while driving, and why many people instinctively turn down the car radio while they are studying a roadmap.

Doing four things simultaneously takes you longer than doing them sequentially – and you do not do them as well.

Cognitive research has even more bad news for music-listening, message-sending, multi-tasking learners. Brain scans show that learning while multi-tasking involves the striatum, a part of the brain devoted to new skills; undistracted learning, however, involves the hippocampus, which is devoted to long-term storage and retrieval of what has been learned.

Undistracted learning goes deeper and lasts longer; it improves problem-solving, creativity and the ability to integrate different ideas. In fact, it improves the very skills that those employers who think they want multi-taskers really need.

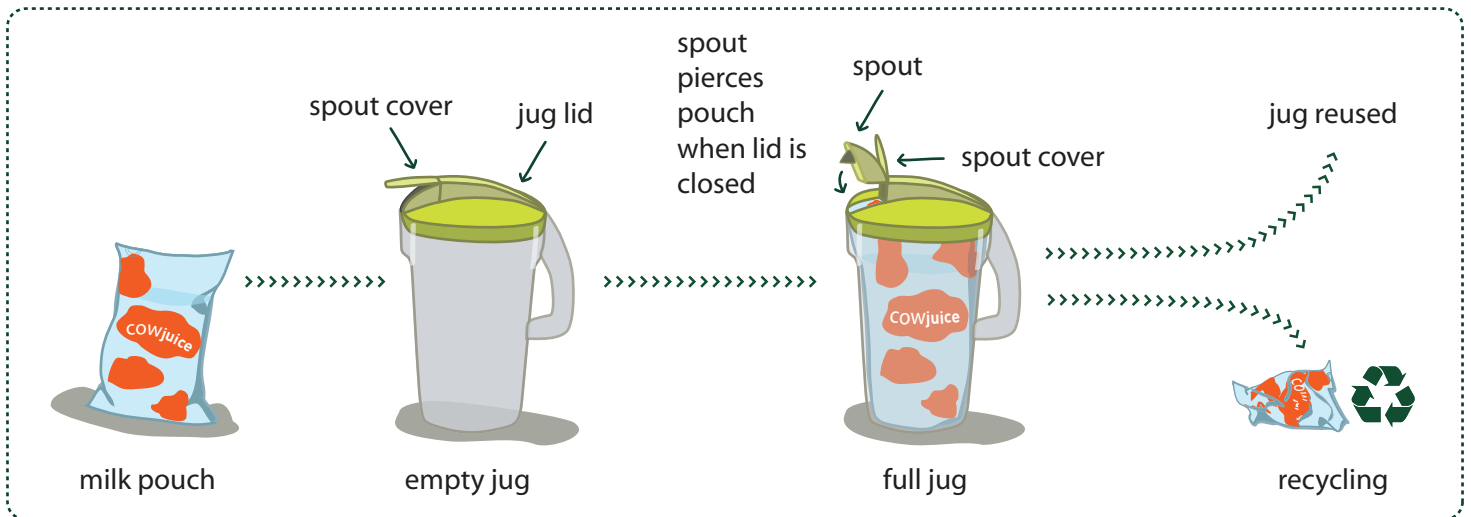


Any udder ideas?

Milk was once sold in glass milk bottles that were washed, used repeatedly and then sometimes recycled. However, glass bottles fell from favour, possibly because many consumers found them heavy to hold and easy to break. By 1987, only about 2% of milk was still being sold in glass bottles in Australia. Customers now prefer to buy milk in recyclable plastic bottles. These make up approximately 80% of supermarket milk sales. Unfortunately, many of these plastic bottles are not recycled and end up in landfill, where they can take 500 years to break down. In response to the need for a greener solution, some alternatives have appeared.

Milk in a pouch

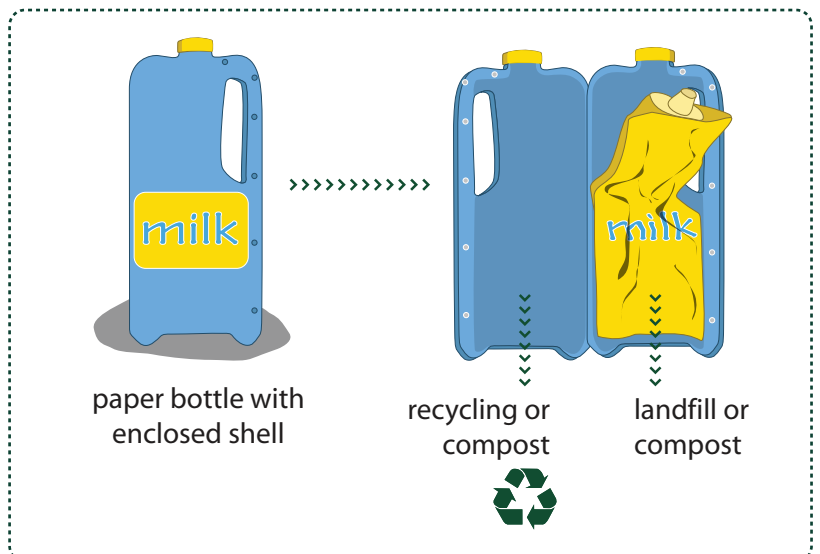
Milk can also be purchased in a plastic pouch, which is then placed in a purpose-built, reusable jug. The jug includes a spout that pierces the bag when the lid is closed. The pouches are made from environmentally friendly material, and they require only 25% of the plastic of a similar-sized plastic bottle. The pouches can be recycled.



Although milk pouches were introduced in Australia in the 1990s, they were unpopular because they were less convenient than plastic bottles. This is because the pouch must be fitted into the jug, and at least some part of the jug has to be cleaned. Milk pouches, however, recently sold well in one supermarket chain in the United Kingdom. This was largely due to a pre-launch education campaign, during which supermarket staff told shoppers about their own positive experiences of using the product. Milk pouches have also been popular in Canada for many years.

Paper bottle

This is not a traditional cardboard milk carton. A British engineer came up with this idea after his son made a papier-mâché balloon at school. He developed a milk bottle made from recycled paper and lined with a thin plastic shell. The outer part of the bottle can be recycled or composted. The lining can also be composted or thrown into landfill. If it ends up in landfill, it will take up only 0.5% of the space of a plastic bottle and will break down in about six weeks.



'Let them eat cake!'

The saying 'Let them eat cake!' has been widely attributed to Marie Antoinette (1755–93), the Queen consort of the French King Louis XVI. She is supposed to have said this during a famine in France, when she was told that the French populace had no bread to eat. The usual interpretation of the phrase is that Marie Antoinette did not really understand the plight of the poor and could not have cared less.

However, there is no evidence that Marie Antoinette ever said those words. In fact, there is evidence to suggest she was unlikely to have done so. She was reputed to be a generous and charitable patroness, donating large sums from her personal fortune to the poor people of Paris. In a letter she wrote to her family, she revealed a great deal of compassion towards the poor. 'It is quite certain that in seeing the people who treat us so well despite their own misfortune, we are more obliged than ever to work hard for their happiness.'

In addition, there is evidence to suggest that a similar phrase was spoken by a princess other than Marie Antoinette. In the 1760s, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the famous philosopher, wrote in Book 6 of his autobiographical work *Confessions*:

At length I recollected the thoughtless saying of a great princess, who, on being informed that the country people had no bread, replied, 'Then let them eat pastry!'

He provided no evidence to show exactly which princess he was describing. Marie Antoinette left her native Austria to become Queen of France in 1770, which was some time after Rousseau wrote those words. Thus, it is clear that whoever the 'great princess' was, it was not Marie Antoinette.

So why has the phrase been attributed to the famous queen? The most likely reason has to do with her lack of popularity in the final years of her reign. Marie Antoinette was disapproved of by the French people, and in particular by the French revolutionaries who deposed the royal family in 1789. Anti-royalists printed stories and articles that attacked the royal family using exaggerations and fictitious events. With such feelings of dissatisfaction, it is probable that an individual or group put the words in the mouth of Marie Antoinette. History, as it is said, is written by the victors.

Dancing

It kept me from sleep, just as I was drifting.
I ignored it, then it happened again.
A clattering loud on the corrugated iron
roof of my neighbour's garage.

Either a burglar inept in the night or something
more interesting, so I got up and stood on my desk.
Looked out the window.
Beheld a marvel.

A ring-tailed possum and a cat, circling each other
on the corrugations in the dark, wary, curious, sinuous.
I can see the cat thinking: What is it? An ugly cat? Maybe it's food.
Maybe I am.

The possum is harder to read, being feral, undomestic,
unknowable. They keep circling each other.
The cat decides against assault. It is bigger than the possum,
but the possum has bigger claws.

The possum stops circling and crouches. It watches the cat
with global night eyes, jet black and slick white. They glisten.
The cat stops, and sits, wrapping tail around feet with fine unconcern
and prissy disdain, making a point to the possum.

The cat begins to lick itself, then stops, knowing this is going too far.
The possum and the pet, they look at each other in moonlight still,
in the moonlight that is mystery,
at the face of the other that is mystery too.

I go back to bed, not wanting to stop this
slow secret, night dance,
loaded with menace.

by Brad Jackel



The 3D dinosaur

This opinion piece was published in a media blog.

Call me the youngest dinosaur in the world. Not the kind whose jaws lunge at you out of the phoney depths of a 3D movie. The other kind: a dinosaur of outmoded opinion. How outmoded? Let's just say I consider 3D physically dangerous, economically predatory, artistically self-defeating and imaginatively stunting.

That kind of dinosaur.

Take off your 3D glasses for a moment and look at some evidence from the real world. (Remember that place?)

When you watch a 3D film, your brain receives two slightly different 2D images and is forced to make sense of them by merging them into one. The immediate result of this merging is an enhanced sense of apparent depth (the 'third' dimension). The not-so-immediate result is, for at least 15 per cent of us, eye strain, headaches and a dangerous disorientation. These risks are greatest for children and teenagers. (And which two groups of people form the major audiences for 3D?) It is even possible that children will develop permanent problems with depth perception if they are overexposed to 3D.

Why do film-makers inflict these risks on us? So they can charge us extra at the ticket office. Who wins out of this? Not us. So who does? The film-makers themselves?

They might think they do, but they should think again. If 3D becomes the new standard, we will see a shift in the kind of films that are made. Setting and action take over; character, relationships and plot wither. Where once we explored the depths of a character's psyche, we plunge into the depths of some 3D ravine. Where once we followed the twists and turns of a developing relationship or a subtle plot, we crawl through a 3D cavern, dodging 3D bats. No film that lacks the promise of a 3D thrill will even find the financial backing to be made. So stand back, all you serious film-makers, and make room for kids' movies and animation.

But the most infuriating thing about 3D is that it is not necessary. There is already depth in 2D media. The imagination finds it there. If we depend on special glasses to find it, we have already begun to replace the wonders of imagination with the gimmicks of technology.

I heard a child leaving a cinema recently announce, 'I wish life was 3D!' That should be sad, not just to us dinosaurs, but to everyone.

John Simpson

etween the bridges

In these times of ours, though concerning the exact year there is no need to be precise, a boat of dirty and disreputable appearance, with two figures in it, floated on the Thames between Southwark Bridge which is of iron, and London Bridge which is of stone, as an autumn evening was closing in.

The figures in this boat were those of a strong man with ragged grizzled hair and sun-browned face, and a dark girl of nineteen or twenty, sufficiently like him to be recognisable as his daughter. The girl rowed, pulling a pair of sculls very easily; the man, with the rudder-lines slack in his hands, and his hands loose in his waistband, kept an eager look out. He had no net, hook, or line, and he could not be a fisherman; his boat had no cushion for a sitter, no paint, no inscription, no appliance beyond a rusty boat-hook and a coil of rope, and he could not be a waterman; his boat was too crazy and too small to take in a cargo for delivery, and he could not be a lighterman or river-carrier; there was no clue to what he looked for, but he looked for something, with a most intent and searching gaze. The tide, which had turned an hour before, was running down, and his eyes watched every little race and eddy in its broad sweep, as the boat made slight headway against it, or drove stern foremost before it, according as he directed his daughter by a movement of his head. She watched his face as earnestly as he watched the river. But, in the intensity of her look there was a touch of dread or horror.

Allied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface, by reason of the slime and ooze with which it was covered, and its sodden state, this boat and the two figures in it obviously were doing something that they often did, and were seeking what they often sought. Half savage as the man showed, with no covering on his matted head, with his brown arms bare to between the elbow and the shoulder, with the loose knot of a looser kerchief lying low on his bare breast in a wilderness of beard and whisker, with such dress as he wore seeming to be made out of the mud that begrimed his boat, still there was business-like usage in his steady gaze. So with every lithe action of the girl, with every turn of her wrist, perhaps most of all with her look of dread or horror; they were things of usage.

by Charles Dickens

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sarbi

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Dancing

Extract 'Dancing' by Brad Jackel from *Quadrant*, March 2005, page 79. Reproduced with permission of Brad Jackel.

Between the bridges

Extract from *Our Mutual Friend* by Charles Dickens.

Playing the bones

Have you ever heard of playing the bones?

The bones are instruments that have ancient origins, and yet are still played today by some Australian folk bands. They are two clean and dried pieces of bullock's rib, each about 15 cm long.

To play the bones you hold them on either side of the middle finger of one hand, and rock your wrist back and forth. Instant percussion!

Some experts claim that today's cattle bones are too soft to make good music. Fortunately, hardwoods such as Tasmanian Oak and Jarrah make good 'bones' and some musicians use spoons instead of real bone to get click and clatter into their music.

