

Today's weather  
picture by:  
Lukas Atkinson, 8,  
Vancouver,  
Lake Shore  
Elementary School



# Opossum passion

Man and his beloved pet set out to change misconceptions

By BRETT OPPEGAARD  
Columbian staff writer

From the beginning, the attitude was mutual: Yantzy Balzer didn't care what people thought about his love for an opossum, and the hand-sized fluff of life entrusted to him didn't care who or what was providing that love.

Delivered by neighbors in a dish towel, the sable runt at first growled at Balzer — as ferociously as she could — displaying her small, pointy teeth. The Orchards resident soothed this frightened baby by slipping her into his shirt pocket, where she could feel his body warmth, like being in her mother's pouch. For days, weeks, months, Balzer coddled the infant he dubbed Dartyan (pronounced dar-tan-yan), pre-chewing food for her before slipping it into her mouth, letting her nuzzle around his neck, sleep in his bed.

Bonded by unconditional love, Balzer felt increasingly emboldened about their special man-marsupial relationship. The 35-year-old wanted to share those experiences. So he started taking his pet with him on errands, through Clark County shopping centers and parks and along busy streets. People he encountered haven't always been pleased. He's been called a freak and a fool. He's suffered through several shouting spurts of obscenities and disapproval, but he's also found a few who were curious, a few who were willing to question their perceptions.

In turn, Balzer has become a possum preacher of sorts, telling — and showing — that the wild animal might not be the dirty, contagion-carrying aggressor of reputation.

Dartyan, meanwhile, has grown to the size of a household cat. On a recent morning, she still was asleep inside a kidney-shaped denim purse when Balzer grabbed the bag from the back of his living room couch and began his day.

Per routine, Balzer and roommate Kevin Keen drove to a nearby convenience store. Once awakened, Dartyan slowly crept up Balzer's left arm, until she found a comfortable resting place on his shoulder, against his neck, with her pink nose continually sniff-sniffing. She can see only one inch in front of her during the day, two at night, Balzer remarked, so her senses of scent and touch are the best way to know that she's secure.

## Causing a scene every time

Dartyan appears relaxed and comfortable on Balzer as he exits his 1995 Honda Civic and walks into Handy Andy's, met by a mixture of skeptics and the surprised. He fills a 44-ounce cup with Mountain Dew in preparation for the potential flock.

As the customers gradually gather around to gape, a woman asks, "What's her name?"

"Dartyan. She's a little sweetie," Balzer replies as he pays for his soda.

OPOSSUM, page D6



"They are a very harmless animal, if you don't do something to harm them."

Yantzy Balzer of Orchards



Photos by DAVE OLSON/The Columbian

Handy Andy's clerk Donna Friend sees Yantzy Balzer and Dartyan regularly, saying of the pet: "I can't believe how sweet she is."



When Balzer and his companion attract crowds, it's an opportunity to alter perceptions about opossums.

## Hollywood love lines still sizzle

But you might not want to try these at home

By CHRIS KALTENBACH  
The Baltimore Sun

Ah, love. If only we had scriptwriters dictating our lives, how easy it all would be.

You know, find an Ingrid Bergman lookalike, lift her chin gently, whisper, "Here's looking at you, kid," and watch the sparks fly.

True, Hollywood has come up with some great pickup lines — turns of phrase guaranteed to make even the most lovelorn among us a veritable Lothario-in-training. But even the best lines don't work for everybody. And some of the classics, phrases that have become part of the vernacular, nowadays may elicit nothing more than a perplexed stare or bemused chuckle.

The good folks at Turner Classic Movies and Chronicle Books recently compiled a list of 30 classic pickup lines and committed them to flash cards. Some, no doubt, still work like a charm. Others, well, you decide:

Clark Gable to Jean Harlow in "Red Dust": "Mind if I get drunk with you?" (Hardly politically correct.)

John Gilbert to Greta Garbo in "Flesh and the Devil": "You know, when you blow out the match, it's an invitation to kiss you." (And I just quit smoking.)

Bette Davis to Leslie Howard in "It's Love I'm After": "You're going to have love for breakfast, love for luncheon, and love for dinner." (Just when Americans are being urged to eat less.)

Robert Taylor to Lana Turner in "Johnny Eager": "Oh, now don't get ordinary on me. I get tired of ordinary dames. And I don't want to get tired of you." (When's the last time anyone got called a dame?)

Loretta Young to Lyle Talbot in "She Had to Say Yes": "I hate being pawed." His reply? "Ah, but then maybe you've never been pawed properly."

## \$1,000 buys a parent day care for one month in Manhattan

Portlanders don't get by cheaply, either, paying \$737 per child

The Associated Press

Day care costs in the United States range from about \$350 to more than \$1,000 per month, depending on where you live, according to a recent analysis.

The priciest places for day care are Manhattan and Boston, which average \$1,057 and \$977 per month, respectively, according to an analysis released in January by Runzheimer International, a Wisconsin-based management consulting firm.

Next in the cost rankings are Manchester, N.H. (\$799); Washington, D.C., (\$773); New London, Conn. (\$748); and a Vancouver neighbor, Portland (\$737).

The analysis found that the least expensive city is Baton Rouge, La., which averaged \$339 per month for day care. The other cities with a monthly average below \$400 are: Miami, New Orleans; Mobile, Ala.; Winter Haven, Fla.; Jackson, Miss.; Macon, Ga.; Billings, Mont.; Jacksonville, Fla.; Casper, Wyo.; Little Rock, Ark.; and Bakersfield, Calif.

The day care costs in the analysis are based on monthly fees for a 3-year-old child in a for-profit day care center, five days a week and eight hours a day.

# Opossum:

From page D1

"Does she bite?"  
"I've raised her since a baby, so she doesn't do that. If you went out and got a wild one as an adult, she could definitely do some damage."

A young man in the crowd says, "Doesn't it have diseases?"

Balzer responds, "People think they are disease-ridden. But they are not. They are not diseased at all. They actually are very clean and loving animals. ... They are a very harmless animal, if you don't do something to harm them."

After getting his morning drink, Balzer wants to buy Dartyan a squirrel plush toy. Next stop: PetSmart, a big-box retailer where customers routinely bring along dogs and cats.

Balzer once again gets swarmed after just a few minutes of walking the aisles.

When he reaches a check-out lane, the clerk nervously comments about the creature



Yantzy Balzer treats his opossum like any other pet, including letting Dartyan climb onto his shoulder while he's driving.

on his shoulder, "She looks like she's being a good girl." Another employee, a couple

of aisles over, yells, "Is that a possum? ... That's awesome!" Shopper Elizabeth Muthan-



stove maintains the room at 80 degrees to help with his mother's arthritis. Everyone talks above the television noise.

Dartyan, at nearly 2 years old, already almost has doubled the life span of an opossum in the wild. Balzer said he's hoping she can make it to at least 14, the oldest known one in captivity. He talks about how she uses a litter box just once a day, routinely at 9:30 p.m.

Balzer is highly allergic to anything alcohol-based, including perfumes, he says, a disability that keeps him from holding a job for long. So he considers educating the public about opossums one of his prime purposes in life.

Hour upon hour daily he spends in his nearby bedroom, looking at information about animals, particularly opossums, on the Internet. If there's a fact, or even general observation, about opossums or their behavior, Balzer probably has read it and worked it into his spiel, which covers legal restrictions, their opposable thumbs, training potential, physiology and purpose in the grand cycle of life, earning the animal the nickname of "nature's little sanitation engineer."

## A recent Northwest arrival

Opossums ironically were brought to this area about the same time as their greatest nemesis: automobiles. A man named L.E. Roy of Pilot Rock, Ore. (near Pendleton), reported one, which had been sent to him from Oklahoma, escaping into the wild in 1921. During the 1927 trapping season, a dozen were captured, and historical accounts with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife recorded Civilian Conservation Corps workers bringing opossums west of the Cascades in the 1930s ... as pets.

Clark County today has about 50,000 opossums roaming about in the wild, said Linda Moorhead, the county's interim animal control manager. That's about the same number of dogs and cats combined. She estimates that there are less than a dozen people in the county who keep opossums as pets.

That number is confirmed by Jud Witherspoon of East

## Experts can handle opossums kindly

As part of Yantzy Balzer's message, he asks that people treat opossums humanely in every circumstance. Here are some options for those who encounter the animals:

Residents wanting removal of opossums from their property can call Lori Brown of Possum Rescue at 503-239-5482, Jason Balint of Big Man Live Trapping at 360-750-9647 or Larry McClintock of Critter Gitter at 503-253-5584.

Those who find abandoned or injured opossums can contact local rehab specialist Beverly Covell at 360-750-5900.

Mill Plain Animal Hospital, one of the few veterinarians in the area that will treat the species. He said, "They are a little misunderstood. They are not aggressive, killer-type animals. ... The gut reaction of people is that it chases my cat or eats my cat's food. They just don't have a good reputation. ... I'm not suggesting people go out and adopt opossums as pets, but if a person picks one up and saves it and wants to give it a life that it wouldn't have had, that's a wonderful thing. It's a good example of human nature respecting life."

Like any other domesticated animal might, Dartyan is expected to sleep on a pile of blankets at the foot of Balzer's single bed. She has a small, stuffed skunk to keep her company, but Balzer acknowledges that his pet often finds her way under his covers.

"She's my little snuggle bunny," Balzer said. "At night, I'll get a nose in the ear, or footies across my stomach and head. Every once in a while, I'll wake up with a cold nose in my belly button. Hey, I know people who do the same things with dogs and cats and even snakes. This is no different. ... If people think I'm strange, that's their choice. I have something that I love dearly. I'm happy about that. So what people think of me doesn't really matter."

# Breakfast Serials™

Good Books Unbound

Sponsored By: School Employees Credit Union CLARK COUNTY Newspaper in The Columbian It's your paper Education

## The Valley of No Return

Written by John Tomerlin • Illustrated by Michael Lacapa

THE STORY SO FAR: Lost and hungry, Jamie and Salia continue to make their way down the valley toward the Colorado River. In the evening, Salia sets a trap in hope of catching something to eat.

### CHAPTER TEN The Rabbit

When Jamie and Salia woke up, their fire had gone out. It took a while to get it started without using more of Jamie's few remaining matches; and it was even longer before they were able to warm themselves.

A light mist hung over the valley, but there was no sign of rain on this, the beginning of their fourth day.

Hunger had become a serious problem. They were growing weak, and roots and berries alone couldn't sustain them much longer.

As they sat shivering, they heard something move in the underbrush, a noise that seemed to come from just beyond the first line of willows. Salia listened, then jumped up. She seized a short, stout branch of firewood and ran toward the sound. Jamie rose to follow her.

There was something flopping on the ground near where Salia had set her trap the night before, a large, brown rabbit trying to free itself from the noose around its hind feet. Before it could escape, Salia seized the leather thong and clubbed the rabbit on the back of its head. She had to hit it a second time before it ceased moving.

She carried the carcass to a tree a little distance away, and tied the thong around one of the branches. "Let me have your knife again," she said to Jamie.

He handed it to her, feeling sick from what he'd seen, and knowing what was to follow would be even worse. But he forced himself to watch as Salia opened the animal down its middle, removed its insides, made slits around the hind feet, and pulled the skin off in one piece, like a glove. She scraped a hole at the base of the tree, buried the fur and head, then carried the slick pink carcass back to the campsite.

She planted forked branches on either side of the fire, threaded her catch onto a spit, and began to roast it. Jamie's feelings of shock gave way almost instantly to hunger. Soon his stomach began to rumble.

Salia had seen his earlier expression of dismay. "What is wrong?" she asked as their meal cooked. "Do you not like meat?"

"I like it fine," he admitted as the girl took the rabbit off the spit, divided it into quarters, and handed him a piece. "I just feel kind of sorry for the poor thing."

Salia stopped chewing. "Why?"

Jamie shrugged, his mouth too full to speak.

"Do not be sorry," she said. "The rabbit is our brother, and is happy to help us."

It was Jamie's turn to show surprise. "He's happy being dead?"

"No, no!" Salia shook her head impatiently. "The deer, the antelope, the rabbit, all are happy being ... She searched for the right words, " ... of use. All creatures are of use to one another in some way ... the rabbit for food."

Jamie thought he understood. But he was still glad he wasn't a rabbit.

Wilman Manakita and Captain Merriman sat on their horses and watched two young men of the village attempt to reach the top of White Face. It was a dangerous climb. The trail was still wet and slippery, all but washed away in places. The men were forced to slither, belly to the ground, much of the time.

Each of them carried a coil over one shoulder, all the rope that could be found among the villagers. If they made it to the top, they would lower the rope to bring the others up.

"Why don't they hurry!" the Captain fretted, mostly to himself, then saw the Speaker looking at him. "I know, your men are doing their best, it's just ..."

"It should not be long, now." The Speaker looked up. "Siyuja is almost there."

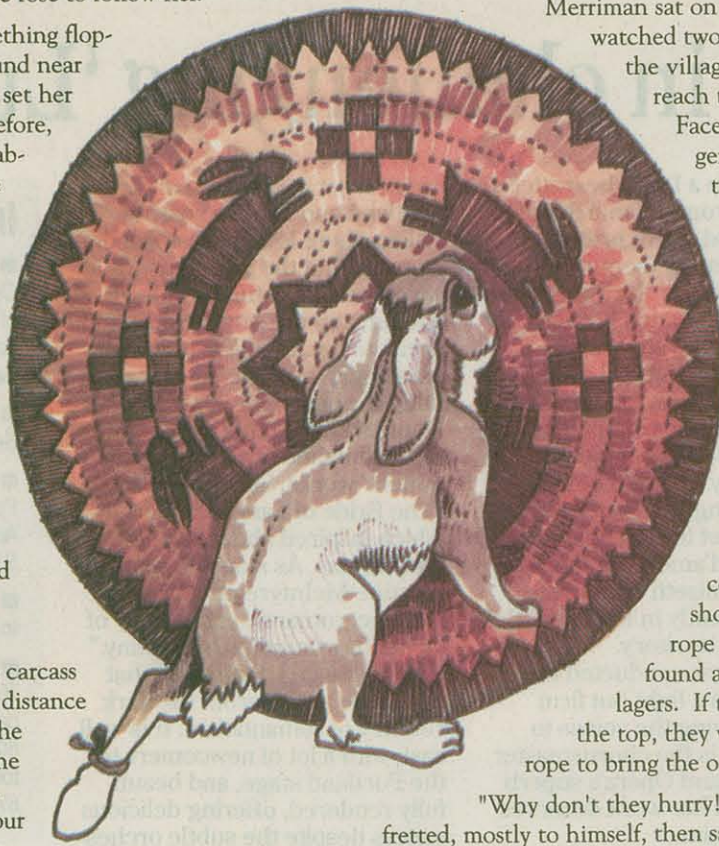
The young man in the lead was just pulling himself over the rim of the plateau. He stood, and reached to help his partner, Nila.

It took a while to make sure all the knots in the rope were secure enough to bear a man's weight, then Siyuja began lowering one end of it. It snagged a few times at wide spots on the trail, but was shaken loose and lowered again. About a hundred feet from the bottom, it stopped descending altogether. Nila waved his arms and shouted down to Manakita.

"What's the matter?" the Captain asked.

"That is all the rope they have," the Speaker said. "There's not enough to reach us."

**Next week: After The Flood**



Text copyright © 2002 John Tomerlin. Illustrations copyright © 2002 Michael Lacapa. Reprinted by permission of Breakfast Serials, Inc. www.breakfastserials.com

Teachers: Involve your students in reading this intriguing story!  
Order your FREE N.I.E. copies today. Call 360-737-3212

The Columbian  
It's your paper

di, who suddenly looks up and discovers herself directly behind Balzer and Dartyan, starts wriggling in disbelief and stays back 10 feet or so, even as Balzer moves forward through the line.

"Oooh, that just gives me the creeps," Muthandi says.

Her 5-year-old son, Muthandi Murururi, responds, "Is that a mouse?"

"It looks like a rat ... with a tail, and it could jump off," Muthandi said. "I'm not getting by him."

"You have nothing to fear whatsoever," Balzer says. Unassured, Muthandi waits until Balzer has moved a few feet past the register until she feels comfortable slipping past.

"It looks like a mouse," the boy says again. His mother corrects, "It looks like a big rrrrrrat."

Back at home, Balzer lets Dartyan stretch again along the back of the couch. Her distinguishing feature is a crimp in the tip of her tail, created as a baby when she sucked on it like a pacifier.

## A family's bond to animals

A big screen television dominates the living room in a house crowded with things and animals and people. Besides Balzer, Keen and Dartyan, the 2,400-square-foot rambler also is shared by Balzer's mother, his two sons, his older brother, his stepfather and his uncle. The decor's theme: Animal knick-knacks and stacks of magazines, including various horse sculptures and years worth of Cat Fancy magazine. The family breeds Bengal cats and chihuahuas in the back yard and has raised many other species, including badgers, bobcats and wolves. To dress up his appearance, Balzer often wears T-shirts with wolf images on the front, complemented by a necklace with silver wolf pendants.

As Balzer feeds Dartyan a hot dog and talks about her other favorite foods, including bananas, Doritos and McDonald's chicken nuggets, a pellet



Elizabeth Muthandi of Vancouver found herself in line behind a man with an opossum on him.

## 'Alias' gets double 'Kill Bill' thrill

By KATE O'HARE  
Zap2it.com

"Independence Day" star Vivica A. Fox guest-stars in "After Six," this Sunday's episode of "Alias," bringing to three the number of people involved in "Kill Bill" to appear on the ABC espionage drama.

Preceding her were the film's director and writer, Quentin Tarantino, who reprises his recurring role as McKenas Cole in "After Six," and Bill himself, David Carradine, who appeared an episode last April. "Do you want me to call my Vipers?" quips Fox, who

played assassin Vernita Green in "Kill Bill." "I will!"

In "After Six," Fox puts aside the fisticuffs for battle of a more intellectual kind, playing rogue security-systems designer Toni Cummings. It's up to CIA agents Sydney Bristow (Jennifer Garner) and Eric Weiss (Greg Grunberg) to convince Toni that she should help the CIA break through the defenses of the evil Covenant.

Fox laughs when asked if Toni's causing trouble for Sydney. "Just a little bit! Just a tad. She needs it. She can handle

it, though. She's a tough one. But working on this show has been an incredible experience. I've been a big fan ever since it came out. I got the offer because of Quentin, because he's in the episode as well.

"So it was all organic. I jumped at the opportunity, went and did it. They were great to work with — great hair, great makeup, great script. If I do TV, this is the kind of TV I want to do. I didn't think twice. 'Alias, yes!'"

Unfortunately, Fox and Tarantino don't cross paths on "Alias," Fox said.