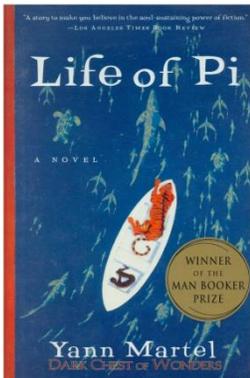


Life of Pi

Yann Martel



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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Life of Pi is a masterful and utterly original novel that is at once the story of a young castaway who faces immeasurable hardships on the high seas, and a meditation on religion, faith, art and life that is as witty as it is profound. Using the threads of all of our best stories, Yann Martel has woven a glorious spiritual adventure that makes us question what it means to be alive, and to believe.

Growing up in Pondicherry, India, Piscine Molitor Patel—known as Pi—has a rich life. Bookish by nature, young Pi acquires a broad knowledge of not only the great religious texts but of all literature, and has a great curiosity about how the world works. His family runs the local zoo, and he spends many of his days among goats, hippos, swans, and bears, developing his own theories about the nature of animals and how human nature conforms to it. Pi's family life is quite happy, even though his brother picks on him and his parents aren't quite sure how to accept his decision to simultaneously embrace and practise three religions—Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam.

But despite the lush and nurturing variety of Pi's world, there are broad political changes afoot in India, and when Pi is sixteen his parents decide that the family needs to escape to a better life. Choosing to move to Canada, they close the zoo, pack their belongings, and board a Japanese cargo ship called the *Tsimtsum*. Travelling with them are many of their animals, bound for zoos in North America. However, they have only just begun their journey when the ship sinks, taking the dreams of the Patel family down with it. Only Pi survives, cast adrift in a lifeboat with the unlikeliest of travelling companions: a zebra, an orang-utan, a hyena, and a 450-pound Royal Bengal tiger named Richard Parker.

Thus begins Pi Patel's epic, 227-day voyage across the Pacific, and the powerful story of faith and survival at the heart of *Life of Pi*. Worn and scared, oscillating between hope and despair, Pi is witness to the playing out of the food chain, quite aware of his new position within it. When only the tiger is left of the seafaring menagerie, Pi realizes that his survival depends on his ability to assert his own will, and sets upon a grand and ordered scheme to keep from being Richard Parker's next meal.

As the days pass, Pi fights both boredom and terror by throwing himself into the practical details of surviving on the open sea—catching fish, collecting rain water, protecting himself from the sun—all the while ensuring that the tiger is also kept alive, and knows that Pi is the key to his survival. The castaways face gruelling pain in their brushes with starvation, illness, and the storms that lash the small boat, but there is also the solace of beauty: the rainbow hues of a dorado's death-throes, the peaceful eye of a looming whale, the shimmering blues of the ocean's swells. Hope is fleeting, however, and despite adapting his religious practices to his daily routine, Pi feels

the constant, pressing weight of despair. It is during the most hopeless and gruelling days of his voyage that Pi whittles to the core of his beliefs, casts off his own assumptions, and faces his underlying terrors head-on.

As Yann Martel has said in one interview, "The theme of this novel can be summarized in three lines. Life is a story. You can choose your story. And a story with an imaginative overlay is the better story." And for Martel, the greatest imaginative overlay is religion. "God is a shorthand for anything that is beyond the material—any greater pattern of meaning." In *Life of Pi*, the question of stories, and of what stories to believe, is front and centre from the beginning, when the author tells us how he was led to Pi Patel and to this novel: in an Indian coffee house, a gentleman told him, "I have a story that will make you believe in God." And as this novel comes to its brilliant conclusion, Pi shows us that the story with the imaginative overlay is also the story that contains the most truth. (*From the publisher.*)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In his introductory note Yann Martel says, "This book was born as I was hungry." What sort of emotional nourishment might *Life of Pi* have fed to its author?
2. Pondicherry is described as an anomaly, the former capital of what was once French India. Do you think the town made a significant difference in Pi's upbringing?
3. In the Author's Note, Mr. Adirubasamy boldly claims that this story "will make you believe in God," and the author, after researching and writing the story, agrees. Did Pi's tale alter your beliefs about God?
4. Chapters 21 and 22 are very short, yet the author has said that they are at the core of the novel. Can you see how?
5. Early in the novel, we discover that Pi majored in religious studies and zoology, with particular interests in a sixteenth-century Kabbalist and the admirable three-toed sloth. In subsequent chapters, he explains the ways in which religions and zoos are both steeped in illusion. Discuss some of the other ways in which these two fields find unlikely compatibility.
6. In the Author's Note, Martel wonders whether fiction is "the selective transforming of reality, the twisting of it to bring out its essence." If this is so, what is the essence of Pi and of his story?
7. There is a lot of storytelling in this religious novel. Is there a relationship between religion and storytelling? Is religion a form of storytelling? Is there a theological dimension to storytelling?
8. Pi's full name, Piscine Molitor Patel, was inspired by a Parisian swimming pool that "the gods would have delighted to swim in." The shortened form refers to the ratio of a circle's circumference divided by its diameter, the number 3.1415926..., a number that goes on forever without discernable pattern, what in mathematics is called an irrational number. Explore the significance of Pi's unusual name.
9. One reviewer said the novel contains hints of *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Pi himself measures his experience in relation to history's most famous castaways. How does *Life of Pi* compare to other maritime novels and films?
10. How might the novel's flavor have been changed if the sole surviving animal had been the zebra with the broken leg? Or Orange Juice? Or the hyena? Would Pi have survived with a harmless animal or an ugly animal, say a sheep or a turkey? Which animal would you like to find yourself with on a lifeboat?

11. In chapter 23, Pi sparks a lively debate when all three of his spiritual advisors try to claim him. At the heart of this confrontation is Pi's insistence that he cannot accept an exclusively Hindu, Christian, or Muslim faith; he can only be content with all three. What is Pi seeking that can solely be attained by this apparent contradiction? Is there something common to all religions? Are they "all the same"? If not, how are they different? Is there a difference between faith and belief?

12. What do you make of Pi's assertion at the beginning of chapter 16 that we are all "in limbo, without religion, until some figure introduces us to God"? Do you believe that Pi's faith is a response to his father's agnosticism?

13. Among Yann Martel's gifts is a rich descriptive palette. Regarding religion, he observes the green elements that represent Islam and the orange tones of Hinduism. What color would Christianity be, according to Pi's perspective?

14. How do the human beings in your world reflect the animal behavior observed by Pi? What do Pi's strategies for dealing with Richard Parker teach us about confronting the fearsome creatures in our lives?

15. Besides the loss of his family and possessions, what else did Pi lose when the Tsimtsum sank? What did he gain?

16. Nearly everyone experiences a turning point that represents the transition from youth to adulthood, albeit seldom as traumatic as Pi's. What event marked your coming of age?

17. How do Mr. Patel's zookeeping abilities compare to his parenting skills? Discuss the scene in which he tries to teach his children a lesson in survival by arranging for them to watch a tiger devour a goat. Did this in any way prepare Pi for the most dangerous experience of his life?

18. If shock hadn't deluded him, do you think Pi would have whistled and waved at Richard Parker? What would you have done?

19. Pi imagines that his brother would have teasingly called him Noah. How does Pi's voyage compare to the biblical story of Noah, who was spared from the flood while God washed away the sinners?

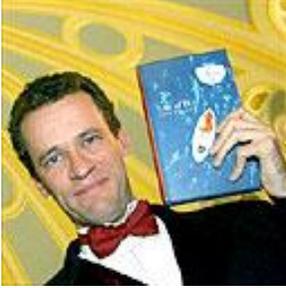
20. Is *Life of Pi* a tragedy, romance, or comedy?

21. Pi defends zoos. Are you convinced? Is a zoo a good place for a wild animal?

22. What did you think of Pi's interview with the investigators from the Japanese Ministry of Transport? Do you think Pi's mother, along with a sailor and a cannibalistic cook, were in the lifeboat with him instead of the animals? Which story do you believe, the one with animals or the one without animals? When the investigators state that they think the story with animals is the better story, Pi answers "Thank you. And so it goes with God." What do you think Pi meant by that? How does it relate to the claim that this is a story "that will make you believe in God"?

23. The first part of the novel starts twenty years after Pi's ordeal at sea and ends with the words "This story has a happy ending." Do you agree?

(Questions issued by publisher.)



'May Richard Parker be always at your side'

This year's Booker winner responds to readers' questions on creativity, plagiarism and pies

The Guardian | November 2002

Yann Martel after winning the 2002 Booker prize

Question: Congratulations on your win. You've said that you like simple stories and can't finish Günter Grass or Salman Rushdie... So which authors do you like?

Yann Martel: Did I really say that? Funny, because my favourite book, the one I'd take to a desert island, would be Dante's Divine Comedy, hardly a "simple story". I guess what I meant - what I was balking at - were stories that are overly, deliberately convoluted. The Grass I had in mind was *The Flounder*. Couldn't finish that. But I loved *The Tin Drum*. And I love Rushdie. Admittedly, I didn't finish *The Satanic Verses*.

Q: This year's Booker was surrounded by controversy, from the suggestion that US writers should be allowed to enter, to the accidental announcement of your win, and the debates over the number and types of books that should be submitted to the judges. So... were you interested in all the news and gossip around the prize or did it pass you by?

YM: I followed it. But the Booker doesn't make as much noise in Berlin, where I'm living at the moment, as it does in Britain or in Canada, so I didn't get the gossip hot off the press but indirectly, through my publicist. It all seemed quite unreal. I only started taking it in once I got to London for the gala.

Q: Do you think American novels should be submitted?

YM: No. It wouldn't add anything to the Booker as far as British and Commonwealth readers are concerned - we're already quite aware of good books that come out of the US - and it wouldn't help Commonwealth writers in the US. The prize is well known there. Opening it up to Americans would make it less foreign, and therefore less interesting to them. There's another point to be considered: the prize mustn't become unwieldy. Opening it up to the entire English-speaking world would make it just that.

Q: I'm writing from Brazil. I'm a journalist from a national newspaper, called *Folha de S Paulo*. I read that you decided to write your *Life of Pi* after reading a review of the Brazilian Moacyr Scliar. I would like to know if you read his book, or just the review.

YM: No, I never read the book. But since the "scandal" I've been sent three photocopies of it, so now I'm swimming in copies of *Max and His Cats*. I'll read it as soon as the Booker madness dies down.

Q: What impact do you think literary prizes have on literary culture?

YM: They bring attention to literary books, which is a good thing. If they make people buy a good book they otherwise wouldn't have bought, that's great. If, because of that, they buy other books, that's even better. On the down side, it does create a "celebrity" culture around certain books and authors, casting into darkness other,

more demanding works. But I don't know what we would gain by eliminating prizes, and I don't see how the jury system for awarding them can be improved. There will always be an element of the arbitrary in literary prizes.

Q: What do you think about globalisation?

YM: If by globalisation you mean fair trade on a level playing field, it's great. If you mean hypocritical posturing that favours first-world economies over third-world economies, I hate it. I also take globalisation to be strictly an economic term. Cultural globalisation is anathema to real culture, which is local.

Q: I finished Life of Pi today. So - which is the real story? Was Richard Parker in fact Pi all along? His evil side (or real side)? Anyway, I loved it. I'm going to read it for a second time, starting tomorrow.

YM: You decide which is the real story.

Q: I've read that Life of Pi was rejected by several publishers. Did you become discouraged at any stage? How did you maintain a measure of psychological fortitude? As a writer, I know only too well the anguish of that rejection note.

YM: It was rejected by several publishers, but only in the UK. And only my agent knew that. I only heard of the ones who accepted my book. That's the good thing about agents: they sometimes keep you blissfully ignorant. Mostly I have had extraordinary good luck with Pi.

Q: What is your favourite type of pie?

YM: Pumpkin pie.

Q: What kind of fractions does a typical "writing day" break down into? 10% doodling; 30% preparing elaborate meals; 5% writing; 55% walking an imaginary dog? How does the day usually shape up?

YM: I'm not that inefficient! I do play a few games of solitaire and FreeCell before I get started, but once I'm working my only breaks are to make tea and answer phone calls. I'm not a fast writer, but I am hardworking: when I'm in front of my computer I can spend hours on end getting sentences down from the dream world on to my screen. It's a joy.

Q: Martin Amis, writing in reaction to a young novelist's book which plagiarised The Rachel Papers, said something to the effect that all plagiarism contains something of the deathwish - that plagiarists want to be caught and punished. Now that the New York Times has publicly debunked your Powell's article, How I Wrote Life of Pi, would you please explain how you could have written so many fatal misstatements about the novel from which you so clearly appropriated the premise for The Life of Pi?

It is very curious indeed why you should begin an article ostensibly about the "influence" and "inspiration" behind the writing of The Life of Pi by publicly and falsely ridiculing the novel from which you took its premise. Were you trying to justify its influence? If there is nothing wrong with using other people's ideas, why would you go to such lengths to condemn the author and book which provided the creative origin for your work? How would you amend your statements now that they have been refuted?

Could you also explain what you believe to be the difference between plagiarism and influence and tell the reader why your writing isn't an example of the former?

sources:

1: www.nytimes.com/2002/11/06/books/06NOVE.html

2: www.powells.com/fromtheauthor/martel.html

YM: "Debunked"? "Fatal misstatements"? What are you, some weirdo conspiracy theorist? Let me debunk your stupid questions and their many fatal misstatements. These are the facts: (1) 12 years ago I read in an American paper a review of a novel by a writer I'd never heard of. The premise struck me. I tried to find the book in Montreal. Couldn't find it. Forgot about the book, never read it, end of story. (2) Seven years later, I'm in India. I remember the premise - its bare bones: boy, wild animal, lifeboat - and suddenly all kinds of ideas come to my mind. I decide to write my own book. (3) Five years later, I'm asked to write an essay on how I wrote the book. Which I do, quickly and for no money, and honestly. Clearly I got some of my facts wrong: it wasn't John Updike and it wasn't the New York Times. So, I got it wrong. So what? Do I gain anything by dragging in one of the most famous writers in the world and one of the most famous newspapers? I'll tell you something: I got other things wrong too. I told people the Scliar book was about a Jew who ends up in a lifeboat with a panther. Well, Max apparently isn't a Jew, and it's a jaguar. I suppose I'm up to something evil with that one. The mistakes I made in the Powell's essay were due to poor memory.

And what's this about me "publicly and falsely ridiculing" the Scliar novel? I suggest you go back to school and learn how to read. I never ridiculed Scliar in any way, shape or form. The Powell's essay makes clear that I was struck by his premise and that I was reacting to what the review had to say about his book.

In the essay and in every interview I've done, print, radio and television, I've mentioned where I got my premise. It was public knowledge for months before the Brazilian press decided to turn it into a scandal.

I have suffered from honestly mentioning where I got "the spark of life". But the idea of a person on a craft with an animal is a premise that has a long history. I could have said I got it from the Bible and no one would have raised an eyebrow.

If you think every author who borrows is a plagiariser, you clearly know nothing about creativity (or the history of literature). I would suggest this to you: don't read anything more recent than Gilgamesh, otherwise you might get upset. My God, I've wasted a lot of breath on you.

Q: What do you know of the works of the Brazilian writer Moacyr Scliar apart from the book Max and the Cats?

YM: Since this stupid scandal broke, I've learned much about Scliar and his work. In fact, I've spoken to the man. He's a gentleman.

Q: Is your exploration of multifaith in Life of Pi a part of your exploration of the boundaries and blurrings of reality, fiction and storytelling? Is multifaith comparable to a multiple-reality existence?

YM: Yes. And yes. Reality is how we interpret it. Imagination and volition play a part in that interpretation. Which means that all reality is to some extent a fiction. This is what I explore in the novel.

Q: I am not so sure whether the implicit or explicit questions of plagiarism are at all interesting. I am far more interested in this image of the tiger and how that beautiful creature figures in so many novels and stories - one thinks of Rudyard Kipling and others. I always wanted to write a tale about a boy and a tiger. I had a friend who had polio who lived in Malaya, who once walked home followed all the way to the mission house by a man-eating tiger. The animal creates fear and wonderment, and I only hope that more people read your novel.

YM: Thank you. May Richard Parker always be at your side.

Q: I think I understand at least some of the things the narrator learns in the novel, but what does Richard Parker learn?

YM: Survival.

Q: What is your favourite place to be? And what are your feelings about Canada (not Montreal)?

YM: I'm happy pretty well anywhere on this big, beautiful planet. I love Canada. It's a wonderful political act of faith that exists atop a breathtakingly beautiful land.

Q: Do you think that "magic realism" is a form of fiction that can only be written by marginalised people, or those who feel a gap between their roots and the country/language they live in? Do you think a writer who did not have such a "gap" in their consciousness could write in that particular mode?

YM: Interesting question. I'm not sure I know how to answer it. I'm a child of a white, western, middle-class family, so hardly marginalised, yet I've written a novel that some call magical realist. Clearly I don't fit the pattern you have in mind. I think art comes from some sense of discomfort with the world, some sense of not quite fitting with it. That sense of not fitting might happen more frequently with peoples who are marginalised, but would that result in magic realism being a favoured mode of storytelling - I don't know.

Q: I believed it all, up until the island and the meerkats, and then my suspended disbelief started to wobble earthwards... did you intend to create that effect in the reader? To see how far they would follow you?

YM: Yes, I did. I wanted to push the reader till he/she was forced to make some leap of faith. If the island didn't do it, then I hoped the second story would.

Q: Are you an animal lover? Which are your favourites, and why?

YM: Animals, all of them, fill me with a sense of wonder. To me, they are walking and breathing mystery.

Q: What was your first novel about (I can't find it anywhere here in England)?

YM: It's about a boy who becomes a woman at 18, is a woman for seven years and then becomes a man again at 25. It's an exploration of sexual identity and orientation. It's more or less successful, I feel. Parts work well, but overall it doesn't do what I meant it to do.

Q: Do you find writing easy, or difficult? Did you always know it was what you wanted to do? Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

YM: I find creative writing a joy when I'm inspired. When I'm not, I can hardly string words together into coherent sentences. So, writing for me is either easy, or impossibly difficult. When it's easy, it's still a lot of work. But it doesn't feel like work.

I came to writing late, after dreaming myself into all kinds of other professions.
Advice? None. You've got to do it yourself and in your own way.