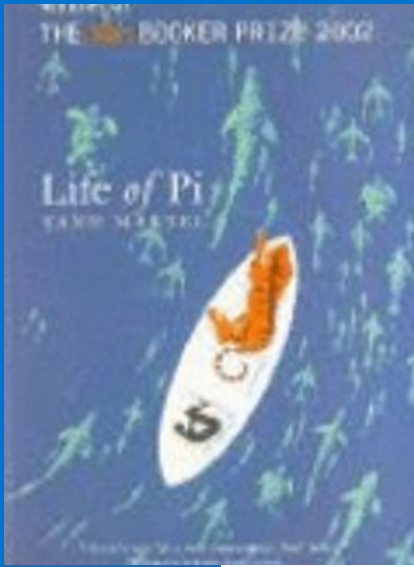


Life of Pi



Author Background

Yann Martel

- Born in 1963 in Salamanca, Spain to Canadian parents
- Resides in Canada

The son of Canadian diplomats, Yann Martel was raised in Costa Rica, France, Mexico, Alaska and Canada. As an adult, Martel has spent time in Iran, Turkey and India. Martel has described his travels as, “*seeing the same play on a whole lot of different stages*”. After studying philosophy at Trent University in Ontario, Martel spent a year in India visiting mosques, churches, temples and zoos. As a young man, Martel undertook a variety of jobs - including tree planter, dishwasher and security guard - before taking up writing full-time from the age of 27.

Martel’s first book, *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories* (1993), was well-received critically, but did not sell many copies. This was followed by his first novel, *Self* (1996), a tale of sexual identity, orientation and transformation. Martel’s *Life of Pi* (2001) was turned down by a number of publishers before being accepted by Canongate. Winning the Booker Prize in 2002, *Life of Pi* became a commercial as well as a critical success. The book was adapted to film in 2012. It has been published in over 40 countries and territories, in over 30 languages.

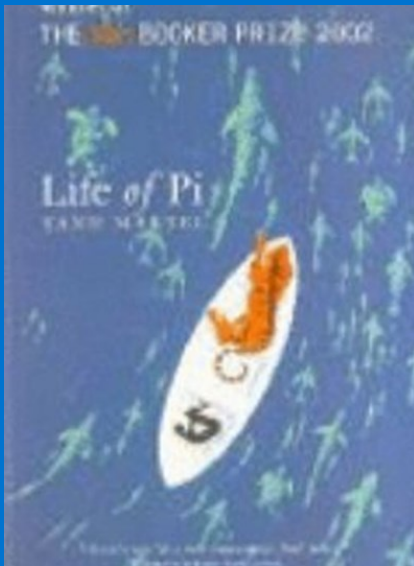
Martel was the Samuel Fischer Visiting Professor at the Institute of Comparative Literature, Freie Universität Berlin in 2002, where he created a curriculum that focused on "The Animal in Literature". He then spent a year in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, as the public library's writer-in-residence. A collection of short stories - *We Ate the Children Last* - was published in 2004. Martel’s other publications include the novels *Beatrice and Virgil* (2010) and *The High Mountains of Portugal* (2016).

From 2007 to 2011, Martel worked on a project entitled *What is Stephen Harper Reading?* Every two weeks, Martel sent the Canadian Prime Minister a book together with an explanatory note. Martel ended the project in 2011 - after sending Harper a total of 100 books. A collection of Martel’s letters - *101 Letters to a Prime Minister* - was published in 2012.

Martel has said: “*I write to understand issues that are important to me, to express my creative energies and to pass the time in a meaningful way.*”

Adapted from *Wikipedia and the British Council*

Life of Pi



Book Summary

Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (2001)

As witty as it is profound, *Life of Pi* is both the story of a young castaway facing immeasurable hardships at sea *and* a meditation on religion, faith, art and life. Yann Martel has created a powerful story of faith and survival 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. Curious about the world, young Pi acquires a broad knowledge of literature, including the great religious texts. Pi's family run a zoo and Pi spends his days among goats, hippos, swans, and bears, developing his own theories about the nature of animals and about human nature.

When Pi is 16, his parents decide that the family needs to leave India to find a better life in 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 orangutan, a hyena, and a 450-pound Royal Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. So begins Pi Patel's 227-day voyage across the Pacific....

Worn and scared, oscillating between hope and despair, the castaway Pi is witness to the playing out of the food chain; eventually only Pi and Richard Parker are left. When the lifeboat washes ashore in Mexico, Pi tells two stories of the ordeal: the story with the animals and an alternative story with people (and similarly gruesome ends). Investigators (and the reader) are left to decide which story is true.

Yann Martel has said in an 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."

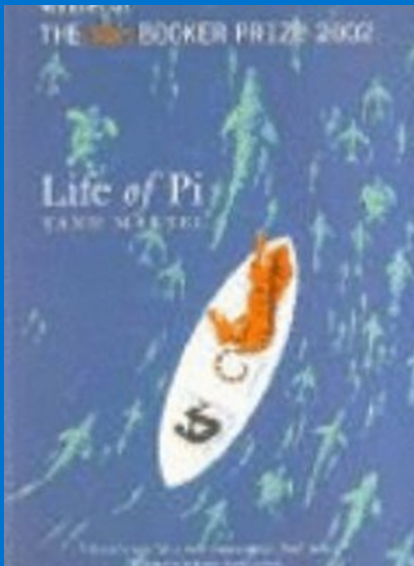
For Martel, the greatest imaginative overlay is religion:

"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. 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.

Adapted from the publisher synopsis on LitLovers [online]

Life of Pi

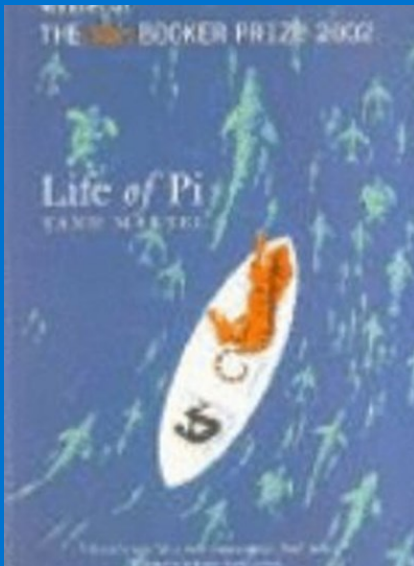


Discussion Questions

1. Which story do you believe, the one with animals or the one without animals? Do you think Pi's mother, along with a sailor and a cannibalistic cook, were in the lifeboat with him instead of the animals?
2. 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?
3. Chapters 21 and 22 are very short, yet Martel has said that they are at the core of the novel. Can you see how?
4. 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?
5. Which animal would you like to find yourself with on a lifeboat? How might the novel's flavour have been changed if the sole surviving animal had been the zebra with the broken leg? Or Orange Juice? Or the hyena?
6. How do the human beings in your world reflect the animal behaviour observed by Pi? What do Pi's strategies for dealing with Richard Parker teach us about confronting the fearsome creatures in our lives?
7. The manuscript for *Life of Pi* was turned down by at least five London publishing houses before being accepted for publication by Canongate and winning the 2002 Booker Prize. Jamie Byng of Canongate has been quoted as saying that publishing a Booker Prize winner "doubled our profits in one year". Book sales were boosted again when the film version was released in 2012. When choosing books to read, to what extent are you influenced by literary prizes, bestseller lists or celebrity endorsements?
8. Have you seen the film version of *Life of Pi*? Which version did you prefer—the book or the film?

Some questions adapted from *LitLovers* [online] and the publisher Canongate.

Life of Pi



Reviews

A fabulous romp through an imagination by turns ecstatic, cunning, despairing and resilient, this novel is an impressive achievement—"a story that will make you believe in God," as one character says. The scenes flow together effortlessly, and the sharp observations of the young narrator keep the tale brisk and engaging. Martel's potentially unbelievable plot line soon demolishes the reader's defences, cleverly set up by events of young Pi's life that almost naturally lead to his biggest ordeal. Martel displays the clever voice and tremendous storytelling skills of an emerging master.

Publishers Weekly

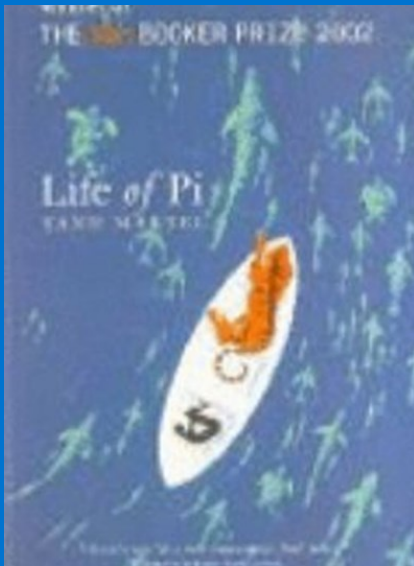
Although *Life of Pi* works remarkably well on the pure adrenaline-and-testosterone level of a high-seas adventure tale, it's apparent that Martel is not interested in simply retelling the classic lifeboat-survival story (with a Bengal tiger playing the prickly Tallulah Bankhead role). Pi, after all, is a practitioner of three major religions who also happens to have a strong background in science; with such a broad résumé, his story inevitably takes on the quality of a parable. In fact, although the book reverberates with echoes from sources as disparate as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Aesop's Fables*, the work it most strongly recalls is Ernest Hemingway's own foray into existentialist parable, *The Old Man and the Sea*. But while Hemingway depicted the defining struggle of his archetypal man as one of sheer endurance and determination, Pi's battle is more subtle. The boy must finesse his demon, not overcome it, and do so by means of a kind of psychological jujitsu. He comes to realize that survival involves knowing when to assert himself and when to hold back, when to take the upper hand and when to yield to a power greater than himself. He discovers, in other words, that living with a tiger ultimately requires acts of both will and faith.

New York Times

Life of Pi is proud to be a delegate for magic realism, and wears a big badge so that we don't forget it. Of course, in a proper paradox, this magical story is made plausible, and vivid and dramatic, only by the careful application of conventional realist techniques. If we do indeed come to believe this story of survival, if we hardly ever feel that our credulity is being taken for a reckless voyage, it is because Martel patiently builds his narrative case: ensuring that no detail is too tiny for examination; quietly folding in a vast amount of research (largely zoological and botanical); taking care to observe the laws of physics and the natural world; and generally grounding his watery tale in the loam of the likely. Martel proves, by skilful example, that realism is narrative's great master, that it schools even its own truants. He reminds us in fact that realism is already magical, an artifice-in-waiting.

London Review of Books

Life of Pi



Reviews (continued)

Life of Pi never really comes alive in the emotional sense. It is more a novel of proposition and conjecture, a series of narrative questions and solutions. You discover the reason for this only in the last few pages, when Pi offers an alternative explanation to up-end your assumptions. A cloud covers the sun and there is the possibility of a darkness so complete as to be absolutely nihilistic. Despite this, *Life of Pi* is a hilarious novel, full of clever tricks, amusing asides and grand originality. Its subtext exists in that delightful area between the possible and the fantastical, and its tone reminded me of Italo Calvino's *Our Ancestors*. As to whether it makes you believe in God - well, miracles can happen, so why not to you?

The Telegraph (UK)

Despite the extraordinary premise and literary playfulness, one reads *Life of Pi* not so much as an allegory or magical-realist fable, but as an edge-of-seat adventure. When the ship in which 16-year-old Pi and his zookeeping family are to emigrate from India to Canada sinks, leaving him the sole human survivor in a lifeboat on to which barge a zebra, a hyena, an orangutan and a bedraggled, seasick tiger, Pi is determined to survive the impossible. "I will turn miracle into routine. The amazing will be seen every day." And Martel writes with such convincing immediacy, seasoning his narrative with zoological verisimilitude and survival tips about turtle-fishing, solar stills and keeping occupied (the lifeboat manual notes that "yarn spinning is highly recommended"), that disbelief is suspended, like Pi, above the terrible depths of the Pacific ocean.

The Guardian (Australia)

A fable about the consolatory and strengthening powers of religion flounders about somewhere inside this unconventional coming-of-age tale, which was shortlisted for Canada's Governor General's Award. The story is told in retrospect by Piscine Molitor Patel.... During 227 days at sea spent in a lifeboat with a hyena, an orangutan, a zebra, and a 450-pound Bengal tiger (mostly with the latter, which had efficiently slaughtered its fellow beasts), Pi found serenity and courage in his faith: a frequently reiterated amalgam of Muslim, Hindu, and Christian beliefs. The story of his later life, education, and mission rounds out, but does not improve upon, the alternately suspenseful and whimsical account of Pi's ordeal at sea—which offers the best reason for reading this otherwise preachy and somewhat redundant story of his *Life*.

Kirkus Reviews