

A discussion on Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*
by Paul Jackson

student # 021266838
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Professors M. Lovewell and A. Hunter
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“I have a story that will make you believe in God”

(VIII)

Yann Martel's novel *The Life of Pi* is narrated by an Indian boy who tells a fantastic story of survival and growth. Piscine (or Pi) is a wise, bookish child eager to make sense of the world. He is attracted to the richness of religion and makes friends with many older people who broaden his love of learning. Throughout the story, Pi explores Hinduism, Christianity, and Moslem faiths with equal passion. The son of a zookeeper, Pi is taught to respect and fear animals, especially tigers. While on a voyage to Canada, the ship sinks and Pi finds himself on a lifeboat with a hyena, a zebra with a broken leg, and orangutan, and a Bengal tiger. The hyena kills the zebra and the orangutan, but is ultimately finished off by the tiger. Pi's relationship with the tiger evolves over the course of the journey, with fear turning to acceptance, then respect. Pi fights for his own survival with a combination of strength and intelligence. After months of subsisting on fish and the occasional turtle, his body weakens to the point where death seems certain. In a delirious near-coma, Pi talks has a conversation with the tiger. Shortly after, Pi talks to a person who, miraculously, has floated up in another lifeboat. The tiger kills this other person just as he is attacking Pi, saving his life. The lifeboat comes upon a fantastic island ecosystem consisting of a mass of algae that forms trees but no soil. A population of meerkats lives off of this island, retreating to the trees at night when the island secretes an acid that kills anything nearby. Pi and the tiger leave after eating their fill of algae and meerkats, knowing they have no place on the island. Not long after, the boat washes ashore in Mexico, ending their journey. After the tiger leaves unceremoniously, Pi is found and brought to a hospital. While recovering, a pair of Japanese men come asking about the fate of the ship. They react with doubt to his story, so Pi tells them another version, replacing the animals with people. Ultimately, his original story is the one they accept for their report.

The characters in *Life of Pi* are rich and meaningful. Martel recounts two

versions of the story, one with animals and one with people. However, the animals in this book don't represent real people, but the elements and forces at play in a person's life. Pi's time in the life boat, which clearly represents the journey of life, begins with a large cast of symbolic characters.

The hyena is illustrated as a vicious, ugly animal that eats anything it finds with equal voracity. It runs around in circles before throwing up and collapsing on the deck. This character resembles the cold, hard logic that is Pi's (and Martel's) enemy. It has no grace or discretion, devouring everything in its sight without a thought. The hyena's first victim is the helpless zebra, which represents Pi's remaining fantasies of reuniting with his family. "...it was not only the day that had died and the poor zebra, but my family as well" (141).

Orange Juice is a caring, gentle orangutan who shows remarkably human emotions. She is capable of defending herself when attacked, and does this when the hyena lunges towards her. In the end, though, the carnivore does what it is best at: killing. Orange Juice represents the traditional bridge between human and animal worlds, and her death heralds the evolution of Pi's relationship with the tiger.

The tiger is given the name Richard Parker, and we meet him in the water when the ship sinks. At first Pi tries to save him, but realizing the impracticality of sharing a lifeboat with a tiger, he changes his mind and pushes Parker away. The prospect of sharing a lifeboat with a tiger reminds Pi of his atheist father's lesson, who imparted the fear of animals to his sons. By looking at Pi's struggle between reason and fantasy, between rationality and religion, we can see that Richard Parker is god.

The London Review of Books (by James Wood) begins by describing how the book's well-known and simple premise puts off new readers. He goes on to describe how Martel's research helps make the story more believable, setting up the reader for something that is not. Wood outlines the plot, concentrating appropriately on everything between the ship's sinking and the lifeboat's landfall.

Citing Pi's lack of depth, he accuses the book of being similarly shallow. Pi is also accused of giving the ocean journey an inappropriate charm that inaccurately portrays the gravity of being stranded at sea. The reviewer claims that because Pi's religious development isn't directly explored, his character and the book suffer a lack of depth and believability. To further his argument, he says that Martel's religious message isn't done justice by the story, and that Pi's sermonizing at the end of the book is implausible and ordinary. Wood continues by placing *Life of Pi* squarely in the "contemporary Postmodern" category and labeling it as such because of its lack of concrete religious commitment. To conclude the review he compares *Life of Pi* unfavourably to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, saying that while Defoe dives into the protagonist's theological anguish, Martel skims the surface of storytelling and gives the reader no insight into Pi's situation, or for that matter, the reader's.

The New York Times book review (by Gary Krist) differs considerably in its approach and treatment of the book. Its beginning is similar to the London review, talking about the believability of the book and delving into a plot summary. The similarity ends there. Krist delves immediately into the relationship between Pi and Richard Parker. Pi's struggle is outlined in detail, and the nuances of our protagonist's survival are treated more favourably. The book is compared to similar stories by Hemingway and, like the London review, Daniel Defoe. Instead of attacking the subtlety of Martel's character and announcing the superiority of the 'classics', the reviewer recounts Pi's journey as a delicate tale of restraint and uncommon maturity. More critical analysis lies in the reviewer's view on the algae island section. He says "One episode involving a bizarre "Gandhian" island...struck me as a little too baldly allegorical" (paragraph 6). Instead of criticizing the end of the book as being flaky and empty of meaning, Krist compliments the unique finish and Martel's overall story. He defends Martel's claim that every event is just a story, so we can choose the version that makes us happiest.

Works Cited

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Martel, Yann. Life of Pi. Toronto: Random House, 2001.

Wood, James. "Credulity." Rev. of Life of Pi, by Yann Martel. London Review of Books 14 Nov. 2002.