Life of Pi
Author: Yann Martel
Born: June 25, 1963; Salamanca, Spain

Type of Work: Novel
Time of Work: 1996
Locale: Pondicherry, the Pacific Ocean, Mexico, and Toronto

Principal characters:

Piscine Molitor Patel "Pi", an Indian boy emigrating to Canada with his family

Richard Parker, a Bengal tiger

The author, who is and is not Yann Martel

"In Life of Pi we have chosen an audacious book in which inventiveness explores belief," said Lisa Jardine, chair of the committee which selected Yann Martel’s novel for the 2002 Man Booker Prize, Britain’s most publicized and arguably most prestigious literary award. The choice was surprising given the competition; the shortlist comprised Sarah Waters, Tim Winton, the venerable William Trevor, and three Canadians: Carol Shields, dying of breast cancer; Rohinton Mistry, all three of whose novels have been shortlisted for the Booker, and Martel. Although the dark horse, Life of Pi was much admired by reviewers, including fellow Canadian and former Booker winner Margaret Atwood: “a terrific book . . . fresh, original, smart, devious, and crammed with absorbing lore . . . a far-fetched story you can’t quite swallow whole, but can’t dismiss outright.” The power of Martel’s novel may be gauged by how well it survived a tabloid-style attack, following the Man Booker ceremony, for not being original enough, borrowing too freely from an obscure 1956 Brazilian novel, Moacyr Scliar’s Max and the Cats. Set in 1933, Scliar’s novel concerns a young Jew who, fleeing Nazi Germany, survives shipwreck by sharing a lifeboat with a panther. That Martel acknowledges Scliar’s novel in his “Author’s Note” as having provided the “spark of life” to Life of Pi hardly mattered, least of all at a time when accusations of plagiarism in high places (against historians Stephen Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin) and the debate over intellectual property rights in the global economy were all the rage.

Martel’s “Author’s Note," a playful mélange of fact and fantasy (the "author" here is and is not Martel), puts the novel in a more autobiographical context. Born in Spain to Canadian parents (his father a diplomat and poet), the well-traveled Martel grew up wherever his father was posted. After studying philosophy at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, he published a collection of short stories, Self (1996). Both received good notices but were commercially unsuccessful. Martel went to India where, depending on whether one believes the author or the “Author’s Note,” one (or both) of two things happened. Either than from within the factoidal "Author’s Note," had a vision. The north Indian plain before him became in his imagination an ocean with a lone lifeboat floating upon it. He began researching his novel while still in India, visiting zoos in the south, then returned to Canada where he read extensively in zoology and animal psychology, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam; he even started attending Catholic mass. Over the course of writing his novel, he became what his protagonist is, a believer, albeit a believer of an odd and oddly inviting kind.

That protagonist is Piscine Molitor Patel, from Pondicherry, a former French colonial city that is now part of the modern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Named for a Parisian swimming pool but later saddled with the moniker Pissing Patel by a classmate, he reinvents himself as Pi. "And so, in that Greek letter that looks like a shack with a corrugated roof, in that elusive irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, I found refuge." The son of secularized parents (as is Martel), Pi becomes as enamored of religion (or religions) as he is of science, but when priest, pandit, and imam each tries to claim him as his own, as his atheist science teacher previously tried, Pi balks, critical of their small-mindedness. When a short time later Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, proving similarly small-minded and territorial, brings down the local government, Pi’s father, owner of the local zoo, decides that the family will immigrate to Canada.

On July 2, 1977, just eleven days after leaving Madras, the ship goes down. After 277 days in a 26-foot lifeboat, Pi and Richard Parker, a 450 pound Bengal tiger, arrive in Mexico, the sole survivors. At first, however, the lifeboat is a bit more crowded, its "ecosystem" more complex. The hyena eats the zebra and then the orangutan, before being eaten in turn by Richard Parker, who does not eat Pi. That he does not is as improbable as the tiger’s name, only more ambiguously explained. The simple explanation is that Pi, the zookeeper’s son, manages to master the beast. However, nothing is ever quite so simple in this artful fable, in which simplicity is invariably a means, not an end in itself. Man (or boy) and tiger, Pi and Parker, become dependent on each other: the tiger on Pi for food and water, Pi on the tiger for a strange kind of
companionship that is as much spiritual as psychological.

Pi’s "I" is omnipresent but unpretentious in this not-quite-first-person story-within-a-story of a novel, and it is his voice that delights and beguiles. At times he sounds like a fortune cookie, at others like a mini-Salman Rushdie, practicing an art of restrained excess. The humor is all the more effective for being understated and the despair made more poignant, more real, because it is so rarely and reticently expressed. Fantastical and ultimately metaphysical as his story is, Pi grounds it in the details of his severely circumscribed everyday reality. Precise descriptions of butchering a turtle, operating a solar water still, and taming a tiger alternate with brilliantly wrought comic scenes, skits, and shaggy dog stories: the arrival of the three not-so-wise men (pandit, priest, and imam), for example, and Martel’s version of how the leopard got its spots (how the tiger got his name). There is the scene, reminiscent of silent film comedy, in which Pi frantically encourages Richard Parker to save himself from drowning by swimming to the lifeboat only to realize, as the tiger climbs aboard, what he has just done, and then leaping into the ocean to save himself from the tiger he has just saved. Best of all is the lengthy Beckett-like scene (five times longer in manuscript) in which a temporarily blind Pi crosses nautical paths with a blind French cannibal, a hallucination that turns out to be real (or as real as anything else in this fabulous, faux-factual novel): The whilom companion-turned-killer is himself killed and eaten by Richard Parker. Pi’s hungry savior. Differently funny, more blackly humorous is the floating island which Pi first believes is his salvation and only later realizes is carnivorous. Mistaken first, and second, impressions are common in the novel, for the reader no less than for Pi, who steps on to a Crusoe-like island and right into a Swiftian satire.

This leisurely told tall tale wears its meanings on its sleeve. Martel may be an allegorist, but he is no José Saramago, nor does he wish to be. "In a novel, you must amuse as you elevate," Martel has said, preferring the accessible and amusing Pi not only to the "complicated and dense" fiction of writers such as Salman Rushdie and Günther Grass but to his own earlier fiction as well, with its "stylistic excesses." Even Pi’s extensive intertextuality proves inviting rather than off-putting. Instead of demanding that readers play (and lose) a game of literary trivial pursuit, Martel allows them to make connections and find resemblances without making the reader’s pleasure dependent on either: Noah’s ark, Edward Hick’s painting The Peaceable Kingdom (c. 1833), Daniel Defoë’s Robinson Crusoe (1719), Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1726), Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1844), Herman Melville’s Moby Dick (1851), Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book (1894), Stephen Crane’s The Open Boat (1898), Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1798), Ernest Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea (1952), and Max and the Cats, as well as (unfortunately) the Tom Hanks film Cast Away (2000), Michael Ende’s Die Unendliche Geschichte (1979; The Neverending Story, 1983), and (even more worrisome) Richard Bach’s Jonathan Livingston Seagull (1970).

Martel’s intertextual range contributes to his larger purpose, turning either/or into both/and, underlining all forms of exclusivity (religious in particular but secular humanist as well) by positing a more inclusive alternative. In the Peaceable Kingdom, a shared, common life of Pi’s realism lies down with fabulation, the mundane with the miraculous, humor with despair, science with religion, past with present, storyteller with novelist. As Pi says two decades after his ordeal, "My suffering left me sad and lonely. Academic study and the steady, mindful practice of religion brought me back to life." At the University of Toronto, he majors in zoology and religious studies, writing theses on the sixteenth century Kabbalist Isaac Luria and on the thyroid function of the three-toed sloth. "Sometimes I got my majors mixed up."

"Life in a lifeboat isn’t much," he says, any more than it is in any confined space, whether an academic discipline or a specific religion or, in Martel’s telling, Pi’s account of survival on the high seas. Thus, Martel prefaces that story not only with his or a surrogate’s “Author’s Note,” but with Pi’s account of his early years, and he intersperses the "author’s" italicized remarks on hearing the story from Pi, including glimpses into Pi’s later life (his marriage and children). He follows it with “excerpts from the verbatim transcript” of a tape made by two representatives of the Japanese Ministry of Transportation who had interviewed Pi years before in Mexico as part of their investigation into the sinking of the Tsimsium. That transcript includes the very account that has just been read, or some version of it; chapter 96 reads in its entirety, "The story." His Japanese listeners find Pi’s account both unhelpful (because it does not explain why the Tsimsium sank—Pi thinks he may have heard an explosion—a big bang) and unbelievable. So Pi tells them a much shorter story in which, instead of Pi, hyena, tiger, zebra, and orangutan, there is Pi, a monstrous cook, Pi’s mother, and a young sailor (both of whom the cook kills before being killed in turn by Pi). Why does Pi begin crying at this point? Because this brutal story is painfully true, his fable patently false? Perhaps, but the more likely explanation is that Life of Pi is not just a story about salvation, one with a happy ending (Pi saved, his formal studies completed, his family settled and secure). It is also a story about the loss of Pi’s other home and other family: mother, father, and older brother, as well as Richard Parker. As soon as they reach Mexico, "Richard Parker, companion of my torment, awful, fierce thing that kept me alive, moved forward and disappeared forever from my life," like a dream, one is tempted to say: a recurring dream, for Richard Parker continues “to prey” on his mind.

Released in Canada on the same day as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Life of Pi is the perfect “literary novel” for the postronic age: earnest, uplifting, global (translated into at least sixteen languages). It is, as the Nation’s Charlotte Innes has noted, “a religious book that makes sense to a nonreligious person” and restores the reader’s “faith in literature.” True enough, but Life of Pi is more than that. As the “Author’s Note” points out, "They speak a funny English in India. They like the word bamboozle." The novel’s charm derives in part from Martel’s capturing that slightly stilted, slightly dated Indian colonial English so perfectly and unconscioningly and in part from its "bamboozling" readers with its metafictional embedding of stories within stories. Life of Pi bamboozles most, however, in pretending to cover up and overcome what it exposes and illuminates: that sense of loss upon which the explosion—a big bang) and unbelievable. So Pi tells them a much shorter story in which, instead of Pi, hyena, tiger, zebra, and orangutan, there is Pi, a monstrous cook, Pi’s mother, and a young sailor (both of whom the cook kills before being killed in turn by Pi). Why does Pi begin crying at this point? Because this brutal story is painfully true, his fable patently false? Perhaps, but the more likely explanation is that Life of Pi is not just a story about salvation, one with a happy ending (Pi saved, his formal studies completed, his family settled and secure). It is also a story about the loss of Pi’s other home and other family: mother, father, and older brother, as well as Richard Parker. As soon as they reach Mexico, “Richard Parker, companion of my torment, awful, fierce thing that kept me alive, moved forward and disappeared forever from my life," like a dream, one is tempted to say: a recurring dream, for Richard Parker continues “to prey” on his mind.

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Essay by: Morace, Robert A.

Sources for Further Study


