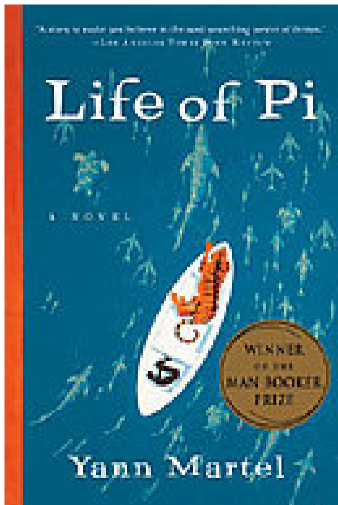

Life of Pi
A Novel by Yann Martel

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Awards 2002 Winner of the Man Booker Prize for Fiction and the Hugh Lennan Prize for Fiction 2001. Short-listed for the Governer General's Literary Award for Fiction

Pi Patel is an unusual boy. The son of a zookeeper, he has an encyclopedic knowledge of animal behavior, a fervent love of stories, and practices not only his native Hinduism, but also Christianity and Islam. When Pi is sixteen, his family emigrates from India to North America aboard a Japanese cargo ship, along with their zoo animals bound for new homes.

The ship sinks. Pi finds himself alone in a lifeboat, his only companions a hyena, an orangutan, a wounded zebra, and Richard Parker, a 450-pound Bengal tiger. Soon the tiger has dispatched all but Pi, whose fear, knowledge, and cunning allow him to coexist with Richard Parker for 227 days lost at sea. When they finally reach the coast of Mexico, Richard Parker flees to the jungle, never to be seen again. The Japanese authorities who interrogate Pi refuse to believe his story and press him to tell them "the truth." After hours of coercion, Pi tells a second story, a story much less fantastical, much more conventional-but is it more true?

Life of Pi is at once a realistic, rousing adventure and a meta-tale of survival that explores the redemptive power of storytelling and the transformative nature of fiction. It's a story, as one character puts it, to make you believe in God.

Publishers Weekly

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 peripatetic Pi (ne the much-taunted Piscine) Patel spends a beguiling boyhood in Pondicherry, India, as the son of a zookeeper. Growing up beside the wild beasts, Pi gathers an encyclopedic knowledge of the animal world. His curious mind also makes the leap from his native Hinduism to Christianity and Islam, all three of which he practices with joyous abandon. In his 16th year, Pi sets sail with his family and some of their menagerie to start a new life in Canada. Halfway to Midway Island, the ship sinks into the Pacific, leaving Pi stranded on a life raft with a hyena, an orangutan, an injured zebra and a 450-pound Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. After the beast dispatches the others, Pi is left to survive for 227 days with his large feline companion on the 26-foot-long raft, using all his knowledge, wits and faith to keep himself alive. 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 defenses, cleverly set up by events of young Pi's life that almost naturally lead to his biggest ordeal. This richly patterned work, Martel's second novel, won Canada's 2001 Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction. In it, Martel displays the clever voice and tremendous storytelling skills of an emerging master.

Library Journal

Named for a swimming pool in Paris the Piscine Molitor "Pi" Patel begins this extraordinary tale as a teenager in India, where his father is a zoo keeper. Deciding to immigrate to Canada, his father sells off most of the zoo animals, electing to bring a few along with the family on their voyage to their new home. But after only a few days out at sea, their rickety vessel encounters a storm. After crew members toss Pi overboard into one of the lifeboats, the ship capsizes. Not long after, to his horror, Pi is joined by Richard Parker, an acquaintance who manages to hoist himself onto the lifeboat from the roiling sea. You would think anyone in Pi's dire straits would welcome the company, but Richard Parker happens to be a 450-pound Bengal tiger. It is hard to imagine a fate more desperate than Pi's: "I was alone and orphaned, in the middle of the Pacific, hanging on to an oar, an adult tiger in front of me, sharks beneath me, a storm raging about me." At first Pi plots to kill Richard Parker. Then he becomes convinced that the tiger's survival is absolutely essential to his own. In this harrowing yet inspiring tale, Martel demonstrates skills so well honed that the story appears to tell itself without drawing attention to the writing. This second novel by the Spanish-born, award-winning author of Self, who now lives in Canada, is highly recommended for all fiction as well as animal and adventure collections.

Booklist

Pi Patel, a young man from India, tells how he was shipwrecked and stranded in a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger for 227 days. This outlandish story is only the core of a deceptively complex three-part novel about, ultimately, memory as a narrative and about how we choose truths. Unlike other authors who use shifting chronologies and unreliable narrators, Martel frequently achieves something deeper than technical gimmickry. Pi, regardless of what actually happened to him, earns our trust as a narrator and a character, and makes good, in his way, on the promise in the last sentence of part one--that is, just before the tiger saga--"This story has a happy ending." If Martel's strange, touching novel seems a fable without quite a moral, or a parable without quite a metaphor, it still succeeds on its own terms. Oh, the promise in the entertaining "Author's Note" that this is a "story that will make you believe in God" is perhaps excessive, but there is much in it that verifies Martel's .

Biography of Yann Martel

born June 25, 1963 Canadian author

Yann Martel, the son of diplomats, was born in Spain in 1963. He grew up in Costa Rica, France, Mexico, Alaska, and Canada and as an adult has spent time in Iran, Turkey, and India. After studying philosophy in college, he worked at various odd jobs until he began earning his living as a writer at the age of twenty-seven. He lives in Montreal

Yann Martel was born in Salamanca, Spain, in 1963, of Canadian parents who were doing graduate studies. Later they both joined the Canadian foreign service and he grew up in Costa Rica, France, Spain and Mexico, in addition to Canada. He continued to travel widely as an adult, spending time in Iran, Turkey and India, but is now based mainly in Montreal. He obtained a degree in Philosophy from Trent University in Ontario, then worked variously as a tree planter, dishwasher and security guard before taking up writing full-time from the age of 27.

His first book, a collection of short stories titled The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios, was first published in 1993. The stories deal with themes such as illness, storytelling and the history of the twentieth century; music, war and the anguish of youth; how we die; and grief, loss and the reasons we are attached to material objects.

His first novel, Self, was published in 1996. The Montreal Gazette described it as '[a] superb psychological acute observation on love, attraction and belonging'.

In 2002 he won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction for his second novel, Life of Pi (2002), an epic survival story with an overarching religious theme. Life of Pi has been published in over forty countries and in thirty languages.

He is currently at work on another novel featuring a monkey and donkey, and will deal with the words, metaphors and stories we use to describe, and so live with, great evil. He lives in Montreal where he divides his time between yoga, writing and volunteering in a palliative care unit.

Interview with the Author on October 2, 2002 at WrittenVoices.com.

What was your inspiration in writing Life of Pi?
Pi was inspired by two things: India, and a so-so review I read ten years ago in the NY Times Review of Books. The review was by Updike of a Brazilian novel. He panned it, but the premise (of a Jew in a lifeboat with a black panther in 1933) struck me.

Had you visited India prior to deciding to write the book?
I've been to India three times, each time with a backpack, dazzled by it all. I did research the second time I was there, and then went back to clear up small details.

Why the three religions in your book?
I included three religions because I wanted to discuss faith, not organized religion, so wanted to relativize organized religion by having Pi practice three. I would have like PI to be a Jew, too, to practice Judaism, but there are two religions that are explicitly incompatible: Christianity and Judaism. Where one begins, the other ends, according to Christians, and where one endures, the other strays, according to Jews.

Why do you think people connect to this book at such a personal level?
I think the book connects with people in two ways: 1, it's a great yarn, 2, it goes deep, talks about spirituality in a real, serious, concrete way, untainted by cynicism.

amagmom : Mr. Martel, did you research people lost at sea? Have you heard of Richard Van Pham lost at sea for 3 months was found roasting sea birds?
Yann Martel : yes, I just read about Van Pham. IN fact, in Canada, it was on the front page of the paper, mentioning how it resembled my story.

How do you feel about the book being compared to The Old Man and the Sea?
Yann Martel : people always seek to compare. They can take the new, but only if it is somehow connected to the familiar. We need that in our lives, the mix of the new and the old. But of course I'm flattered about the comparison with Old man and the sea. Hemingway is a great writer.

What was the inspiration for Richard Parker? There's a lot of symbolism in the tiger image.
I wanted an Indian animal. At first I had an adolescent Indian elephant. But that was too comical. Then a rhino, but rhinos are herbivores and didn't see how I could keep a herbivore alive for 227 days in the Pacific. So finally I settled on what now seems the natural choice, a tiger.

Was your opinion of zoos different before you did the research?
A zoo is not an ideal place for an animal--of course the best place for a chimp is the wilds of Tanzania--but a good zoo is a decent, acceptable place. Animals are far more flexible than we realize. IF they weren't, they wouldn't have survived. But my opinion about zoos came after research. Initially I had the opinion that most people have, that they are jails.
A zoo is an artificial territory, an approximation. Civilization is our natural territory.
figures, is natural.

I thought the animals in the boat represented qualities of companies or countries.
The animals might embody certain traits. We think of tigers as being ferocious, etc. But to my mind, it was the other way around: the humans embodied certain animal traits.

Yann Martel : Amagmom, yes, that was hard. But I wanted a story so horrifying that people would choose the first one. After all, in both stories, the mother dies. So why not choose the better story, I say.

amagmom : Having the mother die did make it more personal as opposed to just crew he did not feel attached to. I also did not understand why the ship sank.
Yann Martel : The ship sinking was for me symbolic of the things, the accidents, that happen to us in life, inexplicably.

mikey : I'm curious, what are your working on now and where will the story take place.
Yann Martel : Mikey, next project is an allegory of the Holocaust featuring a monkey and a donkey. It will be set on a country (with trees, rivers, etc) that is also a shirt.

It sounds grim, but I want to create a portable metaphor for the Holocaust that we might apply in other circumstances, such as Rwanda.

amagmom : Where did you get the jacket cover, it's great. It is what drew me to the book. Why doesn't the jacket tell more of the story? I read about it on the internet and then saw it at the bookstore. But when I suggest to others, they read jacket and then put it down
Yann Martel : Amagmom, yes I love the cover too. It's the British one, actually.

janice : Whenever I mention the title people immediately think it has to do with

I chose the name Pi because it's an irrational number (one with no discernable pattern). Yet scientists use this irrational number to come to a "rational" understanding of the universe. To me, religion is a bit like that, "irrational" yet with it we come together we come to a sound understanding of the universe.

Books

Seven Stories (1993)

The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios (1993)

Self (1996)

Life of Pi (2001)

We ate the Children Last (short stories, 2004)

A 20th Century Shirt (due 2008)

Discussion Questions

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. In terms of storytelling, what makes this town a appropriate choice for Pi's upbringing?

3. Yann Martel recalls that many Pondicherry residents provided him with stories, but he was most intrigued by this tale because Mr. Adirubasamy said it would make him believe in God. Did Pi's tale alter your beliefs about God?

4. Early in the novel, we discover that the narrator 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.

5. Yann Martel sprinkles the novel with italicized memories of the "real" Pi Patel and wonders in his author's note 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?

6. 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. Explore the significance of Pi's unusual name.

7. 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. Considering that Pi's shipwreck is the first to focus on a boy and his tiger, how does **Life of Pi** compares to other maritime novels and films?

8. How might the novel's flavor have been changed if Pi's sole surviving animal were the zebra or Orange Juice? (We assume that if the hyena had been the only surviving animal, Pi would not have lived to tell us his story.)

9. 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?

10. 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 piousness was a response to his father's atheism?

11. 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?

12. 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?

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

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

15. How do Mr. Patel's zookeeping abilities compare to his parenting skills? Discuss the scene in which his 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?

16. Why did Pi at first try so hard to save Richard Parker?

17. 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?

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

19. Do you agree with Pi's opinion that a zoo is more like a suburb than a jail?

20. How did you react to Pi's interview by the Japanese transport ministers? Did you ever believe that Pi's mother, along with a sailor and a cannibalistic cook, had perhaps been in the lifeboat with him instead of the animals? How does Yann Martel achieve such believability in his surprising plots?

21. The opening scene occurs after Pi's ordeal has ended. Discussing his work in the first chapter, Pi says that a necktie is a noose, and he mentions some of the things that he misses about India (in spite of his love for Canada). Would you say that this novel has a happy ending? How does the grown-up version of Pi contrast with his little-boy scenes? talent and humanist vision

Reader's Guide
(http://www.bookclubs.ca/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780676973778&view=rg

1. As Pi's father says, when he is explaining the ferocity of the zoo animals to his sons, "Life will defend itself no matter how small it is." In what ways does Pi defend himself in this novel?

2. With his stories about zoos and zoology, Pi teaches us that the ability to adapt is crucial not only to animals but to humans, and is rooted in the will to survive. How do Pi's theories of zoo-keeping play out on the lifeboat? Does Pi go through a transformation on his journey? What does he learn?

3. Our author discovers the story of Pi Patel after an elderly man in an Indian coffee house tells him, "I have a story that will make you believe in God." As a young man, Pi shocks his family and local religious officials by embracing Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, and sees no reason to pick just one. And on the lifeboat, it is God that Pi turns to in his despair. Discuss the role of religion, and religious stories, in this novel.

4. When Pi meets with the Japanese officials at the end of his journey and tells them his story, they do not believe him and ask what really happened. Pi provides them with a new story, one of "dry, yeastless factuality," without animals, and then asks which one they prefer. Discuss the nature of storytelling and belief in relation to Life of Pi, and to life.

5. "As for hearing, the sloth is not so much deaf as uninterested in sound." "To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation." As a story

of death, loss, fear and destruction, Life of Pi has at its heart a number of very tragic events. However, one of the most pervasive elements of the novel is its very matter-of-fact humour. Why do you think this is? What is the effect on you, as a reader?

6. Near the end of Life of Pi, Pi and Richard Parker come ashore on a free-floating island comprised entirely of algae and inhabited only by many, many meerkats. Why does Pi decide to leave the island? What is the significance of this story? Is there a difference between survival and life?

7. Whereas the bulk of this novel is told by Pi Patel -- "in his voice and through his eyes," our author tells us -- we also see the current-day Pi through the eyes of the author, and read "excerpts from the verbatim transcript" of the young Pi's interview with the Japanese officials. Why? Discuss the effect of and possible reasons for the narrative structure of this novel.

8. The Author's Note ends with a what seems to be a call to arms: "If we, citizens, do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams." In reviews of Life of Pi, Yann Martel has been equally and abundantly praised for his realism and his great imagination. Do you see a conflict between these approaches to writing fiction? What is the role of "truth" in fiction?

9. In Life of Pi we know Richard Parker to be a 450-pound Royal Bengal tiger mistakenly named after the hunter who captured him, and Pi's companion during his seven months at sea. But there are further nautical stories involving Richard Parkers, outside of this book: Edgar Allan Poe's Richard Parker was eaten by his shipmates in the novel The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym, a real-life cabin boy named Richard Parker was eaten by his fellow castaways after the sinking of the Mignonette in the 1870s, and so on. Who is Richard Parker? Why might Yann Martel have chosen the name Richard Parker for this tiger, and this novel? Discuss the importance of names, and naming, in Life of Pi.

Discussion Questions from Novelist online library database

Why does it matter that the story opens in Pondicherry, India?

The narrator tells us a few facts about Pondicherry in his "Author's Note" without making a big deal of them. "In population and size it is an inconsequent part of India -- by comparison, Prince Edward Island is a giant within Canada," he tells us, and it was "once the capital of that most modest of colonial empires, French India." The French, never able to hold much territory on the subcontinent, nevertheless clung to their port of Pondicherry for almost three hundred years, leaving only in 1954. They left behind "nice white buildings, broad streets at right angles to each other, street names such as rue de la Marine and rue Saint-Louis, and kepis, caps, for the policemen" (p. ix-x).

Pondicherry is an anomaly in India, a tiny outpost surrounded by the rest of the country that presses in around it, though it manages to preserve self-rule. Much like Pi himself, the city is distinct, idiosyncratic, a standout anomaly. It's peculiarly appropriate that Pi should grow up in such a place and that he should come to adopt such a strange and paradoxical set of religious beliefs.

As Pi says of the town, and specifically of his father's zoo, "to me, it was paradise on earth" (p. 14). It is a limited place, but one that Pi comes to love greatly, and it only after he is forced to leave this earthly paradise that his troubles begin and he is forced to confront the question of whether he believes all the things he learned in his childhood. It is only after leaving Pondicherry and spending almost a year aboard a life boat that Pi discovers the true depth of

his faith in God and lives out a story that, as his friend Mr. Adirubasamy says, "will make you believe in God" (p. x).

What does the zoo of Pi's childhood teach him about animals and humans?

Though the book's story is ostensibly about the shipwreck and raft journey that Pi makes, over one hundred pages of the tale are first devoted to Pi's early life and upbringing in Pondicherry. His father, a zookeeper, forces his children to learn much about animals and to respect their wildness and sheer power. The lessons Pi learns here are valuable, even necessary, to his shipwreck experience, but they extend beyond simple survival training.

After reading the novel's concluding section, we're forced to reconsider all that came before and to read the presence of animals in the story in a different way. Some of the clues as to how we ought to do this are present in the opening parts of the story, as Pi's lessons about animals turn out to have sharp relevance to his own beliefs about life, God, and storytelling.

In looking around at his father's zoo, Pi reflects on the fact that zoos have fallen into disfavor in parts of the world. "I know zoos are no longer in people's good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both" (p. 19). He makes the explicit connection here between the zoo and religion, arguing that both have lost favor because people have come to see them as means of domination and control.

Pi wants to reverse this way of thinking. He argues that a good zoo can be as comfortable to an animal as a house may be for a person (p. 18), and that animals can be most free, can be most themselves, when they aren't as worried about finding food or avoiding predators. The confining nature of the zoo can actually free the animals up to be more at peace. It does this not by duplicating the conditions of the wild, but of providing the basic elements an animal requires. "It is not so much a question of constructing an imitation of conditions in the wild as of getting to the essence of these conditions," Pi says (p. 40).

These are the same qualities that religion comes to play in Pi's own life: the restrictions and disciplines and doctrines that surround the believer can be the very structures that provide comfort. The idea that unlimited options and utter autonomy of action is the truest kind of freedom is one of the "illusions" that Pi speaks of when he talks about religion. "I have heard nearly as much nonsense about zoos as I have about God and religion," he says. "Well-meaning but misinformed peopled think animals in the wild are 'happy' because they are 'free'" (p. 15).

People who don't respect any religion may come to view all religion as a limitation on freedom, but Pi uses his own early knowledge of animals and zoos to argue that a greater freedom may exist where the essentials of life are truly provided for. In his case, those are found within three religions at once.

What is the significance of Pi's name?

Pi's curious name is more than simply interesting -- it illustrates in miniature one of the novel's central themes, that of rational explanation versus non-rational faith claims. Pi's given name is Piscine, and he opens his story by explaining the picturesque origins of his name. He was named, he tells us, after a swimming pool that his father's friend Francis Adirubasamy loved dearly, the Piscine Molitor in Paris. Everything about the anecdote is charming, quirky, and faintly ridiculous. It's a name that symbolizes the picturesque approach to life.

Significantly, the name is shortened only once Pi enters school, where such a unique name has trouble being fitted into the "system." Teachers routinely mispronounce it and Pi's

classmates prove even worse, mocking him cruelly, until at last he shortens his name to Pi out of desperation to avoid further humiliation. Pi, the Greek letter that has come to stand for a mathematical fraction used in geometry, a discipline with order, precision, and elegance -- but little of the picturesque.

Does all this matter? Consider what Pi himself says on the issue of names near the beginning of the novel. "It is true that those we meet can change us, sometimes so profoundly that we are not the same afterwards, even unto our names. Witness Simon who is called Peter, Matthew also known as Levi, Nathaniel who is also Bartholomew, Judas, not Iscariot, who took the name Thaddeus, Simeon who went by Niger, Saul who became Paul" (p. 20).

Names are powerful things, but in Pi's case, the mathematical promise of his name is never fulfilled. Though he listens constantly to teachers such as Mr. Kumar who espouse a purely scientific and materialistic view of life, Pi moves to the other extreme. He embraces not one, but three religions, to the consternation of his parents. And the story that he narrates about his time in the life raft, that improbable, impossible, but beautiful tale -- it is as though Pi is reclaiming through that story his own true birthright as Piscine Molitor. His story contains the same elements of individual quirkiness and beauty that brought his own name into being, and raises the same question as his name once did: which approach to life is better? Which approach is truer?

What lessons about faith does Pi adopt from his three religious traditions?

Rather than concerning himself with reconciling Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, Pi embraces them in a way that emphasizes the "faith" each one requires of its adherents. Whether this is a tenable system is another question, but it does allow Pi to explore the question of "faith" in general without descending into the specifics doctrines of various religions. His conclusions about faith are shaped by his differing worship experiences, but also by the time spent on the raft. His conclusion? Faith takes real work; it isn't something that simply happens on its own.

Pi grows up surrounded by skeptics and doubters in Pondicherry, among them his teacher Mr. Kumar, who routinely tells him, "There are no grounds for going beyond a scientific explanation of reality and no sound reason for believing anything but our sense experience. A clear intellect, close attention to detail and a little scientific knowledge will expose religion as superstitious bosh. God does not exist" (p. 27). But despite his own growing religious awareness, Pi doesn't find atheists like Mr. Kumar to be the real enemies of faith. They have done the intellectual and emotional work of coming to a philosophy of life that they can embrace and live through.

The true enemy of faith is those who do little work, who neither doubt nor believe. "It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics," says Pi. "Doubt is useful for a while. We must all pass through the garden of Gethsemane. … Bust we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation" (p. 28). This agnostic attitude, one that believes that no choices are necessary or that they may be endlessly deferred, most frustrates Pi.

Faith is not the sort of thing that one will simple stumble across, but something that must be sought. Ultimately, people may decide that it cannot be found, but the looking is an act that Pi believes each individual must engage in. The narrator of the book makes the same point as he describes a visit to Pi's home. He says, finally paying attention to the house for the first time, "This house is more than a box full of icons. They were there all along, but I hadn't seen them because I wasn't looking for them" (p. 80). As Pi tells the Japanese investigators at the story's end, "And so it goes with God" (p. 317). One has to look, has to look consciously and with real

attention, before faith in God can even be a possibility. Those who remain content in their half-doubt will never see.

In a way, Pi's story makes the claim that one has to believe first in order to come to fuller belief. If one is already sure that God does not exist, one won't look for signs of his presence. As Saint Augustine once said, "Faith seeks understanding," not vice versa, and Pi illustrates the openness of spirit towards the possible wonders of life that can at last find a solid faith of its own.

What does Richard Parker teach Pi?

Pi learns his most enduring lessons while alone in the life boat with an adult Bengal tiger, and many of those lessons come as a direct result of having Richard Parker on the boat for the entire voyage. The tiger is something that Pi speaks of with near-constancy. He cannot forget him, cannot ignore him, and cannot stop coming up with schemes to tame him. But for all the ways that Pi attempts to control the situation, he faces up to the fact that he has little control at all over Richard Parker, who holds Pi's life in his claws and teeth.

Richard Parker is a constant source of fear to Pi, who comes to realize how deeply fear is opposed to life. "I must say a word about fear," he says. "It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary, how well I know. It has no decency, respects no law or convention, shows no mercy. It goes for your weakest spot, which it finds with unerring ease" (p. 161).

Pi's greatest mental achievement is the discovery of how to overcome this numbing fear -- name it for what it is. "You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it. Because if you don't, if your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks of fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you" (p. 162). Only then can you begin to face up to the fear, to do battle with it.

Fear tells Pi that certain things -- like being mauled by a Bengal tiger -- cannot be handled. It says that pain and terror will be "too much" for him. But Pi discovers that the whispers of fear are only lies. When he is hit across the face and blinded for the moment, his fear tells him that Richard Parker has at last decided to finish him off. Pi imagines the approach of his own death. "I was to have my face clawed off -- this was the gruesome way I was to die. The pain was so severe I felt nothing. Blessed be shock. Blessed be that part of us that protects us from too much pain and sorrow. At the heart of life is a fuse box" (p. 180). But in the moment of his greatest fear, Pi learns that the body has hidden systems and resources he had not suspected, ways of keeping him alive and ways of dealing with pain. He also learns, when at last he opens his eyes, that what had struck him was not Richard Parker after all, but a flying fish.

Tasting his greatest fear and finding it to be bearable, Pi comes at last to learn a kind of peace from the very animal who so terrified him earlier. "It was Richard Parker who calmed me down. It is the irony of this story that the one who scared me witless to start with was the very same who brought me peace, purpose, I dare say even wholeness" (p. 162). Richard Parker becomes his ward, his charge -- Pi feeds him and trains him and the two become, in a way, companions on the journey.

Why does the episode with the algae island and the meerkats border on the unbelievable?

Pi's journey across the Pacific often has a magical and dreamlike quality about it, but in its first stages it retains an internal credibility. Once we have accepted the Bengal tiger and the Indian

boy in the lifeboat, their journey unfolds as a typical survival story -- for a while. The longer the journey progresses, the stranger it becomes. The episode with the blind Frenchman begins to make readers question whether Pi is slipping into hallucinations or whether he is manufacturing the entire tale. And then, at the moment that the episode with the Frenchman ends, Pi tells us, "I made an exceptional botanical discovery. But there will be many who disbelieve the following episode" (p. 256).

His time among the meerkats on the island of algae becomes so incredible that it is difficult to believe at all, even with all the odd events that he has experienced on the voyage so far. The island is not such a strange place that it could not exist, but it makes a supremely unlikely tale, one that requires a great deal of faith to believe. And this is precisely the point. As Pi's journey lasts longer and longer, it grows increasingly fantastic and forces the reader at last to decide whether or not to accept the narrative or to reject everything that has been read so far. It is with the algae island that credulity is pushed to the point where a choice must be made, and it is the same choice that Pi struggles with throughout his journey: to believe in a God that he cannot see as he floats alone through the ocean or to give up his faith altogether.

The episode on the island also shows Pi how deeply evil and suffering are woven into the fabric of life. This most idyllic of locations, with plenty of food and water and gentle inhabitants, is actually a deathtrap, a seething island of acid and poison. With the discovery (by unraveling a "fruit") that the island had already killed another human, Pi finally pushes off from this dangerous Eden that cannot sustain him. In having his hopes of salvation dashed so bitterly by his new knowledge, Pi sinks into his lowest depression. But it is in this low point, "in the throes of unremitting suffering," that he turns again to God (p. 284).

"When we reached land" are his next words, a testament to the sustaining power of faith and of God's provision. Pi's own resources are stretched to their limits before he collapses at last into a total trust in God's providential care, and the way he arranges his narrative forces readers to make a similar choice. With their credulity strained to the breaking point and a more "rational" narrative of the journey available at the novel's end, readers must decide whether or not to make their own leap of faith and embrace Pi's original story about his journey.

What should we make of the novel's conclusion?

Pi's story ends with the narrator's introducing himself once again, telling us how he tracked down the Japanese investigators of the shipwreck and discovered the strange end to Pi's tale. After his arrival on a Mexican beach, Pi ends up in an infirmary, where the two investigators arrive to question him about the wreck and find that Pi's strange story -- the story we have just been reading -- strains their credulity to the breaking point. When Pi finishes his narrative, one of the men says directly,

"I'm sorry to say it so bluntly, we don't mean to hurt your feelings, but you don't really expect us to believe you, do you? Carnivorous trees? A fish-eating algae that produces fresh water? Tree-dwelling aquatic rodents? These things don't exist." "Only because you've never seen them." "That's right. We believe what we see." (p. 294).

Pi's entire narrative thus becomes one more example of the opposed views of life found in the book, the rational and the picturesque, the skeptical and the faithful. He challenges the two Japanese investigators to believe his tale, throwing its impossibility in their faces, then pointing out how impossible most things in life -- even life itself -- sounds. "Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?" (p. 297).

Pi drives home the point to that humans already believe many difficult, non-intuitive, extraordinary things. Clearly, belief in a story cannot simply be a matter of that story's making sense. He goes on to argue that the investigators don't simply want a story that's easier to believe, but they want a story that will not challenge their view of the world. They want a story that fits within the schema they have already established. "I know what you want," Pi tells them. "You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want a dry, yeastless factuality" (p. 302).

And then he offers up a different tale, one that explains all the same events, but this one filled with humans instead of animals, and far more terrible deeds. He then quizzes the investigators,

"So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can't prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?" Mr. Okamoto: "That's an interesting questions…" Mr. Chiba: "The story with animals." Mr. Okamoto: "Yes. The story with animals is the better story." Pi Patel: "Thank you. And so it goes with God" (p. 317).

Pi never does tell us which story was the "factual" one, though we may well have a good idea. He's more concerned instead with getting his interrogators to see that his fantastic narrative is, in the ways that truly matter, the "truer" story. Yes, it is improbable, but it's also far more beautiful that the "realistic" version of the story, and it tells us more about faith and God and the wonder of being alive. That it is also astonishingly difficult to believe is almost beside the point, for God and the world are both difficult to believe in as well. Pi wants to open the men up to the possibility of seeing the world in a different way, one apart from the facts and ugliness and boredom of normal life. They want the facts, but Pi wants to give them the meaning of what happened.

Why is it significant that the novel contains exactly 100 chapters?

Pi comments to the narrator, near the end of his strange tale, that he believes in the "harmony of order," then goes on to say, "Where we can, we must give things a meaningful shape. For example -- I wonder -- could you tell my jumbled story in exactly one hundred chapters, not one more, not one less? I'll tell you, that's one thing I hate about my nickname, the way that number runs on forever. It's important in life to conclude things properly. Only then can you let go" (p. 285).

What is most interesting about this comment is that it is so at odds with the story Pi has just told. His tale has no neat conclusions, no well-crafted goodbyes. In fact, the two partings that mean the most to him take place without Pi's even speaking a word. His family vanishes in the wreckage of the ship without a chance to speak to one another. Richard Parker, symbolic of the natural world and its cruelly beautiful ways, leaps over Pi's head and onto the Mexican beach, never looking back and showing no affection for the boy with whom he has shared a raft for all that time.

Pi's interest in telling his tale seems, in part, an attempt to provide order and structure to an unstructured, chaotic tragedy, to give it form and meaning. And this is precisely what the narrator wonders about in the "Author's note" at the novel's beginning. He asks, "That's what fiction is about, isn't it, the selective transforming of reality? The twisting of it to bring out its essence?" (p. viii). These comments go to the very heart of story-telling, they ask about its purpose and utility. They are the same issues Pi raises with the shipping investigators, though they seem not to understand.

Pi's story, in the hands of the narrator, does come out exactly at 100 chapters, a nice round number that rarely occurs in the messiness of reality. It's a concrete example of Pi's own powerful belief that order exists in the universe but that it must be sought out before we will see it. The goal of storytelling, both for Pi and the narrator, is not to narrate real events in chronological order but to get at the deeper truths beneath a story's events. That a story can change the way people view reality is illustrated in the novel's final line, where the report of the shipping investigators concludes, "Very few castaways can claim to have survived so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger" (p. 319).

Further Reading:

Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe (1719)
The classic story of shipwreck and survival, Defoe's novel describes a castaway stranded for years on an island, using his wits and his faith to survive. When he discovers another human footprint on the island, though, the existence that he has carved out for himself begins to unravel.

C. S. Lewis, Perelandra (1944)
The middle story in Lewis' "space trilogy" will make more sense if read following Out of the Silent Planet, but the similarities to Pi's interlude on the floating island of algae are striking. Lewis' theological investigations through fiction also have strong echoes in Life of Pi.

William Golding, Lord of the Flies (1954)
Pi believes that the limits found in religion allow people to be truly free. Golding's novel explores a situation in which all limits are removed from a group of British schoolboys shipwrecked on a small island and forced to survive there for some time without adults. The result is a chilling study of human evil and the potential for depravity within each person.

Rudyard Kipling Jungle Book

Herman Melville, Moby Dick (1851)
A classic of American letters. This is the story of Captain Ahab and his ferocious quest to find and kill Moby Dick, the white whale, at any cost. Although in some ways an adventure story, the novel is more concerned about larger questions of life and death as Ahab hunts a creature who comes to represent everything mysterious and inscrutable about the universe.

Salman Rushdie, The Moor's Last Sigh (1995)
Rushdie's narrator describes his life and the life of India as it progresses over the last fifty years, tracing its independence, its political struggles, its business dealing, and its religious conflicts, all of which the narrator and his family have some hand in. This is a very different India from Pi's Pondicherry, one that is more violent and fierce and chaotic, but equally fascinating.