

Life of Pi

My Radical Introduction

Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* is not what it appears or pretends to be. Yann has written a deeply ironic novel about a boy raised by wealthy parents who only care about their profits and do not like the socialist, altruistic policies of India's Prime Minister Gandhi. They have no interest in religion and no interest in philanthropy. Their son, Pi, seems quite lost in their world of false wealth, so he –fantastically and implausibly – pursues religion in search of meaning. Does this ever happen in reality? Not at all. But absurdity was no obstacle for Martel.

Please, don't make me laugh with talk about Pi's religious sincerity. Like his parents, Pi has no interest in socialism, society, or even doing Christian good deeds. His interest in religion is purely selfish, just as his parents' interest in Canada was purely selfish, and that is not absurd or implausible. In fact, selfish motives compel almost all immigrants to any country.

To make the story even more implausible, Pi embraces not one but three religions. This, like so much of the novel, is a joke, but silly readers take it and the whole novel on face value, completely overlooking the irony and absurdity in the name of 'positive thinking' or some other trendy, quasi-religious equivalent.

As for Pi's journey on a lifeboat with a tiger, a hyena, an orangutan and a zebra, this bloody little party symbolizes the brutal economic reality of the real world – the world Pi had been protected from while he was being spoiled by his wealthy parents.

The fact that *Life of Pi* fails to communicate its true meaning to readers isn't entirely the fault of the incompetent modern reader and teacher, it should also be blamed on the overly-subtle author.

Comprehension Questions

1. Discuss some of the irony, jokes, paradoxes, contradictions, and oxymorons in Part One and Two.
2. Describe Pi's parents. What evidence do we have that they are only interested in money and do not want a government that helps poor people?
3. Discuss Pi's religious faith(s) and his lack of love and concern for other people, poor people, sick people, world issues like war, environmental degradation, animal extinctions, etc. Can a religious person be religious or truly faithful just by praying and going to a temple, mosque or church? Respond with your thoughts.
4. After you finish the novel: In his introductory note Yann Martel says, "This book was born as I was hungry." Discuss the theme of hunger in *Life of Pi*. Consider discussing the tiger, Pi's life in Canada, the lesson in the zoo taught by Pi's father, and the cookies given by the Japanese authorities.

6. 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? Discuss three examples of how the tale challenges belief. -- Pi claims that his story will inspire belief in God. However, the story—both stories—and both Part One and Part Two—seem intentionally designed to make us question belief in God. Expand on this observation on the heart of the novel. It deserves an essay, but shorter reflections are okay.
7. Discuss the numerous insults, prejudices and racist jokes in Part One.
8. 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.
9. The italicized sections tell us about Pi's life in Canada. Is there any evidence that, after graduating, he had any interest in God? What, instead, is his interest now? What does this imply for Canada?
10. Has anyone ever wanted to practice multiple religions at the same time? Comment on Pi's effort.
11. Is the part about Pi's exploration and experimenting with religion plausible? Do the priests embarrass themselves? Explain.
12. 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?
13. During Part Two, an oil tanker passes the castaway Pi, but as it approached he spoke of salvation and God. Speak about this religious optimism and reflect on its disappearance afterwards. Also, soon afterwards, Pi says he loves the tiger. Discuss the irony.
14. How is the refrigerator a symbol of cruel irony?
15. 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.)
16. 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?

17. 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?
18. 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?
19. Besides the loss of his family and possessions, what else did Pi lose when the Tsimtsum sank? What did he gain?
20. 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?
21. 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?
22. Do you agree with Pi's opinion that a zoo is more like a suburb than a jail?
23. 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? --- Discuss the factors that make stories believable. Refer to Pi's points but add the point that people don't like believing stories that offend or frighten them.
24. Why doesn't Pi eat the cookies?

Connections

The following tasks provide quotations from *Life of Pi* and the media. Please reflect on them and write connections that use specific details in the quotations and use any literary devices found in the novel. For this first task, consider treating the boat and the animals on it as a symbol for the Earth and all that lives upon it.

Task One: On the Boat and the Sixth Extinction

Quotation from *Life of Pi*

“And what of my extended family—birds, beasts and reptiles? They too have drowned. Every single thing I value in life has been destroyed. And I am allowed no explanation? I am to suffer hell without any account from heaven?” (Martel 108)

Quotation from the media (ALTERNET.ORG)

“For years now, conservationists have warned that Earth is in the middle of the “sixth great extinction,” with dozens of species going extinct every day owing to habitat loss, pollution, climate change and other factors.

“But here’s even worse news: That may be just the tip of the iceberg.

“According to new research, previous estimates may seriously underestimate the number of species that we’re losing. A paper published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences suggests that we may have already lost 130,000 species, or a staggering 7 percent of the world’s total biodiversity.”

<https://www.alternet.org/environment/unseen-extinction-wiping-out-worlds-wildlife>

Task Two: On loss of faith

“Then the elderly man said, “I have a story that will make you believe in God” (Martel).

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/how-the-holocaust-challenged-faith/>

Task Three: On atheism

“I can well imagine an atheist's last words: "White, white! L-L-Love! My God!"-and the deathbed leap of faith” (Martel).

On the rise of atheism:

<https://www.economist.com/democracy-in-america/2012/08/22/growing-disbelief>

Magic Realism

Some teachers think *Life of Pi* is a work of magic realism. They think some of the events in the story are fantastical, mythical, and magical. Anything that isn't realistic is interpreted as magical instead of ridiculous, comical or infantile. Examples are as follows:

Pi follows three religions

Pi has a vision of the Virgin Mary

Pi studies zoology and theology

The tiger and the hyena do not attack Pi

The ocean is full of fish (ch.59)?

<https://www.sott.net/article/295399-Collapse-of-sea-life-in-Pacific-Ocean-Sardine-populations-decline-by-91-in-eight-years>

<http://endoftheamericandream.com/archives/mass-fish-deaths-millions-have-been-found-dead-all-over-the-world-in-the-past-month>

The floating island

Historical Irony

Did an actual historical event inspire the author to write *Life of Pi*? Study the information in the following three links and explain. Use the word irony to explain the connection between history and the book.

- <http://vancouver.mediacoop.ca/newsrelease/7354>
- <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/story-komagata-maru-sad-mark-canadas-past-180959160/>
- <https://humanrights.ca/blog/story-komagata-maru>

National Irony

Did an actual historical event inspire the author to write *Life of Pi*? Study the information in the following three links and explain. Use the word irony to explain the connection between history and the book.

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Canada's Wonderland: More Irony

Pi says he loves Canada. Present evidence that he must have been joking. Consider the difference between beautiful Pondicherry and Scarborough – a suburb of Toronto that was famously ugly and dangerous. Below is part of an article about Scarborough and its Indian and other ethnic minorities.

Article on Scarborough:

“This past September, Dineshkumar Murugiah, a 16-year-old student at Scarborough’s Winston Churchill Collegiate, was stabbed to death in what appeared to be a targeted attack. The murder, the city’s 57th of the year, didn’t resonate in the media. It didn’t have the narrative that the death of 15-year-old Jane Creba had in 2005, when she was hit by gang gunfire near the Eaton Centre on Boxing Day, a shooting Citytv called “the most notorious crime in recent Toronto history.” The theme in that story was the notion of innocence, and how an alien (and largely suburban) threat had come to the core and taken the life of an innocent bystander. With Dinesh, the notion of innocence was compromised, as the murder appeared, on the surface, to be retributive, and both the crime and the narrative were contained within Scarborough, rendering it tragic but somehow familiar.

Dinesh, the papers suggested, may have been embroiled in “Tamil reprisals” that had followed him from a previous school (he had attended two other high schools in the past two years). But both Detective Sergeant Gary Grinton of the homicide squad and Pastor David Loganathan of the Miracle Family Temple said Dinesh had no known gang ties. And then this comment to a reporter, from a student at Winston Churchill, a girl who was undisturbed by the event that had occurred an hour earlier, and who stood with an equally giddy friend: “We can pretend to be upset for you.” Presumably, she had seen tearful teenagers on the news gathered outside American high schools as police investigated a shooting death. She knew what was expected of

her. If the actual emotion wasn't there, the sense of what the media, of what life, demanded from such an event hadn't entirely fled. She was floating through this landscape, untethered, but she was prepared to do another take.

If the feud that took Dinesh's life was unclear, the one that prompted the hurling of a Molotov cocktail through the living room window of a house on Gilroy Drive last April was very clear. Pream Anandarajah, an 18-year-old student at Stephen Leacock Collegiate, had said to a friend the day before that he was worried that the boys who were bullying him at school would come after his family. Pream's mother and sister were asleep in the living room when the bottle came crashing through. In the resulting fire, his mother suffered burns to 30 per cent of her body. His sister suffered non-life threatening burns. Nine young men were arrested in connection with the firebombing and other assaults.

The feud was between Sri Lankans who had recently arrived (FOBs, for "fresh off the boat") and those who had been in Canada for some time, the group Pream was aligned with. It wasn't a revival of religious and political battles in Sri Lanka—most of those involved are Hindu Tamils—but the distancing of new arrivals by those who were established. Sometimes, the boys admitted, it was because the FOBs, with their broken English, different clothes and alien haircuts, reminded them of themselves when they arrived, the version they had since cast off. This pattern existed in other groups: with Jamaicans in the 1980s, where new immigrants were called Freshies, and it has been seen in the Sikh community (where new arrivals are called Gurus) and Chinese community (pitting the CBCs—Canadian-born Chinese—against Chinese FOBs).

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There are fewer well-paying jobs in Scarborough, and fewer car owners, and those spaces that once seemed liberating—a relief from the congested city—now look forbidding and oppressive. Public transit doesn't adequately service the area, and, ironically, it's in those transit stations where the most vital signs of life are seen. In the absence of a streetscape where people meet for both social and practical matters, there are generic malls and the forced intimacy of the subway stations. The problem with Scarborough is that it wasn't designed for the future, as Oliver Crockford (and almost everyone else) thought in 1954, but for a brief, unsustainable moment in history.

Various urbanists have pointed out that suburbs are poised to be the ghettos of the future. They have all the ingredients: uninviting and unclaimed spaces, housing stock that is neither as durable nor as adaptable to other uses as the sturdy brick buildings of the inner city, a shortage of well-paying jobs, architecture that is disposable and arbitrary, and the need for cars at a time when energy prices are rising and may become prohibitive for many.