

An Interview with the Author

Most people know Yann Martel from his 2002 novel *Life Of Pi*, a brilliant fable that begins with a long, rapturous philosophical exploration of topics ranging from zoos to religion, then transitions into a story about a young Indian shipwreck survivor trapped in a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger. Like Martel's earlier novel *Self* and his short-fiction collection *The Facts Behind The Helsinki Roccamatios*, it tells a story while delving into the question of why people tell stories, and how they choose to perceive and remember the world around them. Martel recently spoke with *The A.V. Club* about the lavish new illustrated version of *Life Of Pi*, his extensive research process, and the most satisfying feeling in the world.

The A.V. Club: How closely were you involved with the new, illustrated *Life Of Pi*?

Yann Martel: Not very closely. The decision to do an illustrated edition was my publisher's at Canongate—he remembers seeing illustrated editions as a kid of Robert Louis Stevenson, and I remember reading Jules Verne's novels and stories illustrated by Gustav Doré. So it was his idea, and I said, "Oh, what a great idea." So he's the one who came up with the idea of the whole competition. I was involved at the level of the jury. There were about 1,600 submissions, I got involved when there was a long list of 60, and we boiled it down to six, and we chose the winner. After that, my involvement was with the winner, Tomislav Torjanac. We talked over the phone, me in Canada and he in Croatia, to try to find quotes he would use as the basis of his illustrations. A number, he already had in mind. But in an illustrated edition, you need to have the illustrations evenly spaced. So in some places, I just sort of looked for quotes that he would find stimulating. And after that, it was all his work.

AVC: That actually sounds fairly involved.

YM: Oh, okay. I guess it is. But it's just a few conversations here and there. It was actually pretty fun on the jury. For the competition, each artist had to submit one full-color illustration. So while I was in the jury, at one point, I got a package from the UK of 60 illustrations—60 visions of *Life Of Pi*. All kinds of styles. All kinds of points of views, of techniques. It was more fun than work.

AVC: What about his art in particular drew you?

YM: It was several things. First off, his really neat point of view. In the illustrations, you never see Pi. Everything is seen from Pi's perspective. At most, you see his hands, his arms, his feet, his legs. But otherwise, the reader becomes Pi. And that's a very clever visual device, and very effective, because if Pi were illustrated, people would look at it and say, "Oh, that's not how I imagined him." Whereas no one has preconceived notions, I don't think, of what a tiger looks like, or a hyena, and only fleeting ones in regards to the lifeboat. And in us never seeing Pi, that fits the tone of the novel, which is a first-person narrative very much concerned with looking out, and not very concerned with psychologizing. So I like that. Also, his style. It's very lush, colorful, painterly. You can see the ridges in the swirls of paint. And the compositions are quite brilliant. Once he chose to do *Pi*, that's one thing. But how he decided to fill up the vertical spaces was often brilliantly done.

AVC: There have been at least some initial attempts to make *Life Of Pi* into a movie. In a film, presumably he'd have to be onscreen most of the time.

YM: A movie would have to be very different. I find that movies tend to fix the aesthetics of a story in people's minds. So it's hard to visualize James Bond without seeing one of the actors who played him. And it's hard to visualize Harry Potter without seeing Daniel Radcliffe. A movie is so visually powerful, so overwhelming, that it tends to crowd out how you might have imagined things. With illustrations, at least with good ones, it doesn't have that effect. It's a starting point. You read 10 or 12 pages of text, have certain images, and then this different language, the language of images, complements that, by at most making a suggestion directing you, or showing you something you hadn't imagined, which starts you off in exactly the same way the way that text starts you off. Whereas a movie tends to box you in, at least as far as the aesthetics. You have an incredibly kinetic experience, which is the joy of cinema.

AVC: Are you eager to see a movie version of the book?

YM: Oh, it's in the works, with all the usual fits, starts, stoppages, and uncertainties of Hollywood. But there is very much a movie in the making. And I look forward to that. I love cinema. I think the risk of the aesthetics being fixed is compensated by other advantages. Cinema is visually powerful, it is a complete experience, reaches a different audience. It's something I really like. I like movies.

AVC: What kinds of concerns do you have about *Pi* becoming a film?

YM: It has to work. The language of prose is very different than the language of cinema, so the movie has to successfully translate what was in the book. I've read the screenplay, it does do that. But what works in a story is very different than what works in cinema. For example, dialogue in books: If you translate it too faithfully, it sounds a little stilted, because we often don't speak the way we speak in novels. Oral language is much punchier, shorter sentences. Often, things are not finished. And also, whereas in a book, you get the words and you have to imagine the tone and all that, in a movie, it's given to you. So the tone has to be right.

In a movie, you need good actors, whereas in a book, you don't, unless you have a really bad imagination. In a book, your imagination will do the acting for you. Also, the process of revelation is often different. Tension is achieved in a different way. It's just a very different language. There are great advantages, but there are also great risks. It could be visually dazzling but dramatically quite flat, which you often get with complicated movies. The visuals are lush and beautiful, but the story is somehow lost. But as I've said, I read the screenplay, and I'm quite confident that the story is there.

AVC: What's the film's status? Is there actually a director attached at this point?

YM: Jean-Pierre Jeunet, the director who did *Amélie*. We're just waiting. It's so complicated, making movies. So many people are involved. Technically, it's a complicated thing, and demands a lot of work. Logistically, it's very complicated. And it's very expensive. All that requires a lot of people getting their act together. So Fox is still in the process of getting their act together. But they're still very keen on making it. I was in L.A. just a few days ago; it was where my tour started. And I was gratified to see that the studio and the producing company are still very keen on making the movie.

AVC: Did you have any involvement with the film version of your story "Manners Of Dying"?

YM: I read the screenplay, and I made suggestions to the director, who was also the writer. But that's as involved as I really want to be. As much as I love movies, it would be presumptuous of me to think that I know how to make one. So I just read the screenplay and made certain suggestions about the language, maybe certain scenes. Other than that, none.

AVC: Have you written anything you'd like to see filmed more than *Life Of Pi*, or that you think would work better onscreen?

YM: Well, my second book, *Self*, is an odd story. It's the story of a boy who, on his 18th birthday, while he's backpacking through Portugal, over the course of a week, metamorphosizes into a woman. And he's a woman for seven years, and then he becomes a man again. So it's an interesting character study—sexual identity and sexual orientation, exploring the idea that the body is an environment, and just as we adapt to our outer environment, the body has an inner environment that we adapt to. It could, I suppose, make a movie. It'd be an interesting one, where you'd have to have two actors playing one role. I don't know—I play with words, I write, I express myself through words, I don't need to rush out and see stories adapted into other forms. I have to say, my first book, a book of short stories, *The Facts Behind The Helsinki Roccamatios*, has been adapted to the stage as a one-man play. And it has a lot of potential. When I have some free time, I'd want to work on it some more. But that has potential.

AVC: After *Life Of Pi* took off, *The Facts Behind The Helsinki Roccamatios* was re-released, but remains out of print in the U.S. Are there any plans to re-release it?

YM: It's a problematic novel. I seem to alternate between books that are easy to write and ones that are very hard to write. So my first book and my third book, *The Life Of Pi*, were easy to write. *Self* was very hard to write. With *Self*, I did a lot of research—sexual identity is very complicated. What it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman, is very hard to pin down. We have these generalizations that broadly can apply, but as soon as you get down to the level of the individual, they seem to vanish or become rigid ideologies. It's inappropriate to generalize on the level of the individual. Then, if you add on sexual orientation—why people are gay, why people are straight—it becomes incredibly complicated. It's a terrain full of opinions and opinionated people, and certainties that aren't necessarily certainties. So it was a lot of work to do. And it was also my first novel. I think it's certainly a very interesting book, a hard book, but not in the sense that it is hard to follow, but maybe a bit arduous in some way. After all of the hard work, I'm not sure it did what I wanted it to do. Which isn't necessarily a problem. I tend to be very hard on that book. I've met a number of people who really, really like it. But it requires a particular kind of reader.

And the other thing, too, is that most people take who they are, naturally, as a given, and they're interested in the sexual other, but not in being the sexual other. Most men are interested in women—whether sexually or not is not the question—but they don't necessarily want to be a woman. And most women don't want to be a man. So a story that explores that, what Tiresias did in the Greek myth, does not have broad appeal, I don't think. And I'm not just saying that because it delves into sexuality—the book goes beyond that. It's just not the kind of otherness that most people like exploring. It demands a particular type of reader, an open-minded reader, probably a younger reader, at that stage in their lives when they are still open to the many ways of being.

AVC: There has been some theorizing that *Self* was inspired in part by Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. Is that the case?

YM: Well, I read *Orlando*, it's a wonderful book. But in *Orlando*, Orlando is a man for only a few years, and then a woman for 300 years. In fact, I think Virginia Woolf, despite being a genius, was still a woman of her time. And with that switchover that she does, I don't know if she had the political will or the political insight to go quite as far as that story should have led her. It's a good exercise in language—lovely, lovely images—and there is a sort of irony throughout that is instructive, but it doesn't have the hard edge that I think it would have had if she had written it 60 or 70 years later. So I wasn't necessarily inspired by it. It's such an obvious switch; the planet is populated by human beings, of which there are only two sexes, and the role of the writer is to explore otherness, other realities. So the idea of a man exploring what it's like to be a woman doesn't strike me as being that wild or crazy an idea. So I didn't need *Orlando* to give me that idea.

Also, the idea of switching is not unique to her. I just mentioned Tiresias, and in that myth, Zeus and Hera were arguing over who had the best orgasm. Zeus said it was women who had the best orgasm, had a better sexual life, and enjoyed sex more. And Hera said that it was men. So they asked Tiresias. Tiresias, as a young man, had seen two snakes interlaced and had struck them with a stick, and was transformed into a woman. He was a woman for seven years. Then the same thing happened, he saw snakes interlaced on a mountainside, he hit them, and he became a man again. So he had sexual experience on both teams. He agreed with Zeus that women enjoyed sex more—when sex was good, women enjoyed it more. Hera was so angry to be proven wrong that she struck him blind.

But Zeus gave him foresight. He could see into the future. Most people encounter Tiresias later on, in *Oedipus*, when Oedipus consults the seer. So there's that in Greek mythology, and other instances of people switching to the other sex. I read Virginia Woolf, but I can't say it had a direct influence. It was part of the background.

AVC: Talking about influences, you've said that *Pi* was inspired in part by a review you read, of Moacyr Scliar's *Max And The Cats*.

YM: Yeah. It got me in trouble. I read its review in a New York paper in passing, and forgot about it for years. Then I went to India. And India being crowded with animals and gods, I suddenly remembered that premise. *Max And The Cats* is a novella of 16 pages that takes place in the Atlantic. The character is in a boat with some animal, a jaguar or a panther. And the tone is very fable-like, not very realistic. It's for a different purpose. But nonetheless, that idea of reducing Noah's ark to one human character and one animal character struck me. So I was in India, and I remembered that, and I took that premise to tell my own story. So there is an influence. I hadn't read the book when I wrote the book. In fact, I read it only afterward, after a scandal broke out. I was accused of plagiarizing Scliar. And I said to people, "How can you plagiarize a book you haven't read?" A Quebec newspaper asked Scliar to read my book, and me to read his. So I read it in November of 2002, after I won the Booker Prize, a full two years after I wrote the book.

AVC: And what was your impression when you did read it?

YM: It's a very different book from mine, in that it is mainly a political fable. As far as I can remember, it's a book about authoritarianism. It starts in Nazi Germany, and Max's father is a taxidermist. So the stuffed animals represent Nazism. In the Atlantic, I forget what it represents. And in Brazil, they were under a dictatorship. So the various incarnations of the cats represent oppression, totalitarianism, and how one accommodates or escapes those. The book, especially when they are in the Atlantic, is very fable-like. There is no concern with details. It's a story for the mind. It was imaginative. I liked it. It was for a very different purpose. I couldn't get it in Canada. When I got it, it was sent to me by that newspaper in Montreal. It's funny—in the wake of *Life Of Pi*, *Max And The Cats* was reprinted in Canada, or published there for the first time. And copies of the book would say, "The book that inspired *Life Of Pi*."

AVC: What responsibilities, if any, do you have to a writer who inspires you?

YM: I have the responsibility to acknowledge him. So in *Life Of Pi*, in the authors note, right from the start, I say, "I am indebted to Mr. Moacyr Scliar, for the spark of life." The only reason I didn't say "Mr. Moacyr Scliar and his novel" was that I wanted to blur the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. Because just as art brings you to another place, so does religion—and to ask questions of factuality tends to reduce both. If you say you were inspired by a novel, that implies that your book is a work of fiction. I wanted people to be unsure whether the story was true. So I used "spark of life," because it's a little more tenuous. That was right from the start. I always told people where that book came from. But people who want to cut you down will take whatever they need to.

AVC: *Life Of Pi* begins with a fictional account of how somebody in India told you this story, claiming it would make you believe in God. Did the decision to begin the book that way come out of this desire to raise the question of truth vs. fiction?

YM: Well, only part of it is fiction. It's mostly, factually true. I was in India, I was working on a novel set in Portugal, I did meet a man named Mr. Adirubasamy, I am thankful to the Canada Council for the Arts. You're asking me the question everybody asks me, under the guise of asking about the introduction: You're asking me whether the book is true. You know, truth is a nebulous thing. There are certain, definite truths, but the truth of our lives goes far beyond facts. Life is an interpretation of a series of facts, and that interpretation is really what life is about. So the division between non-fiction and fiction has a certain logic, but it's a very limited one. And by and large, it isn't helpful.

I meet a number of people as a writer of fiction who say "Oh, I don't read much fiction," as if the history of the United States, just as an example, isn't an exercise in storytelling and myth-making. You know, the history of the United States is not just a series of flat facts: "George Washington was the first president. John Adams was the second." That's not it. The history of the United States fleshes those out in ways that are necessarily ways of storytelling. And any good novel is true in the sense that it's emotionally true, psychologically true, aesthetically true, and factually true, and when they aren't, it's because they are spiritually true. Take George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. It was totally true to Soviet Russia under Stalin, it captures the essence of what happened there.

But it's not only not true as it relates to Russian history, it isn't even true to the way farms operate in England. But it's absolutely true to that human event called Stalinism in Russia. So this thing of "Is it true? Is it not?", I think people are basically asking if it's factually true, which has its validity if you are some scientist, if you're a logician, if you're a technician. But existentially, it is quite limited. And I'm not saying that just to obfuscate. I can tell you right now what was factually true or not throughout the book. But I think once you have those answers, it tends to reduce the story instead of making it something greater. And that attitude, expressed constantly, reduces life. And we get a whole series of people, the alienated people of the West, who having reduced and scoured anything marvelous about it, are finally left with nothing.

AVC: The book has been published in more than 40 countries. Have you talked to people around the world about the book?

YM: Oh, yes. I toured for two years. For two years, I enjoyed the success of *Life Of Pi*. I toured from Iceland to Greece to Hong Kong to San Francisco—everywhere. I traveled a lot and talked to a lot of people. I loved it.

AVC: How does reaction to the book vary by country? You were talking about the West's reaction to imagination, and the dearth of it. Is it different elsewhere?

YM: The reactions were on an individual basis—there was no difference nationally. Individuals in Greece and Turkey and Iceland and Finland, whether they liked it or not, it came down to who they were as individuals. The book did very well in English-speaking countries—Canada, the U.S., England, the Commonwealth. Probably because it was written in English, and because I won a big, fat prize well-known in English-speaking countries. But in more foreign environments, I'd say it did exceptionally well in countries where there is still a tradition for trusting the imagination. Countries like Ireland—well, they do speak English. But Poland, countries that are very Catholic, even though it has nothing to do with Catholicism. Religion is just an alternate way of reading reality—you read material reality, and then you add on an extra layer of religiosity that deepens that understanding of reality. Some countries have lost that capacity, or dismissed it or marginalized it. But in those that have it, the novel did very well. It did very well, as I said, in Poland and Ireland. But it also did well in South Korea, and I have no idea why. Perhaps because it's culturally so distant that they read my book and added on incredible layers. It did well enough in France, so-so. The French are notoriously Cartesian—perhaps it leapt a bit too far for them.

AVC: Did religious culture make a difference, given that the main character identifies as a Christian, Muslim and Hindu simultaneously?

YM: Well, as I said, in countries that have traditionally been Catholic, the book has done well. And then, I'm not sure. It was published in Turkey, and there is an Arabic edition, but the Arabic world, for whatever reason—I guess, economically they aren't as wealthy—are by and large oral cultures. I've had no echo of how the book fared with Muslim readers. In India it did well, but mind you, the kinds of people who read in India are the kinds of people who are in the upper middle class, who speak English very well, and who wouldn't necessarily be native and wouldn't necessarily be Hindu. The comments I've gotten from Indians, who were by and large secular, was that they liked the story but could point to a few factual mistakes, some of which were intentional on my part. But they weren't necessarily acting as Hindus.

AVC: So you don't find on that individual level you mentioned, people of any one faith are more accepting or open to the book than people of another faith?

YM: No. But if I project, Christians—part of this is based on my personal experience, and part of it is based on my intuition—don't read fiction. The Bible is enough for them. Jesus is enough for them. That otherworldliness of the Bible stimulates their imagination enough. Ardent Christians are not novel readers. Now, having said that, I did receive letters from Americans who were very Christian. I remember one man liked the novel, liked the story, but didn't find the fact that Pi practiced more than one religion all that amusing. He said "I've been put on this earth to spread the word of Jesus, and Jesus is the only truth, and to claim to be Christian and do something else is to be muddled and lose your way." I haven't received any equivalent letter from a Hindu or a Muslim. I would very much doubt that Hindus who were novel-readers would react in that way, if only because Christianity has tended to be exclusive. Christianity has tended to believe that it has the truth, and if you're anything else, you're going to be in limbo or in Hell.

The Hindus have a different approach—everything is an incarnation of the divine, whether it has a Hindu name on it, or whether it's called Jesus, Buddha, or Allah. To them, everything is a manifestation of Rama. So they tend to be inclusive. In other words, everything is a metaphorical expression of Hinduism. You'll often see in India, Hindus who will step into churches and make an offering to a statue of Mary or Joseph, figuring that this might be another avatar of Vishnu. It's not necessarily thought-out, but

their instinct is not to disclude, but rather to include. Which isn't necessarily theologically any better than what Christianity does.

Whereas Christianity discludes in a way that's quite narrow, Hinduism includes in a way that denatures the original religion. But nonetheless, the reaction of the Hindu would not be to feel threatened.

I suppose a Muslim would probably react in the same way as the Christian. Islam is more tolerant, not many people know that, in theory—in the word, in the Koran. It is actually quite tolerant of other ways of getting to God. There's an entity called the dhimmi. It means "the people of the book." Muhammad had met Christians and had met Jews, and he respected them. So the dhimmi are people who get to God through other ways. According to Islam—"Allah" just means "The God," by the way, it's not a proper name, like Joe or Frank—Muslims pray to the same God as Jews and Christians. So to them, Jews and Christians are praying to the same God in a different way, so they are to be respected. Not that that has been put into practice, due to other considerations. But I do imagine a Muslim reader might be slightly more open than a Christian, but not as open as a Hindu.

AVC: You said that your next book is almost finished. Do you have a sense of when we're going to see it?

YM: I would think, the fall of 2008. It's two things, the next one. It's a novel and an essay. The reason I did that was that as I was writing the novel, I had certain questions and approaches and things I wanted to discuss which didn't fit in the genre of the novel. They'll be published back-to-back, upside down, what the trade calls a flipbook. In other words, a book with two covers. And they'll have the same title: *A 20th-Century Shirt*. They share the same fundamental metaphor to do with the shirt and to do with the laundry, and they both have to do with the Holocaust.

AVC: *Pi* sort of came in two sections. There's the pre-trip section and the trip section. *Self* is divided into two parts, too. Do you see that as a motif in your work?

YM: No, I never thought of that. Well, *Pi* comes in three parts. There's some preliminary, then there's a trip, and then there's the investigation. In *Self*, you are right, there are two chapters. One is 300 pages, and chapter two is half a page. So it is roughly divided into two unequal parts. But that is two parts. I don't think—well, I *hope* I don't think in terms of dualities. It's just happenstance. There is a before and an after.

AVC: You said you tend to alternate books that are easy to write with books that are difficult. By that logic, *20th-Century Shirt* would have been hard to write. Is that the case?

YM: Yeah, the Holocaust one is tough to write, if only because I had to do a lot of research. The point I make in my essay is that I am not so much interested in the Holocaust itself—well, I am interested, just not in this book—as its representations. As soon as a historical event has passed—and it's passed the second it's gone by—what we are left with is our representations of it. And in the essay, I discuss how the nearly singular representation of the Holocaust is always in the same mode, and that mode is historical realism and social realism. We don't allow other, more metaphorical representations of the Holocaust. It's unlike, let's say, war, which easily subjects itself to metaphor, so that we can take the reality of war and easily turn it into a comedy, or a romance, or a thriller, or a documentary drama. We can set it anywhere—so a drama about the Second World War could take place in Kansas, in Bolivia, in Samoa, or in the Arctic. It can be translated to another planet, and become a science-fiction movie that is a metaphor for the Second World War. War subjects itself to transportation in a way that we find acceptable. Whether it's true to the reality of war is something else. But even if it isn't, we find it acceptable that art and war can mix. And we feel that through all its incarnations, the overall result will be a sounder understanding and appreciation of war. Whether that's true is something else.

We don't allow ourselves that liberty with the Holocaust. You know, a Holocaust Western, a Holocaust science-fiction movie, a Holocaust comedy, a Holocaust set in Bolivia, all of these feel like oxymorons to us. So in the essay, I discuss many things, but one of them is "Why do we limit our representations of the Holocaust so much? Why must a Holocaust story necessarily feature Jews and Germans and be set between 1939 and 1945? Why is it so historicized?" That's very unusual among historical events. We have no problems looking at Napoleon historically and then doing something else with him. With the Holocaust, we're very, very attached to doing nothing but the historical. And I discuss the problems with doing that. If something feels historical, it will feel more and more like something of the past. And the fact is, we clothe the Holocaust in very old clothing. We always see the Holocaust in terms of black-and-white images, barking Germans, cowering Jews. We know very well-known fixed places like Auschwitz, Birkenau, Treblinka, and Beltzec.

Instead, war can live in a couple having a spat, when we say, "That was a real war." We very rarely have the Holocaust live in the terms of today. And I think that's a problem, because it becomes ancient history.

History has to become story, and the Holocaust hasn't. I discuss that in the essay, and then in the novel, I try to do a non-historical representation take on the Holocaust. It's a story featuring a monkey and a donkey, and it's set on a shirt. And the shirt is both a shirt and a country. So it's a very far cry from your standard Holocaust story.

AVC: It seems odd that you said *Life Of Pi* was easy, though years of research went into it. It seems like you're going through a similar process with *20th-Century Shirt*. What's your research process like?

YM: Well, for *Life Of Pi*, it was fairly organic. It was easy to write, because it was so fun. For *Life Of Pi*, I did a lot of research on religion, on animal behavior, on zoo biology, on shipwrecks. All of which are really, really interesting. So I did two, two and a half years of research, writing notes as I was going along. It helped me with fleshing out the story, giving me new directions to explore in. And it took me two years to write it. And it was just a joy, a joy to explore the behavior of wild animals, to explore the transcendental, to see how people have suffered in shipwrecks and what they have done to get by. And it all came together; all the bits sit together very well. They snapped into place like puzzle pieces. It was very satisfying to see that picture emerge. The Holocaust one was a bit harder. On the one hand, there is so much information out there on the Holocaust. But also, it's quite repetitive. It explores the same terrain, the same characters, the same narrative arc, over and over. Over and over, you hear the date 1933, you hear the name Adolf Hitler, you read the word Berlin, you hear the word Auschwitz, you hear the rumbling of trains. The narrative arc is ceaselessly the same. It really does become like a narrow corridor where you have no choice but to go down it. And you have very few exits. So it was hard in a very different way from *Self*. *Self* is a very nebulous terrain about sexual identity. With the Holocaust, you enter a very narrow corridor. It's difficult for that reason.

AVC: In the end, do you think you enjoy the writing more or the research more?

YM: That depends. I couldn't imagine writing without research. I don't know anything. And I don't like books that look inward; I like books that look out. So I enjoy both. I wouldn't do a book whose research I didn't enjoy. To me, the research is a way of exploring what it means to be alive. And I love the writing too. I am not a particularly natural writer. I am not a person who can write in paragraphs the way some writers do. For me, it's sentence by sentence, sometimes word-by-word.

And I revise constantly. It's a very laborious process, but I love doing it. There is nothing more satisfying than having a sentence fall into place in a way you feel is right, and then adding another one and then another one. It's extraordinarily satisfying. It contradicts *King Lear*. "Nothing will come of nothing"? Well, in art, something comes of nothing. Out of the thin air and the ether, you create a story. And that is intensely satisfying.

(readinggroupguides.com)

Reviews

"A story to make you believe in the soul-sustaining power of fiction and its human creators, and in the original power of storytellers like Martel."— *Los Angeles Book Times Review*

Life of Pi could renew your faith in the ability of novelists to invest even the most outrageous scenario with plausible life." — *Gary Krist, The New York Times Book Review*

"If this century produces a classic work of survival literature, Martel is surely a contender." — *The Nation*

"Martel displays the clever voice and tremendous storytelling skills of an emerging master." — *Publishers Weekly*

barnes & noble.com

Further Reading

In the heart of the Sea: the tragedy of the whaleship Essex by Nathaniel Philbrick

Night, Sea & Stars by Heather Graham

The English Patient: a novel by Michael Ondaatje

Midnight Sun by Ben Towle

(novelistplus.com)

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Life of Pi

By Yann Martel

Possible 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 an 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. How did Pi's tale alter or affect 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"? What do you believe was the source of or reason for Pi's piousness?

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. According to Pi's perspective, what color would Christianity be?

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 he tries to teach his children a lesson in survival by arranging for them to watch a tiger devour a goat. How might this have prepared 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. Pi is of the opinion that a zoo is more like a suburb than a jail. What is your response to this?

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?

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