



Title: Life of Pi, by Yann Martel
Author(s): Pamela Cooper (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
Source: [Booker Prize Novels: 1969-2005](#). Ed. Merritt Moseley. *Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 326*. Detroit: Gale, 2006.
Document Type: Critical essay, Critical essay

Full Text : COPYRIGHT 2006 Gale, COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning

[Critical Essay](#) [Primary Bibliography](#) [Further Readings](#)

MANUSCRIPTS AND EDITIONS:

- *Life of Pi* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2001; New York: Harcourt, 2001; Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002).
- *The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 1993; London: Faber & Faber, 1993).
- *Self* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 1996; London: Faber & Faber, 1996).
- *Life of Pi* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2001; New York: Harcourt, 2001; Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002).
- *We Ate the Children Last: Stories* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2004).

The awarding of the 2002 Man Booker Prize to *Life of Pi* was controversial, although not unexpected. Yann Martel's novel had been the bookmakers' third choice, with those of William Trevor and Sarah Waters as official and popular favorites, respectively. Then, a week before the 22 October announcement, the Man Booker Internet site broadcast *Life of Pi* as the winner. The team of judges quickly claimed the online publication as an organizational mistake, and all betting was suspended. The judges maintained that their final decision would not be made until the day of the ceremony--which it was, on a four-to-one vote after an hour of deliberation. The explanation for the Internet error was technical: organizers usually prepare six winning proclamations for all six contenders, and then release the appropriate one after the award is made. Martel's prepared publicity had been inadvertently leaked on the web.

This muddle joined other controversies surrounding the 2002 award. There were the usual differences of opinion about the shortlist, which had been picked from 130 novels--118 submitted by publishers and 12 called in by the judges. The final 6 were

Life of Pi, by Yann Martel;

Family Matters, by Rohinton Mistry;

Unless, by Carol Shields;

The Story of Lucy Gault, by William Trevor;

Fingersmith, by Sarah Waters;

Dirt Music, by Tim Winton.

Mistry's *Family Matters*

is set in Bombay and revolves around a sick old man's relationships with his family and their collective past. Shields's *Unless* is the story of a Canadian woman whose daughter inexplicably becomes a beggar and street person. Trevor's *The Story of Lucy Gault* tells of the privileged Gault family, whose proposed move to England in the 1920s provokes their young daughter, Lucy, to run away.

Waters's *Fingersmith*

is a thriller set in Victorian times, featuring two orphan heroines and their efforts to escape entrapment of various sorts. Winton's *Dirt Music* is set in Western Australia and is the story of an illegal fisherman struggling with the loss of his family.

Moreover, the judges proved quarrelsome and contentious. They lashed out against the kinds of novels submitted and disagreed about the quantity of submissions with representatives of the Man Group PLC, the investment brokers who took over sponsorship of the prize in 2002. The judges for this crucial year in the administering, and renaming, of the Booker were chairwoman Lisa Jardine, a writer, critic, and broadcaster; David Baddiel, a writer and comedian; Russell Celyn Jones, a novelist and short-story writer; Sally Vickers, an analytical psychologist turned novelist; and Erica Wagner, literary editor of *The Times* (London).

During the selection process, Baddiel and Vickers were critical of the kinds of works brought before the judges. Baddiel, as reported by Fiachra Gibbons in *The Guardian*

(25 October 2002), complained about the dullness and length of the books, railing against the "pompous, portentous, and pretentious fiction" submitted. Vickers also objected to superfluous weightiness, finding male novelists most at fault: "there are far too many big male books." Given these reservations, *Life of Pi*, already well known (despite its relative length) for its popularity and readability, seemed a fitting choice--although Baddiel held out for *Fingersmith*, Waters's vivid novel of Victorian lesbian adventure. As Gibbons observed in *The Guardian* of 23 October, the day after the award ceremony, not since Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993) had such a populist novel won the prize.

Jardine set out self-consciously to initiate, in 2002, a new era in the history of the prize. She rejected the suggestion by Booker administrator Martyn Goff that the prize be opened to American novels, feeling them to be already well served by the Pulitzer Prize. She told *The Observer*

(20 October 2002): "This is a transitional year for the Booker Prize. We have a new sponsor and we have more transparency." Jardine's aim was evidently to change the tenor of the prize, dispelling any residual stuffiness and elitism. She sought a new frankness, with headlines being made "by the books and not the bitching," as Gibbons put it. As Robert McCrum reported with slight skepticism in *The Observer*

(27 October 2002), under Jardine's stewardship the Man Booker Prize "presented itself as a publicity-savvy, transparently modern, reader-friendly, market-conscious literary prize like Whitbread and Orange, with a winner to match. . . . Yann Martel, the child of the Zeitgeist, torn between quasi-oriental humility and Western triumphalism, sprang to the microphone like an Olympic athlete, with his speech in his pocket." Thus the sponsorship of the Man Group and the declared ambitions of the chief judge forged a symbolic link, under the auspices of the prize, between modernity and commerce on the one hand and literary excellence on the other.

The 2002 shortlist was notable for its lack of English-born writers. The choices reflected a breadth of geographical and cultural scope in the awarding of the Man Booker and a continued emphasis on Commonwealth fiction. For the first time in Booker history, three Canadians--Martel, Mistry, and Shields--were short-listed. Martel attributed this recognition of Canadian fiction to "happenstance," but *The Times*

(London) speculated about the influence of cultural diversity on artistic inventiveness: "In Canada's case, as perhaps in India's and Australia's in the recent past, it may be the remaking of a nation in a more fluid mould which sparks creativity." (The last Canadian novel to win the Booker was Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* in 2000.) In an interview for the *BBC News* Internet site (24 October 2002), Martel associated the richness of storytelling with the openness of Canadian society: "the world is in Canada. It's a country with two official languages but no official culture. So people from all over the world are welcome to come and tell their own stories."

Newspaper photographs of Martel at the award ceremony show an elated young man--he was thirty-nine at the time--throwing out his arms and beaming. Martel later described his reaction as rather "un-Britannic," but his frank joyfulness in victory was both endearing and highly photogenic. He thanked his parents in French, and then his readers "for having met my imagination halfway." Martel admitted that winning a prestigious prize is a writer's dream and the next day added the almost obligatory qualifier: "For most serious writers, it's not the money, it's not the fame--it's that your book will now connect with more people."

In her presentation speech, Jardine clarified the judges' choice: "In *Life of Pi*, we have chosen an audacious book, in which inventiveness explores belief. It is, as the author says, 'a novel which will make you believe in God'--or ask yourself why you don't." Despite the jubilation, there were reservations about Martel's win. Not all the reviews of *Life of Pi* were positive. Finlo Rohrer, writing for *BBC News* (15 October 2002), found the characterization of the hero, *Pi* Patel, to be "as thin as tracing paper"; *The Guardian* described the novel mockingly as "a cross between *The Owl and the Pussycat* and *The Jungle Book*." On a broader note, the novelist Will Self lamented to the *BBC News*

(30 September 2002) the predictable blandness of the Man Booker selection. He lambasted the organizers for ignoring the most influential British writers (such as Martin Amis) and for choosing books with mass appeal that sought to confirm, rather than to challenge, existing cultural prejudices. Self attacked the reductive commercialism of the prize-giving mentality: the Man Booker "pushes the writer and the audience of the books into an uncomfortable contortion and it introduces a kind of nerdy, list-making component to the whole business." Self's own novel, *Dorian*, a postmodern rewriting of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), failed to make the shortlist.

There was also the deafening silence maintained by several London publishing houses that had rejected *Life of Pi*. While Martel's agent refused to name them, both Chatto and Windus and Penguin admitted having seen the manuscript. *Life of Pi* was a major coup for the small Edinburgh publisher Canongate--who in 2004 printed the one-millionth copy of the novel. The managing director of Canongate, David Graham, observes that the novel "has reached far beyond the market for the most successful 'literary fiction,' and become a phenomenon with entirely its own momentum." Since winning the Man Booker Prize, *Life of Pi* has been on either the hard- or paperback best-seller lists in the United Kingdom and is second only to Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's Ark* (1982) as the best-selling Booker Prize winner.

In his home country, Martel won the Hugh MacLennan Prize for fiction in 2001 and was also short-listed that year for the Governor General's Prize. The success of *Life of Pi* was briefly clouded shortly after its Man Booker win, however, by accusations of plagiarism leveled at Martel by the distinguished Brazilian novelist Moacyr Scliar. In both the author's note to *Life of Pi*--where he thanks Scliar "for the spark of *life*"--and in later

comments, Martel is candid about the inspiration for his book: Scliar's 1982 novel *Max and the Cats*, in which a Jewish boy loses his family in a shipwreck and finds himself stranded in a lifeboat with a panther. Martel recalled coming across a review of *Max and the Cats* by John Updike in *The New York Review of Books*.

"I saw a premise that I liked and I told my own story with it," he told Colin Blackstock of *The Guardian* (8 November 2002). "I don't feel I've done something dishonest." No such review exists, however, and critics began to suspect Martel of being familiar with the actual book. While Jardine vigorously defended him in the *Toronto Star*--describing *Life of Pi* as the best Booker winner since Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

(1981)--Martel aggravated the situation in Canada by writing on the Internet site Powells.com: "I didn't really want to read it. Why put up with the gall? Why put up with a brilliant premise ruined by a lesser writer?" Scliar interpreted this comment as a slur on Brazilian culture.

Martel further distanced *Life of Pi* from *Max and the Cats*

by declaring his narrative to be about "religion, faith and imagination," while Scliar's story worked as an extended metaphor for Nazism and military dictatorship in Brazil in 1964-1965. Nevertheless, Scliar saw the idea as his intellectual property and considered legal action. The two writers have since reconciled, and while the scandal "wasn't fun" for Martel, he did find it "intellectually stimulating." In a 2003 interview with *Trent*--the magazine of his alma mater, Trent University in Ontario--Martel commented: "Moacyr Scliar is a very nice man. He read my book and loved it. . . . The point of art is to build bridges."

Life of Pi

tells the story of Piscine Molitor Patel, a resourceful and pious Indian boy who endures more than seven months adrift in a lifeboat on the Pacific Ocean, accompanied by a 450-pound tiger. The novel begins with an author's note, which sets up an elaborate frame for Pi's story: an unnamed narrator encounters a garrulous old man in a coffeehouse in Pondicherry, a town on the coast of Tamil Nadu. The old man declares "I have a story that will make you believe in God" and urges the narrator to seek out **Pi**, now resident in Canada. In a series of meetings in Toronto between the narrator and the now grown-up **Pi**, the story unfolds in three parts.

Part 1, "Toronto and Pondicherry," tells of Pi's **life**

in India as the son of a zookeeper. It details his love of animals and the natural world and his spiritual journey through three religions--Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. It ends with the Patel family's decision, in the wake of political unrest in the 1970s, to immigrate to Canada. Part 2, "The Pacific Ocean," is the heart of the novel. It describes the shipwreck that deprives the sixteen-year-old **Pi** of both his human and animal families, for many of the zoo animals were also aboard the *Tsimtsum*, headed for the "New World." After a Darwinian battle among the animal survivors of the wreck--an injured zebra, an orangutan, a hyena, and the tiger--the latter becomes Pi's sole companion. Alternately factual and hallucinatory, this section of the novel details the complex interdependency of boy and animal, Pi's taming of the beast, their slow deterioration at sea, and their adventure on a mysterious island filled with algae and meerkats. Part 3, "Benito Juarez Infirmary, Tomatlan, Mexico," brings **Pi** to shore at last. His comrade having escaped into the wild upon landing in Mexico, **Pi**

undergoes a lengthy interrogation by Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba--representatives of the Japanese ministry of transport and responsible for the *Tsimtsum*--about his ordeal. The framing narrator concludes Pi's story with meditations about fiction and plausibility and with an admiring quotation from the otherwise skeptical Okamoto: "As an aside, story of sole survivor, Mr. Piscine Molitor Patel, Indian citizen, is an astounding story of courage and endurance in the face of extraordinarily difficult and tragic circumstances. In the experience of this investigator, his story is unparalleled in the history of shipwrecks. 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."

At its core, *Life of Pi*

is a religious novel. Specifically, it explores faith and love of God through the lens of a physical world depicted as wondrous, brutal, and deeply mysterious. The linking of religion and physicality--especially the diverse physicality of animals--is established at the start of the novel, when the adult **Pi**

describes the double major of religious studies and zoology he took for his bachelor's degree at the University of Toronto. He then launches into one of his long disquisitions on animals--their characteristics, behavior, and enigmatic spiritual import: "Sometimes I got my majors mixed up. A number of my fellow religious-studies students--muddled agnostics who didn't know which way was up, who were in the thrall of reason, that fool's gold for the bright--reminded me of the three-toed sloth; and the three-toed sloth, such a beautiful example of the miracle of **life**, reminded me of God." In Pi's twin obsessions--God and animals--Martel encapsulates the broad intellectual endeavor of the novel: to critique reason as a limited way of approaching the world and to explore the intertwined powers of faith, love, and imagination.

From the start, Pi's identity is closely bound to water, animals, and family **life**. Named after a Parisian swimming pool, the Piscine Molitor, **Pi**

acquires the nickname "Pissing," and as a schoolboy deliberately renames himself in terms of geometry. He writes on the blackboard his new name, adding the mathematical formula $A = 3.14$ and drawing "a large circle sliced in two with a diameter." Like Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), **Pi** emerges from the symbolic waters of birth to fashion himself, as it were; he claims an identity and takes possession of his own **life** at a young age. Moreover, his new name reflects the philosophical poles between which he and his story oscillate: reason, or logic, and faith, or mystery. The number A is a paradoxical blend of numeric logic and irrationality; transcendental in mathematical terms, it is a unit of measurement that, being indefinite,

cannot itself be measured by whole numbers. Crucial to the commensurability of the circle, A remains incommensurate--both a practical geometric tool and a small piece of eternity. Figuratively, the irrational, indefinite number A is used to measure a circle, the traditional emblem of completion; it is the imperfect sign of a perfect form.

Martel plays cleverly with these implications of his protagonist's name. **Pi** sums up the paradoxical mixture that is physical **life** itself, for his name captures the interplay of body and spirit, of man and God. In *Life of Pi*, anatomy (human and animal) is a functional and limited structure that, miraculously, opens onto the infinite. The flesh, incomplete and mortal, signifies divine completion and immortality; the pragmatic body invokes the transcendental. This interplay of the physical and metaphysical is the philosophical base of the novel. It informs the affectionate detail with which **Pi** elaborates his childhood in the Pondicherry Zoo and draws together his love of animals and his search for God.

Pi's religious intensity leads him first to Hinduism--a religion filled with gods and goddesses in animal form. Through shapes like those of Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of good luck, wisdom, and learning, **Pi** apprehends the world and his place in it: "The universe makes sense to me through Hindu eyes. . . . for everything has a trace of the divine in it. . . . The finite within the infinite, the infinite within the finite." He also falls in love with Christianity and Islam, whose visions of disciplined compassion make sense to him as well. In his innocence, **Pi** disregards the fundamental differences among these three religions and moves happily through the creeds and rituals of each. His eclectic faith disconcerts both his family and teachers, and the novel makes gentle comedy out of the concerned yet limited perceptions of Pi's parents and his theologically opposed gurus. To their insistence on the impossibility of such multiple commitments, **Pi** offers transparent simplicity: "Bapu Gandhi said, 'All religions are true.' 'I just want to love God,' I blurted out, and looked down, red in the face." Invoking the name of the former Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy of nonviolence, Martel gives his hero an apostolic character; he centralizes love as a value and implies the power of faith to overcome apparent impossibilities.

In the novel, the marvelous body of the animal becomes both an image of God and a sign of the inexplicable cruelty of the world. Besides the three-toed sloth as a kind of divinity, the zebra is used twice in the novel to suggest the miraculous powers of nature and the force of love. Just before the Patels depart for Canada, **Pi** finds himself in the company of two men visiting the zoo, both named Mr. Kumar. One Mr. Kumar is a baker and Pi's mentor in Islam; the other is a teacher and a rationalistic atheist. In a moving, sweetly comic scene, these two identically named yet philosophically opposed father figures are united in their wonder at a zebra eating carrots from their hands:

Mr. and Mr. Kumar looked delighted.

"A *zebra*, you say?" said Mr. Kumar.

"That's right," I replied. "It belongs to the same family as the ass and the horse."

"The Rolls-Royce of equids," said Mr. Kumar.

"What a wondrous creature," said Mr. Kumar.

"This one's a Grant's zebra," I said.

Mr. Kumar said, "*Equus burchelli boehmi*."

Mr. Kumar said, "*Allahu akbar*."

This moment captures the spiritual import of the physical body and suggests enchanted apprehension of that body as a means of philosophical and theological reconciliation among people.

A zebra appears again early in part 2 and becomes the focus for one of the most violent and disturbing episodes of the novel. As the *Tsimtsum* sinks, **Pi** is thrown into a lifeboat by some sailors, and a massive zebra, "leaping with the grace of a racehorse," lands in the boat with him, shattering its leg. What follows for the zebra is a terrible ordeal, as it is mauled by the hyena and gashed in its side. Virtually disemboweled, it clings to **life**, and **Pi** comments: "I was horrified. I had no idea a living being could sustain so much injury and go on living." Here the zebra suggests martyrdom to the apparently senseless brutality of **life**. Martel uses the zebra's suffering to emphasize the Christian virtues of patience and love. Earlier, as **Pi** discusses Christianity with the priest Father Martin, he fails to comprehend the meaning of Jesus' death: "Why not leave death to the mortals?" asks **Pi**. "Why make dirty what is beautiful, spoil what is perfect?" Father Martin's reply is simple: "Love." In the brokenness of the world, the novel implies, love and the endurance of pain have deep spiritual meaning; the adult **Pi** honors the suffering of the zebra by remembering it daily in his prayers.

The animal that dominates the central part of the novel is the Bengal tiger, Richard Parker. He slaughters the other beasts in the boat--including the spunky female orangutan, Orange Juice. An odd mixture of the Virgin Mary and Aphrodite, love goddess of the waves, Orange Juice is the last female presence in Pi's **life** and an analogue of his own lost mother. Once **Pi** and Richard Parker are alone, the novel embraces an all-male world: their relationship becomes an extended encounter between an alpha male (the smart, adaptable **Pi**) and an omega male (the fish-out-of-water Richard Parker).

One of the most intriguing games that Martel plays with the reader is also a rather obvious one. During the crucial shipwreck scene, he allows one to assume that Richard Parker is a human being. As **Pi** flounders among wreckage, he sees Richard Parker desperately swimming and uses a whistle to call and encourage him: "Don't you love **life**? Keep swimming then!" He begins a pattern of engagement that persists throughout his relationship with the tiger: he addresses to Richard Parker profound philosophical questions and uses his dumb "interlocutor" to explore these questions aloud to himself. In the midst of catastrophe, **Pi** establishes a formality of tone: "I am to suffer hell without any account from heaven? In that case, what is the purpose of reason, Richard Parker? Is it no more than to shine at practicalities--the getting of food, clothing and shelter? Why can't reason give greater answers?" Through devices such as this mock-Socratic dialogue, Martel does more than emphasize Pi's aloneness; he suggests an intimacy between boy and tiger (and Pi's respect for the animal) that grows throughout their ordeal into genuine love. The anthropomorphizing of the tiger through his almost absurdly proper name makes **Pi** and Richard Parker kin--even though they are of different species.

Richard Parker, the narrative reveals, acquired his name through a bureaucratic muddle that assigned to the tiger cub the name of the hunter who found him and his mother. It is a misnaming that anglicizes an Asian animal, making him an incongruous sign of the troubled colonial heritage of India. **Pi** too is misnamed, for he is neither a French swimming pool nor a mathematical symbol. Yet, the names of both creatures fit: **Pi** must stay afloat in the boundless pool of the Pacific and contemplate infinity in the rich emptiness of the seascape; Richard Parker is oddly humanized and achieves his own postcolonial migration by ending his journey in Mexico.

The name "Richard Parker" also has literary and historical resonances appropriate to Martel's story. In Edgar Allan Poe's only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), Richard Parker is the name of an unlucky sailor who is eaten by two other survivors of a shipwreck. In the 1870s the yacht *Mignonette* sank on its way to Australia, and a sailor named Richard Parker was eaten by the captain of the vessel and two other survivors. On their return to England, these three were tried for murder, and the case set a legal precedent. The only acceptable excuse for murder being self-defense, the *Mignonette* case became the standard legal rebuttal for a defense justifying murder in extreme circumstances.

Clearly, these echoes of shipwreck, catastrophe, and cannibalism are at play in *Life of Pi*, where both human and animal are pushed to the brink of their powers of endurance, confronting the horrors of abandonment and starvation. **Pi** deeply fears the loss of his humanity, as circumstances force upon him choices he would ordinarily never make. At one point he attempts to eat Richard Parker's excrement, but his taste buds rebel. More serious for him is the setting aside of his vegetarianism and the nonviolence that it implies. The first time **Pi** must kill a fish, he weeps "heartily over this poor little deceased soul. It was the first sentient being I had ever killed. I was now a killer. I was now as guilty as Cain. I was sixteen years old, a harmless boy, bookish and religious, and now I had blood on my hands. It's a terrible burden to carry. All sentient **life** is sacred. I never forget to include this fish in my prayers." Martel established a perspective for his hero's painful compromises when he commented to *The Guardian* (23 October 2002): "My narrator isn't weird. He's an ordinary boy, simple and approachable. I like normality that suffers trial."

Pi's beleaguered normality shows itself in his pragmatism, as he goes about using the scant resources of the lifeboat to build a functioning world for himself. He constructs a makeshift raft, in order to place some distance between himself and Richard Parker; he learns to use the solar stills in the survival kit to obtain fresh water; he learns to fish and to slaughter sea turtles for their meat and blood. Although the novel insists upon the limits of rationality as a tool for understanding the world, Pi's good sense and practicality stand him in good stead throughout his ordeal. His greatest trials, though, are psychological and spiritual. He finds his worst enemies to be despair and fear, and his true strength emerges in his efforts to combat these: "I must say a word about fear. It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat **life**. . . . You dismiss your last allies, hope and trust. There, you've defeated yourself. Fear, which is but an impression, has triumphed over you." **Pi** fights hard "to shine the light of words" upon the face of such dread. The lists that he makes--inventories of the contents of the lifeboat, schedules of his daily activities--become achievements of character and faith as well as ways to organize space and time. Through his lists **Pi** orders chaos, anchors himself, and fights his fear. Through his prayers he maintains a sense of God's presence despite his terrible solitude.

In Pi's struggle with fear, Richard Parker plays a crucial part. The central section of the novel is built on an ultimately hopeful and optimistic paradox. Although the tiger's presence seems to spell certain death for **Pi**, Richard Parker is actually a source of **life**; in his relationship with the animal, **Pi** finds a sense of usefulness and the comfort of interdependence. As he observes: "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." Awestruck by Richard

Parker's "overwhelming presence," **Pi**

marvels at the animal's imposing beauty: "He was incredibly muscular, yet his haunches were thin and his glossy coat hung loosely on his frame. His body, bright brownish orange streaked with black vertical stripes, was incomparably beautiful, matched with a tailor's eye for harmony by his pure white chest and underside and the black rings of his long tail." Gripped by wonder at the sheer spectacle of the tiger, **Pi**

perceives the need to tame him as the only way for them both to survive. He decides for cooperation rather than enmity: "It was not a question of him or me, but of him *and*

me." This choice is a turning point for him, as he realizes that he needs Richard Parker to stave off despair--"a foe even more formidable than a tiger." In *Life of Pi*, hope and faith inhere in an unlikely relationship: a dangerous wild animal enables a vulnerable boy "to go on living."

Pi's taming of Richard Parker constitutes--along with his fishing activities and management of his meager supplies--the main action of the central section of the novel. Here he draws on his experience with animals and his superior intelligence to assert a kind of power over the tiger. Brains triumph over brawn, and the taming process enables them safely to share the confined space of the lifeboat. The two establish a routine and become domestic partners of a sort. When a whale drifts by and observes them, **Pi** imagines it sizing him up as a possible mate before concluding that he has a mate already. Their partnership balances **Pi** within the bleak yet beautiful world he inhabits; it is an act of psychological conservation comparable to those he undertakes in order to preserve food and shelter.

Pi's battle with the elements, in the course of seven months adrift, eventually takes its toll, however. He goes blind temporarily and lapses into hallucination, imagining an encounter with another castaway and a long conversation about food with Richard Parker. At this point, toward the end of part 2, the narrative leaps into a fantasy realm that challenges the reader by its apparent departure from the predominantly realistic mode of the rest of the novel. **Pi**

and Richard Parker suddenly find themselves on an island made of algae and inhabited only by meerkats. In this green and apparently gentle place **Pi**

recovers, learning to walk again and eating vegetable matter for the first time in months. Yet, the island is not what it seems; when **Pi** finds fragments of a human body wrapped in the leaves of a tree, he realizes that the island is itself a species of digestive organ that will eventually consume him if he stays. He and Richard Parker set sail again and finally reach the coast of Mexico.

One could read the sojourn on the carnivorous island as a hallucination. The adult **Pi** anticipates disbelief in his audience but steadfastly declares the episode to be factual. Alternately, one could interpret the episode as a kind of test of the reader's faith. Having followed Pi's improbable story thus far, one is asked to make a leap of faith, as it were, into the fantastic. With reason entirely removed from the narrative, readers are challenged to trust imaginative truth and believe in the miraculous: "it's part of the story and it happened to me," says **Pi**.

This idea of faith in the power of the imagination and, by extension, in miracle informs the final section of the novel. Here the mundane world of facts and rational inquiry returns, as the convalescent **Pi** is questioned by the officious Messrs. Okamoto and Chiba. Another of the odd couples of the novel, the investigators provide some slapstick comedy to the conclusion of the story. In this way they deflect the anticlimax that can weaken the ending of the typical castaway narrative: returning the lost protagonist to his culture threatens a feeling of letdown. With the adventure concluded, the author is required to keep readers interested in the aftermath. Martel uses this becalmed space of aftermath to explore the numinous power of stories and to emphasize the dilemmas of interpretation. Faith is crucial to the workings of both, he suggests.

The two men (perhaps echoing the reader's response) balk at the illogic of Pi's story. For **Pi**, though, faith is an existential principle that trumps reason; he is indignant: "If you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for? . . . Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. **Life**

is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer." Enacting his contempt for their limited perceptions, he offers the men another version of his story--without the imaginative challenge represented by the animals. This brief version is a much more conventional castaway narrative, with squabbling survivors, brutish violence, and cannibalism. **Pi** then asks his interrogators: "Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?" When they admit that the story with animals is the better one, he replies: "Thank you. And so it goes with God." For **Pi**, imagination is an agent of faith, and the story, like the miraculous body itself, holds spiritual weight within its incredibility.

Life of Pi ends happily. In fact, the reader has known from the start that **Pi** not only survived, he went on to thrive in Canada and to have a happy family of his own. Yet, the strongest emotional note struck at the conclusion of the novel is that of loss. **Pi** still mourns the loss of Richard Parker, whose departure was both spectacular and devastating. On landing in Mexico, Richard Parker leaped from the boat and vanished into the jungle: "I saw his body, so immeasurably vital, stretched in the air above me, a fleeting, furred rainbow. . . . Then Richard Parker, companion of my torment, awful, fierce thing that kept me alive, moved forward and disappeared forever from my **life**." **Pi**

is wounded by the tiger's indifference to him and the inconclusiveness of their parting. He sees it as a "bungled goodbye," the pain of which has never left him. In Richard Parker's exhilarating reclaiming of his wildness at the end of the adventure, Martel seems to assert the difference between animal and human. He effectively reiterates the lesson of Pi's father, who, in the first part of the novel, attempts to teach his two sons, **Pi**

and Ravi, about the ferocity of animals by feeding a goat to a tiger as they watch. Like the three-toed sloth at the beginning of the story, the fierce tiger at its end seems to stand not just for the "miracle of **life**" but for the enigma of God. Pi's faith in this enigma sustains him throughout his harrowing experience; the serenity of his seasoned belief informs the **life** he goes on to shape for himself in a new land.

Life of Pi was a breakthrough work for Martel. He had previously published a book of stories, *The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories* (1993) and a novel, *Self* (1996). The former revolves around the title novella--an account of the vicissitudes of the twentieth century told through the experiences of one family, the Roccamatios, and related by a young man dying of AIDS. The latter, reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), is about a character who changes gender. While *The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories* was critically acclaimed, it sold poorly; *Self* was neither critically nor commercially successful. **Life of Pi** was thus born from a sense of malaise and failure. Martel began the novel in 1996, during six months of traveling in India, visiting mosques, churches, temples, and zoos. The inspiration for the Pondicherry Zoo was the Trivandium Zoo in South India. With the novel beginning to emerge in a "smashed-up, kaleidoscopic way," as he wrote on Powells.com, Martel then spent a year reading religious texts--including the Bible, the Qur'an, and the Bhagavad Gita--castaway stories, and various works of animal and child psychology. It took him four years to complete a novel in which he set out to challenge the received idea that writers should write only about what they know. Martel determined to learn about "animals, religion, spirituality" and to imagine a somewhat fantastic yet fully realized and naturalistically convincing fictional world.

In 2003 Yann Martel wrote a piece for *The Man Booker Prize: 35 Years of the Best in Contemporary Fiction, 1969-2003* about the effect of winning the prize on his creative **life**. He claimed a kind of psychological distance from success and recognition, stating that "fame and fortune are not felt the same way happiness or loneliness are felt. They remain something from the outside that intrudes upon me . . . not generated from within, not felt in my core." Nevertheless, he acknowledged the significance of his win: "I now have the attention of the book-reading world. My creative act, conceived like a whisper, is ringing across the world."

REFERENCES:

Interviews:

- Aida Edemariam, "Third Time Lucky," *Guardian*, 23 October 2002.
- "Ask Booker Prize Winner Yann Martel," *BBC News* (24 October 2002) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/forum/2350807.stm>.
- Marilyn Burns, "Interview with Yann Martel," *Trent*, 34, no. 1 (2003): 7-8.

References:

- "Martel's Quirky Path," *BBC News* (23 October 2002) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/2351847.stm>>.
- "Yann Martel Relishes Booker Boost," *BBC News* (24 October 2002) <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/2352437.stm>>.

Source Citation: Cooper, Pamela. "Life of Pi, by Yann Martel." *Booker Prize Novels: 1969-2005*. Ed. Merritt Moseley. *Dictionary of Literary Biography* Vol. 326. Detroit: Gale, 2006. *Literature Resource Center*. Gale. LANE TECH HIGH SCHOOL. 23 Jan. 2008 <<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=LitRC&u=cps1440>>.

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1220000951

Life of Pi is a Canadian fantasy adventure novel by Yann Martel published in 2001. The protagonist is Piscine Molitor "Pi" Patel, an Indian Tamil boy from Pondicherry who explores issues of spirituality and practicality from an early age. He survives 227 days after a shipwreck while stranded on a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean with a Bengal tiger named Richard Parker.