

Title: Adventure Afloat - The classic tradition of castaway tales and survivor stories will never be the same

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Book Info:LIFE OF PI

Yann Martel

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336 pp., \$25.00

If, initially, it seems to take Yann Martel a while to launch *Life of Pi*, reader, be patient. Very soon, you will be totally hooked: drawn into a wonderful adventure tale whose originality, imaginative detail, suspense, and immediacy will keep you turning pages breathlessly until the very end. Imagine a three-ring circus conducted in a twenty-six-foot lifeboat by the sole human survivor of a shipwreck in the company of several wild animals, and you'll have a glimmer of what is in store.

Martel's novel--which won Canada's Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction in 2001--begins with mere hints of the surprises to come. The hero, Pi (short for Piscine Molitor) Patel, spends his childhood in Pondicherry, India. Early on, he explains how he came to have his unusual name--that of a swimming pool in Paris that his father particularly admired--from which he has derived a less embarrassing nickname. Martel clearly enjoys playing with names: besides the fact that Pi is destined for a sojourn in a watery expanse much larger than a piscine, the other central character of the novel, an adult male Bengal tiger, is named (in one of those bureaucratic bunglings too complicated to summarize here) Richard Parker.

In the narrative's first section, Pi shares with the reader numerous interesting details about zoos and animals, which he acquires as the son of a hotelkeeper turned zookeeper. As he puts it,

"Running a zoo is a hotelkeeper's worst nightmare. Consider: the guests never leave their rooms; they expect not only lodging but full board; they receive a constant flow of visitors, some of whom are noisy and unruly. One has to wait until they saunter to their balconies, so to speak, before one can clean their rooms, and then one has to wait until they tire of the view and return to their rooms before one can clean their balconies; and there is much cleaning to do, for the guests are as unhygienic as alcoholics. Each guest is very particular about his or her diet, constantly complaining about the slowness of the service, and never, ever tips."

Animal management

Pi's education in the ways of animals proves invaluable for his later adventures. He learns, for example, the importance of "getting animals used to the presence of humans. ... The key aim is to diminish an animal's flight distance, which is the minimum distance at which an animal wants to keep a perceived enemy." An applied example of this strategy is the behavior of a circus lion tamer, who knows that he must always enter the ring first, in full sight of the lions. In doing so, he establishes that the ring is his territory, not theirs, a notion that he reinforces by shouting,

stomping about, and snapping his whip. The lions are impressed. They are in the presence of a strongly dominant male, a super-alpha male, and they must submit to his dominance rituals. So they open their jaws wide and sit up; they jump through paper-covered hoops, crawl through tubes, walk backwards, and roll over.

The trainer must ensure that he always remains super alpha. He will pay dearly if he unwittingly slips to beta in the lions' eyes.

Pi's precocious powers of observation extend beyond the particulars of animal management into the realm of faith. During his impressionable youth, he manages to become multid denominational, committing himself not only to the Hinduism of his birth but also to Islam and Christianity. He asks his parents for Christian baptism and a Muslim prayer rug; though they express consternation, ultimately they indulge him in his unusual requests. As Pi attempts to explain the doctrines of his three chosen faiths, the author injects a measure of humor into these weighty subjects. For example, Pi regards Christianity as a religion in a rush. Look at the world created in seven days. Even on a symbolic level, that's creation in a frenzy. To one born in a religion where the battle for a single soul can be a relay race run over many centuries, with innumerable generations passing along the baton, the quick resolution of Christianity has a dizzying effect. If Hinduism flows placidly like the Ganges, then Christianity bustles like Toronto at rush hour.

As an earnest sixteen-year-old, Pi endeavors to understand the "weird" foundational story of Christianity from a zoological perspective (providing another taste of the author's mellow humor):

"What? Humanity sins but it's God's Son who pays the price? I tried to imagine Father saying to me, 'Piscine, a lion slipped into the llama pen today and killed two llamas. Yesterday another one killed a black buck. Last week two of them ate the camel. The week before it was painted storks and grey herons. And who's to say for sure who snacked on our golden agouti? ... I have decided that the only way the lions can atone for their sins is if I feed you to them.'"

Then, in what seems thus far to be a traditional coming-of-age story with a few zoological twists and theological turns, the world of current events intervenes. Pi's father, worried that India has entered a politically unstable period (during the mid-1970s of Indira Gandhi's government), decides to dismantle his zoo and move his family to Canada to begin a new life. While most of the animals are successfully relocated to other zoos, a few are shipped to North America, accompanied by the Patel family, on a Japanese cargo ship.

Shipwrecked

However, nightmare overtakes utopian dream: somewhere in the Pacific beyond Manila, the Tsimtsum sinks in a storm and the only survivors are Pi, a zebra with a broken leg, a rapacious spotted hyena, a Borneo orangutan named Orange Juice, and the Bengal tiger, Richard Parker. The narrative that follows chronicles Pi's astonishing tale of survival at sea on a small lifeboat with only animals--and ultimately, one animal, a 450-pound carnivore--as his shipmates. Imagine the industry and resourcefulness of Robinson Crusoe, without an island to provide succor and sustenance, crossed with the courage and dogged determination of Ahab confronting his elemental rival, Moby-Dick. As Pi describes the early days of his ordeal as a castaway, "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."

Among the challenges Pi must meet and overcome are the numerous physical deprivations and psychological responses to his circumstances- -heat, cold, thirst, hunger, dampness, seasickness, insomnia, injury, exhaustion, fear, loneliness, grief, despair--to say nothing of the necessity to become a zookeeper, as it were, in the confines of a lifeboat in which the tiger occupies nearly a third of the floor space. When Pi realizes the extremity of his situation, he observes,

"You might think I lost all hope at that point. I did. And as a result I perked up and felt much better. ... With a tiger aboard, my life was over. That being settled, why not do something about my parched throat? "

"I believe it was this that saved my life that morning, that I was quite literally dying of thirst. Now that the word had popped into my head I couldn't think of anything else, as if the word itself were salty and the more I thought of it, the worse the effect."

Like Crusoe on the island, Pi soon familiarizes himself with his environment and discovers that, fortunately, the lifeboat is stocked with a supply of drinking water, basic survival rations, tools, ropes, and other essentials. His seven-month sojourn at sea long outlasts these limited provisions, however, requiring Pi to survive by his wits. Forswearing vegetarianism, he becomes an expert fisherman and degutter of sea turtles; to put some distance between himself and the tiger, he constructs a raft of oars and life jackets; most important, he learns to master his fear. While Richard Parker represents his most immediate danger, Pi comes to understand that the tiger is, equally, the key to his survival. "Part of me did not want Richard Parker to die at all, because if he died I would be left alone with despair, a foe even more formidable than a tiger. If I still had the will to live, it was thanks to Richard Parker."

During the course of his months at sea, Pi mulls philosophically on his circumstances. He comes to regard the universe in a new way that is wittily linked to another meaning of his name, pi:

"To be a castaway is to be a point perpetually at the centre of a circle. However much things may appear to change--the sea may shift from whisper to rage, the sky might go from fresh blue to blinding white to darkest black--the geometry never changes. Your gaze is always a radius. The circumference is ever great. In fact, the circles multiply. To be a castaway is to be caught in a harrowing ballet of circles. You are at the centre of one circle, while above you two opposing circles spin about."

At one point, rescue seems tantalizingly within reach. Excited to see an enormous oil tanker steaming directly toward his lifeboat, Pi attempts to attract someone's attention. Instead, heartbreakingly, the ship practically runs over his boat without even noticing it. At another point, still optimistic that he will be saved, Pi places in a bottle an earnest message that is a masterpiece of understatement: "Japanese-owned cargo ship Tsimtsum, flying Panamanian flag, sank July 2nd, 1977, in Pacific, four days out of Manila. Am in lifeboat. Pi Patel my name. Have some food, some water, but Bengal tiger a serious problem. Please advise family in Winnipeg, Canada. Any help very much appreciated. Thank you."

Unlike Robinson Crusoe, Pi reaches an island relatively late in his story, after he has already become an experienced and resourceful survivor. His "exceptional botanical discovery" is a lush stand of trees supported, astonishingly, not by land but by vast populations of floating algae. At first, Pi is certain that this floating island is nothing more than a hallucination induced by too many months at sea, but his subsequent explorations confirm its materiality. For a brief interval,

he and Richard Parker are able to leave the claustrophobic space of the boat and tread on something almost like land.

Survival

It would spoil the reader's pleasure to say much more about the unique characteristics of the island as well as other remarkable events in Pi's trial by sea, other than to suggest Pi's ingenious efforts to tame (or at least to neutralize the carnivorous instincts of) the tiger, his strategy to distill seawater into fresh water, and equally significant inner discoveries. Suffice it to say that this is a book worthy to join the classic tradition of castaway tales, survivor stories, and marvelous adventures. Martel knows how to weave a spellbinding, suspenseful story. Immersed in his vivid, witty, and profound narrative of endurance and survival, you'll experience the claustrophobic confinement of the lifeboat, feel the burning intensity of endless days of sun and sea, smell the hyena's rancid breath, sweat in fear as Pi confronts Richard Parker, and marvel at Pi's resourceful, optimistic contest with the elements and his own doubts.

The novel's denouement--we know that Pi must survive to tell the tale we are reading--reminds readers of the questions of faith and belief that may have seemed somewhat extraneous when introduced earlier in the narrative. Is his story credible? Two authorities from the Japanese Ministry of Transport assigned to interrogate Pi regarding the details of their ship's disappearance at sea are inclined to doubt most of what he tells them, particularly the reality of the tiger, which by then has disappeared. Pi rails against their limited capacity for belief, arguing,

"You want hard to believe? I'll give you hard to believe. It's a closely held secret among Indian zookeepers that in 1971 Bara the polar bear escaped from the Calcutta Zoo. She was never heard from again, not by police or hunters or poachers or anyone else. We suspect she's living freely on the banks of the Hugli River. Beware if you go to Calcutta, my good sirs: if you have sushi on the breath you may pay a high price! If you took the city of Tokyo and turned it upside down and shook it, you'd be amazed at all the animals that would fall out: badgers, wolves, boa constrictors, Komodo dragons, crocodiles, ostriches, baboons, capybaras, wild boars, leopards, manatees, ruminants in untold number."

Pi realizes that the two investigators want a story that won't "surprise" them--one that will, as he challenges them, "confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. ...You want dry, yeastless factuality." Implicitly, we readers are assumed to have greater capacities for belief, worthy of the yeasty story that Pi Patel--and, behind him, the master storyteller, Yann Martel--creates for us: a chronicle that indeed pushes the reader to see higher and further and differently. So, grip your armchair; you're in for a memorable journey. Besides being a compelling narrative, *Life of Pi* would make a terrific movie--that is, if a director can figure out how to cast the role of the essential antagonist, the tiger Richard Parker.

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