

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

Life of Pi by Yann Martel

- Due to the similarity of plotlines, Martel has been accused of plagiarising Max and the Cats by Brazilian author Moacyr Scliar. That book was written as a metaphor for Naziism and the Brazilian military dictatorship which extended from 1964-1985. Are specific plots the property of an author?
- Are zoo animals better off in nature or in a zoo?
- Symbolism of numbers
 - $227 = \pi = 2/27$ indivisible this irrational number helps make rationale sense of life
 - June 21, 1977 = pagan holiday of the summer solstice
 - Extends to the Christian holiday of love February 14, 1978
- In an interview with Katharine Weber (Publishers Weekly 9/9/03) she says that “when you have written a novel or two, people ask you, is it autobiographical, which parts really happened. You can explain that the sensibility may be autobiographical, but the events never happened. I'm fascinated by the way people look for truth in novels, and the way they look for reality in general.” “The obsession with reality affects the way even the most intelligent reader reads fiction. I was thinking about the way we read novels now—as a substitute for reality.” In the process of reading the novel did you ask yourself if this could really happen? If so, how did that affect your enjoyment of the novel?
- Why do you think Pi chose to study the three-toed sloth? What did he find so fascinating about this particular animal?
 - In harmony with it's surroundings
 - Non-aggressive
 - Landbound
- Names are significant in this novel. What is the significance of Richard Parker as the tiger's name? (Within the story the name was a result of a clerical error—the man who originally rescued the tiger was actually Richard Park). Richard Parker is also a reference to two historical survival stories. The first was related in Edgar Allan Poe's Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym in the 1830's in which Pym and a companion are marooned on the hull of a ship with a third survivor who they kill and eat. His name was “Richard Parker” In the 1870s the Yacht Mignonette sunk on its way to Australia. It had four people traveling on it — captain, mates, and the cabin boy called Richard Parker. The boy was killed and eaten by the other crew members who were later tried and found guilty for murder. As you first read this novel, were you aware of who “Richard Parker” was?
- Mr. Kumar the biology teacher — atheist, materialist, scientist (gives the scientific name for the zebra) and Mr. Kumar the baker — mystic, transcendental, emotionally driven (exclaims “God is Great” upon seeing the zebra) = same name two realities. Martel feels the meeting of these two at the zoo (p. 83) and their first glimpse of the zebra encompasses the whole novel in one scene. It depicts how reality is an interpretation, a choice of readings, a choice of stories.
- Pi : He chose Pi as his character's nickname because Pi is the number used so often in mathematics and engineering. It is an irrational number; that is, a number that goes on forever without any discernable pattern. “It stuck me that a number used to come to a rational, scientific understanding of things should be called “irrational” that helps make sense of things. Along the same lines, I named my main character



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after a swimming pool to play on a contrast. A swimming pool (“piscine” in French) is a rectangular volume of water, a controlled volume of water. I liked the irony of a boy named after a rational volume of water being adrift in an uncontrollable volume of water, the Pacific.” (ABC's Good Morning America August 22, 2003)

- What effect did Pi’s unusual name have on his character?
 - changing it to Pi showed his creativity and take-chargedness
- The author states that *The Life of Pi* “can be read on many levels.” “If the readers are not interested in religion, they won't see it. If they love animals, they'll see it as a book about animals. ...He goes on to say that "this book is about the role of imagination in our lives.” How do you interpret this statement in your reading of the book?
- Early on we are aware that Pi survived. Would the novel have been better had we not known?
- Can one embrace three separate religions? Do you think an American child would have done this? Why or why not?
 - did not include Judaism because it is incompatible with Christianity. You can’t be looking for the Messiah on Saturday night and worship him on Sunday morning.
- Is it odd that two relatively secularized parents begat a child so interested in religion? (p. 74) “He seems to be attracting religions the way a dog attracts fleas,” he pursued. “I don’t understand it. We are a modern Indian family...”
- Was the act of the father in putting the goat in with the tiger cruel or essential for Pi’s survival?
- Although it depicts a rather gruesome experience, did you find any humor in this novel?
 - Description of the biology teacher two triangles and two parallel lines (p. 25)
 - “The three-toed sloth is not well informed about the outside world.” (p. 4)
 - Hotel guests compared to zoo inhabitants (p. 13)
 - The three religious leaders meeting the Patels at the same time (p. 65)
- At the bottom of p.70 the author discussed religious hypocrisy. Is his take accurate according to your experiences?
- When the ship is sinking, Pi says that the crew members threw him overboard. He thinks it is because they see the hyena in the boat and they want Pi to kill the hyena before they get into the boat (p.110). Do you think this is a plausible explanation?
- It’s at the point that Pi notices Richard Parker aboard the lifeboat that he loses all hope (p.134, Chap. 49). “And as a result I perked up and felt much better.” He then mentions that this phenomena is common in sports when a player or team loses confidence and starts to play much better. Have you had any instances in your own life where you had this kind of experience?
- How do you interpret the incident where Pi becomes blind and then meets another man in a boat who tries to kill him. Do you think this really happened or was Pi hallucinating? Why do you think this episode was included in the novel?
- Another reader of the novel asked Martel about the significance of the island (Good Morning America's “ReadThis!” Book Club Series) Martel remarked that this is one of the most frequently asked questions. He says “it means what you choose to see in it. My narrative strategy in writing this book was to write a story that was progressively harder to believe....I figure most readers will not believe it. Their suspension of disbelief will break down and readers will start making excuses for Pi: He's starving and hallucinating. But I

hope that when readers get to Part Three of the novel and read the other story, the one without animals, that their revulsion at that story will be such that they, like the investigators, will choose the first story as the BETTER story. But I wanted that better story to have something unbelievable about it. I wanted it to get beyond the reasonable and the plausible. BECAUSE every great thing in life — be it religion, love, any ideal — has an element of the unreasonable to it.”

- In an interview with Ray Suarez, Martel says "the idea of a religious boy in a lifeboat with a wild animal struck me as a perfect metaphor for the human condition. Humans aspire to really high things, like religion, justice, democracy. At the same time, we're rooted in our human, animal condition..." Do you think he successfully conveys his message?
- On p. 85, Martel goes into a long exposition on zoomorphism. Why?
- An article in the Internet indicated that there are plans to make this book into a movie. The director is reportedly going to be M. Night Shyamalan — the one who directed the movie the *Sixth Sense*. How do you think this book will be transformed into a movie? If you were the director what actor would you choose to play the part of Pi?
- In the author's note at the beginning of the novel, Martel claims he met a man in Pondicherry who told him the tale would "make you believe in God." Has this story altered your perceptions of or belief in God?
- Essentially Pi relates two stories to his rescuers. Which is the true story? Why?
- "I will come clean. I will tell you a secret: a part of me was glad about Richard Parker. A 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. He kept me from thinking too much about my family and my tragic circumstances... without Richard Parker, I wouldn't be alive today to tell you my story." (p. 164)
 - Zebra=sailor (broken leg)
 - Orangutan=mother
 - Hyena=cook
 - Richard Parker=God
- The Hindu gods are all strong and powerful; a tiger is similarly strong.
- After killing and eating the cook, Pi says, "He was such an evil man. Worse still, he met evil in me — selfishness, anger, ruthlessness. I must live with that. Solitude began. I turned to God. I survived."
- The author says that he took a while to decide what animal would be the main animal protagonist. (quote from How I wrote the Life of Pi by author) "I finally settled upon the choice that in retrospect seems the obvious one: a tiger. The other animals in the lifeboat—the zebra, the hyena and the orangutan arose naturally, each one a function of a human trait I wanted to embody, the hyena cowardliness, the orangutan maternal instincts and the zebra exoticism. Do you think he succeeded. What do you think these animals represent? (food chain?) Do you think this part of the story is credible?
- In this novel there is a juxtaposition between love and violence...he truly loved Richard Parker. The scene with the goat depicts two sides of the same coin.
- How has Pi changed by the end of the story or has he?