

Why *Life of Pi*?

Faith, friendship, factions, and fiction are all themes explored in *Life of Pi* the 2002 novel by Yann Martel. Beyond the themes, we are prodded to seek truth in ourselves and our stories. The protagonist tells a story of survival that is extraordinary and fantastical. What we learn from Pi is that we have choices: we can learn to be reasonable rational creatures, or we can exercise our imagination.

Life of Pi is a form of fiction that cannot be easily defined by one genre. The contemporary novel is a survival story, a religious parable, and a coming-of-age tale all rolled into one. Pi Patel is a curious teenager with a love for both animals and religion. His real journey begins when he is 16 years old.

~~~~~

For your summer reading & responses, you are asked to read the author’s note (pages VII- XII) and chapters 1-36 (pages 3-93) and respond to the questions that follow. Your questions should be typed so that you can submit a copy on the first day of class, and you should save an electronic copy to submit online.

The novel is engaging, and I am looking forward to lively discussion. Please give your time and attention to this first assignment. If you have questions, please feel free to email me at [ebrady@bishopdwenger.com](mailto:ebrady@bishopdwenger.com). If any questions are perplexing or unclear, refer to the chapter indicated and review it—or reach out to me.

~~~~~

A. **Anticipation Questions:** Respond with a quick thought about each before you begin your reading. *Spend no more than five minutes with each* to jot down a few initial thoughts.

1. What does the title *Life of Pi* lead you to expect from the novel? (Some of you have already dove into the novel, so think back to when you originally were handed the novel at the end of the school year.)
2. In what ways are human beings like animals? In what ways are we different?
3. What does it mean to be “free”? Is it possible then to ever truly be “free”?

~~~~~

**B. Author’s Note (VII-XII)**

1. What are three ways to characterize the author?

For example, the author expresses his uneasiness with life as he spontaneously takes a trip to Bombay. He then lists three reasons that this trip would help alleviate this “restlessness” he was experiencing. That a stint in India will “beat it out” of anything living.

2. What is the potential significance of the opening sentence, “This book was born as I was hungry” ? Opening lines are important, what sentiment does this line stir?
  3. Mr. Adirudasamy tells the author a story. What is the key point of this conversation?
- ~~~~~

### **C. Chapters 1-7 (pages 3-28)**

1. Who is narrating chapter one? How do we know this? (refer to author’s note)
  2. The narrator is pursuing a double-major at the University of Toronto. Do his majors complement one another at all?
  3. What can we infer about the narrator from his tone in chapter one? Give a couple of examples. (couple is 2)
  4. What does the narrator say about Richard Parker in chapter one?
  5. What is the tone of the passage on page 6, “The reason death sticks so closely to life isn’t biological necessity... but the passing shadow of a cloud” ?
  6. Chapter two shifts narrative voice back to the author. What is the purpose of this short chapter?
  7. What is the significance of Pi’s name? What is the significance of YOUR name?
  8. What is more “free”—an animal in the wild or an animal in a well-thought-out zoo?
  9. Chapter six chooses to return to the author as narrator briefly. What is revealed in this chapter?
  10. What language and imagery does Pi use to describe Mr. Kumar in chapter seven? What is achieved by this?
  11. Why does Pi feel a kinship with Mr. Kumar?
- ~~~~~

### **D. Chapters 8-14 (pages 29-45)**

1. In chapter eight, Pi spends a great deal of time comparing animals to humans and vice versa. What is the effect of this comparison?
2. What is the point of Father’s “lesson” to Ravi and Pi at the zoo in chapter eight?
3. Why is the information in chapter nine included?
4. Chapters 12-14 appear to be what the *New Yorker* has deemed “an impassioned defense of zoos.” What reason might Martel have had to include these chapters in the novel? What do they serve?
5. In chapters 13-14, what conclusion is made about the hierarchy of animals?

~~~~~

E. Chapters 15-28 (pages 45-77)

1. What is paradoxical about the décor in Pi Patel's home as described in chapter 15? What does it tell us about this character?
2. In what way does Pi's anecdote about Lord Krishna as a cowherd in chapter 16 relate to the way Pi appears to view religion?
3. What do you think Pi means when he says the following: "... Hindus, in their capacity for love, are indeed hairless Christians, just as Muslims, in the way they see God in everything, are bearded Hindus, and Christians, in their devotion to God, are hat-wearing Muslims"?
4. Pi seems to have experienced some conceptual difficulties with Christianity at first. Why did this young Hindu boy struggle with Christian concepts? Why did he ultimately come to embrace Christianity?
5. Compare the Satish Kumar in chapter 18-20 with the Satish Kumar of chapter 7. How does Martel use language differently when describing them? Why does he give these two characters the same name?
6. Martel says that chapters 21-22 are at the core of the novel. Why do you suppose that he asserts that?
7. What does Martel seem to be suggesting about human beings and religion when he writes about the confrontations between Pi and his three religious teachers in chapter 23? How does Pi diffuse the situation and why does that work?
8. In chapter 26, Pi's mother suggests what diversion from his religious interests? How are her suggestions received by Pi?

~~~~~

**F. Chapters 29-36 (pages 78-93)**

1. In chapter 29, Pi thinks about why people move. In what ways does India become an "unsuitable enclosure" for Pi's father?
2. Why was there "no Emergency" in Pi's life (chapter 29)?
3. What do we find out about Pi's adult life in chapter 30 and 36?
4. What is paradoxical about Mr. Kumar (Sufi) saying, "In all this there are messages intended for people who use their reason"?
5. Compare the comments of Mr. Kumar and Mr. Kumar at the end of chapter 31. What does the diction used by each one reveal about his personality and world-view?
6. What is the significance of chapter 32 and animals coming to "surprise living arrangements"?
7. How has Martel used ambiguity purposefully in chapter 33 when discussing Richard Parker's appearance in an old photo? What is the reader lead to believe?
8. The narrator tells us at the end of part one that the story has a happy ending. Why would the author let the reader know this in advance?

## **Resources & Acknowledgements**

Krist, Gary. "Taming the Tiger." *New York Times*. 7 July 2002.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/07/books/taming-the-tiger.html>

Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi: A Novel*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001.

Martel, Yann. "How I Wrote Life of Pi." *Powell's Books*. 17 July 2015.  
<https://medium.com/@Powells/how-i-wrote-life-of-pi>.

Renard-Spicer, Lisa. *In English: Literary Analysis Study Guide*. 2009.