

# Life of Pi



by Yann Martel

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## Introduction

It is easy to see why Yann Martel's 2001 novel, *Life of Pi*, was widely praised and went on to become an international bestseller. Martel tells a story both striking and unique, the life story of Piscine Patel. When he was growing up in India as the son of a zookeeper, Piscine was teased unmercifully for his name, so he shortened it to Pi, as in the mathematical symbol is change of name is only the first of several fascinating changes Pi experiences. Some are more or less under his control, like his pursuit of truth by simultaneously studying Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. Some, like his father's decision to move the family to Canada, are not under Pi's control, especially when the ship carrying the Patel family sinks and Pi is stranded in a lifeboat with only a zebra, a hyena, an orangutan, and a 450-pound tiger for company.

The bulk of this fascinating, colorful novel focuses on Pi's struggles to survive and to make sense of this dehumanizing condition in which he finds himself. Every setting, from India to the lifeboat and on to Mexico

once Pi is rescued, is vividly rendered. Martel has an eye for vivid details and piles them on, making this novel a joy to read and supremely easy to imagine.

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## Biography

Yann Martel was born on June 25, 1963, in Salamanca, Spain. Because his father was a professor and a diplomat, his family moved frequently during his childhood. Shortly after his birth, they moved to Portugal and over the next several years lived in such places as Alaska, Costa Rica, France, Mexico, and the Canadian provinces of Ontario and British Columbia. Martel received a degree in philosophy from Trent University in Ontario in 1981, and he subsequently traveled widely on his own, living in India, Iran, and Turkey. He worked odd jobs to survive and fund his travels. During his journeys, Martel wrote a collection of short stories, *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, which was published in 1993 and won the Journey Prize. The publication of *Self*, Martel's first novel, followed in 1996, and it was shortlisted for the Chapters/Books in Canada First Novel Award. Martel performed much of the research that would lead to the writing of *Life of Pi* in India, where he spent thirteen months visiting mosques, temples, churches, and zoos. Following that, he spent one year reading various background texts for his novel before taking two years to write *Life of Pi*.

*Life of Pi* was published in 2001 in Canada, then in 2002 in the United Kingdom and United States while Martel was living in Montreal. *Life of Pi* was Martel's breakthrough novel and went on to receive numerous awards, including Canada's Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction in 2001 and the 2002 Man Booker Prize. *Life of Pi* was a U.K. bestseller from October 2002 through much of 2003 and was a U.S. bestseller for most of 2003. The paperback version experienced continued strong sales in 2004. Overall, the novel has sold over three million copies.

The early success of the novel led Martel to accept an engagement to teach a course at Berlin's Free University before embarking on a worldwide book tour. Following the tour, Martel served as the writer in residence at the public library in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in the first half of 2004. He is currently working on a new novel that examines evil as it was expressed during the Holocaust, with the novel's two major characters being a monkey and a donkey.

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## Summary

*Life of Pi* is the story of Piscine Molitor Patel, also known as Pi, who at the age of sixteen survived for 227 days on a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean. Pi's story begins with an account of his childhood in Pondicherry, India, where his father is the head of the Pondicherry Zoo. Pi is a deeply spiritual person who, after learning the teachings of Hinduism, Islam, and Catholicism, creates his own spiritual practice from all three traditions. Pi is equally enthralled with science, influenced not only by his agnostic father but also by his biology teacher, a confirmed atheist. While Pi's scientific and religious influences exclude one another and even while the different religions he embraces are also mutually exclusive, Pi himself is able to integrate these seemingly disparate systems of thought into his daily life.

In 1977, Pi's family departs Pondicherry for Toronto to avoid the brewing civil unrest in India, taking many of the zoo animals with them aboard the *Tsintsum*, a Japanese cargo ship. The ship inexplicably sinks, and Pi finds himself alone in the Pacific Ocean in a 26-foot lifeboat with a crippled zebra, an orangutan, a hyena, and

a male Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. No one else survives. Before the first week is up, the hyena has killed the zebra and the orangutan, and the tiger has killed the hyena. Pi is left alone on the raft with the potentially man-eating tiger.

After overcoming his initial shock, Pi uses the boat's survival gear to preserve his life from both the elements and the tiger. He overcomes his lifelong vegetarianism to be able to kill fish and sea turtles barehanded, though he finds the ease with which killing comes to him disturbing. Pi spends his days fishing for food for Richard Parker—in an effort to preserve his own life from the tiger—and tending the freshwater stills. Pi and the tiger face rainstorms, sharks, the scorching sun, and starvation. They also encounter whales, dolphins, and an oil tanker ship that narrowly misses the lifeboat as it passes by. Throughout this long period of suffering, Pi manages to remain sane by keeping up his daily religious practices.

At one point long into his ordeal, Pi's lifeboat comes upon another castaway in a lifeboat. The castaway tries to kill Pi, but Richard Parker kills the castaway first and eats him, filling Pi with relief for his own life but remorse for the death of the castaway.

Shortly thereafter, they come upon a vast floating island that is covered with trees and made up entirely of a strange type of algae. Pi and Richard Parker stay at the island for many weeks to recover their strength until one day Pi discovers that the algae becomes carnivorous at night. He and the tiger leave the island immediately.

Their lifeboat finally reaches the Mexican shore. Richard Parker bounds into the jungle without looking back, and Pi is discovered by some locals. He slowly recovers and makes his way to Toronto, where he eventually goes to school, marries, and has a family.

However, while he is in Mexico, two Japanese representatives from the owner of the *Tsintsum* interview Pi to learn why the ship sank. When they press Pi for the “real” story, not believing his seemingly fantastical account about the tiger and the floating island of algae, he tells them a different version: he was stranded aboard the lifeboat with his mother, a crippled sailor, and the ship's cook—a coarse and vulgar man who eventually kills and cannibalizes the sailor and Pi's mother. Pi, in turn, kills and cannibalizes the cook. Pi does not reveal which story is indeed the “true” story, and the Japanese businessmen, left to pick one story for their report, choose the story of the tiger.

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## Summary and Analysis

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## Summary and Analysis: Author's Note

### Summary

The author's note explains how *Life of Pi* came to be written, saying that after the author had published his second book (and first novel), he jumped right into another one. He went to India to work on it, but found the novel stalled. While there, people told him stories. Most of these were unimpressive, but one person in Pondicherry, India, told him the story of Pi Patel, which he later researched more fully in Canada.

### Analysis

As with any first-person narrative in a novel, these claims should be taken with a grain of salt: this is a work of fiction, and one about a narrator who consciously reshapes his story to fit the needs of his readers. Therefore, while the note may include a number of facts (Martel did go to India for example), the perspective taken in this chapter should be read as part of layered narrative about the nature of stories.

### Quotes

*"If we, citizens, do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams."*

While this final line of the authorial introduction seems to address primarily the creation of the book of *Life of Pi*, it also refers to the argument Pi has with the representatives of the Japanese Ministry of Transport's Maritime Department in the novel's final pages.

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## Summary and Analysis: Part One—Toronto and Pondicherry—Chapters 1-11

### Chapter 1:

#### Summary

This chapter shifts around a bit in time as Pi attempts to recover from his ordeal on the ocean, but it primarily focuses on his education after he arrives in North America. He finished high school, then attended the University of Toronto, where he studied both zoology and religious studies. His zoology thesis focused on the three-toed sloth.

#### Analysis

Pi's double major reflects his longstanding interest in the meaning of life. However, this interest is given particular emphasis by the memories of his ocean ordeal, which continually drift through his mind in this chapter. He is continually marked by what he suffered.

#### Quotes

*"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."*

Pi's thought here shows the importance of his religious beliefs and how fully the different realms of reality interweave.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Summary**

Just a few lines long, this chapter introduces Pi as an adult, telling his story to the author.

### **Analysis**

All chapters in italics will be from the author's point of view.

### **Quotes**

*"No small talk."*

This line seems to be a minor observation, but it will gain importance as Pi's story is revealed; all trivia has been burned out of him by his suffering.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **Summary**

Pi tells the story of his relationship with Francis Adirubasamy (Pi calls him Mamaji), a close friend of his father's who had once been a championship swimmer and still swam every day. He taught Pi to swim, the only one of Pi's family that Adirubasamy was able to teach. He entertained the family with stories of swimming competitions and swimming pools, including the great pools of Paris. To Adirubasamy, no pool compared to Paris's Piscine Molitor, "a pool the gods would have delighted to swim in." Pi was named after that pool: Piscine Molitor Patel.

### **Analysis**

Pi looks back on these details about Adirubasamy from an unspecified future time. Some of this story is clearly not things he could have experienced, as they occurred before he was born, but all details are presented with vivid immediacy, among them his name and his training to swim: it is as if he were being selected from before birth for an ocean adventure.

## **Chapter 4:**

### **Summary**

Pi discusses the nature of zoos, and of his father's zoo in Pondicherry in particular, noting that his father ran a hotel in Madras before starting a zoo.

### **Analysis**

Here Pi seems to be talking simply about his past, in a way that foreshadows his expertise with animals, and to be discussing issues related to zoos that he cares about because he encountered them through his father's zoo, such as freedom, territory, and confinement. However, he will later experience all of these issues first hand on the lifeboat with Richard Parker (the tiger).

### **Quotes**

*"I have heard nearly as much nonsense about zoos as I have about God and religion."*

Pi's thought here suggests that most people understand neither biological life nor God—and that zoos contain animals like religions contain spirituality.

*"Animals in the wild lead lives of compulsion and necessity within an unforgiving social hierarchy in an environment where the supply of fear is high and the supply of food low and where territory must constantly be defended and parasites forever endured."*

Pi's thought here refers first to the zoos he knew so well as a child but also to his own ordeal to come on the lifeboat.

*"I know zoos are no longer in people's good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both."*

Pi's thought here underscores the relationship between his two main obsessions, both of which he ends up living from the inside.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **Summary**

Pi explains how he was teased for his name "Piscine," sounding like "Pissing," and how he renamed himself "Pi" his first day at Petit Séminaire (his secondary school in Pondicherry). When it was Pi's turn to state his name in class, he wrote his name (Piscine) on the blackboard, underlining the first two letters (Pi). Then he added 4 and drew a circle with a diameter through the center. Pi repeated this in every class throughout the day. He said, "Repetition is important in the training not only of animals but also of humans."

### **Analysis**

As Pi renames himself after a mathematical abstraction (pi expresses the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter) to avoid physical and social torments, so will he retell his story and situation at sea to avoid similar torments.

### **Quotes**

*"And so, in that Greek letter that looks like a shack with a corrugated tin roof, in that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, I found refuge."*

Pi's very name is symbolic of his approach to the universe. For him, mysticism and science—the two pillars of )—form a construct that will shelter him from the universe.

## **Chapter 6:**

### **Summary**

The author notes how full of food Pi's house is, and how good a cook he is.

### **Analysis**

This brief chapter also seems to be a simple observation: Pi is a good cook who keeps a full cupboard. However, this too is a mark of character created by his starvation aboard ship.

## **Chapter 7:**

### **Summary**

Pi recalls his relationship with Mr. Satish Kumar, his biology teacher at Petit Séminaire. Kumar was his favorite teacher and the first atheist Pi ever met.

### **Analysis**

This chapter ties back to chapter 1, in which Pi discusses his respect for religion and science but his lack of respect for agnostics and living in doubt.

### **Quotes**

*"To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation."*

Pi's thought here comes at the end of an extended exchange with Mr. Kumar (the atheist) on the nature of reason, but it also refers, in high irony, to his own situation to come. Reason keeps him alive on the lifeboat, but it cannot give him reason (cause) to live—and he is both immobile on the raft and carried along by the current.

## **Chapter 8:**

### **Summary**

After a discussion of how badly humans treat the animals they see in zoos, Pi recounts a story about his father trying to teach his boys caution and responsibility by taking them to watch one of the zoo's tigers kill a goat.

### **Analysis**

Pi's father intends to teach his boys how dangerous tigers are as a way of teaching them to be cautious around all animals in the zoo. However, the experience is so shocking and vivid that it is seared into Pi's memory, and it will guide and hinder him later when he has to deal with Richard Parker.

### **Quotes**

*"Just wait till we're alone. You're the next goat!"*

After Pi's father showed Pi and Ravi the tiger feeding, Ravi used to tease Pi with this line. It is deeply ironic in several ways, for Pi's father meant to keep him alive and to use the tiger as a metaphor for all dangers. Instead, Pi's father dies, and Pi fights for his life, trying not to become the next goat for Richard Parker.

## **Chapters 9-11:**

### **Summary**

Each of these brief chapters discuss human-animal relationships in zoos, especially the need to manage the distance between humans and animals, and what drives animals to try to escape.

### **Analysis**

On first reading, these chapters seem to be fascinating in themselves but not directly connected to any plot-related issue. However, they thematically foreshadow the issues Pi will face in the lifeboat and after. For example, the hyena will face the issue of space and confinement, and Pi will, in Part Three of the novel, try to convince the Japanese inspectors that animals can be found in peculiar places.

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## **Summary and Analysis: Part One—Toronto and Pondicherry—Chapters 12-21**

### **Chapter 12:**

#### **Summary**

The author discusses how much telling his story upsets Pi, and how spicy the food is that Pi serves.

#### **Analysis**

These unrelated details go together thematically; Pi has not "digested" the "spicy" story he lived through in the past, just as the author cannot in the present.

### **Chapters 13-14:**

#### **Summary**

These two brief chapters both discuss pack relations. Chapter 13 notes that an animal will attack primarily to protect its territory and that a trainer must gain a psychological edge over an animal by establishing territorial ownership before the animal does. Chapter 14 follows this by observing that pack hierarchy will aid this; a trainer can train the "socially inferior" animal more easily because a close relationship with the trainer means protection from the other animals.

### **Analysis**

While again seeming to be simply interesting information Pi would have learned from his family, these chapters foreshadow the precise knowledge and techniques he will have to use with Richard Parker, with one exception: he will be in that cage/territory himself, with no escape.

### **Chapter 15:**

#### **Summary**

The author describes the many religious icons that fill Pi's home.

#### **Analysis**

This chapter shows not only how intensely Pi worships but also how broadly: he is not limited by specific traditions. The breadth of faith refers to his childhood; the intensity, his ordeal.

#### **Quotes**

*"His house is a temple."*

The author makes this flat observation about Pi's home when he sees it, noting the many icons and representations of different religions filling it. At the time, the very multitude of these symbols is a mystery: how can one man worship these different religions? Later, it becomes a larger mystery: how can a man who has been through such an ordeal still believe?

### **Chapters 16-17:**

#### **Summary**

These chapters discuss the origins of two of Pi's religious faiths, Hinduism and Christianity. He suggests that we are all "born like Catholics," in that we are born in limbo, but our context provides a religion. Pi grew up a Hindu and describes the details that shaped him as one. Pi then tells of his first encounter with Christianity at age fourteen.

#### **Analysis**

Pi's description of Hinduism is so detailed and so loving that it clearly shapes him, and the fact that it is his primary world view is demonstrated in Pi's first reaction to Christianity. However, Pi's suffering in the lifeboat is much closer to the agonies of Christ on the cross (down to the shared thirst) than to Hindu stories.

### **Chapters 18-20:**

#### **Summary**

These three chapters review Pi's first encounter with Islam, which happened when he was fifteen. Pi meets another Satish Kumar, this one a Sufi mystic, who impresses him with the love and clarity of his faith. The end of chapter 20 describes the two direct experiences of God that Pi had.

#### **Analysis**

Pi's accidental encounter with this Mr. Kumar parallels his two experiences of direct communion with God: both come unlooked for, and move him beyond words.

#### **Quotes**

*"His name was Satish Kumar. These are common names in Tamil Nadu, so the coincidence is not so remarkable. Still, it pleased me that this pious baker, as plain as a shadow and of solid health, and the Communist biology teacher and science devotee, the walking mountain on stilts, sadly afflicted with polio in his childhood, carried the same name." (Chapter 20)*

While this may be simple coincidence, as Pi himself suggests, it is also symbolic: though they look different, both the mystic and the rationalist are essentially the same, and both guide Pi.

## **Chapter 21:**

### **Summary**

In this chapter the author reflects on the stories Pi has told him. He is clearly moved, even troubled, by what Pi has said.

### **Analysis**

The author's reaction sums up the effect a good story can have on us: they make us discontent with our lives and leave us wishing for more, even as they satisfy us.

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## **Summary and Analysis: Part One—Toronto and Pondicherry—Chapters 22-32**

### **Chapters 22-24:**

#### **Summary**

Together these three chapters sum up Pi's confusion regarding the role of faith and meaning in the world. Chapter 22 briefly suggests that the atheist is closer to faith than the agnostic. Chapter 23 describes the time all of Pi's religious teachers met him at the same time, with his family, and had a nasty argument over which faith he followed and which was better. Chapter 24 describes how Ravi teased Pi for his attempt to follow multiple faiths.

#### **Analysis**

Chapter 23 is a deeply ironic commentary on the conflict between the ideals espoused by religion and their practices. They are all supposedly paths of love and paths to truth, but when their representatives meet, they squabble like spoiled children—or like the territorial animals Pi has previously described.

### **Chapters 25-28:**

#### **Summary**

These four chapters all detail various assaults upon religion. Chapter 25 speaks in general terms about the need to defend God from the inside. Chapters 26 and 27 describe Pi's parents' attempts to distract Pi from religion and to put religion within human constraints. Pi's family laughs at him, then come, eventually, to a kind of truce with his faith.

#### **Analysis**

These chapters show Pi as already isolated, already a strange animal among those that he loves but that do not understand him, as he will be on the lifeboat.

#### **Quotes**

*"The water trickled down my face and down my neck; though just a beaker's worth, it had the refreshing effect of a monsoon rain."* (Chapter 28)

This description of Pi's baptism indicates that religion and water are linked for him and that both are refreshing and life-giving, as they will be on the lifeboat.

## **Chapter 29:**

### **Summary**

Mr. Patel decides to move the family out of India (to Canada) due to political upheaval in India.

### **Analysis**

In this chapter, Pi learns his life will be changing forever. He makes explanations for it, and for his father's actions, without realization that his explanations echo the reasons that animals escape their cages.

### **Chapter 30**

#### **Summary**

The author meets Pi's wife.

### **Analysis**

The author realizes both that Pi is no longer alone—that he has formed a new family—and that he has missed many signs of Pi's character. He is not as keen an observer as he thought, or as life has made Pi become.

### **Chapter 31:**

#### **Summary**

The two Mr. Kumars both come to the zoo, where they view the animals, meet one another, and each feed the same zebra.

### **Analysis**

The zebra is marked by harsh contrast: black and white. The colors should not go together, but they are only superficial differences. Likewise, though one is pure faith and one pure reason, both Mr. Kumars meet the animals with the same sense of wonder, showing the underlying similarities between these world views.

### **Chapter 32**

#### **Summary**

Pi explains zoomorphism: animals adopting other, different animals (or humans) as their own.

### **Analysis**

This entire chapter is a meditation on Pi's relationship with the animals in the lifeboat, especially, of course, Richard Parker. He should be prey for a tiger, or kill it for protection, but instead he comes to love the tiger.

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## **Summary and Analysis: Part One—Toronto and Pondicherry—Chapters 33-36**

### **Chapter 33:**

#### **Summary**

Pi shows the author photos from his past. The author notes that Pi is smiling in the photos taken since his rescue but that his eyes tell a different story. There are only four photos from India, which Mamaji sent to Pi. None are of his family, and Pi can hardly remember what his mother looks like.

### **Analysis**

The fact that a picture of Richard Parker is part of Pi's family memorabilia symbolizes the role animals play in Pi's identity.

### **Chapters 34-35:**

#### **Summary**

These chapters describe the efforts the Patel family went through as they tried to leave India. Chapter 34 is a comic review of the main bureaucratic and economic obstacles; in chapter 35, the Patels, especially Mrs. Patel, say their emotional farewells to their country.

## Analysis

The contrast between Americans and Indians in chapter 34 shows how fully Pi will be out of place in his new land (and how much he already knows it). In chapter 35, the description of Pi's mother and India blend: he is leaving his motherland behind.

## Quotes

*"Things didn't turn out the way they were supposed to, but what can you do? You must take life the way it comes at you and make the best of it."* (Chapter 35)

Pi thinks this looking back at the family's departure from India. It is a lightly philosophical statement that covers a world of pain.

## Chapter 36:

### Summary

The author meets the rest of Pi's family: his son, daughter, cat, and dog.

## Analysis

The author compares Pi's house to India in its ability to hide souls, a suggestion he has made a new motherland of his own here. The fact that Pi's family includes animals further underscores that he leads a zoomorphic life: animals are people to him, and vice versa.

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## Summary and Analysis: Part Two—The Pacific Ocean—Chapters 37-46

## Chapter 37:

### Summary

This chapter begins with a dramatic line: "The ship sank." After that event, Pi is in the lifeboat, screaming for Richard Parker to swim to the boat. Pi screams at heaven, throws first a life buoy, then an oar, to try to save Richard Parker, who finally makes it on board. In the chapter's last paragraph there is another telling line, "Truly I was to be the next goat."

## Analysis

This chapter marks the beginning of Pi's tremendous ordeal, but also demonstrates how his mind works. In the lifeboat in the heat of the moment, Pi calls to heaven for explanations, always seeking divine meaning even in the midst of loss. He also tries to save Richard Parker, calling for him as if he were a human; the chapter does not reveal that Richard Parker is an animal until the final paragraph, showing how Pi's world view treats animals as human.

## Quotes

*"Every single thing I value in life has been destroyed. And I am allowed no explanation? I am to suffer hell without any account from heaven? In that case, what is the purpose of reason, Richard Parker?"*

Pi shouts this and other questions at the world in the time just after the *Tsimtsum* sinks. It is the question at the heart of his account, the question of his suffering: why me?

## Chapters 38-39:

### Summary

These chapters describe the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*, moving back a bit in time to describe how the ship had

functioned while it was successfully underway. The ship is very noisy all the time, but some unfamiliar noise wakes Pi the night that it sinks. Three of the sailors throw Pi to safety in the lifeboat, then throw a zebra after him.

### **Analysis**

What is essential about these chapters is that Pi is saved by forces beyond himself that he does not understand. He notes that he does not know why he woke up or why he investigated the strange noise, since that was more something Ravi would do. Pi's new environment is also shaped by these forces as the sailors create the strange and contained ecosystem he will live in from now on.

### **Chapters 40-42:**

#### **Summary**

In chapters 40-42, three things happen. First, Pi faces his fear for the first time that Richard Parker is going to eat him. Second, the ecosystem aboard the lifeboat is completed: first by Pi discovering a male hyena there, and second by Orange Juice, the female orangutan, joining them on the lifeboat. Third, Pi begins to see that as unnatural as it is, the ecosystem has developed its own rules; Richard Parker does not kill the zebra because the hyena would be there, and this competing predator would have access to his prey.

### **Analysis**

Pi's discovery of the hyena is another of those seemingly strange or negative things that he sees as shaping his fate for the better. Pi decides that the sailors had thrown him onto the lifeboat not to save him but as fodder for the hyena, so it would not attack them. Therefore, their self-centered behavior actually saved him. The hyena's presence in turn keeps Richard Parker from killing the zebra or Pi, which is a prime example of natural/biological laws working towards what Pi sees as divine purpose: his salvation.

### **Quotes**

*"Oh blessed Great Mother, Pondicherry fertility goddess, provider of milk and love, wondrous arm spread of comfort, terror of ticks, picker-up of crying ones, are you to witness this tragedy too?"* (Chapter 42)

Pi cries this when he sees Orange Juice the orangutan floating towards him on a "raft" of bananas. This line shows Pi's ability to connect the sublime with the ridiculous and his tendency to find meaning in everything.

### **Chapter 43:**

#### **Summary**

The last trace of the ship vanishes. The hyena seemingly goes crazy, racing in circles around and around the lifeboat. Pi recalls his father's teaching about how hyenas will eat and drink anything.

### **Analysis**

Pi had seen zoos from the outside when growing up and had spoken of them with confidence, indicating that animals were happy there so long as sufficient distance was provided. Here Pi experiences life in a zoo himself—and what happens when that distance is compromised. He is in a very small hell.

### **Quotes**

*"When an animal decides to do something, it can do it for a very long time."*

Pi's observation here relates most directly to the hyena, which has just started running around the lifeboat. However, it applies to him as well: his decision to stay alive and to keep Richard Parker alive.

### **Chapters 44-45:**

#### **Summary**

Pi passes his first night in the lifeboat. When it is completely dark, he hears the terrible sounds from the other

end of the boat of a fight between the hyena and the zebra. The next morning, after imagining being saved and his brother teasing him for playing Noah, Pi sees that the hyena attacked the zebra and bit its broken leg completely off. After seeing this, Pi sees that Orange Juice is seasick and sees his first sea turtle.

### **Analysis**

These two chapters highlight the distance between Pi and the religious stories he tries to use to guide him. He is not Noah, and rather than making it through forty days with peace among the animals, they attack one another right away. It also shows the range of human-animal behavior. At this time Pi cannot imagine taking the leg of another being off, especially when it was still alive; that is pure animal. However, he sees Orange Juice's seasickness as human and tries to send a turtle for help.

### **Chapter 46:**

#### **Summary**

During the second evening in the lifeboat, when Pi has seen many sharks around the boat, the hyena goes crazy and attacks the zebra despite Richard Parker's presence. It bites and gnaws it so savagely that it digs into the animal. While Pi watches in silent horror, Orange Juice gives a roar of disapproval.

### **Analysis**

The hyena's break in behavior—attacking despite the tiger's presence, attacking more savagely than he needed to—foreshadows Pi's own descent into savagery. Orange Juice's actions, by contrast, illustrate the way that the universe provides kindness and protection when Pi least expects it, and the way animals take on the role of family, in this case a mother.

### **Quotes**

*"To lose a brother is to lose someone with whom you can share the experience of growing old, who is supposed to bring you a sister-in-law and nieces and nephews, creatures to people the tree of your life and give it new branches. To lose your father is to lose the one whose guidance and help you seek, who supports you like a tree trunk supports its branches. To lose your mother, well, that is like losing the sun above you."*

At this point Pi admits to himself that his family is dead and poetically reflects on the pain of his loss. To think this while stuck in a lifeboat with a hyena chewing on a live zebra makes his condition that much uglier.

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## **Summary and Analysis: Part Two—The Pacific Ocean—Chapters 47-57**

### **Chapter 47:**

#### **Summary**

The next day, the zebra dies. That afternoon the hyena attacks Orange Juice. She fights back, but the hyena kills her and bites her head completely off. Pi looks away, and sees Richard Parker's head under the bench.

### **Analysis**

The ecosystem aboard the lifeboat is being whittled away, becoming simplified, and reducing Pi's chances to hide. Soon he will have to be part of it.

Pi sees Orange Juice as a "simian Christ on the Cross" when she is killed. This indicates both his wish to think that suffering has meaning and his recognition that in some ways she did die to save him.

## **Chapter 48:**

### **Summary**

In this chapter, Pi thinks back on how Richard Parker was captured near Bangladesh by Richard Parker, a hunter who had been sent to capture a panther but accidentally stumbled upon a tiger and her cub. He also remembers how Richard Parker got his name; when the baby cub arrived at Pondicherry Zoo, there was a clerical error on the shipping papers, which stated the cub's name as Richard Parker and the hunter's name as Thirsty (the cub's name).

### **Analysis**

Pi thinks back on this event now because it is a pleasant event, and he needs to escape from the slaughter he has witnessed aboard the lifeboat. However, it also shows three other factors that are thematically important. First, Richard Parker is also in this situation (a zoo/the lifeboat) by accident. Second, both the tiger and the man were originally named something else. Third, the tiger's original name was Thirsty, which he will be in a literal sense from now on.

## **Chapters 49-52:**

### **Summary**

The next morning, after some time spent recovering from fear and weakness, Pi takes stock of the lifeboat. He is driven in part by the fact that he missed seeing Richard Parker for two days, having convinced himself that his first sighting of the tiger was mistaken, and in part by his incredible and growing thirst. Pi finds the dimensions of the lifeboat, then, once he dares to go under the tarpaulin where Richard Parker is, he finds food and water and other emergency supplies. Pi makes a list of his supplies, which ends with "I God."

### **Analysis**

This sequence develops several crucial elements of the novel. First, Pi recognizes how necessary it will be for him to pay extremely close attention to detail if he wants to survive; this shapes much of his conscious behavior. This sequence also shows Pi expanding his perspective to include the tiger and hyena as assets, rather than liabilities. Finally, in the list of supplies and the description of thirst as being like that suffered by Christ, Pi again shows his ability to retain a religious perspective in difficult times.

### **Quotes**

*"I would be in the direst of dire straits, facing a bleak future, when some small thing, some detail, would transform itself and appear in my mind in a new light."* (Chapter 50)

This sums up how Pi survived: by keeping his mind focused on the tiniest details until he spied a chance for survival.

## **Chapter 53:**

### **Summary**

After a period of anxiety and depression, Pi makes his first plan to improve his situation in the lifeboat: he builds a raft from life jackets and oars, and ties it to the boat. As he is in the middle of doing so, the tiger kills the hyena. Pi gets onto the raft while Richard Parker is eating the hyena and lets himself get distant from the boat.

### **Analysis**

Richard Parker killing the hyena narrows the ecosystem even more: now it is just Pi and the tiger. However, Pi's actions show a rising ability to cope with the situation and his ability to combine materials from the present with lessons from the past, in this case his knowledge that animals need distance from humans to prevent attacks.

## Quotes

*"Oncoming death is terrible enough, but worse still is oncoming death with time to spare, time in which all the happiness that was yours and all the happiness that might have been yours becomes clear to you. You see with utter clarity all that you are losing."* (Chapter 53)

Pi's thoughts here cut to the essence of his ordeal. His suffering is physical, emotional, and mental because of it.

## Chapters 54-55:

### Summary

As it rains all night, Pi works through six plans for dealing with Richard Parker. These range from pushing him off the lifeboat to killing him out right. Pi settles on fighting a "war of attrition" and outlasting Richard Parker. The next morning, however, Pi realizes that this will not work—that Richard Parker has the lifeboat, will catch him on the raft, etc.

### Analysis

These plans for dealing with Richard Parker are not so much realistic plans in most cases as mini-adventure stories with Pi cast as the hero. As such, they fail as plans for dealing with Richard Parker, but they do sustain Pi, getting him through darkness and despair.

## Chapters 56-57

### Summary

At the end of chapter 55, Pi had given in completely to his fear. Chapter 56 is a meditation on the power of fear. Chapter 57 describes Pi's road out of fear, which he finds through Richard Parker's actions. Richard Parker makes noises that Pi recognizes as friendly, and Pi decides on a new plan: he will dominate Richard Parker like a lion tamer does. That leads to the seventh and final plan: keep Richard Parker alive.

### Analysis

This is another transitional passage for Pi. He surrenders completely to fear but manages to come out the other side after passing through a literal version of that time of despair, which religious writers have called the dark night of the soul. His gratitude towards Richard Parker both recognizes the tiger's role in their zoomorphic existence and treats his actions as, once again, a kind of divine favor.

## Quotes

*"I must say a word about fear. It is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary, how well I know."* (Chapter 56)

Pi's thoughts on fear, which continue for some time after these lines that open chapter 56, mark a transition in his thinking. Previously he was simply suffering, in pain from all he had lost. At this point, no matter how afraid he is, he is fighting back for his life.

*"It was Richard Parker who calmed me down. 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."* (Chapter 57)

This is why Richard Parker is so important to Pi, in the lifeboat and after; Richard Parker lifted Pi to new heights and is the reason Pi survived.

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## Summary and Analysis: Part Two—The Pacific Ocean—Chapters 58-67

### Chapter 58:

#### Summary

Pi reads the survival manual included in the lifeboat's supplies and then makes further plans for survival, such as training Richard Parker, fishing, and improving his raft. He then falls into despair over his situation.

#### Analysis

Despite Pi's despair, this chapter demonstrates his embrace of his responsibility for keeping himself alive.

### Chapters 59-60:

#### Summary

Pi's hunger and thirst bring him out of his despair. He pulls his raft next to the lifeboat and retrieves rations, drinks rain water, and splashes his urine on the tarpaulin and locker lid to mark his territory. He then sets up solar stills to distill fresh water from sea water, and improves his raft. Pi is then sufficiently recovered to really look into the sea around him, where he sees a "city" of ocean life: dorados, sharks, plankton, etc. He goes to sleep happy, then wakes in the night. At the sight of the stars, Pi moves through a range of reflections on his suffering, prays, and returns to sleep.

#### Analysis

On the practical side, Pi is continuing to master his environment. On the emotional and spiritual side, his recovery is marked not only by his new ability to see the beauty of the natural world around him but also by his attempt to consciously make sense of his suffering in a religious context.

#### Quotes

*"With just one glance I discovered that the sea is a city."* (Chapter 59)

Pi's thought here is a marker of how far he has come up from his despair. He has ascended to a level of integration that he can notice what is around him for the first time. As he does so, he notices the parallels between natural activity and human activity.

*"For the first time I noticed—as I would notice repeatedly during my ordeal, between one throe of agony and the next—that my suffering was taking place in a grand setting."* (Chapter 60)

Pi has moved another stage up the ladder of selfhood. He is not just noticing things; he is noticing the beauty and wonder in which he is living. What's more, though his situation is more dramatic than most people's, his comment could apply to everyone's life.

### Chapter 61:

#### Summary

Pi decides to fish. He is not successful at fishing on his own, but flying fish begin to jump into the boat. Pi feeds one to Richard Parker, who then eats many on his own. Pi stores several fish, then uses the flying fish's head as bait and kills one himself.

#### Analysis

When Pi's own skills fail him—and he thinks Richard Parker will eat him as a result—nature and/or God suddenly provides, giving him flying fish to feed the tiger. This is another example of things working out for Pi, but it comes at a price: he must become a killer and give up his vegetarianism.

#### Quotes

*"I was now a killer. I was now as guilty as Cain."*

Pi is filled with these thoughts of guilt after killing a flying fish. It is the first thing he has ever killed. In killing he adapts to his circumstances (he must kill to live), but he remembers the moral importance of his actions.

### **Chapter 62:**

#### **Summary**

Pi gets fresh water from his solar stills and feeds Richard Parker again. When Pi blows his whistle, Richard Parker goes back under the tarpaulin.

#### **Analysis**

Pi continues his practice of taming Richard Parker, but he notices that the lifeboat is becoming more and more like a zoo; he may be taming the tiger, but he is still trapped himself.

#### **Quotes**

*"It occurred to me that with every passing day the lifeboat was resembling a zoo more and more."*

In a way Pi's observation here marks the way that his life is a circle (it started in a zoo and is in a zoo now) and a straight line at the same time. It is a straight line because he is moving through new stages all the time. He used to be outside the cage. Now he is in it.

### **Chapter 63:**

#### **Summary**

Pi reviews memories of famous castaways and how long they survived. He establishes a regular routine for his days.

#### **Analysis**

Pi's days blend the extremely "biological"—a practical focus on keeping himself alive—and the spiritual with regular prayers. Such a routine again indicates Pi's dual nature, and remembering it is a kind of storytelling to help keep himself sane.

### **Chapter 64:**

#### **Summary**

Pi's clothes disintegrate over time, and he develops boils from the sea water.

#### **Analysis**

Since it is the sea water that causes these boils, this chapter is indicating how truly hostile Pi's environment is: outside the cage of his lifeboat, he would die.

### **Chapter 65:**

#### **Summary**

Pi attempts to learn how to navigate by studying the survival manual, but fails. He later learns he crossed the ocean due to a current that follows the equator.

#### **Analysis**

This brief chapter seems practical, and it is, but it also indicates a deeply religious orientation: Pi cannot choose the course of his journey (life). He can only accept it and adapt to it.

### **Chapters 66-67:**

#### **Summary**

Chapter 66 describes how Pi fished and how he killed turtles. Chapter 67 follows that with his observations about the plants and animals growing on the bottom of his raft.

## Analysis

These chapters describe Pi's adaptation to life as a seagoing creature. From a boy who had never killed, he learns to butcher turtles. In saying that getting the turtles into the boat took "strength worthy of Hanuman," Pi is once again finding religious parallels for his actions, as Hanuman is a Hindu god. However, Hanuman takes the form of a monkey, which indicates Pi knows how animalistic he has become.

## Quotes

*"I descended to a level of savagery I never imagined possible."* (Chapter 66)

Pi thinks this about himself after narrating how he kills turtles, as a marker for himself of just how much he has changed.

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## Summary and Analysis: Part Two—The Pacific Ocean—Chapters 68-77

### Chapters 68-69:

#### Summary

Chapter 68 describes how Pi's sleeping patterns changed (he slept only at brief stretches) and how they differed from Richard Parker's (he slept for a long time). Chapter 69 describes the times Pi thought he saw a light in the distance and set off flares to attract the ship's attention.

#### Analysis

If the previous chapters had shown how animalistic Pi had become, these chapters show how great a distance there still is. Pi cannot sleep much because of his anxiety, and it may be false hope that makes him shoot off the flares. Richard Parker just accepts.

### Chapters 70-72:

#### Summary

Chapter 70 describes in detail how hard it is to butcher a turtle. Chapter 71 synthesizes Pi's lessons on how to conquer a savage predator and claim their shared territory. Chapter 72 describes how Pi made shields from turtle shells to protect himself from the tiger's attacks. Pi challenges Richard Parker four times and fails; each time the tiger knocks Pi and his shield off into the sea. Pi finally conquers Richard Parker after he learns to read the tiger's signals and to back down before he raises his paw. Then Pi would make his point by blowing his whistle.

#### Analysis

These chapters focus on the next transformation in Pi: his decision to consciously triumph over Richard Parker. Pi makes himself into a tiger tamer. In doing so, Pi conquers the fear which had reduced him to immobility earlier in his story.

## Quotes

*"It was rights I needed, the sort of rights that come with might."* (Chapter 70)

Pi thinks this as he sets out to bend Richard Parker to his will, but it can be taken as a larger reflection on political philosophy. Early in the novel, Pi's religious sentiments made him wonder why everyone could not simply get along. Now he knows: sometimes force is necessary.

## **Chapter 73:**

### **Summary**

Pi wishes he had a book, and he describes how he kept a diary.

### **Analysis**

In itself, this brief chapter indicates just what it said: Pi wishes he had a book, especially a holy scripture of some sort, along to raise his spirits and to allow him to escape. However, in its placement, this chapter also serves as just that sort of escape: Pi needs to think about quiet escape after facing down the tiger.

### **Quotes**

*"My greatest wish—other than salvation—was to have a book. A long book with a never-ending story. One I could read again and again, with new eyes and a fresh understanding each time. Alas, there was no scripture in the lifeboat."*

Pi's thought here marks several points. First, it is another stage in his development in his new niche; he has time and energy for leisure. Second, it marks his ongoing character that he thinks of this sort of book as scripture (a holy book). Third, it is a kind of structural loop, for Pi ends up telling/writing this sort of story himself.

## **Chapters 74-75:**

### **Summary**

Pi tries to elevate his spirits through religious rituals in chapter 74 and through singing "Happy Birthday" to his mother in chapter 75.

### **Analysis**

Here Pi tries to master his moods and his larger environment in a fashion similar to the one that worked on Richard Parker. He is not as successful. He can drive the despair away with words, but it always comes back.

## **Chapters 76-77:**

### **Summary**

Chapter 76 describes Pi's practice of cleaning up after Richard Parker in order to keep him healthy. Pi uses this practice to enforce their positions in the hierarchy, with him on top. He then describes how he reduced his intake of formal rations and shifted more of his diet to food at hand, like fish and turtles. At one point, extreme with hunger, Pi tries eating Richard Parker's feces.

### **Analysis**

These chapters emphasize how severe Pi's situation is, and how divided: he is at once ruler over a tiger, due to will alone, and so pathetic that he eats the big cat's feces.

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## **Summary and Analysis: Part Two—The Pacific Ocean—Chapters 78-87**

### **Chapters 78-79:**

#### **Summary**

In chapter 78, Pi describes the changing skies and seas he faces, but a castaway's gaze, he says, does not change; it is always a radius with the castaway at the center of the circle. His life as a castaway is a life of opposites, such as wishing to be wet when it is hot, but wishing to be dry when it is raining. Chapter 79 describes the many kinds of sharks that Pi sees, a number of which he catches for food. The first shark that Pi

tries to catch is a large mako shark. He grabs it by the tail with his hand and pulls, but it jumps into the air and ends up in the lifeboat. The tiger and the shark fight. Richard Parker wins, but his paw is injured.

### **Chapters 80-81:**

#### **Summary**

When a large dorado chases a flying fish over the lifeboat, Pi captures it. Pi senses Richard Parker and sees that he is in a crouch and ready to attack him. Because of Pi's hunger, he is more concerned about eating than staying alive, so Pi stares the tiger down until he turns away. Pi demonstrates his new confidence at the end of the chapter by sitting with his back to the tiger. All of chapter 81 reflects on the meaning of this battle and on Pi's survival.

#### **Analysis**

Chapter 80 is a marker. The battle of wills between the two of them only lasts two or three seconds, but it cements their relationship and Pi's dominance. In chapter 81, Pi, characteristically, identifies biological sources for this event (the tiger's seasickness) but attributes its meaning to divine sources, calling it miraculous.

### **Chapters 82-83:**

#### **Summary**

In chapter 82, Pi tells how he saves and rations their water. He gives "the lion's share" of the food he catches to Richard Parker; Pi realizes he has started to eat like the tiger, not so much from hunger but in a rush to get some before the tiger takes it. In chapter 83, Pi describes a terrifying storm that comes up and lasts into the night. Afterward the storm, his raft is mostly gone, a fatal blow to Pi's spirits. The lifeboat is in disarray, much of the food is gone, and Pi's leg is badly cut. Pi finds the last of his whistles while bailing water from the lifeboat. He considers the whistle to be "all that remained between me and death."

#### **Analysis**

Chapter 82 describes Pi's mastery over "contained" water: the water in the stills, which he can master and use to support his life because of previously existing technology. However, chapter 83 shows the power and majesty of "wild" water: the sea. It could kill them at any time, and only fate keeps them alive.

### **Chapter 84:**

#### **Summary**

Pi describes the different marine life he sees: whales, dolphins, and birds. Pi catches and eats some birds, sharing some with Richard Parker.

#### **Analysis**

Pi's ability to wonder over the intelligence and beauty of the whales and dolphins shows that he has managed to protect his sensitive soul, despite all he has been through.

### **Chapters 85-86:**

#### **Summary**

There is a powerful lightning and thunder storm in chapter 85. It terrifies Richard Parker but fills Pi with a sense of glory and wonder. A ship goes by in chapter 86. Pi tries to signal it, but he fails. Richard Parker's lack of response to Pi's inability to signal the ship fills him with love for the tiger.

#### **Analysis**

Taken together, these two chapters show the difference between man and beast, and the wonders of zoomorphism. Pi can see the beauty of the storm, which the tiger cannot—but Richard Parker does not realize that they were not saved and so balances Pi out.

## **Chapter 87:**

### **Summary**

Pi uses a piece of cloth soaked with sea water to block the sun and let him enter a visionary daze.

### **Analysis**

The placement of this chapter, which essentially describes a much-needed escape, undercuts Pi's burst of love at the end of chapter 86. This is how badly he needs to escape: he suffocates himself to hallucinate.

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## **Summary and Analysis: Part Two—The Pacific Ocean—Chapters 88-94**

### **Chapter 88:**

#### **Summary**

The lifeboat runs into some floating trash, and Pi finds a rotted lamb in a floating refrigerator. He pulls a corked bottle from the trash, puts a message in it, and launches it in the water.

#### **Analysis**

Given Pi's powerful religious leanings, the lamb should be taken as symbolic. After becoming a killer as he has, Pi is no longer innocent (as a lamb), but rotten.

### **Chapter 89:**

#### **Summary**

Pi describes how everything suffered on the lifeboat from exposure to the weather, and how Pi and Richard Parker were slowing dying. His pens ran dry, ending his diary. His last entry is "I die."

#### **Analysis**

Pi's ability to use words—to plan, tell stories, conduct rituals, and praise God—have kept his spirits alive. That ability is gone now, symbolizing spiritual death.

### **Chapter 90:**

#### **Summary**

Richard Parker goes blind, then Pi goes blind. He decides he has failed as a zookeeper and says his goodbyes to Richard Parker and his family out loud. A voice answers him; they begin to talk of food. Pi thinks it is Richard Parker, but it turns out to be another human on another lifeboat who has also gone blind from poor hygiene and lack of nutrients. The stranger tries to kill Pi, but Richard Parker kills the stranger instead.

#### **Analysis**

This chapter can be read as a metaphor for Pi's entire cursed voyage: blind beings moving through the sea without any clue of who they are speaking to or where they are going, and telling gentle stories only to lure the innocent close by so that they can be killed. On a simpler level, it is a sign of how far gone Pi is that he thinks Richard Parker is talking and, once again, how extreme their situation is that the stranger is killed.

#### **Quotes**

*"Something in me died then that has never come back to life."*

Pi thinks this after his joyous encounter with the stranger turns first violent, as the man tries to eat him, then deadly, as Richard Parker kills the stranger. This is Pi's final personal passage through hell, as the trip to the carnivorous island is the final contextual passage through hell.

## **Chapter 91:**

### **Summary**

Pi cries, and his vision comes back. He admits that he eats some of the stranger's flesh.

### **Analysis**

This chapter blends the literal and the symbolic. If crusted salt and lack of nutrition caused Pi to go blind, then crying and meat (human flesh) should correct it. On the symbolic level, though, only by weeping for his loss can Pi see this man clearly.

### **Quotes**

*"I will confess that I caught one of his arms with the gaff and used his flesh as bait. I will further confess that driven by the extremity of my need and the madness to which it pushed me, I ate some of his flesh."*

Earlier in the novel when Pi kills a fish for the first time, he is consumed by guilt. Now he can eat human flesh and make excuses. Something in Pi really was killed by what he went through.

## **Chapter 92:**

### **Summary**

Pi sees an island of trees. The tide carries the lifeboat to shore, where Pi confirms it is not a hallucination. He tastes the vegetation there and finds it sweet. Both Pi and Richard Parker begin to explore the island but return to the lifeboat for safety (and due to familiarity). Pi continues to train Richard Parker while they are on the island, which seems to be inhabited by only one kind of animal, meerkats. There are fresh water ponds on the island, but the fish in them are dead.

Pi eventually leaves the lifeboat to sleep on the island. He sleeps in a tree, only to be joined by many meerkats. Pi climbs a tree that has fruit, but when he peels it, he finds that he can keep peeling. He does so and finds a human tooth at the center of each fruit. That night, Pi tests his suspicions about the island by dropping a meerkat onto the ground; the ground burns its feet. Pi then steps on the ground, which burns him. Disgusted by this carnivorous island, Pi repacks the lifeboat, gets Richard Parker, and goes back to sea.

### **Analysis**

Like the encounter with the blind killer, this chapter is deeply symbolic. According to Pi's survival guides, an island should be his salvation—an oasis, even an Eden. Instead, it is a perversion, a hell on earth in which the fruit of the tree of knowledge shows evidence of eating humans, a great sin.

### **Quotes**

*"The island was carnivorous."*

This single line sums up Pi's horrific line of reasoning that follows the discovery of human teeth hidden in the tree's fruit. It also sums up the horrific nature of Pi's larger discoveries: that within each of us, no matter how gentle, there is a killer.

## **Chapter 93:**

### **Summary**

Pi passes over most of the rest of his story as depressing, saying that in such depths it was natural that his mind should turn to God.

### **Analysis**

This chapter can be read literally, but even so, it is a form of escape. Pi does not share the thoughts that haunted him after he left the island, only the claim that he turned to God.

## **Chapter 94:**

### **Summary**

Pi reaches land in Mexico. Richard Parker jumps off the lifeboat and disappears into the jungle. Locals take Pi in, clean him, and feed him. The next day the police take him to the hospital, where Pi was overwhelmed by the generosity of his rescuers.

### **Analysis**

Though he is at last rescued and might weep for joy, Pi says he weeps because Richard Parker left him "so unceremoniously." Pi has become so attached to Richard Parker, his cage-mate, that he expects him to act human, in turn, and say goodbye.

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## **Summary and Analysis: Part Three—Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán, Mexico—Chapters 95-100**

## **Chapter 95:**

### **Summary**

Told from the point of view of the author's persona, this chapter summarizes how Mr. Tomohiro Okamoto and Mr. Atsuro Chiba from the Japanese Ministry of Transport's Maritime Department make their way from California down to Tomatlán, Mexico, to interview Pi about the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*. They get lost because a poorly folded map causes them to read "Tomatán" as "Tomatlán." Chapters 96-99 are excerpts from the transcript of their conversation with Pi.

### **Analysis**

The fact that these men drove over a thousand miles to get answers about why the *Tsimtsum* sank shows the intensity of the human need for meaning. The fact that it is an incorrectly folded map that confuses them shows how fate and random chance control our destinies.

## **Chapter 96:**

### **Summary**

Mr. Tomohiro Okamoto and Mr. Atsuro Chiba start to interview Pi, shifting in and out of Japanese to keep some elements of their conversation private.

### **Analysis**

The shifting languages and mundane details, like Okamoto being tired and Pi wanting a cookie, show the many difficulties in the human search for the truth.

## **Chapter 97:**

### **Summary**

This chapter is just two words long: "The story."

### **Analysis**

This chapter makes the entire book a story within a story as Pi supposedly retells "the story" readers have read to this point. However, since Pi admits to leaving things out and the author to missing many details, the reader does not know exactly what is told, leaving private experience a mystery, as it always is.

## **Chapter 98:**

### **Summary**

Summary and Analysis: Part Three—Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán, Mexico—Chapters 95-100

Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba praise the story publicly but doubt it in Japanese.

### **Analysis**

As the men hide their true feelings behind a foreign language, keeping what is most important to them private, so Pi keeps his cookies private. His priorities were changed by this voyage; he is more purely biological than they are.

### **Chapter 99:**

#### **Summary**

Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba challenge Pi's story, saying bananas do not float, a carnivorous island is impossible, no trace of Richard Parker was ever found, and two blind strangers in lifeboats meeting in the Pacific is unlikely. Pi first argues with them, pointing out the limits to human knowledge, then offers them another story that fits their world view better.

In this story, there are four *Tsimtsum* survivors—Pi, his mother, the cook, and a sailor. The sailor broke a leg jumping into the life boat (just as the zebra did in the original story). In this story, the cook convinces the other humans to cut the sailor's leg off (just as the hyena bit off the zebra's leg in the first story) to save the man's life, but with the real intention of using the rotting leg as bait so that they can survive. Eventually Pi's mother and the cook fight, and Pi's mother is killed (just as Orange Juice the orangutan is killed in the first story). This story ends with Pi killing the cook and eating his flesh (just as Richard Poyer killed the hyena and the blind stranger in the original story).

The two men questioning Pi note the similarities between the stories, then move on to questioning Pi about the ship and its crew. Pi makes a few observations, noting that the crew seemed sullen and drunken, but is careful not to claim too much knowledge about how the ship was being run or how it sank. When the men are done with their questions, Pi asks some of his own, asking them which story they like better. Both men admit that they like "the story with animals" better, and Pi says, "Thank you. And so it goes with God."

### **Analysis**

This chapter shows how important stories are in making sense of the world and how people judge the truth of them. In everyday life, people judge the truth of stories against their (very limited) knowledge of the world. In a divine world, people judge them by intrinsic quality.

### **Quotes**

*"I know what you want. You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless factuality."*

Here Pi shows that he understands his inquisitors from the Japanese Ministry of Transport's Maritime Department better than they understand themselves. He has lived that sort of story on the lifeboat; they have not.

*"So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can't prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?"*

Pi's question to his inquisitors from the Japanese Ministry of Transport's Maritime Department sums up the central importance of stories in his world. Humans cannot know the ultimate truth of the universe. What we can do is choose the better story.

### **Chapter 100:**

#### **Summary**

Summary and Analysis: Part Three—Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán, Mexico—Chapters 95-100

Told from the point of view of the author's persona, this chapter includes a section of Mr. Okamoto's report, which indicates his belief in Pi's core story about Richard Parker.

### Analysis

Though this chapter technically leaves the question of what happened open, Mr. Okamoto's conversion indicates the path the reader should take: believing in Pi's core story of animals, wonder, and God.

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## Questions and Answers

### Study Questions

1. Where did Pi get his given name? (Chapter 3)
2. How did Pi come to be called Pi? (Chapter 5)
3. What does the Pi mean? (Chapter 5)
4. What does Pi's home in Toronto tell the author about his character? (Chapters 6 and 15)
5. Who is Mr. Satish Kumar? (Chapters 7 and 20)
6. How does Pi's father prepare him for the ordeal on the lifeboat (unknowingly), and how does he handicap him in this ordeal? (Chapter 8)
7. How is the Patel's family departure from India like the attempts of animals to escape from the zoo, and how is it different? (Chapter 10)

### Answers

1. Pi was given the name Piscine Molitor Patel after a family friend (Francis Adirubasamy)'s favorite swimming pool.
2. Pi renamed himself, starting with his first day at Petit Séminaire when he wrote his name on the blackboard in each class and underlined the "Pi" in Piscine. He forced the nickname on those around him through repetition, which he thought was important in training not only animals but also humans.
3. Pi (the mathematical symbol, represents the ratio between the distance around a circle (the circumference) and the distance across its center (the diameter): 4.
4. Pi's house is jammed full of food; he is terrified of ever going hungry again. But it is also jammed full of religious icons, as if he were terrified of going "hungry" of meaning.
5. There are two Satish Kumars in *Life of Pi*. One is a biology teacher, a Communist, a rationalist, and an atheist. The other is a baker and a Sufi mystic. Both teach Pi in ways that shape his soul.
6. The answers to both questions are the same: the intimate knowledge he provides of animals. This knowledge lets Pi survive and guides him in taming Richard Parker. It also handicaps him because Mr. Patel taught him never to get close to an adult tiger.

7. In chapter 10, Pi notes that animals try to escape not to something, but from something. The Patel family's "escape" from India is similar to this in that Mrs. Gandhi's changes force Mr. Patel to leave India. Their departure is different in that they were not fleeing blindly, but rather consciously seeking something better.

### Study Question

1. What are Pi's initial objections to Christianity? (Chapters 17)

### Answer

1. Pi objects to the fact that Christianity has only one core story, which gets told and retold; this seems sparse compared to Hinduism's profusion of stories. Pi is troubled by the content of the story and reacts with disbelief that Christ had to die for the sins of humanity. He also objects to the character of Christ, who seems an unconvincing and unimpressive god compared to Hindu gods, a god who seems too human.

### Study Question

1. What does the author learn about Pi in Chapter 30, and what does this fact teach him about himself? (Chapter 30)

### Answer

1. He learns that Pi is married (and meets Pi's wife, Meena). Once he meets Meena, the author realizes that there had been "small signs of conjugal existence" and that they "were there all along"; Pi's home was marked by his marriage, but the author did not pay sufficient attention to notice.

### Study Question

1. What were the major difficulties in preparing to move the Patel family zoo from India to Canada? (Chapter 34)

### Answer

1. There were physical difficulties and social ones. The physical difficulties—actually shipping the animals—were less challenging than the social ones. The social challenges took the form of the paperwork required and of the respective value the market placed on the animals.

### Study Question

1. Why did the *Tsimtsum* sink? (Chapter 38)

### Answer

1. No one knows. Pi heard an unfamiliar noise, perhaps an explosion, but never got an explanation before the ship sank.

### Study Questions

1. Where did Richard Parker get his name? (Chapter 48)
2. How does Pi tame Richard Parker? (Chapters 57-92)

### Answers

1. The hunter who captured him and his mother was named Richard Parker, and a clerical error swapped the hunter's name with the name for the baby tiger (which was "Thirsty").
2. Through studying all the signals the tiger sends, by facing him with a shield on his arm made from turtle shells, by training him to believe food comes from Pi, and by methodically claiming the tiger's territory.

## Study Questions

1. What happens when Pi kills a dorado? (Chapter 61)
2. What happens on the bottom of the raft, and how does it matter? (Chapter 67)

## Answers

1. The dorado changes color, flashing several different colors. Pi is struck by the beauty of this but also feels like he "was beating a rainbow to death." Given his strong religious training, it is reasonable to assume that Pi knows the meaning of the rainbow in Christianity: God's promise that he will not flood the world again/will not kill off humanity as he had before. Killing this promise would be canceling the promise not to drown/kill humanity.
2. Algae begins to grow on the underside of the raft, then other sea life appear—tiny shrimp and fish, worms, crabs—until it is so crowded and busy that Pi sees it as "an upside-down town." It matters because it provides Pi some other food, because watching it gives him entertainment, because it seems cool, calm and peaceful (unlike the top of the raft), and because it is an example of how one arena of life mirrors another: the plants and animals make a town, like people.

## Study Question

1. How does Pi try to lift his spirits while lost at sea? (Chapters 74-75)

## Answer

1. Through religious rituals and through singing "Happy Birthday" to his mother. He sometimes succeeds, but sometimes fails and falls into despair.

## Study Questions

1. When does Pi become sure of his mastery over Richard Parker? (Chapters 80-81)
2. How do the lightning storm and the ship that does not see Pi's flare show the differences between Pi and Richard Parker? (Chapters 85-86)
3. What is Pi's "dream rag"? (Chapter 87)

## Answers

1. When Richard Parker is ready to attack him over a dorado, Pi stares him down until the tiger turns away.
2. Richard Parker is terrified by the storm. Pi is scared, but he can see the glory in the storm as well. When the ship comes, Pi goes through hope and despair; Richard Parker does not react to the ship, but only to Pi's emotions.
3. It is a piece of cloth Pi soaks with salt water and puts on his face. It cuts down on the amount of oxygen in the air he breathes and gives him hallucinations. These allow him to escape from his ordeal, however briefly.

## Study Questions

1. What happens when the lifeboat runs into a mass of floating trash? (Chapter 88)
2. When does Pi die symbolically? (Chapters 89-90)
3. Who does Pi talk to in Chapter 90?
4. Why is the island Pi finds so disturbing? (Chapter 92)

5. Pi saves Richard Parker by giving him food and water. How does Richard Parker save Pi? (Throughout Part Two of the novel)

### Answers

1. Pi finds a refrigerator with a rotted animal carcass in it; he thinks it is a lamb. He finds an empty wine bottle and puts a message in it, acting out the cliché of a message in a bottle.

2. Pi dies symbolically in Chapters 89-90. He has been keeping his soul alive in part by keeping a journal, but his pen dies. Soon after his words die, he goes blind. While he is blind, he meets another human lost on the sea. Though it is Richard Parker who kills the man, Pi eats part of him and thinks, "Something in me died then that has never come back to life."

3. Pi thinks he is talking to Richard Parker. He even gets answers that would fit Parker's character, about eating humans. However, late in the chapter it becomes clear that he is actually talking to another human being.

4. It is intrinsically disturbing because it is carnivorous. It is an island of plants that kill animals, including humans. However, it is also disturbing because it disrupts the stories Pi has been counting on to guide him, specifically the stories in the survival guide, which tell him to seek out the green of plants for salvation.

5. By giving Pi a focus and helping him overcome fear, by giving Pi a society to be a part of, and by giving Pi something to care about.

### Study Questions

1. What is special about Chapter 97?

2. Why don't Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba believe Pi's story about what happened to the *Tsimtsum*? (Chapter 98-99)

3. Pi tells two different stories about what happened in the lifeboat. How are they similar? (Chapter 99)

4. Pi tells two different stories about what happened in the lifeboat. How are they different? (Chapter 99)

5. What eventually convinces Mr. Okamoto of Pi's story? (Chapters 99-100)

6. What is the relationship between the three sections of the novel?

### Answers

1. It is two words long: "The story." In it, the entire story that has happened up to that point is retold.

2. They claim it is because his story does not hold together—that it is neither factual nor logical: bananas do not float, a carnivorous island is impossible, no trace of Richard Parker was ever found, and two blind strangers in lifeboats meeting in the Pacific Ocean is unlikely. Pi says it is because it asks them to expand their horizons and look beyond their own limited experience.

3. In both stories, there are a limited number of characters, one preys upon another, and Pi eats human flesh.

4. In the first story, which fills Part Two of the novel, Pi is the only human for almost the entire story. The other characters are animals (the zebra, orangutan, hyena, and tiger). In the second story, which he tells Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba in Part Three, all characters are human.

5. Judging by what he says and by what he includes in his report, it is part the intrinsic quality of the stories told (the one with animals just seems better) and part Pi's own character.

6. Part One is Pi's life in India. Part Two is Pi's time spent lost at sea. Part Three is Pi's recovery and his attempt to convince others of his story.

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## Characters

### The author's persona

Early and late in the novel, the author projects himself into the novel, speaking of "I" and how the novel came to be. The author shares little about himself, only that he is a writer from Canada with two books published prior to *Life of Pi*. These details are true of Yann Martel, but in a book that accents the constructed nature of stories so heavily, readers cannot assume they are completely one and the same.

### Pi

Pi, born Piscine Molitor Patel, is the central character in the novel and at times the only human character. Born and raised in India, Pi received his given name as homage to a family friend, Francis Adirubasamy, a great swimmer who spoke highly of the Piscine Molitor pool in Paris. Pi renamed himself to escape ongoing jokes about his name.

Pi is raised on the premises of his father's zoo in Pondicherry, India, until his father decided to move the entire family to Canada. Pi's life is defined by two factors, one internal and one external. The internal factor is his lifelong interest in and dedication to religion. Pi studies all religions for the sheer joy of it. The external factor is the shipwreck that kills his family and strands Pi in a lifeboat with only a few animals for company. Pi is an intelligent and likeable sixteen-year-old when he loses his family and passes into this ordeal.

### Mr. Santosh Patel

Pi's father, Mr. Santosh Patel, is called simply "Father" throughout most of the novel. Readers catch a glimpse of Santosh's character in his attempt to teach his sons caution by letting them see a tiger kill a goat, and in his decision to change countries in search of a better life. A modern and pragmatic man who had run a hotel before opening a zoo, Mr. Patel is killed when the *Tsimtsum* sinks.

### Mrs. Gita Patel

Pi's mother, Mrs. Gita Patel, is called simply "Mother" throughout most of the novel. A quiet woman who likes to read, the biggest glimpses of her character come when she and her husband must face Pi's religious practice, and in chapter 35 when she says good-bye to India. Mrs. Patel is killed when the *Tsimtsum* sinks.

### Ravi Patel

Ravi is Pi's older brother. A devoted athlete, Ravi is killed when the *Tsimtsum* sinks.

### Meena Patel

Meena Patel, Pi's wife, is a pharmacist. The author hears a slight Canadian accent when he meets her in Toronto and deduces that she is a second-generation Indian immigrant.

### Usha Patel

Pi's daughter, Usha, is four years old when the author meets her in Toronto.

**Nikhil Patel**

Pi's son, Nikhil (Nick), is a teenager when the author meets him in Toronto.

**Tata**

Tata is Pi's little brown dog, who the author meets in Toronto.

**Moccasin**

Moccasin is Pi's orange cat, who the author meets in Toronto.

**Francis Adirubasamy**

Francis Adirubasamy, also called Mamaji (uncle), is a close friend, first of Mr. Patel, then of the entire family. A devoted swimmer, he passes this love on to Pi, who is named for Adirubasamy's favorite pool.

**Mr. Satish Kumar (the atheist)**

A teacher, this Mr. Kumar teaches Pi biology. He is a bald man with a large stomach and thin legs who visits Pi at the zoo once. A Communist, this Mr. Kumar considers religion darkness and superstition.

**Mr. Satish Kumar (the Sufi)**

A baker, this Mr. Kumar teaches Pi about Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam.

**Father Martin**

Father Martin is the priest who introduces Pi to Catholicism when Pi is young.

**Richard Parker**

Richard Parker is a 450-pound Bengal tiger who is trapped on the lifeboat when the *Tsimtsum* sinks. Richard Parker received his name through a clerical error; this was the name of the hunter who captured the tiger and his mother.

**a zebra**

One of Pi's companions on the lifeboat after the *Tsimtsum* sinks (until the hyena kills it).

**a hyena**

One of Pi's companions on the lifeboat after the *Tsimtsum* sinks (until the tiger kills it).

**Orange Juice**

A female orangutan, Orange Juice is one of Pi's companions on the lifeboat after the *Tsimtsum* sinks (until the hyena kills her).

**Another lost human**

Perhaps the ship's cook, this character, whom Pi refers to as "my brother," appears only in chapter 90. He is about to kill Pi when Richard Parker kills him.

**meerkats**

The meerkats, collectively, are the only animal inhabitants of the island of carnivorous trees.

**Mr. Tomohiro Okamoto**

Mr. Okamoto is the representative of the Japanese Ministry of Transport's Maritime Department assigned to investigate the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*. He challenges Pi's story at first as unbelievable, but his final report supports Pi's claims.

## Mr. Atsuro Chiba

Mr. Chiba is Mr. Okamoto's assistant in the Japanese Ministry of Transport's Maritime Department investigation of the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*.

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## Themes

### The quest for the meaning of life

All throughout *Life of Pi*, characters are seeking the meaning of life. The primary seeker for this profound truth is, of course, Pi himself. As the first chapter notes, as an adult Pi studies both science (zoology specifically) and religion at colleges. These interests are both the natural extension of how Pi passed his time while he was a boy: he was the son of a zookeeper but also a devotee of several religions, seeking direct knowledge of God from an early age. Both practices seek to understand the mysteries of human existence.

However, these early interests had to have been heightened by Pi's traumatic time on the lifeboat. When his father decided to move his family from India to Canada, this choice would have stripped many of the customary answers away from Pi. He was to be exposed to new things and would have to make sense of even more of the world in unfamiliar and unexpected ways. When the *Tsimtsum* sank, not only was Pi shoved face to face with the unknown, but he also lost his family, the core of his human context. Instead, he had to try to survive. For his months at sea, simple survival was the essence of Pi's existence.

Once Pi had passed through his ordeal, he had to adapt again, this time back to being part of a human society rather than part of the strange man-beast society that he had known on the lifeboat. When Pi returned to human society, he had to live with some of the choices he made. He had been a vegetarian; he became a carnivore. He had eaten animal feces. He had eaten human flesh. What does Pi's life mean when he transgresses so many of his early values? That is the question Pi tries to answer on a regular basis.

### The centrality of stories in making sense of life

In *Life of Pi*, the question "Who am I?" is answered by a story: the story of a name. Pi's identity changes many times, beginning with the story of his name. (As Pi himself says at the start of Chapter 5, "My name isn't the end of the story about my name.") When he shortens his name from "Piscine" with the many jokes made about "Pissing" to "Pi," he was freed to be himself—and mysterious. When Pi encountered the Christian god, he was troubled not just by the content of the story the Christians told but also by the fact that there was only one core story, told again and again.

When Pi was lost at sea, he told and retold the story of what was happening to him, trying to make sense of it. These stories took quite different forms.

Finally, the story of what happened after the boat sank determines the meaning of Pi's entire life. The two Japanese officials inquiring in the fate of the *Tsimtsum* quizzed him about his actual story. They did not believe it, challenging it at many points, especially about the idea of a cannibalistic island. Because they challenged Pi's story, readers do too. We are left with not one but two possible stories of what happened.

### One's identity is shaped by the niche in which one finds oneself

Early in *Life of Pi*, Pi discusses this truth explicitly, but objectively, as he talks about how the different zoo animals adapt to confinement and how they learn to live with other species. For example, in chapter 4 Pi talks about how animals are territorial and how a cage in a zoo might serve as territory as well as a patch of ground in the wild, and in chapter 14 he discusses the fact that how an animal like a lion acts towards his trainer is

determined both by the lion's place in the hierarchy of the pride and by how the trainer claims a space as his own.

Later, on the lifeboat, Pi learns this truth intensely and personally as he forms his own new society with a hyena, a tiger, and an orangutan. His identity is completely shaped by where he is. A strict vegetarian in the human world, Pi becomes a complete carnivore in the lifeboat. He also forms emotional attachments based upon his new animal society; Richard Parker the tiger is more important to him than most humans ever had been before the ship sank.

### **As above, so below: what is true for one arena of life is true in others**

Early in *Life of Pi*, Pi shares a number of observations about how animals adapt to new circumstances, and in chapter 32 notes that "there are many examples of animals coming to surprising living situations," such as the mouse in his family's zoo that was adopted for a time by a family of vipers. At that time, Pi thinks he is only talking about animals, but as the novel goes on, he finds that this is true for humans too: Pi finds a new family of animals in the lifeboat, then makes a new family of humans in Canada.

Other parallels are between realms of nature and even between metaphysical levels of reality. It is not just Pi the vegetarian that learns to eat meat (and humans!); it is in chapter 92 a tree! What is true for the animal world applies to the human world, and vice versa, as Pi observes "cities" on the underside of his lifeboat. Finally, what is true in the human realm is also true in the realm of divinity, which humans access through myths.

### **The essence of life is in the details**

This is the simplest of the novel's themes; it appears in the line-by-line writing throughout the novel. Whether he is leaving the zoo to walk to school or noticing how many colors a fish passes through as he kills it, Pi is forever alive to the details of the world. He recites them with a pure joy, and in the lifeboat and on the island, his mastery of details is what keeps him alive.

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## **Style**

### **Parable**

*Life of Pi* can be read as a parable. A parable is a story told in such way that it parallels a particular lesson that the storyteller is trying to teach the audience. The most famous parables in Western culture are those told by Jesus in the New Testament Gospels of the Bible. In *Life of Pi*, Pi himself is the storyteller, and he relates two very different stories: a fantastic, yet hopeful and encouraging story about being stranded on a lifeboat with animals, and a more realistic, yet bleak story about being stranded on a lifeboat with human beings. The choice Pi offers between the two stories is a parable for the choice between having faith in God that cannot be proven, or atheism. The parallel is explicitly drawn when the Japanese businessmen, to whom Pi offers the choice, choose the story with animals as "the better story." When they make their choice, Pi concludes, "And so it goes with God."

### **Narrative Structure and Point of View**

In *Life of Pi*, Martel utilizes three distinct narrative voices. The first is the voice of the author, which narrates both the opening Author's Note as well as parts of Part One in the first person. The first-person point of view, in which the narrator speaks as "I" and is a participant in the story, relates the narrative exclusively from the subjective, biased, and therefore limited point of view of that character. The Author's Note, which describes how the author came upon Pi's fantastic story, has the effect of grounding the novel in reality: the author sees

Pi's story as biography, not fiction. The author also points out that although Pi's story will be told "in [Pi's] voice and through his eyes," it is written by the hand of the author, and "any inaccuracies or mistakes" are his. This note introduces one of many levels of doubt experienced in the reading of this tale.

Parts One and Two are narrated in the first person by Pi himself. The first-person point of view is fitting for the account of a solitary character surviving in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, but it also is limited to Pi's particular and subjective perspective. The increasing incredulity of Pi's story—from being trapped on a lifeboat with a tiger, to meeting a blind man on the open sea, to finally landing on an island made entirely of carnivorous algae—gives the reader cause to doubt the veracity of Pi's subjective narrative, begging the question of what is fact and what is Pi's imagination. But since his story is told strictly from his point of view, the reader is deliberately deprived of an objective evaluation of Pi's story.

Part Three provides the most objective narrative structure of the novel. It is a transcript of a conversation between Pi and the two Japanese businessmen who try to determine why his cargo ship sank. There is no narrator to filter the proceedings of the conversation, and thus it is presented in an entirely objective manner. It is during this conversation that Pi's second version of his survival surfaces: one which does not involve any animals, but rather involves him committing murder and cannibalism. However, no matter what the narrative voice—be it Pi's subjective account or the factual transcript—the novel does not give any clues as to which of Pi's stories, if any, is the accurate version of his life. Just as the Japanese businessmen are left to decide which story they will believe, the reader, too, is left to choose.

### **Foreshadowing as a Structural and Thematic Device**

To foreshadow means to use symbolic or plot devices within the narrative to prefigure, or give clues, as to what will arise later in the story. Martel uses Part One—the account of Pi's childhood and his formative influences—to foreshadow the trials and tribulations he will face in Part Two. The most obvious example of foreshadowing is the lesson that Pi's father gives his sons on the danger of wild animals by feeding a goat to a tiger in front of their eyes. This lesson in the potentially brutal behavior of the wild tiger foreshadows Pi's future challenge in surviving Richard Parker.

The themes introduced in Part One also foreshadow the challenges that Pi faces Part Two. For example, his discussion of zoomorphism among different species of animals foreshadows his own strange cohabitation with Richard Parker. Part One details the origins of Pi's fervent devotion to a number of different religions. The equality of divine inspiration that Pi finds in Hinduism, Catholicism, and Islam seem to infer the universality of humanity's quest for divinity and uniquely spiritual drive. At the same time, Pi discusses at great length the instinctual and particular behaviors of different animals. Pi's detailed discussions of both the higher calling of spirituality and religion and the overpowering instinctual drive of wild animals in Part One foreshadow Pi's own inner struggle in Part Two, in which he finds himself trying to reconcile his animal instinct to survive and his aspirations to seek the divine.

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## **Historical Context**

### **The War on Terrorism**

In late 2002, America, only one year removed from the September 11 attacks, had just defeated the Taliban in Afghanistan but was deeply divided over the impending war in Iraq. At a time of continued anxiety over possible attacks from al Qaeda and other Muslim terrorists, Americans were increasingly curious about Islam. Many struggled to understand why many Muslims hated America and why the al Qaeda airplane hijackers were driven to kill otherwise innocent Americans. Many Americans saw the need to deal with, and perhaps

make peace with, Muslims after the carnage that al Qaeda had wrought on the United States. However, books such as Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996, Simon & Schuster) asserted Christian and Islamic cultures were absolutely opposed and could not peacefully coexist. As an earnest practitioner of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism who saw no conflict between these three beliefs, Pi became a symbol of how the major religions of the world could coexist and that they in fact shared many common features. Pi's reconciliation of three different faiths stood in sharp contrast to the violence between Christian and Muslim peoples that was evident both in America and in the Middle East.

In the decades before the issue of a possible clash between Muslim and Christian cultures arose, growing numbers of Americans had also become less attached to specific churches while still affirming a belief in God and seeking to pursue a religious path. In an interview with *The Sunday Telegraph* (London) shortly after receiving the Man Booker Prize, Martel said his novel "will make you believe in God or ask yourself why you don't." Pi, a believer who does not choose between the various visions of God offered by the world's different religions, offered American readers a way to explore faith and spirituality without having to follow any specific creed or tradition.

### **Indian History and Culture**

India has a long history of hostility between Muslims and Hindus. Soon after the country gained independence from Great Britain in 1947, it embarked on a civil war, which resulted in the partitioning of Pakistan from India as a homeland for the nation's Muslims. However, clashes over Kashmir, a land in northern India claimed by both India and Pakistan, continued to haunt the region throughout the rest of the 1900s. The conflict led both countries to test nuclear weapons in 1998, and skirmishes on the border nearly brought the countries to war in 1999. Murderous riots and persecution by Muslims and Hindus have also plagued India for decades, including, in February and March 2002, riots in the Hindu nationalist state of Gujarat. In those riots, Hindus were angered over a fire that killed roughly sixty Hindu pilgrims on a train, and they responded by accusing Muslims of setting the fire. Hundreds of Muslims were killed by angry Hindu rioters. Pi is a native of Pondicherry, India, but he displays none of the hatred that had inspired thousands of Indian Muslims and Hindus to kill each other in the fifty-five years between India's independence and the U.S. publication of Martel's book.

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## **Critical Overview**

The U.S. publication of *Life of Pi* in mid-2002 was preceded by its publication in Canada in 2001 and the United Kingdom in early 2002. In Great Britain, *The Daily Telegraph* (London) criticized it as a novel that "never really comes alive in the emotional sense" due to its concern with pursuing "a series of narrative questions and solutions." Nonetheless, it praised Martel's book as a "hilarious novel, full of clever tricks, amusing asides and grand originality." *The London Observer* echoed this praise in saying that "Martel has large amounts of intellectual fun with outrageous fable" as he creates a book that "dramatises and articulates the possibilities of storytelling." *The Guardian* continued this theme of praise for the book's fantastic nature by calling it "an edge-of-seat adventure" and an "enormously lovable novel is suffused with wonder." However, the reviewer slightly tempered this sense of fantasy by noting that Martel's narrator "has a believer's scepticism about reason."

In the United States, reviews continued to effusively praise *Life of Pi* with an emphasis on its magical qualities, humor, and meticulous creation of a believable yet fantastic story. Salon.com said that although the novel's premise "might sound ridiculous," that "by the time Martel throws Pi out to sea, his quirkily magical and often hilarious vision has already taken hold." Pi, the reviewer wrote, has a "nonreligious kind of

understanding and faith.” *Publishers Weekly* said Martel takes the reader on “a fabulous romp through an imagination by turns ecstatic, cunning, despairing and resilient.” *The New York Times* observed that as a zookeeper’s son, Pi is “attuned to the intricacies of interspecies cohabitation,” and he uses this knowledge to gain power over the tiger who accompanies him, and thereby keep himself alive. The reviewer further claimed that since Pi is “a practitioner of three major religions who also happens to have a strong background in science,” his “story inevitably takes on the quality of a parable.” Martel’s book, the review continued, “could renew your faith in the ability of novelists to invest even the most outrageous scenario with plausible life.”

Not all critics were so impressed. *The Boston Globe* said that its “deadpan seriousness ... can grow wearisome” while Pi discusses his three religions and that when finishing the book, it is “hard not to bristle with the skepticism that comes from having weathered a hard sell for the Lord.” The reviewer went on to say that the novel is most successful when it is both “serious and silly at the same time.” In assessing its balancing of fantasy and precision, many critics professed their delight in *Life of Pi* by discussing the fairly straightforward narrative of Pi’s journey that he tells to two researchers when he lands in Mexico. Salon.com said that “this played-down version makes Pi’s true tale, thanks to Martel’s beautifully fantastical and spirited rendering, all the more tempting to believe.” *The New York Times* said “it’s a testimony to Martel’s achievement that few readers will be tempted to think” that the more straightforward narrative is more honest than the fantastic one.

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## Criticism

1. [Establishing Faith Despite Opposing Realities: The Truth of Fiction in Life of Pi](#)
2. [A Christian Parable](#)

### Establishing Faith Despite Opposing Realities: The Truth of Fiction in Life of Pi

David Partikian is a freelance writer and a college English instructor. In this essay, Partikian discusses the idea that “unbelievable” tales—tales that defy logic—are an integral part of most religions. In order to have faith and believe in God, or the unknowable, we need to believe in stories that otherwise seem fictional, such as the biblical accounts of the Fall of Man and Jonah and the Whale, or the tales of the Ramayana. *Life of Pi* is similarly a tale that asks the reader to suspend disbelief and have faith; it is only through this suspension that a person is able to read “a story to make you believe in God.”

At a superficial level, Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* is a simple tale of endurance after a shipwreck. However, there is much more to the novel than that. Ultimately, Martel has created an allegory for something deeper, which sets it apart from more straightforward, journalistic-style survival tales. The added twist of having a 450-pound Bengali tiger in the lifeboat adds an unreal Calvin and Hobbes element; on a literal level, a teenage boy relates to a tiger during a months-long adventure at sea, and from this he somehow learns the necessities of survival.

But to summarize *Life of Pi* as a boy and a tiger’s tale of survival is to overlook one of its main themes—the role of religious tales in helping mankind find faith. Pi ultimately relies on his own amalgamation of religions

for the faith he needs to cope with the harsh reality of survival in a lifeboat and, afterwards, with his everyday existence as an orphan in a foreign land. Without that faith, he is doomed. At its heart, *Life of Pi* is a deeply religious book that sets out to show that faith depends on stories for its existence. Without stories, mankind would not have the faith necessary for survival.

Since there are animals involved, one may be apt to view *Life of Pi* as a fable, which is often an indicator of a religious or moral theme. But the tale is a bit too long and pays too much attention to realistic detail to be a fable. Furthermore, while Pi is able to communicate with Richard Parker, the tiger does not speak a human language; speaking animals are often a criterion for fables.

If *Life of Pi* is not a fable in the classic sense of the word, and is too long to be a parable—the most likely genre classifications that allow for a tale to be included in a religious canon—is it fair to relegate the work as common “fiction”? The problem is that this would imply that the book is mere fancy, a concoction of a fertile imagination and nothing more. Can a work openly address religion and God and also be considered a work of “fiction”? Is it possible to classify *Life of Pi* then as “religious fiction”? Labeling a religious work “fiction” opens a can of worms, setting the obdurate theist against the equally stubborn atheist, both slugging it out without realizing that the two are not necessarily incompatible. From the believer's point of view, labeling a religious work as “fiction” diminishes the “truth” of the theology it address. How can a work be regarded as “fiction” and still be seriously considered as a religious text?

Regardless of this apparent contradiction, *Life of Pi* is an enthusiastically religious tale as well as a work of fiction. What’s more, the work stands as a statement on the importance of fiction in religious belief; in order to have faith in a religion, mankind must suspend disbelief and have faith in many stories that to all logical reason should be viewed as fictional.

Many readers intent on enjoying *Life of Pi* as an adventure tale might casually overlook Pi’s curiosity about, and reverence for, the three major world religions, as if Pi’s all-embracing acceptance of different faiths is not a central theme of the work. How can an author make constant observations on life and death without revealing the religious beliefs of the person who narrates? Pi’s Hindu background, his forays into Christianity and Islam, and the faith these elicit are ultimately as responsible for his survival as is his knowledge of zoology and animal behavior. In fact, if one ultimately chooses to believe Pi's alternate story of survival—the one without Richard Parker—that he “concocts” to mollify the officials investigating the sinking, then one must allow that it was Pi’s faith in religious tales that helped him to keep his sanity and cope with what actually occurred on the lifeboat. Yann Martel deliberately left the ending obscure, with no one tale predominating as the absolute “truth.” Ultimately, each reader must decide what the truth is for him or her, much in the manner that Pi does.

Pi has a talent that many adults lack: he is able to comprehend the world without prejudice. This child-like, credulous quality is what allows him to delve into different religions, accepting them for what they are, while his teachers quibble over the superiority of one particular faith over another. There is a pungent sense of irony when Pi deadpans, in all innocence: “Mr. and Mr. Kumar were the prophets of my Indian youth.” Although the two are indistinguishable in name, they (as well as Father Martin and Pi’s belief in Lord Krishna) represent opposing worldviews.

A non-judgmental protagonist, Pi is able to comprehend that there is one truth behind the creeds of both Mr. Kumar and Mr. Kumar. Unlike most adults, this adolescent is able to see the inherent beauty and universal truth behind each faith without ranking them. This open-armed acceptance of differing faiths causes chagrin in the religious leaders whom he befriends. However, Pi is wiser than the adults. In this respect, the narrative voice expressing perplexity at the absurdity of adults is akin to that in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*. Pi instinctively senses, much like Sri Ramikrishna, to whom his father deridingly compares his son, that all religions are paths to one central truth. Without being aggressive or disrespectful, Pi easily counters

his Mother's arguments that he should choose one faith from the many, here metaphorically referred to as nations. "If there's only one nation in the sky, shouldn't all passports be valid for it?" Pi asks his mother.

Although Pi accepts the inherent truths behind different religions, he still judges the "tales," so to speak, on which they are based. When Pi first confronts Christianity, for instance, he remarks on the paucity of narrative splendor in the Passion. Christian tales do not have length and embellishment comparable to those in the Ramayana.

I asked for another story, one that I might find more satisfying. Surely this religion had more than one story in its bag—religions abound with stories.... Their religion had one Story, and to it they came back again and again, over and over. It was story enough for them.

Pi comprehends instinctually that it is not one particular tale that is important; rather it is the need for each individual to have faith in a story, almost any story, that's representative of his or her religious. Additionally, one can have faith in a scientific explanation of nature; it is acceptable to deny God. Ultimately atheism is also an act of faith in what cannot be proven—the non-existence of God. Pi remains non-judgmental so long as someone can use a philosophy or creed—any philosophy or creed—as a means to faith. He reserves his disapproval for agnostics, or those who cannot accept any faith or explanation: "Doubt is useful for a while.... But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation."

Pi understands the importance of varying interpretations; his faith in the power of the interpretations themselves helps him survive, both mentally and physically, on the lifeboat. While the importance of his zoological knowledge and experience with wild animals cannot be overstated, Pi clings to faith—a faith that is inherent in all the religious tales he has studied—in order to overcome his plight. Whether these religious tales are fact or fiction is unimportant, so long as they help him cope. And as part of his coping mechanism, he also needs to create a (perhaps) fictional account of the survival.

The delineation between fact and fiction is murky from the outset of the novel; the reader cannot immediately ascertain whether the "Author's Note" which precedes the tale is simply Martel's fictional prelude to more fiction, or if it is indeed his statement of truth. Although cleverly cloaked as the confession of a struggling author grappling with finding a subject for his second novel, the incidents that Martel—a real person—relates are fictional, as is the character who proclaims, "I have a story that will make you believe in God." In blurring the distinction between reality and fiction, Martel is, ultimately, making a statement on the need of all religions to relate a tale which clarifies, or attempts to explain, life and death. In order to believe in God, one must suspend rational skepticism and accept the fantastic, and one must do so without dismissively relegating the tale to the genre classification of "fiction." This does not mean that to be religious we must believe that man was literally created from mud, for instance, or that Noah was responsible for saving humanity. Rather, a person of faith can use these tales, without taking them literally, as instruments to strengthen their belief system; the tales are metaphors for universal truths, and their incredulous nature forces a person to suspend rational belief in order to have a glimpse of the unknowable.

Pi's own survival adventure is also a blurring of fact and fiction; it reads like a biblical narrative, an extended parable complete with wild animals and elements of the story of Noah and the Ark or Jonah and the Whale. The diversion or interlude of the carnivorous island can be viewed as an allegory for the Garden of Eden and Man before the Fall. This "Paradise" crumbles when Pi discovers the "forbidden fruit" containing the teeth of a previous human inhabitant of the island. Whether one sees parallels between Pi's island experience and the Book of Genesis, Pandora's Box of Greek mythology, or even Bluebeard of Charles Perrault's tales, the result is the same: the tale is too phantasmagoric for the rational, skeptical mind to accept literally. The officials sent to interview Pi in Mexico refuse to believe tales that defy logic. Instead they prod him: "But for the purposes of our investigation, we would like to know what really happened," they ask the bedridden Pi.

They want a story with less “invention” and more “facts.”

The story Pi ultimately relates for these skeptics is a straightforward narration of survival, cannibalism and savagery. While it is easy for the investigators to accept this unexpurgated explanation, it is painfully difficult for Pi; to him, this is the “invented” story, the true “fiction.” The alternate narration—in many ways the most “believable”—is ultimately so unpalatable to Pi himself, that he quite possibly relegates it to a spot deep in his subconscious. Instead, he prefers the fantastic extended parable of existence between species which makes up the bulk of the book. In the preferred tale, different species of herbivore and carnivore, representing different positions on the food chain, adapt to an environment of deprivation and mutual existence. The tale of naked, brutal survival and “murder,” a word that by definition only applies to the human species, is ultimately neglected precisely because it does not inspire faith.

These two opposing tales of survival—one cold and empirical, and the other inspirational—both share the same kernel of truth, much like how the differing religious stories of the Ramayana and Passion attempt to bring us all closer to a universal Truth through their different interpretations. While we can view both of Pi’s tales as subjective interpretations of reality, ultimately it is unimportant whether they are truth or fiction, so long as we can find the inspiration in them to have the faith to endure. Why should we, like the agnostic, refuse to believe any of the plethora of stories at humankind’s disposal and relegate ourselves, in Pi’s words, to “dry, yeastless factuality”?

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## A Christian Parable

Tamara Fernando is a freelance writer based in Seattle, Washington. In this essay she argues that *Life of Pi* can be read on one level as a Christian parable. The suffering and ultimate spiritual resurrection that Pi experiences parallel the suffering and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and at the end of the novel, similar to Jesus, Pi offers his own parables about the meaning of faith.

In Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*, the novel’s protagonist, Piscine Molitor, relates an anecdote of how he came to be known by his nickname, Pi. When he first entered elementary school, a schoolmate immediately began calling him “Pissing,” a denigrating name that stuck with him throughout primary school, much to Pi’s great humiliation. When he reached secondary school, however, he resolved to overcome this problem: insisting on being called Pi, he drew the Greek symbol for pi on the blackboard of his classroom for his teachers and classmates to see, and from that point on he would be known to everyone as Pi.

This small anecdote of Pi’s triumph over a childhood suffering serves to foreshadow the bigger triumph to come: Pi’s surviving as a castaway, against all odds, in the Pacific Ocean for 227 days. This anecdote, along with his experiences at sea, brings to light the parallels of Pi’s life with the life of Jesus Christ, particularly with respect to Christ’s passion, death and resurrection.

When Pi first experiences the abuse of being referred to as “Pissing,” he alludes to the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ to illustrate his own humiliation and his ultimate triumph: he refers to the classmate who gave him that name as his “Roman soldier,” and he says he wore his nickname “like a crown of thorns.” By successfully renaming himself and emerging anew with the nickname Pi—a name that would hold for the remainder of his life—Pi facilitated his own symbolic resurrection.

The name itself—Pi—comes from the Greek letter *pi*, a letter closely associated with the circle, a geometric symbol which is often used to represent the idea of eternity and therefore, of God. Likewise, in mathematics, *pi* is used to represent an irrational number—that is, a number that goes on for eternity. By taking a name that symbolizes eternity, Pi’s “resurrection” effectively comes to symbolize—like Christ’s resurrection, in Christian doctrine—eternal life. Also, that Pi chooses such a significant symbol for his name is strongly reminiscent of the appellation “the Alpha and the Omega” attributed to Christ (Rev. 1:8). So by the time the tanker carrying Pi and his family sinks, and Pi is left alone with Richard Parker in Part II of the novel, the parallels between Pi and Christ have been established, and the progression of Pi’s trial at sea can be more readily viewed as a retelling of Christ’s own suffering, death, and resurrection.

In addition to the anecdote of the origin of Pi’s nickname, Martel establishes other parallels between Pi’s character and the figure of Christ. In Part I of his narrative, Pi establishes that he is a deeply spiritual person with an insatiable hunger for knowing God—so much so that he combines the practices of three different religions into his own daily practice. Already equipped with an extraordinary spirituality and strong faith in God, it takes an extraordinary event for Pi’s faith to be tested. During his 227 days as a castaway, he suffered immensely, both physically and spiritually. Even through his suffering, however, he strived to maintain his faith in God through the daily practice of religious rituals, but he admits that his faith was continually tested. He says, “I would point at the sky and say aloud, ‘THIS IS GOD’S EAR!’ And in this way I would remind myself of creation and of my place in it.... But ... God’s ear didn’t seem to be listening. Despair was a heavy blackness that let no light in or out.” However much he experienced this sense of despair, though, he ultimately succeeded in not letting it defeat him: “The blackness would stir and eventually go away,” he says, “and God would remain, a shining point of light in my heart.”

Pi is able to cling to his belief in God, even amidst the moments when he feels forsaken and utterly alone. This illustration of conflicted faith in the face of such extraordinary suffering echoes the complexity of Christ’s own spiritual conflict during his long and painful crucifixion. In the Gospel of Mark, 15:34, Christ calls out to God, as he is dying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” At the same time, He is shown to still believe in the ultimate goodness of God, and He calls upon God to forgive His murderers: “Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Ultimately, according to Christian teaching, Christ’s resurrection from the dead is an act that forms the basis of humanity’s salvation from death. His resurrection prefigures the resurrection of all those who believe in Him; that is, a faithfulness to God ensures the defeat of death.

For Pi, faith in God is also the root of his own salvation from the spiritual death of despair that threatens him throughout his ordeal. Pi himself does not physically die as a result of his suffering, but when he arrives on the shores of Mexico, he has experienced a spiritual death brought on by the loss of his family and the actions he undertook in order to survive. He says, “My suffering left me sad and gloomy,”—a severely understated description of his utter feeling of loss and despair. However, he is able to survive this death and “come back to life” by a “steady, mindful practice of religion.” In essence, he achieves a spiritual resurrection by never giving up on his belief in God, by refusing to give up his faith. Like Christ’s resurrection, Pi’s symbolic resurrection is a direct result of his own faith in God.

The parallels between Pi and Christ continue into Part III. Early in the novel, Pi describes Christ as “a god who spends most of his time telling stories.” Like the New Testament’s Christ, Pi plays the storyteller in Part III. And like the lessons of Christ’s parables, the ultimate lesson behind Pi’s stories become the heart of the meaning to be found in this novel.

In Part III, Pi tells two very different stories of his time as a castaway: the story of the tiger, which is a fanciful and ultimately life-affirming story, but which tests the listener’s faith in its veracity; and another more realistic but much less enjoyable version, in which Pi witnesses the murder of his mother, and commits

murder and cannibalism himself. Pi tells both of these stories to the Japanese businessmen who interview him, and who initially question the believability of his first story. The second story deeply disturbs the interviewers, and they are unable to determine which story is true. Pi gives them no clues, but he asks which story they think is “the better story.” They choose the story with animals as the better story, and he answers them, “And so it goes with God.” In essence, the novel can be read as a parable about faith in God. The account of the businessmen’s choosing of “the better story”—and Pi’s answer to them—serves to fulfill Pi’s own previous account of his survival: ultimately, for Pi, it is his conscious belief in the “better story”—that fantastic story of the existence of God, which can neither be confirmed or invalidated—that affords hope for something bigger than his suffering, mortal, human existence. Faith in that story is at the root of his own spiritual resurrection from the spiritual death. Faith, like the faith that Christ showed at his mortal death, enables Pi to survive.

The lesson Martel offers is that those who choose to believe in God choose between two stories that are ultimately unprovable—that a God exists, or that a God does not exist. The choice to believe in God is ultimately a choice made against what Pi refers to as the “dry, yeastless factuality” of predictable believability. It is the choice of “the better story”—that story which offers the simple but life-sustaining element of hope.

### **Works Cited**

*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. NY: American Bible Society, 1989.

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## **Media Adaptations**

- The audiotope version of *Life of Pi* was issued in January 2003 by Highbridge Audio, with Jeff Woodman narrating.
- The movie adaptation of the book is forthcoming in 2006 from Fox 2000, with Alfonso Cuarón directing and Dean Georgais writing the screenplay.

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