

Teacher Guide

Grades 9–12

Life of Pi

Yann Martel

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LIFE OF PI

by
Yann Martel

Teacher Guide

Written by
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Note

The 2004 Harcourt paperback edition of the novel, © 2001 by Yann Martel, was used to prepare this guide. The page references may differ in other editions. Novel ISBN: 0-15-603020-9

Please note: This novel deals with sensitive, mature issues. Parts may contain graphic descriptions of violence (including murder, the slaughtering of animals, and references to cannibalism). Please assess the appropriateness of this book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading and discussing it with them.

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Skills and Strategies

Critical Thinking

Analysis, inferences, research, opinions, predictions

Comprehension

Plot development, compare/contrast, pros/cons

Literary Elements

Unreliable narrator, theme, irony, humor, symbolism, conflict, anthropomorphism

Vocabulary

Definitions, application

Listening/Speaking

Presentation, play, discussion

Writing

Essay, poetry, research paper, letter, journal, synopsis

Across the Curriculum

Literature—*Robinson Crusoe*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, Aesop’s Fables, book review, author interview; Biology—animal habitat needs, carnivorous plants; Psychology—defense mechanisms, fantasy vs. reality, animal psychology; Art—poster, photography, painting, collage, comic

Chapters 94–100

Pi lands in Mexico, and Richard Parker escapes to the jungle without any sort of goodbye, which breaks Pi's heart. The Mexicans who find him and treat him in the hospital are kind and generous, and Pi receives two visitors from the Japanese Ministry of Transport. They ask Pi to explain his story and they question every suspicious detail, equally impressed and confounded by Pi's story, but they are not convinced he is telling the truth. When Pi tells them a different version of the tale, where there are no animals who survive, but people, the two men are shocked. The tale is similar to the original tale, but instead of hyena, zebra, orang-utan, and tiger, there is the Frenchman, a Chinese sailor, Pi's mother, and Pi. The second tale is so shocking and brutal, where humans are killing and eating each other rather than animals, that the two men prefer to believe the first tale where Richard Parker and Pi survive together, leaving the reader to wonder which tale is true.

Vocabulary

surreptitious
pliable
meek
altruistic
scholars
factuality
reprieve
bestial
improbable
unparalleled

Discussion Questions

1. Where does Pi eventually land, and why does he cry when he arrives? *(Pi eventually lands on a rural beachfront in Mexico, and locals soon find him. Richard Parker, however, jumps off the boat and disappears into the jungle. Pi begins to weep like a child, not so much because he is overcome by surviving his ordeal or because he is around humans again, but because Richard Parker left him without saying goodbye. Pi feels as though the tiger had abandoned him, and for all the two have been through together, knowing he will never see Richard Parker again breaks Pi's heart. As Pi says, "What a terrible thing it is to botch a farewell [p. 360]. He wishes he had had a chance to thank Richard Parker for saving his life, not just by killing the other predators aboard the boat and killing the cannibalistic Frenchman, but by becoming Pi's friend and companion when he needed it most.)*
2. Who pays Pi a visit while he is recovering in the hospital, and what is the intent of this visit? *(Mr. Tomohiro Okamoto and Mr. Atsuro Chiba of the Maritime Department of the Japanese Ministry of Transport arrive in a plane to speak to Pi. They are required to file a report about the ship that sank since it was a Japanese-owned vessel and Pi is the only survivor. They hope to find clues that might lead to discovering the cause of the ship's sinking.)*
3. Why don't Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba believe Pi's first story, and how does Pi answer each of their questions? Do you feel the two men make a compelling argument about wanting Pi's story? Why or why not? *(The men do not believe the story because it contains too many unlikely scenarios, which they elucidate one by one. They point out that bananas do not float, which would disprove how Orange Juice managed to get to the lifeboat. Pi counters their claim by having them float bananas in the sink of his room. Then the men say that some elements of Pi's tale seem like complete fantasy, such as the carnivorous trees, the fish that live in the water that produce fresh water, and the tree-dwelling and aquatic rodents. Pi says it is easy to discount anything you have never seen with your own eyes, using science as an example. The men also find the idea of living with a tiger rather unbelievable, especially since there is no trace of Richard Parker. Pi says animals like tigers naturally try to avoid all human contact, so he is not surprised they have not yet sighted Richard Parker. The two men find Pi and the Frenchman's chance meeting very unlikely. Pi agrees but compares the scenario to a lottery win, which is also unlikely but happens sometimes. The men say the bones aboard the lifeboat do not belong to meerkats, but Pi insists that they do. Answers will vary. Some students will say that the two men point out obvious flaws in Pi's story that anyone*

would question, especially the lack of evidence that Richard Parker was ever present or still lives in the Mexican jungle. Other students may say that the two men are close-minded to refuse to believe a miraculous story simply on the basis that it is “illogical” or has never happened before.)

4. Discuss the role food plays in the interview, and explain Pi’s seemingly strange actions when food is offered. (Throughout the interview, the two Japanese men offer Pi food, mainly to be polite but also to keep him interested in their questions. Once they offer food, Pi begins to ask for more and more. Throughout the course of their interview, he procures cookies, all of the food in the two men’s lunches, a chocolate bar, and even lets the men borrow his bananas, only to take them back. Pi hoards the food under his sheet. He offers one of the men a cookie at one point but keeps the rest. What seems humorous at first quickly turns sad from a psychological standpoint. Pi was at sea for many months, and hoarding food must be natural to him now. Having “reserves” of food after starving for so long probably makes him feel safe and prepared. Despite the fact that there is an abundance of food now, he is stuck in civilization, he cannot break his habit of saving food.)
5. Why does Pi offer the men a second story? How is the second story similar to and different from the first? (Mr. Okamoto says he does not want a story with “invention,” only “straight facts.” Pi questions their definition of “story” since he sees any story as invention, whether it is based on true events or not. However, Pi agrees to tell the men a story that will not surprise them and will conform to what they already know about the world. Unlike his first story, Pi’s new story involves his mother, an injured Chinese sailor, and the zebra cook. Aside from the total absence of animals, the two stories are very similar. Each person in Pi’s second story seems to bear resemblance to an animal from Pi’s first story. The cook (the hyena) was “a disgusting man” who ate anything and was very cruel to everyone else aboard. The Chinese sailor [the zebra] suffered from a broken leg. He could not communicate with the other men and Pi [the tiger] and his mother [the orang-utan] tried to comfort him. The cook eats much of the rations aboard the boat and eventually cannibalizes the sailor. Just as Orange Juice persecuted the hyena, Pi’s mother traps the zebra. The tension between the two adults grows. In a wild act, the cook kills Pi’s mother. Finally, Pi kills the cook. The actions aboard the boat in the second story exactly mirror the actions in the first story. In each story, Pi is left with a feeling of regret—in the first it is due to lack of closure with Richard Parker, and in the second it is due to letting the evil in his nature erupt and allow him to cannibalize the cook.)
6. How do Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba react to Pi’s second story, and why do you think they feel this way? (They see that the two stories match, but they think the second tale is horrific. Since neither story explains how the Tsimtsum sank, Pi is confused about which story the men would prefer to believe. The men think that they prefer the story with the animals and even tell each other that they must beware of Richard Parker as they take the boat. Answers will vary. The humor in Pi’s second story is overwhelmingly depressing, and while the tale is realistic, no humans want to imagine such brutal carnage committed by others of their species. The tale about the animals is much more palatable, fanciful, and interesting, and to a certain degree, it is also believable, especially in the way Pi relates the tale.)
7. Why does Pi offer the little information he knows about the sinking ship and its crew? (Pi knows very little about how or why the ship sank, but he sees it as his duty to help the two men make their report. Although he has little technical knowledge of boats, he gives the men information on the weather, unusual sounds he heard, etc. Pi does express his opinion on the quality of the ship, which he calls “a dingy, third-rate rustbucket” [p. 39]. Pi’s sullen, unfriendly crew, most likely to hint that a drunken crew member could have been responsible for the ship’s sinking and for letting the animals loose.)

8. Which story do you prefer, and why? (Answers will vary. Students who think creatively and imaginatively will most likely believe the first story. Believing this story requires readers to imagine something outside the realm of reality, to push the limits of possibility, and to believe in things like faith and spirituality that cannot be seen or touched. Students whose thinking is grounded in logic and precision will most likely believe the second story, because although it is gruesome, it does not require readers or listeners to look beyond their existing knowledge of the world. These students might assume that Pi concocted the first story to ease the trauma of what actually happened and that Pi used what was accessible and familiar to him—his own—his supreme knowledge of animals. Ultimately, the author leaves it to readers to answer this question for themselves.)

Supplementary Activities

1. After Richard Parker escapes into the Jungle, Pi proclaims, “What a terrible thing it is to botch a farewell” (p. 377). Do you think it is worse to botch a first impression or a farewell? Explain your opinion in a one- or two-page essay, using real-life examples where possible.
2. Select four people from your life, and choose an animal that adequately represents each person. Explain your choices in a short paragraph. Be sure to compare personality traits between the person and his or her corresponding animal and show logical reasoning for your selections.
3. Using the Thought Bubble on page 3 of this guide, write what you think Pi is thinking when Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chino tell him that they want a falcon without reservation.

Word Map

Directions: Complete the word map below for six of the following words: anecdotes, exemplary, indolence, yogis, anemic, incessant, raiments, proffered, tremulous, intuitive, disrepute, strenuous.

Synonyms

Antonyms

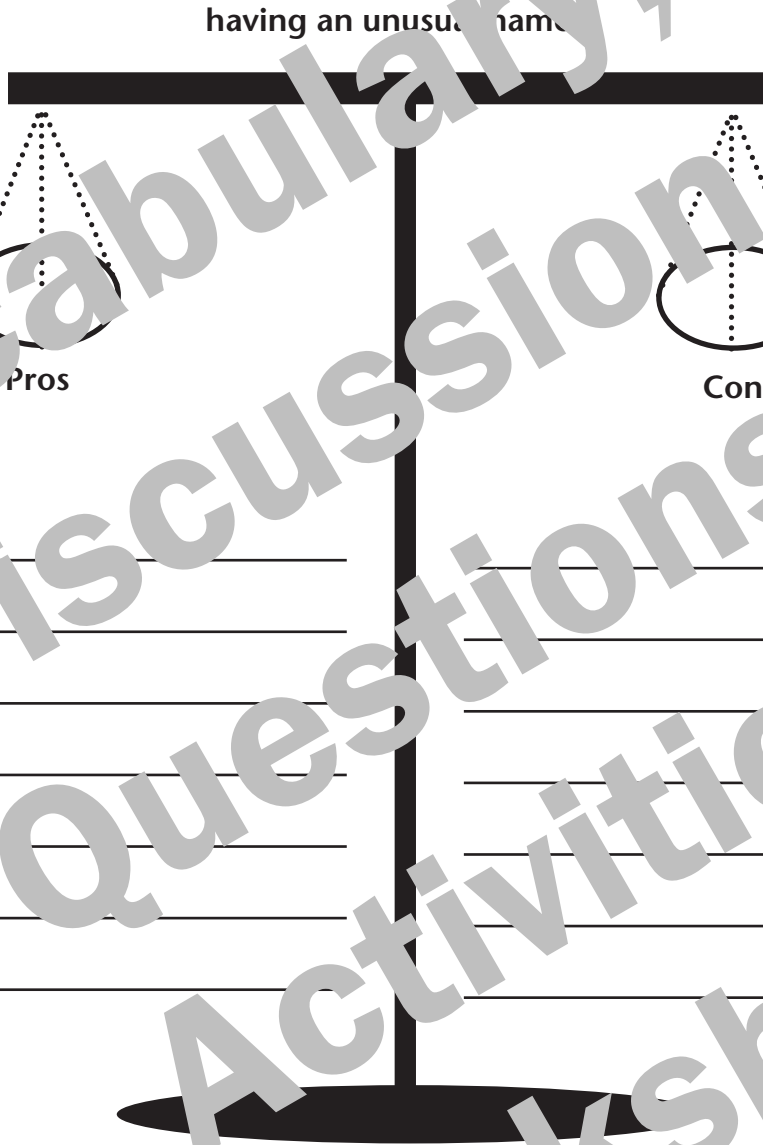
WORD

Definition in your own words

Used in a sentence

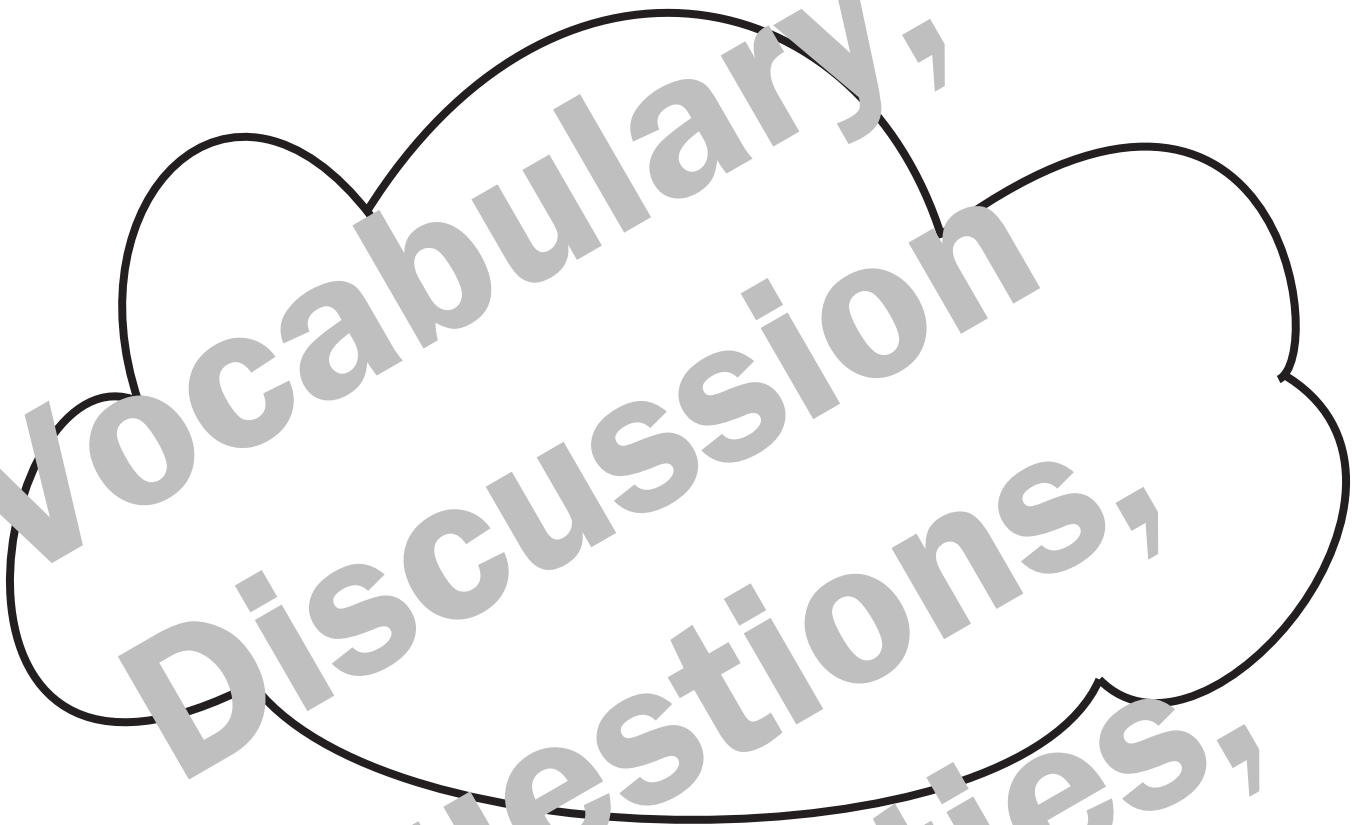
Pros and Cons

Directions: List the positive and negative aspects of having an unusual name.



Thought Bubble

Directions: In the bubble below, write what Pi might be thinking when Mr. Okamoto tells him he would like to hear a story without “invention.”



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