

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Life of Pi
by Yann Martel

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Life of Pi

Pre-Reading

1. *Life of Pi* seems like a strange title. The word “Life” suggests that the book will be a biography or an account of someone’s life, but the word “Pi” suggests the Greek letter used in mathematics. These two concepts seem completely unrelated.

What did you think *Life of Pi* would be about when you first heard the title or saw the cover of the book? Write a paragraph describing what you expect from the book, and why you expect it.

2. In the author’s note, Yann Martel explains that he went to India after his second book was not well received in order to work on another book, to be set in Portugal in 1939. He claims that his choice to do so made sense for several reasons, including that “...a novel set in Portugal in 1939 may have very little to do with Portugal in 1939.”

What do you think Martel means by this statement? Interpret this seemingly contradictory statement as best as you can.

Chapter 1

3. In Chapter 1, Pi Patel talks about the sloth. He explains the characteristics of the animal, which seem like they should be bad for the sloth’s chances of survival. But Pi claims that those traits are what keep the sloth alive.

Choose an animal that you find surprisingly wise or good at survival. Write a description of the animal, and list the characteristics it possesses that make it a good survivor. Then, answer this question, and briefly explain your opinions: What human characteristics does this animal have?

4. Pi describes being in a hospital in Mexico. He says that he was nauseated, dizzy, and weak on first standing, that his levels of vitamins and minerals were very off-balance, and that he had severe injuries and scars. He also says that he fainted when turning on the water faucet the first time.

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When you first read this part of the chapter, what was your initial reaction? Write a journal entry describing how you felt when reading about the physical sensations Pi experienced while in the hospital. Your reaction could be positive, neutral, or negative.

5. Pi talks about several encounters with others that he had while in the hospital. He states that everyone at the hospital was kind and friendly to him, doctors and patients alike. He also says that they all wanted to spend time with him after hearing his story. From Pi's in depth description of his ailments, it seems that he went through severe trauma, but Pi doesn't explain why he was in the hospital, which leaves the reader in suspense.

Write a few paragraphs in which you explain what you think might have happened to Pi that would have required hospitalization. What possible events could have led to such circumstances? What do you think the rest of the book will reveal about Pi and his story?

Chapter 3

6. Pi describes in detail how he learned to swim. The reader learns that Mamaji, whose passion in life was swimming, tried to teach Pi's parents how to swim and was unsuccessful. But Pi loved learning how to swim and did a good job of it. Specifically, Pi says of Mamaji and his father, "Mamaji remembered, Fathered dreamed."

From Pi's description of his family's experiences with swimming, compare and contrast Mamaji and the members of Pi's family. How are they different, and how are they the same? Make a list of similarities and differences and then write a paragraph discussing how you think these similarities and differences affected Pi.

Chapter 4

7. Pi argues that zoos are not necessarily bad for animals, if they are well
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run and maintained. His view is that zoos provide a much more stable environment for animals than the wild does. Pi's belief, however, is contrary to the viewpoint of many others. Some would argue that taking an animal out of the wild and putting it in a cage is cruel and abusive.

Take a stand on the issue, and write an editorial for your local newspaper. Explain in the editorial whether you think zoos are good for animals. In addition, be sure to give evidence to support your opinion. If you have trouble deciding how you feel about the subject, it may be helpful to first make a list of the pros and cons of each option.

8. When Pi is explaining why zoos are good for animals, he describes the nature of animals. He says, "For that is what animals are, conservative, one might even say reactionary. The smallest changes can upset them. They want things to be just so, day after day, month after month." While this is true of animals, many human beings also fall into this category, preferring that things stay very similar or routine.

For ten minutes, free-write about what the concepts of routine and change mean to you and how these concepts influence the way you live.

Chapter 5

9. Pi describes how he was teased in grade school for being named Piscine. He says that other kids laughed at him because his name sounded like a bad word, and often, teachers would not make the effort to pronounce his name correctly, making it sound more like an unattractive word. Pi fought the teasing when he reached secondary school by having everyone call him Pi.

Think of someone you know or a character in a movie, TV show, or book who was teased about something but managed to overcome that adversity. Write a paragraph describing the character, how the character was teased, and how the situation was resolved.

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Chapter 6

10. Chapter 6 consists of only two paragraphs that are italicized and told from the point of view of the author, who is interviewing Pi. The first paragraph describes Pi's fantastic cooking and the author's amazement with Pi's mastery. The second paragraph merely notes that Pi's kitchen is stockpiled with food enough to "last the siege of Leningrad."

What is the siege of Leningrad? Look up information on this historical event and write a paragraph or two about its importance in history.

Chapter 7

11. Pi describes one of his favorite teachers, Mr. Satish Kumar, who is a biology teacher and an atheist. Pi provides a rather unattractive description of Mr. Kumar, comparing him to a mountain and triangles. But, Pi also thinks that Mr. Kumar is friendly and he feels a kinship with him. This is surprising in light of Pi's description of him and the fact that Mr. Kumar is an atheist, and Pi is religious.

Have you ever felt a surprising kinship or developed an unlikely friendship with someone? Write a paragraph describing that person and why you think you have that kinship. If you have never experienced such a relationship, choose someone you know or are acquainted with who is very different from you. Describe the differences between you, and state whether you could possibly feel a kinship or develop a friendship with this person despite your differences.

Chapter 8

12. Pi recounts a very important lesson his father taught him when he was a child. His father brings Pi and Ravi to the tiger's cage so they can watch the tiger eat a goat. The point of the lesson is to teach them how very dangerous wild animals are, even though they are in cages, are pretty, and

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seem to be friendly. Mr. Patel does not want Pi and Ravi thinking that they can play with the wild animals.

What do you think of Mr. Patel's method of teaching his sons the danger of wild animals? Write a letter to Mr. Patel explaining whether you think he was correct in teaching his sons that lesson and how you feel about his teaching method.

Chapter 9

13. Flight distance is described here as an instinctive self-preservation response in animals when humans get too close to them. This same response is present in humans as well and is commonly referred to as "personal space." Every type of animal reacts differently to an invasion of its personal space in order to reestablish its predetermined comfort zone.

Consider what your comfort zone is. Estimate at what distance someone can be to you without crossing into your personal space. Is this distance different if the person is a stranger or is known to you. What are your feelings and responses when someone invades your personal space? Write an e-mail to a hypothetical new acquaintance who crossed the line when you met. Explain the situation, including what your flight distance is and how you felt and responded to the encounter.

Chapters 10-11

14. Many of the beginning chapters of *Life of Pi* concern the nature of animals, how zoos operate, what makes animals happy or unhappy in captivity. Specifically, Pi explains what makes an animal want to escape, whether from a zoo or any other location. Pi says, "All living things contain a measure of madness that moves them in strange, sometimes inexplicable ways. This madness can be saving; it is part and parcel of the ability to adapt. Without it, no species would survive." This is an insightful and important comment. Pi is making a statement about all living things, not just animals in a zoo.