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# *Life of Pi*

by

**Yann Martel**

**2001**



MonkeyNotes by D. L. Cassie

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The story is initially set in India in the late 1990's. The author has traveled to Pondicherry, a coastal town in the former French territory of India, which joined Independent India in 1954. The territory of Pondicherry still has many French citizens, as well as an unusually wide variety of churches/places of.....

### CHARACTER LIST

#### Major Characters

**Piscine Molitor Patel (Pi)** – Pi is the main character/protagonist of the story. He is a teenage Indian boy, son of a zookeeper. He practices three religions, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. His faith and.....

**Richard Parker** – He is the Bengal tiger that becomes Pi's nemesis as well as his reason for living. The tiger ended up with a human name as the result of a clerical error where the name of the tiger, Thirsty.....,

#### Minor Characters

**Author** – Though it would seem unusual to include the author as a character, in Life of Pi, the author is more than a narrator. He interacts with the adult Pi as well as describes Pi's home, family, .....

**Francis Adirubasamy** – He is a close friend of the Patel family and a former competitive swimmer. He teaches Pi to swim. Pi refers to him as Mamaji, *mama* meaning uncle and.....

**Father (Santosh Patel)** – Pi's father is the owner/keeper of the Pondicherry Zoo. He teaches .....

**Mother (Gita Patel)** – Pi's mother is loving and nurturing, especially in the area .....

**Ravi** – He is Pi's older brother who loves to tease Pi. Unlike Pi, he is popular and.....

**Mr. Satish Kumar** – He is an excellent biology teacher who finds nature to be an.....

**Mr. Satish Kumar** – Ironically, this man of faith has the same name as the atheist science.....

**Father Martin** – He is the Catholic priest who exemplifies Christ's love to Pi. He meets with Pi .....

**Mr. Tomohiro Okamoto** – He is the senior representative from the Japanese Ministry of .....

**Mr. Atsuro Chiba** – He is the junior representative from the Japanese Ministry Of Transportation who accompanies Mr. Okamoto to Mexico. He sees deeper meaning in Pi's story, but goes along with whatever Mr. Okamoto says.

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** – The protagonist, Pi, is also the narrator. Therefore the reader gains understanding through Pi's point of view. He is a young man who is confident about his knowledge of zoology, but eager to.....

**Antagonist** – On the surface, it would appear that the antagonists here are Richard Parker and Nature. Pi's hardships at sea begin with the threat presented by the tiger, and progress to surviving starvation and the elements. However, the real conflict is an internal struggle. Pi must maintain his faith in order to .....

**Climax** – The climax comes in Part Three of the book. The reader has known all along that Pi survived his ordeal because it is he who is narrating the story. So none of the drama at sea is truly.....

**Outcome** – Both men admit the first story is better. This reaffirms Pi's own beliefs (even though the men may or may not really believe the story). Mr. Okamoto chooses to include the.....

## **SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)**

The Author's Note, preceding Chapter 1, explains that the author has traveled to India, restless and in need of inspiration for a story. At a coffeehouse in Pondicherry, an elderly man named Francis Adirubasamy strikes up a conversation with the author saying, "I have a story that will make you believe in God." He refers the author to Piscine Molitor Patel who lives in Toronto, Canada. The novel then begins in Piscine's voice.

Piscine is an ardent teenager growing up in Pondicherry, an area of southern India that was once part of French India. The family, consisting of Piscine, his parents, and his playfully irritating older brother, Ravi, is happy. His life is rich with unique and wonderful educational opportunities. His father runs the Pondicherry Zoo where Piscine learns the psychology and husbandry of animals. (One such lesson in the workings of the natural world comes when Piscine's father explicitly demonstrates for Piscine and Ravi how a starving Bengal tiger reacts to a goat being introduced into its pen.) Piscine's mother reads widely and has an extensive assortment of books and literature which Piscine is encouraged to explore. In addition, Piscine's thirst for knowledge is nurtured by good schools and excellent teachers, in particular his atheist science teacher, Mr. Kumar, who inspired Piscine to study zoology.

Piscine is named after a famous swimming pool in France. A good friend of the family, Francis Adirubasamy, had been a champion competitive swimmer and touts the glory of the Piscine (pool) Molitor in Paris and thereby influences the parents' choice of the name. Schoolmates tease Piscine (pronounced *Pea – seen*) calling him "pissing." In response to this verbal bullying, when Piscine enters the next level of school he rushes up to the blackboard during roll and announces his full name, underlining the first syllable, instructing all to know him as "Pi." He proceeds to illustrate his new name with the mathematical explanation of the Greek letter pi, the "letter that looks like a shack with a corrugated tin roof." The name catches on and Pi is thrilled.

Along with his search for knowledge, Pi is also in search of God. He grew up Hindu, but at age 14, he meets Jesus Christ via a Catholic priest named Father Martin. He asks to be baptized. Soon after, he meets another Mr. Kumar, this one a devoutly practicing Muslim, and converts to Islam as well. Pi happily practices all three religions simultaneously, even asks his father to buy him a prayer rug so he can face Mecca to pray. Once, upon a chance meeting at the zoo, the priest (Catholic), the pandit (Hindu), the imam (Muslim), and Pi's parents discover Pi's triple religious affiliation and argue that Pi must choose one. Pi responds, embarrassed, that he just wants to love God.

As the adult Pi narrates his story, he includes seemingly random, but informative discussions of religion, zoology, and Indian culture. During the interview process, the author also interjects his own .....

## **THEMES**

**The Better Story** - The predominant theme is the concept of the "better story", in other words, the importance of telling a good story. Life itself is a story and one can choose his own story. The "better story" is the.....

**Science and Religion** - A minor theme is the reconciliation of science and religion as ways to understand the world. Pi meshes the two in order to survive 227 days on the lifeboat. He ends.....

**Religious Syncretism** - Another minor theme is the syncretism, or union of the.....

## **MOOD**

The novel is divided into three parts and the mood changes as one part transitions to the next. In Part One, the mood is wondrous, full of the embarrassments and marvels of childhood. It changes to a spiritual mood as Pi gets older, discovers multiple ways to know God, and prepares for the journey to Canada. Part Two deepens....

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION – BIOGRAPHY**

Yann Martel was born in Spain on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1963. His Canadian parents were there while Martel's father was on a scholarship to complete his doctorate. Martel's family traveled a lot because his father was a teacher and a diplomat. Martel therefore grew up in Alaska, British Columbia, Costa Rica, France, Ontario, and Mexico.

He attended Trinity College School in Port Hope, Ontario from 1979 to his graduation two years later. He continued on and studied philosophy at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. While beginning his writing career, Martel took various jobs such as tree planting, dish washing, and working as a security guard. He has been living off his writing since the age of 27. Yann Martel currently lives in Montreal. In addition to writing, he practices yoga and volunteers at a palliative care unit.

As an adult, Martel has traveled to Iran, Turkey and India. To write *Life of Pi*, he spent six months in India visiting zoos, temples, mosques, and churches. He interviewed the director of.....

## **CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND NOTES**

### **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

#### **Summary**

The author is in India attempting to write a novel. He is displeased with his progress, as his current story lacks passion. It hasn't a spark of life, so he mails his notes off to a fictitious address in Siberia.

While in a coffeehouse in Pondicherry, he is conversing with an elderly man named Francis Adirubasamy. The man offers a story "that will make you believe in God." The author is skeptical at first, assuming the man is some sort of fundamentalist or evangelist. The man says the author must get the true account from the person who lived it – a man named Patel, in Canada. The author goes to Canada, finds Patel, and gets his story. The story is told in Patel's voice.

#### **Notes**

The Author's Note begins autobiographically, explaining Martel's trip to India and his restlessness as he searches for a story. However, the Author's Note is more than an "Introduction," "Acknowledgement," or "Foreword" to the book. It sets the reader up for actually believing the story. It establishes the setting as a real place. The formerly French territory in south India where Pondicherry is located, of course, exists. Even the coffee house in Pondicherry exists, across the road from the Trivandrum Zoo. The "Pondicherry Zoo" does not exist, but the Botanical Gardens do. The author introduces Francis Adirubasamy as a real person, and even goes so far as to include the characters of Mr. Patel, Mr. Adirubasamy, and Mr. Okamoto in the acknowledgements. The characters are mentioned right beside the non-fictitious Canada Council for the Arts which granted support for Martel's writing of *Life of Pi* in 1997. Mixing actuality and invention prepares the reader for the "better story" so that we do not "sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality" or "end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams."

## **PART ONE - Toronto and Pondicherry**

### **CHAPTER 1**

#### **Summary**

A gloomy, unknown narrator presents himself, explaining that he has majored in both religious studies and zoology at the University of Toronto - his religious studies thesis being about the cosmogony theory of Isaac

Luria, and his zoology thesis about the thyroid gland of the three-toed sloth. He then describes the nature and habits of the sloth in detail. Though he was recognized for his intelligence and ability in the zoology department, he personally did not separate science and religion, “such a beautiful example of the miracle of life, reminded me of God.” He mentions the goddess Lakshmi, hinting that he may be of the Hindu faith.

He describes how he loves Canada, but misses India. He also misses Richard Parker (though the reader does not yet know exactly who Richard Parker is). He continues, disjointedly, about his experience in the hospital in Mexico and his embarrassment at an Indian restaurant in Canada.

### **Notes**

Chapter 1 sets the pace and motif of the novel. The reader will often be sidetracked by digressions into the nature and habits of animals and their relationship with humans. These descriptions were well researched by Martel and can be considered accurate science. The main character will also often digress into religious remarks, but they will not always come from the Hindu faith.

The topics for the theses are significant. The “thyroid gland of the three-toed sloth” sounds methodologically scientific, but the narrator chose the sloth because of its soothing, spiritually calming nature. The doctrines of Isaac Luria’s cosmogony are based on the Old Testament and Zohar (Kabbalist text), but the concepts closely correspond to the Big Bang Theory which was validated by science hundred of years after Luria. This coexistence of faith and science is the motif of the novel.

Lastly, the narrator’s list of the top five places to visit presages the particulars that the reader will be learning about Pi’s life. The list includes Oxford, representing intellectual/scientific interests, Mecca, the holiest city for Muslims, Varanasi, the holiest city for Hindus, Jerusalem, the holiest city for Christians, and Paris, the city of magnificent swimming pools.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Summary**

Patel lives in Scarborough. He is a small, dark man of about forty. He speaks quickly and goes into his story.

### **Notes**

This is a brief interjection by the author giving the narrator’s physical appearance and location. It let’s the reader know that the previous chapter was the beginning of the author’s interview with the man in Canada referred to in the Author’s Note. These interjections support the reality of the story.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Summary**

The narrator (Patel) talks about Francis Adirubasamy who is a close family friend. Patel calls him Mamaji (dear uncle). Mamaji was a champion competitive swimmer and tries to teach Patel’s parents and older brother, Ravi to swim. The family is unskilled and unenthusiastic, except for Patel himself, who is thrilled with both swimming and pleasing his “uncle.”

In addition to teaching swimming, Mamaji loves to talk about swimming and about the incredible swimming pools in Paris. Patel’s father loves to hear of them. Mamaji gloriously praises one pool in particular, the Piscine Molitor. So taken is Patel’s father with the dreamlike image of that pool, that his son becomes its namesake. We finally learn the narrator’s name: Piscine Molitor Patel.

### **Notes**

India did have an Olympic swimmer in 1928, named Mulji. He may have been Martel's model for Mamaji. It will become significant later in the story that Piscine is the only family member that can swim. The word *piscine* (pronounced pee-seen) means pool in French. However, the word *piscine* (pronounced pie-seen) means fish-like in English. This is an interesting play on the word in light of what is in store for Piscine in Part 2 of the novel.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Piscine Molitor Patel (Pi)** – The adult Pi is the narrator of the story who survived 227 days at sea. Being the son of a zookeeper, he constantly interjects facts about animals and animal behavior into his story. The boy Pi is the character experiencing the story, a young man full of wonder. He is slim with dark hair and dark eyes. His attitude is honest, innocent and respectful. He is named after a beautiful pool in.....

**Richard Parker** – Richard Parker, the tiger, may or may not be a real character, depending on which story the reader chooses to believe. In the “better story,” he is a royal Bengal tiger that swims to Pi's lifeboat.....

### PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The novel espouses several postmodern concepts including learning things for the purpose of using them (such as Pi's knowledge of animals), subjective rather than traditional approaches to religion (as Pi has practicing three religions), and theological impoverishment (wherein faith is for the story rather than for the soul). Accordingly, the novel is written using postmodern techniques. The most striking example is the.....

### THEMES ANALYSIS

**The Better Story** – The major theme is the value of the “better story.” As Pi puts it, “The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no?” How we interpret reality can be, as it is for .....

**Science and Religion** – A theme, and also a recurring motif, is the bringing together of science and religion as equal ways of understanding the world. Pi's zoo upbringing and his relationship to the animals provide a scientific understanding of the world. His multiple religious philosophies and.....

**Religious Syncretism** – Seemingly opposing religions are brought together in Pi. Hinduism, Catholicism (or Christianity), and Islam are very different religions. However, they are all based on belief in one God. Though Brahman (Hindu) is expressed as countless different divinities, Christ (Christian) is one.....

### POINT OF VIEW

The story is told in the first person, but by two different narrators. At first, as expected, the Author's Note is in the author's voice, but this voice becomes a fictional narrator as the story progresses. The bulk of the.....

### IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS / QUOTES

[Page numbers are from the paperback edition, Harcourt, 2001.]

1. **“I have a story that will make you believe in God.”** Author's Note p. x  
This is spoken by Francis Adirubasamy to the author. At first the reader may think the story is about believing in a religion but it is not. It is not about holding on to the particulars, but about having faith in something beyond what is seen. At the end of the book the reader may choose to believe or not.

2. **“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.”** Author's Note p. xii

The author is thanking the Canada Council for the Arts for their support, but he is also encouraging the promotion of the better story.....

## **SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY**

**Pi** - Piscine's nickname, Pi, has a symbolic relationship with the mathematical pi ( $\pi$ ). The ratio of the circumference (circular) of a circle to its diameter (linear) is pi. The correlation between the linear journey to North America and the cycles of doubt and faith are experienced by Pi. Mathematical relationships are calculated and explained logically and rationally by the irrational number pi. Unbelievable experiences and irrational events are explained logically and rationally by Pi. Neither Pi nor pi can be confined by.....

**Algae Island** - The island itself is symbolic as a Garden of Eden. It offers temporary.....

**Tsimtsum** – The name of the ship comes from the Kabbalist concept of tsimtsum, where God .....

Additional symbols are identified in the complete booknote.

## **MOTIFS**

The motif of the reconciliation of science and religion as equal ways to understand the world stems from the concept of pi – using the irrational to explain the rational. Throughout the book science and .....

## **IMPORTANT/KEY FACTS SUMMARY**

**Title:** Life of Pi

**Author:** Yann Martel

**Date Published:** 2001

**Meaning of the Title:** It is not “The” Life of Pi because no particular life is supported. It is about the multiplicity of life and, in the end, the reader is left to choose which of Pi’s “lives” to believe.

**Setting:** India, Canada, Pacific Ocean, Mexico.....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS / QUIZ**

1. Where is the author when he first hears about Piscine Patel?  
a. Canada                      b. India                      c. home
2. Who is narrating the italicized chapters?  
a. Piscine                      b. Martel                      c. a fictional author.....

## **Answer Key**

1.b 2.c .....

## **ESSAY TOPIC IDEAS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS**

1. Relate Piscine's nickname, Pi, to elements of the story and/or themes of the novel.
2. What role does Richard Parker play in the story?.....

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