

Book Title: Life of Pi

Author: Yann Martel

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by Karen Wong 6U (2008 – 2009)

Is reality the sum total of what we see?

If we could not see something, does that mean they do not exist?

Is it true that science and religion, or reasons and stories could never co-exist?

“ If you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for? Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?” The book, “Life of Pi” written by Yann Martel, is an exhilarating tale of faith and survival. The protagonist of the novel, a 14 year-old Indian boy named Piscine (Pi) Molitor Patel, in first person voice, is telling his 227 days of arduous ordeal in a solitary lifeboat at the Pacific Ocean with a 450-pound Royal Bengal tiger. Through his story, he explores with his readers the true values of faith, imagination, and the art of storytelling

The novel starts off in an unconventional manner, a warm-hearted yet quirky tone. The first part of the novel, with meticulous use of detail, is a factual note about Piscine. Piscine Molitor Patel spends his entire childhood in the Pondicherry Zoo and as the son of the zookeeper. He is named after a family friend’s favourite swimming pool in France. His unusual name has already set pace for his unlikely, fantastical life. Annoyed of jokes at the expense of his name as “Pissing”, he transforms himself as ‘Pi’ which reminds him of “an elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, and which he finds refuge.” Born as a Hindu, Pi is attached to other two religions, Christianity and Muslim, “the way a dog attracts flees”. Pi’s family then decides to immigrate to Canada, taking a menagerie of animals with them on a ship called tsimtsim, all is set to change.

In the second part of the book, the ship sinks, leaving behind Pi as the only human survivor, accompanied by a spotted hyena, a zebra with a broken leg, a female orangutan and a Royal Bengal tiger, which is known as ‘Richard Parker’. In long hallucinatory chapters Pi recalls his life on the small lifeboat. His remarkable tale of 227 days of ordeal in the Pacific Ocean, involving flying fishes, encounters with God, and an Algae Island, is soaked with religious lore, zoological knowledge and metaphysical speculation. And this is the first story told by Pi.

The last part of the book is about Pi reaching the land. Pi soon meets with the officials of the Japanese shipping company, who struggle to understand what has happened to their ship. Pi

tells them two stories. First is the story with animals, the one that we know, through the previous part of the novel. However, the Japanese officials do not believe. Pi then tells a more conventional version of the story, the one without animals, but much more grotesque, involving more bloodshed and cannibalism, exposing the dark side of human nature. The reader is left to muse upon which version might be the truth, yet realize sometimes life is not all about finding out the truth, but appreciating the colours in between.

Yann Martel's wit is not only seen in his colourful portrait of characters, but also in his careful arrangement of the storyline and the meticulous use of details throughout the novel. Every word authenticates the story, adds in credibility for the story allowing the readers to fall into the trap of believing the first story, the story with animals. Martel's book is an enchanting, astonishing story that sets itself up as a truth in such a convincing way that at the end, the readers find out it is nothing more than a fantasy.

The book "Life of Pi" is intertwined with a hybrid of themes. The first theme is to view life as a story. Life is about choosing our own story. If everything in life is fundamentally the same, then actually it is only about how we interpret life. "Isn't telling something – using words, English or Japanese – already something of an invention?", says Pi. Life after all is just the same. Different people have different perspectives towards life. Perspectives might be different, but that does not mean they could not coexist. Life is about making up your own story, choosing your own story. But still, we could always appreciate others' stories. If there's another better story waiting for you to embrace, then why not?

Stories are not camouflages of reality, but just another interpretation of reality. Stories are a way to get around the upsetting truth. Stories are not lies, but they are just dull facts decorated by the use of narrative techniques. Like how Pi asks the Japanese men, "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?"

Accepting the first story, does not change the fact that the ship sank, does not change the fact that Pi is the only survivor, does not change the fact that Pi is alive here to tell them the story. But Pi's story just gives us another interpretation of the tragic incident of his. You might choose the second story, the uninteresting version. But what "Life of Pi" is trying to bring out is, why do we have to make the situation even sadder when it is sad enough?

Another theme of the book is religious syncretism. Dogmas of religions may contradict each other, but for Pi it is about faith, not about the dogmas. Pi concentrates on the process of enjoying the story. Pi focuses on the essence of the story, and what you get from the story. Stories are different interpretations of the world. But it is a pity that when people find out Pi has been practicing three religions at the same, they are forcing Pi to choose one. They stress

that there shall be freedom of practice in India, but only when practice is singular. In a contrasting way, Pi embraces all stories, as to appreciate different perspectives of life. “The world isn’t just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn’t that make life a story?” To Pi, another story does not have conflict with his existing beliefs, but giving Pi another way to know life and God.

I guess the above two themes are what we, Hong Kong people, should learn these days. I would recommend this book to most Hong Kong people, because most of us just cannot help clinging to the dull reality. Very often, we struggle for evidence. We do things if only return is promised. And the most tragic of all, we seldom let our imagination go wild. We refuse to believe in what we could not see. However, like what Yann Martel has mentioned in the Author Note, “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.” Cookies are good, but they tend to crumble; Stories are good, but our perception of reality makes it to crumble. Life is more than believing in what we see. Life is to believe beyond the seen. Hard to believe does not mean it is not believable, it just takes more faith. To believe helps us deal with fear, helps us to embrace “the better story” of life. If you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for?

This lecture of faith and trust is also a lesson that we, as a world citizen, must learn. Living in the 21st century, global hostilities, racial divisions and national rivalries are still big problems waiting for us to solve. But these problems could not be solved without the presence of mutual trust and faith. Few months ago, we saw Cambodia warning Thailand for “provoking armed hostilities”. Though the new U.S. president Obama bridges racial division, the problem still exists in places like South Africa and Iraq. National rivalries in terms of arms race still go on, with India declaring her plan to build a new aircraft by 2012, followed by China’s decision to build her first aircraft carrier battle group. These are all results of mutual distrust. Undeniably, the situation has improved a lot these years, yet the countries still do not have enough faith in each other to make the problems completely resolved. Different cultural groups are unwilling to embrace the ‘stories’ of others. This world could actually be better if we are willing to embrace each other’s ‘stories’, like Pi in the novel, accepting different stories as different interpretations of life. Problems will longer be problems, if only we have faith.

Indeed, though I appreciate Yann Martel’s writing style to authenticate his story, I must point out that his story has way too much flaws. His novel is filled with loopholes—there is no Pondicherry Zoo in India, and there is not a ship called Tsimtsum. The context suffers from a bit of inconsistency, because Pi mentions in the last part of the book that the two stories are actually the same, however when we match the characters of the two stories, the chronological order is a bit muddled up.

Besides, no matter how blessed this child is, we could not expect a 14 year-old boy to say something so wise and philosophical like "Fear is life's true opponent. Only fear can defeat life". Putting ourselves in the same scenario, being alone in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, accompanied by a dangerous male tiger and a hyena, we probably just trap ourselves in despair, cry ourselves to death or do something irrational. But Pi does not. What he does is all well-planned and logical. But anyway, I think the message behind the book is good enough to outweigh the flaws. If we keep doubting the credibility of the novel, and give it up at the beginning, eventually we would miss this "better story".

To end this book review, may I bring forward a question: how would you describe a rainbow to a blind man? If seeing is believing, then a blind man may never know the beauty of life. Sometimes we just need to take a leap of faith, and the world would be much brilliant. But anyway, regardless of how you describe a rainbow, or whether the blind man believes it or not, it does not change the fact that rainbows exist. To believe in rainbows despite not being able to see how beautiful they are, is faith. And this is what Yann Martel ultimately trying to tell in "Life of Pi".