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Life of Pi
Yann Martel

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Yann Martel



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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

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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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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Write a short essay in which you imagine yourself as an animal in the zoo. Explain how you feel about your situation.

Chapters 13-14

15. Pi explains how the concept of territory in the animal kingdom works. He says that a lion does not attack another creature in its territory because it is hungry, but because the other animal is invading its territory. However, according to Pi, an animal does not necessarily establish its dominance and territory through brute force, but through intimidation and psychological attacks.

Consider how such a scenario transfers to the human world. How do we establish our territories? Write a paragraph or two describing your bedroom or a place you feel is yours and how you have decorated or otherwise altered it to make it your own. Then describe how you feel when a parent, sibling, or other person comes in uninvited and tries to change your “territory.”

16. In Chapters 13 and 14, Pi describes how a lion trainer uses intimidation as a training tool and how the other lions perceive the trainer as the alpha lion, or the leader. Pi explains that the weakest lion, or omega lion, is the one that is most likely to be subservient and loyal to the trainer.

Explain this idea to a classmate who cannot quite understand what Pi means about alphas and omegas on how that relates to dominance and submission.

Chapter 15

17. Martel describes the many religious artifacts found in Pi’s house, and remarks that, “his house is a temple.” Pi has prayer rugs, crucifixes, the statue of Ganesha, and others in his home. Martel also notes that these religious artifacts appear everywhere in the house—in the kitchen, in cupboards, in Pi’s bedroom, etc.

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you currently live and those that you perceive the foreign country to have. Look at both lists, and tally the similarities and the differences. Then state whether there are enough similarities to ease your concerns about moving to that place.

Chapter 31

30. Pi describes the time that his teachers (both named Mr. Kumar) meet each other at the zoo. One had taught Pi about Islam, and the other is Pi's favorite teacher. Even though they share the same name, they are two very different people with very different beliefs. At one point, the teachers and Pi are at the zebra display, feeding a zebra a carrot. Despite their differences, the teachers enjoy sharing the experience of feeding the zebra. They have found a neutral or common ground in which they can interact peacefully.

There are many situations in which people who are normally in opposition to each other can find a neutral place or common interest that momentarily provides an opportunity for interaction without conflict. Think of two such people or groups, and write an editorial to your school newspaper giving your opinion about what would unify these groups, if only for a brief time. Be sure to explain the reasons for your opinion.

Chapter 33

31. Chapter 33 is another chapter told from Martel's perspective. Martel describes four photographs that represent the entirety of Pi's childhood. One is of several men at the zoo, another is of a group of children at the zoo, one is of Pi's school, and one is of the Aurobindo Ashram swimming pool. Pi identifies Richard Parker as being in the picture of the school children.

When you read this passage, who did you imagine Richard Parker to be? Richard Parker had been mentioned several times leading up to this chapter, but here the author finds actual evidence of Richard Parker's existence. Based on what you know from the story so far, write whom you think Richard Parker is and what role he plays in Pi's life.