

At the end of the novel, Pi offers the Japanese officials a different story to the one told in part two. Which story do you think is true? Why?

By Stephanie Wakefield

Yann Martel's 'Life of Pi' is an uplifting novel about faith and endurance portrayed in a fable where animals symbolise the animalistic side of human nature. The tale begins in India, where the 16 year old protagonist Piscine Patel finds refuge in three religions; Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. Pi lives a happy life until his family decide to move to Canada, when his family experience tragic shipwreck, leaving Pi to encounter a harrowing journey in the Pacific Ocean. Martel's novel tells two distinct stories in relation to Pi's journey and then he allows the reader to decide which "is the better story". In the first version of the story, Pi tells of how he was trapped at sea for 227 days with a "hyena, a zebra with a broken leg, a female orang-utan and a 450-pound Royal Bengal tiger." This first version of the "truth" is juxtaposed to a second version where the animals from the first have been anthropomorphized to represent humans and hide, or justify to the protagonist, a horrible truth; that cannibalism has occurred. Martel encourages readers to take a post modernist perspective in this way, as he forces them to question the truth. In doing so, Martel also suggests it doesn't matter which story is true, as in both stories "the ship sinks, [Pi's] entire family dies, and [Pi] suffers."

Sometimes, it is in human beings instincts to pick "the better story". Part two of 'Life of Pi' is used by Martel to provide readers with a story of faith and survival. Martel uses 190 pages of his novel to describe Pi's amazing tale of how he survived 227 days on a life boat in the Pacific Ocean with a "450 pound Royal Bengal Tiger", which would be difficult for readers to believe if it were not for the evidence and foreshadowing in part one that hint to readers that it could be possible. Martel constructs his text in such a way to craft readers to believe the first story. Martel explains the "flight distance" of wild animals, the need for territorial control and the "alpha...omega" relationship that exists between big cats and their handlers. This sets the reader up to believe the plausibility of protagonist Pi Patel surviving on a life boat with a tiger for 227 days at sea. The purpose of the author's notes at the beginning of the novel is to set readers up to believe that 'Life of Pi' is a true story. Martel does this by providing evidence such as "the diary he kept during the events... the yellowed newspaper clippings that made him briefly, obscurely famous." Martel's also uses a double narration as another contributing factor as to why readers could believe the first story. 'Life of Pi' is "mostly told in first person" through the perspective of Pi, "through his voice and through his eyes". However, there are some parts of the novel in the author's first person perspective. The purpose of Pi's perspective is to make the novel appear more authentic to readers, while the author's perspective is used to remind readers that the story of Pi surviving on a boat with a tiger for 227 days is meant to be a "true" story. Contrastingly to this, part three of 'Life of Pi' presents the idea to readers that perhaps Pi is an unreliable

narrator, and the plot of him surviving with a tiger for 227 days could have been created by Pi's mind to hide the fact that cannibalism had occurred.

After a time of emotional strain and instability, it is possible for the mind to construct justifications of what events took place. Martel constructs 'Life of Pi' in such a way to manipulate readers to take a psychological perspective on the novel, creating the idea that there were no animals on the life boat but rather people; with the zebra symbolising the sailor, the orang-utan symbolising Pi's mother, the hyena symbolising the French cook and Richard Parker representing the animalistic side of Pi. Although this idea is only presented in 9 pages of the text, compared to 190 pages of the first story, it provides readers with "another story" that despite its gruesome nature, its words "reflect reality". Martel supplies excessive amounts of evidence that this version of the truth is true, such as Pi's "chimera...mental delusion" of the island he and Richard Parker lived on briefly. The island is a metaphor for Pi, it is "sweet on the outside... bitter on the inside" just like Pi as on the outside he appears to be a sweet little religious boy, but in reality he is a bitter human being who ate one of his "brothers". Furthermore, Pi discovers the island to be carnivorous and finds one complete set of human teeth within the "fruit" of one of the trees on the island. If the island is a metaphor for Pi, then the teeth would be those from the French cook that Pi supposedly murdered. Part one provides readers with an insight, to Pi's character as well as his religious and vegetarian lifestyle. Martel juxtaposes this lifestyle with how he survives on the lifeboat, "but given the exceptional circumstances the vegetarian part of [Pi] would simply pinch its nose and bear it." This gives readers enough reason to believe that perhaps Pi created an alternate story with a hyena, a zebra, an orang-utan and a tiger to hide and justify himself eating one of his "brothers". However, both story one and two contain inconsistencies which suggest to readers that 'Life of Pi' is an exploration of the truth.

Sometime in life there is no truth, but rather multiple alternatives which could be equally as correct. Whichever version of the story readers accept, ultimately 'Life of Pi' is a search for truth. Martel constructs his text with a post modernism discourse, questioning the absolute nature of truth and whether it is stationary. After Pi tells the Japanese officials both versions of his journey, Martel crafts Pi to say "you can't prove which story is true...in both stories the ship sinks, my entire family dies, and I suffer." This suggests to readers that each story could be equally as legitimate, and that it makes no difference which story is accepted. Although, perhaps Martel crafted his novel in this way with the purpose of represent a bigger idea. It could be interpreted that story one represents religion and story two represents science. Therefore, by saying that story one and story two could be equally true, this is a metaphor for the idea that religion and science are the same or each as likely as the other. This opinion is supported by Pi when he says "I have heard just as much nonsense about zoos as I have about God and religion", this not only suggests that science and religion are equal but foreshadows the outstanding message Martel conveys in his novel; that science and religion could be equally as true, just like the alternate stories in 'Life of Pi'.

'Life of Pi' by Yann Martel, is a novel that provides an insight into the nature of truth. The story told in three parts offers two alternate versions of the truth, leaving readers to decide "which is the better story". However it is possible that rather than giving a single solution to the truth, Martel suggests that it does not matter which story readers believe, as both are equally as viable. Martel first goes into great detail to describe the version where Pi survives on a boat with a "450-pound Royal Bengal tiger", using various techniques such as double narration to support this truth. Martel then juxtaposes this story with one with no animals, only humans, suggesting that Pi constructed the animals in his mind to hide the fact that cannibalism occurred. Then since there is no conclusion in the text as to which story is true, perhaps Martel is suggesting that both stories are equally as true, similar to how religion and science are equally as likely. 'Life of Pi' by Yann Martel is a story which poses many truths as opposed to one absolute explanation.