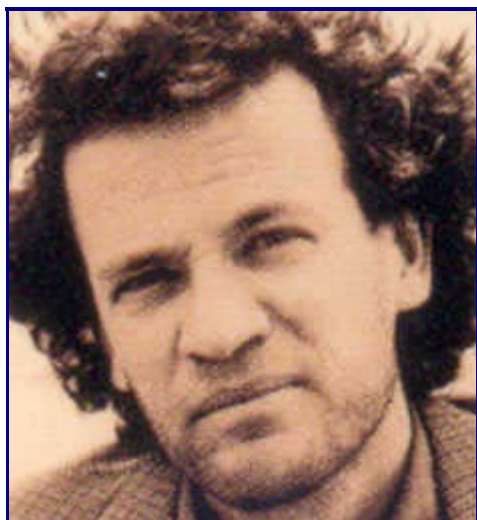


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A READER'S JOURNAL

Life of Pi

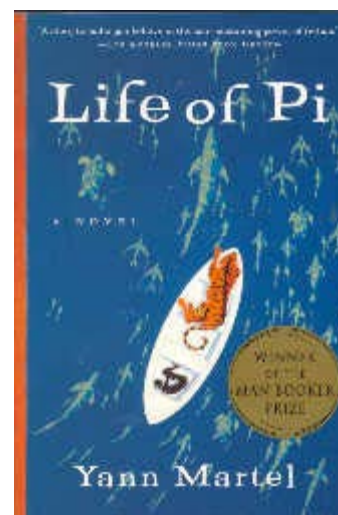
A Novel

by

Yann Martel

Published by Harcourt/FL in 2001

A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2007



Are you ready to be bamboozled? The author goes to India and is told by a friend that people there like words

like "bamboozle." Well, by the time you've read this novel, you may have the feeling that you've been bamboozled. The Japanese representatives of the ship that sank with Pi and his family on it certainly felt bamboozled by the end of their interview with Pi. You can read the comments in their report at the end of the book.

The essence of the story that Pi tells the author is presented on the cover of the book: a 450 lb. Bengal tiger and a 16-year-old Indian boy are adrift in a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean for about seven months and survived to tell the story. Well, the tiger ran off into the jungle, and the boy grew into a man who told the story. And what a story it is — one to astonish, amaze, and stretch one's credulity to the limit.

The author came across this story while sitting in a coffeeshop in Pondicherry, India and chatting with an elderly man who promised to tell him a story that will make him believe in God. The *San Diego Union-Tribune* said that the "*Life of Pi* may not make you believe in God. But it will make you believe in literature." In "The Author's Notes" Martel comments that, "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." He understands that the true artist transcends what others take for reality. The true artist destroys the illusion of sameness that pervades the accepted manner of art(1). The true artist blows holes in the crude reality of accepted art and allows us to see through to a deeper world which would have never existed but for the artist's work. If we believe in nothing or have worthless dreams, we need a shock that can only be provided by a true artist existing in our own time. Yann Martel is such an artist.

What kinds of shocks are to be found in this novel? After all, it's only a story, isn't it? Well, it's a story of a young man who got his name from a swimming pool in Paris, the Piscine Molitor. Most pools in Paris in the 1930s had pools with unfiltered and unheated water straight from the Seine after it had crossed much of Paris. Then the Parisians who swam in it fouled it up further. The Piscine Deligny, Bain Royal, and others were like cesspools. There were pools like the Piscines Hébert, Ledru-Rollin and Butte-aux-Cailles, which were modern and clean, but the best of all was the Piscine Molitor which had the best competitive swimming club in Paris. That was the one from which Piscine Molitor Patel got his name. "The water was so clean and clear you could have used it to make your morning coffee."

But Pondicherry, India was originally a French-speaking colony and the name "piscine" pronounced by a Frenchman is not the same as "Piscine" pronounced by an English-speaking schoolmaster. It sounded ever so close to "Pissing" to the Pondicherry ear that our hero was called Pissing Patel by many of his schoolmates and even some of his teachers. He had to do something to set things right, and his opportunity came when he changed schools. When asked his name, instead of saying it in his desk like the other kids, he executed his plan by quickly walking to the front of the class and writing, "My name is

Piscine Molitor Patel, known to all as Pi." He added below it: $\pi = 3.14$ and drew a circle with a diameter across it to represent pi as the ratio of the diameter to the circumference of the circle. From then on, everyone called him "Pi" and the sound of "Pissing Patel" faded away faster than the smell of urine after it has dried. (Page 20) We are introduced to the life of pi, that endless, never-repeating decimal and to the life of Pi which resembles its eponymous origins in so many ways. The name Piscine went down the drain as so many Parisian pools did.

[page 24] And so, in that Greek letter that looks like a shack with a corrugated tin roof, in that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, I found refuge.

For myself, if I may add my own mathematical digression at this point, understanding the universe for me amounts to one equation which relates π , e , i , 1 , and 0 , namely, $e^{\pi i} + 1 = 0$. The symbol e is a transcendental number, that is, like π , an infinitely long, non-repeating decimal, except that it begins 2.71... instead of 3.14..., whereas i is the symbol for the imaginary number, the square root of minus 1. Here we have five amazing numbers connected together. First there's zero: 0 or *zero*, the amazing number which none in the western world, with their brains stuck in Roman Numeral sand, could comprehend until the Arabs showed them how to use it. Second there's *one*: 1 or unity, the only prime number which can divide any other number without changing it. Third there's π , the ratio of the circle's diameter and circumference, among other things. Fourth there's e , which is used in endless engineering calculations and physics theories, among other things. Fifth and last, there's the most improbable number of all — a number so unlikely that we call it *imaginary* — but its uses are *not* imaginary, but are legion and match the uses of e and, which accompany i in many useful equations. How can five numbers, hardly understandable alone (except perhaps 0 and 1) be related in such a simple equation?

Here's a sentence which will resonate with anyone who considers themselves educated. Education is from the root word, *educare*, which means to draw out, like the way copper is drawn out into a wire. Copper is a *ductile* (from the same root word) metal which allows it to be pulled into wires of many different sizes. To educate is also to bring the light of wisdom into a person.

[page 25] It was my luck to have a few good teachers in youth, men and women who came into my dark head and lit a match. One of these was Mr. Satish Kumar, my biology teacher at Petit Séminaire. . .

What is the most dangerous animal in the zoo? Pi's father created a zoo in Pondicherry and Pi grew up in a house which had a gate that entered the zoo. Pi and his father knew. It was the one animal that could kill any other animal in the wild or in the zoo for that matter. To emphasize his point, Pi's father put up a dramatic display.

[page 31] Just beyond the ticket booth Father had had painted on a wall in bright red letters the question: DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS THE MOST DANGEROUS ANIMAL IN THE ZOO? An arrow pointed to a small curtain. There were so many eager, curious hands that pulled at the curtain that we had to replace it regularly. Behind it was a mirror.

One day Pi and his brother received an important lesson about the animals in their father's zoo. "A lesson that might save your lives," he told them seriously, while his wife tried to talk him out of giving their sons the lesson. The lesson was a live goat thrown into a cage with a starved tiger. They watched as the tiger streaked across the cage and devoured the goat. Their teary-eyed mother was furious at the father for what he'd done, scaring their sons like that. His reply was telling.

[page 36] "Gita, my bird, it's for their sake. What if Piscine had stuck his hand through the bars of the cage one day to touch the pretty orange fur? Better a goat than him, no?"

After the tiger demonstration, Pi's father took him to each of the animal cages, and explained the dangers that each of the animals posed to human beings, the lions, the bears, the hippos, the hyenas, the antelopes, the ostriches, the orangutans, etc. Pi had no way of knowing just how valuable this lesson was going to be when later he found himself stranded on a lifeboat with a 450-lb Bengal tiger, a spotted hyena, an orangutan and a zebra.

There was another bit of information that was to prove valuable to Pi on the lifeboat. It had to do with the lion-tamer at the circus. What is the most important thing that a lion-tamer has to do at the start of *every* performance? We've all seen them do this one thing, but just what is it? It is so important that their very lives depend upon them doing it. And yet few people know how important it is, and therefore could never be a lion-tamer. It is so simple it evades our notice. A lion or tiger will tear you to pieces if you fall into their cage or pit, not because it's hungry, but because you've invaded its territory.

[page 43] As an aside, that is why a circus trainer must always enter the lion ring first, and in full sight of the lions. In doing so, he establishes that the ring is *his* territory, not theirs, a notion that he reinforces by shouting, by stomping about, by snapping his whip. The lions are impressed. Their disadvantage weighs heavily on them. Notice how they come in: mighty predators though they are, "kings of beasts", they crawl in with their tails low and they keep to the edges of the ring, which is always round so that they have no place to hide.

While I have no special information on the details of the mauling of one of the Siegfried and Roy animal-trainer performers, it seems likely that in the design or the execution of the act for that one performance, the performer had not clearly established his territory in the sight of the tiger. One minor slip on this detail can be life-threatening even to a performer who is intimately familiar with the tiger.

Pi was a Hindu, a Christian, and a Muslim. His parents couldn't understand how Pi could belong to all three religions, but it made no difference to Pi. He saw all three ways as leading him to God. After he became a Christian he gave thanks to Krishna for having made it possible.

[page 58] I entered the church, without fear this time, for it was now my house too. I offered prayers to Christ, who is alive. Then I raced down the hill on the left and raced up the hill on the right — to offer thanks to Lord Krishna for having put Jesus of Nazareth, whose humanity I found so compelling, in my way.

Then he met a Sufi, a Muslim mystic, who had the exact same name as his biology teacher, Satish Kumar, a common name in the region, and who taught him about being a Muslim.

He called them Mr. and Mr. Kumar.

[page 61] Mr. and Mr. Kumar taught me biology and Islam. Mr. and Mr. Kumar led me to study zoology and religious studies at the University of Toronto. Mr. and Mr. Kumar were the prophets of my Indian youth.

When pleaded with by his parents to choose just one religion, his answer was that Bapu Ghandi said, "All religions are true." Pi said that he just wanted to love God. Each of the religions had individuals that shooed away or otherwise encouraged him to leave the mosque, the church, or the darshan. Pi simply found a way to avoid such people and continue to go to all three. He seemed able always to take life as he found it and make the best of it. Like when it came time for him and his family to leave India for Canada on a ship with many of the animals from the zoo that his father sold to zoos in North America.

[page 91] Animals were sedated, cages were loaded and secured, feed was stored, bunks were assigned, lines were tossed, and whistles were blown. As the ship was worked out of the dock and piloted out to sea, I wildly waved goodbye to India. The sun was shining, the breeze was steady, and seagulls shrieked in the air above us. I was terribly excited.

Things didn't turn out the way they were supposed to, but what can you do? You must take life the way it comes at you and make the best of it.

When the ship sank quickly in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, he was thrown overboard into a dangling lifeboat and bounced on the tarp covering it. Then a full-size zebra fell onto the tarp, breaking the middle seat of the lifeboat and the ropes from which it dangled in the air, and Pi hit the water with the detached lifeboat, which saved him from being dragged down with the ship. He saw a beloved tiger called Richard Parker from the zoo struggling to stay afloat nearby, and he blew his whistle to coax the 450 pound tiger to come aboard. At the last moment he realizes the folly of his automatic life-saving instinct — he remembered his father's lesson at the zoo and realized that, if Richard Parker got into the lifeboat, Pi would become "the next goat" as his older brother often threatened him with. But it was too late to stop it, and the tiger reached the boat and climbed under the tarp in the far end. Luckily Pi was there first and he had established his territory. He was going need every bit of animal training lore and knowledge of animals to survive the next day.

He was in a 27-foot long zoo containing a mother orangutan, a spotted hyena, a zebra with a compound fracture in one leg, and healthy, hungry Bengal tiger. He made himself a raft out of ringed life preservers and oars which allowed him to stay out of the boat while the tiger made mincemeat of the zebra, hyena and orangutan. But Pi's salvation required water and he dared to return to the boat in search of its stores. He found cans of water and most important, solar distilling equipment. These were small, inflatable rafts into which he poured seawater. During the heat of the day, the salty water would evaporate, condense overhead on a rubber cone, and drip down around the rim into a freshwater bladder below the seawater container. He had about a dozen of these which he inflated and strung out behind his raft. Each night he would pull them back, empty the bladders, and release them again to the ocean pasture. He milked them daily like a dairy man does his cows, only he received, instead of milk, life-giving fresh water.

Imagine Pi in the boat with his life-preserver's whistle taming the tiger. Marking off his half of the lifeboat and blowing the whistle. He needed the tiger to attempt to attack him so he could apply the most effective intimidation. He scraped a turtle shell and used it for a shield. When the tiger raked at him, his paws only clawed the shell, and Pi responded with a shrill blow of the whistle and the tiger shrank back. Soon Pi was off the makeshift raft and sleeping soundly in the lifeboat.

But his problems had only begun. He had barely enough food and water for himself, and, unless he fed the tiger, he would become food for the tiger, and he knew it. The stores also contained fishing gear and Pi became a fisherman. For the first time in his life, he had to kill a living animal, a fish, to survive. He tossed the first large fish he caught to Richard Parker who summarily gulped it down. Occasionally a flock of flying fish would pass over the boat and provide a quick afternoon snack of those he and the Richard Parker could knock down into the boat.

How the tiger got the name Richard Parker is an interesting story. Some of the best names come about from clerical mistakes. My own surname stemmed, as best I can reconstruct, from my German ancestor in 1721 arriving at the St. Charles Parish Courthouse in Hahnville and declaring "Wir heissen Matern." The little Cajun clerk who only spoke and wrote French, said, "Oui!" and wrote down the name he heard adding the silent 'h' and terminal 'e'. "Matherne" he replied (pronouncing it Mah TURN), and the German said, "Ja, Matern." The English-speaking residents who followed in the next 200 years began pronouncing it "Muh THURN" as everyone pronounces it today in Louisiana. So it came to be that, due to a clerical error, I have an Anglicized, Frenchicized, German name, and since I am, by heritage, an Anglicized, Frenchicized, German, it fits quite well. My ancestral history over the past three centuries is embodied in my surname today. According to official Indian documents, a hunter named "Thirsty None Given" found the tiger cub who grew up to be Pi's lifeboat companion and named it Richard Parker.

[page 133] The cub was found in a bush close by, meowing with fear. The hunter, whose name was Richard Parker, picked it up with his bare hands and, remembering how it had rushed to drink in the river, baptized it Thirsty. But the shipping clerk at the

Howrah train station was evidently a man both befuddled and diligent. All the papers we received with the cub clearly stated that its name was Richard Parker, and the hunter's first name was Thirsty and that his family name was None Given. Father had a good chuckle over the mix-up and Richard Parker's name had stuck.

Later, when the tiger had just feasted on the hyena, he turned his attention to Pi, whose every hair was standing on end. Surely it is all over, Pi was thinking, when a rat emerged from nowhere, ran the length of the boat and jumped atop Pi's head. Richard Parker stared at the rat as if ready to lunge for it, and Pi reached up, grabbed the rat, and tossed it to the tiger who downed in one bite, like one might an olive from a martini glass. Pi lived to fish another day.

The moment Pi decided to train Richard Parker was when he realized he needed the tiger — it kept him from despair and therefore alive — besides they were in the same boat, were they not? Pi had to tame the tiger or they would both die. To be alone he saw as a more formidable foe than the tiger.

[page 164] I had to tame him. It was at that moment that I realized this necessity. It was not a question of him or me, but of him *and* me. We were, literally in the same boat. We would live — or we would die — together. He might be killed in an accident, or he could die shortly of natural causes, but it would be foolish to count on such an eventuality. More likely the worst would happen: the simple passage of time, in which his animal toughness would easily outlast my human frailty. Only if I tamed him could I possibly trick him into dying first, if we had to come to that sorry business.

With that he mounted the seat, and with loud voice and whistle ready he proclaimed the opening act of the "Pi Patel, Indo-Canadian, Trans-Pacific, Floating Circus!" followed by multiple blasts on his tiger-taming whistle. The tiger roared, clawed in the air, and seemed ready to jump into the water, but eventually he backed off and dropped to the bottom of the boat. Pi launched a new plan to supplant the first plans of ways to kill Richard Parker. "Keep Him Alive."

And keep him and himself alive, Pi did. Here's his post-trip report with statistics comparing his staying-alive feat with other famous castaways in history and fiction.

[page 189] The Robertson family survived thirty-eight days at sea. Captain Bligh of the celebrated mutinous *Bounty* and his fellow castaways survived forty-seven days. Steven Callahan survived seventy-six. Owen Chase, whose account of the sinking of the whaling ship *Essex* by a whale inspired Herman Melville, survived eighty-three days at sea with two mates, interrupted by a one-week stay on an inhospitable island. The Bailey family survived 118 days. I have heard of a Korean merchant sailor named Poon, I believe, who survived the Pacific for 173 days in the 1950s.

I survived 227 days. That's how long my trial lasted, over seven months.

Pi's voyage was to be interrupted by an inhospitable island, but it took him some time to discover the life-threatening nature of the island. It was so dangerous to human life that *only* a man with a ferocious tiger could have survived the island. Had Pi been alone, he would have eaten his fill of the delicious vegetation, cooked a few easily caught small mammals, and bunked down to sleep on the island. Had he been alone and done the above, he would have disappeared without a trace by dawn!

The island seemed to be made completely of plant life. Some advanced kind of algae that formed into concentric tubes so that seawater went through the tubes's walls but the salt was filtered out and concentrated in one of the tube's walls while only freshwater was in the other tube.

Pi quickly discovered that he had stumbled onto an endless supply of fresh water in ponds throughout the island. In addition, saltwater fish which swam into these ponds, or were chased by sharks, quickly died and floated to the surface of the ponds, providing freshly killed fish for his larder. There were no bugs, insects, or wildlife of any kind on the island, except for the docile meerkats, a kind of prairie dog animal

which had never developed a fear of other animals because they lacked *any* predator on the island. Richard Parker soon regained all the weight he had lost on the long journey, and the shine was back on his furry coat. His diet of fish was quickly replaced by an endless supply of meaty meerkats. The tiger stayed on the island during the day, ate till he was full, and then returned to sleep in the lifeboat.

Pi likewise thrived on the island. He ate the freshwater side of the algae tubes and found them sweet-tasting and delicious. This he supplanted with dried strips of meerkat meat. Pi wished to sleep on the island, but he couldn't chance Richard Parker ingesting him as a midnight snack one night, so he remained on the lifeboat to sleep offshore of the island by night, and walked ashore only during the day while Richard Parker was roaming around the island eating meerkats on the island. While the tiger was busy eating, Pi explored the island and found it puzzling in many aspects. When a storm came, the island's vegetative foundation absorbed the waves and simply moved with the wind without any destruction. Pi called it a "Ghandian island" because it resisted the forces of the wind and sea by not resisting. But the most puzzling thing of all was that there were absolutely no other plant or animal life which lived on the island. Just the meerkats, and now him and a 450-lb Bengal tiger. How could this be possible? Pi wondered.

[page 271] Harder to understand was the island's complete desolation. I never saw such a stripped-down ecology. The air of the place carried no flies, no butterflies, no bees, no insects of any kind. The trees sheltered no birds. The plains hid no rodents, no grubs, no worms, no snakes, no scorpions; they gave rise to no other trees, no shrubs, no grasses, no flowers. The ponds harboured no freshwater fish. The seashore teemed with no weeds, no crabs, no crayfish, no coral, no pebbles, no rocks. With the single, notable exception of the meerkats, there was not the least foreign matter on the island, organic or inorganic. It was nothing but a shining green algae and shining green trees.

Pi said, "I made an exceptional botanical discovery. But there will be many who disbelieve the following episode. Still, I give it to you now because it's part of the story and it happened to me." In order to believe this story about the island, one must keep ever in mind that no one else has ever been marooned in a lifeboat with a 450-lb Bengal Tiger and lived to tell the tale. The presence of Richard Parker in the equation of the island, Pi, the meerkats, and the tiger is what allowed Pi to live to tell the story he reveals to us. Anyone without such motivation to avoid sleeping on the island would have never survived a single night to tell the story to someone else. It is an island which literally devoured all its previous discoverers.

Pi and Richard Parker were happy on the island. They were well fed with minimal effort and had a lot of free time. Pi decided to extend Richard Parker's training beyond the "do not eat me" basics he had focused on previously. He created a hoop and had the tiger jumping through hoops on the island. Then he decided he could sleep on the island and not worry about Richard Parker eating him only if he arranged himself a sleep place in one of the trees. Note that Richard Parker jumped from the lifeboat to the island first! That made it his territory, and Pi was aware of that aspect of wild animal behavior.

He got ready to go to sleep on the first night in his tree house bed and suddenly found himself covered with living meerkats. "I woke up at dawn covered from head to toe in a living fur blanket." He looked around and saw that *every other tree on the island was full of meerkats*, also taking up every vacant space on the tree limbs and branches. He saw no signs of any meerkats on the ground of the island.

[page 276] Some meerkittens had discovered the warmer parts of my body. I had a tight, sweaty collar of them around my neck — and it must have been their mother who had settled herself so contentedly on the side of my head — while others had wedged themselves in my groin area.

One night Pi was awakened by the racket and motion of agitated meerkats. They were all looking in the clear, moonlit night towards a nearby pond, forty-feet across, which was filling up with dead fish. At last the shark which must have chased them into the pond also floated up to the surface, seven feet long and

equally as dead as its prey. Pi expected the meerkats to run down to fetch the fish, but not a single meerkat left the tree. Very strange. None went down and all vociferously expressed their frustration at not going down. What was the invisible hand that stayed these otherwise wild and carefree animals?

With great difficulty Pi fell back asleep only be awakened at dawn by the meerkats scrambling down the trees to get to the pond. But it was empty! Except for a few stragglers which the meerkats dove to retrieve, there were none of the huge quantities of fish from the night before. And that large shark was no where to be found, not even its bones! Pi knew Richard Parker might have eaten some of the fish, but the entire pond full, not in just one night, not when he usually went to bed on the lifeboat after a day of eating meerkats to his heart's content. The solution to the puzzle was ominous when it came and caused Pi to leave the island immediately and forever. He said, "The answer to the mystery came sometime later, from deep within the forest."

Every biologist, even a beginning one like Pi, knew that a tree must reproduce, so he began looking for signs of fruit. Finally he found some black fruit in one tree.

[page 278] It wasn't the largest in the forest, or in its dead centre, or remarkable in any other way. It had good level branches, that's all. It would have made an excellent spot from which to see the sky or take in the meerkats' nightlife.

I can tell you exactly the day I came up on the tree: it was the day before I left the island.

So Pi climbed the tree with the black fruit and took one in his hands. The fruit was covered with leaves glued tightly together to form a ball. Slowly the fruit became smaller, the size of an orange, a mandarin, a cherry, and finally . . .

[page 280] And then it came to light, an unspeakable pearl at the heart of a green oyster.

A human tooth.

A molar, to be exact. The surface stained and finely pierced with holes.

Pi began to peel away the coverings of the other "fruit" and found a human tooth in each one, until he had a complete set of thirty-two human teeth. He was no doubt holding the sole remains of the only human being before him that left any sign of having visited this island. Like Pi, he had resided in the trees and after dying there, his body was slowly dissolved by the same process which happened on the floor of the island every night. The process which dispatched an entire 40-foot wide pond of dead fish in one night, bones and all. To confirm his suspicions, he dropped a meerkat one night to the forest floor and it whimpered on the fall down and then scampered quickly back up the tree. Then he tested the floor with his foot and received a scathing burn which no matter how he bandaged, washed, or put meerkat blood on, kept him awake most of the night. The last night he was to sleep on the island. The horrible answer dawned on him. The beautiful and lush island, which was so inviting and nourishing by day, turned into a devouring monster by night. It was definitely not a Ghandi island — it was a *Jekyll and Hyde island!*

[page 281. 282] The island was carnivorous. This explained the disappearance of the fish in the pond. The island attracted saltwater fish into its subterranean tunnels — how, I don't know, perhaps fish ate the algae as gluttonously as I did. They became trapped. . . . At night, some chemical process unknown to me but obviously inhibited by sunlight, the predatory algae turned highly acidic and the ponds became vats of acid that digested the fish. This was why Richard Parker returned to the boat every night. This was why the meerkats slept in the trees. This was why I had never seen anything but algae on the island.

Again Pi was faced with what to do with Richard Parker when he left. It would be so easy to push off the lifeboat during the morning right after the tiger left to hunt his daily fare of meerkats and then row away from the island. But that would be certain death for the tiger the very first night. Human beings may not

have the hunting prowess of tigers, but they do know a thing or two that no tiger could ever figure out. Pi could hatch the plan, but he could not bring himself to do it. As a human, he had something else that animals do not, compassion.

[page 283] I could not abandon Richard Parker. To leave him would mean to kill him. He would not survive the first night. Alone in my lifeboat at sunset I would know that he was burning alive. Or that he had thrown himself into the sea, where he would drown. I waited for his return. I knew he would not be late.

They drifted along, Pi and Richard Parker, till they finally made landfall on the coast of Mexico. The tiger jumped unceremoniously out of the lifeboat and disappeared into the jungle. No doubt he led a full tiger-life, but died without offspring in those jungles at an old age of 12 to 17 years. Pi was left without any evidence in the boat that there had been a tiger, a hyena, a zebra, and an orangutan in the lifeboat. There were a few small bones of meerkats, but they resembled any small animal bones. The pieces of algae tubes Pi had attached to the lifeboat ate through the rope on the first night at sea and may have begun to grow into another floating island by now.

The Japanese owners of the sunken ship sent two investigators to visit Pi in the hospital in Mexico. They wanted to hear his story, but found it too incredulous to believe. Finally, to get rid of them, Pi manufactured a shorter and more plausible version of the story which didn't involve a live Bengal tiger and had no carnivorous island components. This one they believed or seemed to. Luckily he received a tape of the conversation he had with them and this is provided in full for comic relief after one finishes reading this amazing story. Here's a short clip of the interchange between Pi and the two Japanese men, J1 and J2. Japanese language translations shown in italics.

[page 298]

Pi: "Nothing beats reason for keeping tigers away. But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater."

J1: "Calm down, Mr. Patel, calm down."

J2: *"The bathwater? Why is he talking about bathwater?"*

Pi: "How can I be calm? You should have seen Richard Parker!"

J1: "Yes, yes."

Pi: "Huge. Teeth like this! Claws like scimitars!"

J2: *"What are scimitars?"*

J1: *"Chiba-san, instead of asking stupid vocabulary questions, why don't you make yourself useful? This boy is a tough nut to crack. Do something!"*

J2: "Look! A chocolate bar!"

Pi: "Wonderful!"

[long silence]

J2: *"Like he hasn't already stolen our whole lunch. Soon he'll be demanding tempura."*

[long silence]

The only evidence Pi had was the meerkat bones, and he insisted that his father had no meerkats at their zoo, but the Japanese only replied, "We have no proof they were meerkat bones." Mr. Chiba even chimed in, "Maybe they were banana bones!" and was chided severely for that outburst. Well, you can imagine how far Pi got with the Japanese shipping men. They obviously didn't believe him and wanted to know what really happened, and so Pi make up a plausible story. Their final report ended with this admission: "Very few castaways can claim to have survived so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger." (Page 319)

How marvelous it was for me to discover that not all the islands of the world are charted and exist on our detailed satellite maps. Suddenly the world seems larger to me than it was before and certainly more mysterious. Huge island-size, totally plant-based ecosystems, about which nothing is known by

establishment science, are roaming the vast expanses of the Pacific Ocean. What an opportunity awaits for some entrepreneur to attach a floating city to one of these islands and thereby provide a renewal supply of fresh water, algae, and fish for the residents of the city. Not to mention the tremendous resource of automatic and hygenic organic and inorganic garbage disposal each night. How much freshwater or fish could one take from the island without killing it? We don't know.

We know little more about these islands than what is in this book — the assiduous recollections of an adult of his adventures as a 16-year-old Indian teenager. How much more there is for us to learn before we humans can live in concert with the plant life of such an island. Humans have shown that we require extensive and careful advance planning before the results of our cooperation will prove beneficial to both plants and humans. Let us hope that the explorers and entrepreneurs who finally locate one of these amazing islands will prove worthy of the task before them. That they will further our understanding and prove our ability to cooperate gently with the plant kingdom as befits our status as human beings on this truly robust and amazing planet we call Earth.

If Pi Patel has bamboozled us, it is truly a legendary bamboozlement, one for which we owe him a huge debt of gratitude!



----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. See my Essay, [Art Is the Process of Destruction](#), which expounds upon that theme.

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