

Religion, shipwrecks and an enormous tiger called Richard Parker ... It's all in *The Life of Pi*.

The book and its author

The Life of Pi tells the extraordinary story of Pi, a teenage boy from India, who is shipwrecked and finds himself trapped in a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean with a ferocious tiger. It is the third book by the Canadian author Yann Martel, and was published in 2001. Since then, it has sold over seven million copies worldwide, won several prizes and been translated into 41 languages. Martel is the son of a diplomat and as a child lived in Costa Rica, Canada, France and Mexico. After finishing university in Canada, he spent two years travelling round India and then decided to devote himself to writing.

The plot

In the first part of the book, we learn about Pi's childhood in the city of Pondicherry in India. His father owns and runs the city zoo and the family home is in the zoo complex. When they aren't at school, Pi and his brother help out at the zoo. Here, Pi comes to appreciate the beauty of nature and learns a lot about animal psychology and behaviour.

Religion is important to Pi too. Though his family is Hindu, he is curious about other religions and he makes friends with a Christian priest and a Muslim baker. To everyone's surprise, Pi declares himself to be simultaneously Hindu, Muslim and Christian. When his family and teachers ask him to choose just one religion, Pi refuses, saying 'I just want to love God'. From that moment, his family and teachers decide to let him make his own mind up about religion.

When Pi is 16, a new government is elected that his parents don't support. Worried about the future, Pi's parents decide to close the zoo and emigrate to Canada. Some of the animals are sold to zoos in North America and the family travel by ship to Canada taking the animals with them. On the way, there is a terrible storm and the ship sinks. Tragically, Pi's family and the ship's sailors all drown, but Pi finds himself in a lifeboat with a hyena, zebra, orang-utan and an enormous tiger. At first, Pi is terrified of the animals and jumps into the ocean. Then he remembers that there are hungry sharks in the water around him and realises his only option is to climb back into the lifeboat. One by one, the animals in the lifeboat kill and eat each other, till only Pi and the tiger are left. Fortunately for Pi, the tiger, who he names Richard Parker, is seasick and has no immediate interest in eating him.

As time goes by and it becomes clear that no ships or helicopters have been sent to rescue survivors, Pi decides to use his knowledge of animal psychology to stop Richard Parker attacking him. Using eye contact, a whistle and rocking the boat to make the tiger seasick, he sets out to show Richard Parker that he is the dominant animal on the lifeboat despite the tiger's far superior strength. Pi discovers a supply of food and water on the boat, but soon he needs to start catching fish to keep himself and Richard Parker fed.

Pi and Richard Parker spend 227 days in the lifeboat. They live through hunger, illness and exhaustion. They endure violent storms and the burning heat of the Pacific sun, but somehow they survive. At times, Pi finds comfort in his three religions, but at other times he is overcome with loneliness and despair. Finally, the Mexican coast appears on the horizon and everything changes. It would be a shame to give away the

ending, so you will have to read the book yourself to find out what happens to Pi and Richard Parker once land is in sight.

What do the reviewers think?

'It's a great book and I couldn't stop reading it, but I didn't want it to end either! As you read, you share Pi's emotional journey through hope, despair, exhaustion, loneliness and joy. There's one chapter where Pi sings "Happy Birthday" to his mother on the day that he guesses is her birthday, even though he thinks she is dead. It's a heart-breaking moment and it made me want to cry.'

Alex, 15

'I found some sections of the book very tedious and slow-moving. For me, there were too many chapters without any action and just long explanations of Pi's thoughts or his memories. Also, to be honest, I found the plot really unrealistic. I think the tiger would have eaten Pi straight away.'

Danny, 16

'What a fascinating book! I enjoyed the story, but I also learnt a lot about animal psychology, religion and how to survive a shipwreck (you never know, it might happen to you one day!). I would recommend this book to anyone, old or young, men and women. It's a good read!'

Paula, 18

Robin Newton