“Extraordinary . . . *Life of Pi* could renew your faith in the ability of novelists to invest even the most outrageous scenario with plausible life. . . . Although the book reverberates with echoes from sources as disparate as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Aesop’s Fables*, the work it most strongly recalls is Ernest Hemingway’s own foray into existentialist parable, *The Old Man and the Sea.*”

— NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

“An impassioned defense of zoos, a death-defying trans-Pacific sea adventure a la Kon-Tiki, and a hilarious shaggy-dog story . . . : This audacious novel manages to be all of these.”

— THE NEW YOKER

“*Life of Pi* is a real adventure: brutal, tender, expressive, dramatic, and disarmingly funny. . . . It’s difficult to stop reading when the pages run out.”

— SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

“A story to make you believe in the soul-sustaining power of fiction.”

— LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK REVIEW

“One of the strangest but most approachable novels in years. . . . *Pi* mixes yarn, fable, and morality tale.”

— THE ECONOMIST
TO THE TEACHER

Life of Pi quickly became an international bestseller when it was published in 2002. Narrated by a spirited sixteen-year-old boy named Pi Patel, this novel explores a diverse range of life experiences while taking readers on an unforgettable adventure.

Growing up in India, Pi has a great curiosity about the workings of the world. He is especially intrigued by his father’s zoo, where there is much to discover about survival. These lessons take on a new meaning when Pi’s family decides to emigrate to Canada. Their ship sinks during the journey, leaving Pi to fend for himself in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, stranded on a lifeboat with a 450-pound Bengal tiger as his menacing companion. He quickly realizes that the only way to survive is to make sure the tiger is more afraid of him than he is of it. Finding strength within himself, he draws upon all of his knowledge and cunning to stay alive, battling for food and shelter, overcoming storms and disasters, and, in the end, making a peace of sorts with both the tiger and the ocean.

A modern classic with more than one million copies in print, Life of Pi combines the best sort of storytelling with a profound perspective on life’s most compelling themes: faith and truth, man versus nature, science and religion, and innocence and experience. We hope this guide will serve you well as your students explore Pi’s world.

USING THE GUIDE

This guide is divided into three sections. “Reading and Understanding This Book” will help students with reading comprehension and conceptual appreciation. “Creative Topics” will enable students to think freely and associatively about the ideas and events experienced by the narrator. “Further Activities” is a brief supplement featuring activities that build vocabulary skills and further the students’ knowledge in a variety of disciplines encompassed by the novel.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING THIS BOOK

1. Discuss the significance of Pi’s name, including its mathematical implications and the historical reasons for its French references.

2. Chapters 15 through 20 delineate Pi’s religious conversions. What threads link his three religious identities? What enables Pi to embrace all three, rather than focusing on their differences?

3. What social strata are described in Pondicherry? Where does Pi’s family “rank” in terms of economics and status? What are their motivations for moving to Canada?

4. How does Pi’s educational experience compare to yours, both in and out of school?

5. Is Life of Pi a tragedy, romance, or comedy? Is Pi an archetypal literary hero or an anomaly?

6. Construct an outline of the novel’s major narrative peaks. How does the author address the concept of time? When does the author make use of flashbacks and memory to drive the novel’s exposition and resolution? Does Life of Pi appear to follow a traditional narrative arc?

7. Who narrates the italicized passages such as the one that comprises chapter 12? What is the effect of this shift in point of view?

8. Aside from his name, what human attributes does Richard Parker possess? Why did Pi try so hard to save him at first, and why does Pi profess devotion to him at the end of chapter 86?

9. Is Pi a reliable narrator? What do you think really happened to Pi and to the other members of the Patel family? Why don’t Mr. Okamoto and Mr. Chiba believe Pi’s tale? If the book weren’t labeled “fiction,” would you believe Pi’s story?

10. Does this novel have a happy ending? How did you react to Pi’s interview by the Japanese transport ministers? How does the grown-up version of Pi contrast with his little-boy scenes?

11. What tactics does Pi undertake to reduce the risks of malnutrition, dehydration, and exposure while at sea? What are his primary sources of knowledge during the voyage? Is his survival mostly due to quick thinking, luck, prayer, or courage? How is Pi able to undertake so many gruesome actions?
CREATIVE TOPICS

1. Yann Martel said in an interview, “The theme of this novel can be summarized in three lines. Life is a story. You can choose your story. And a story with an imaginative overlay is the better story.” In five paragraphs, summarize an event from your own life using precise accuracy. Next, recast this narrative as fiction, using the sort of “imaginative overlay” Martel admires.

2. Pi draws many parallels between the behavior of animals and humans. Discuss how the novel might unfold if it were narrated by one of the animals, particularly Richard Parker. How might the novel’s tone have changed if Pi’s sole surviving companion had been a zebra or Orange Juice?

3. How might you have coped with Pi’s situation? What are your personal strategies for facing fear?

4. Discuss the many uses of the word “survivor” in contemporary society. How is Pi’s survivorship different from that of participants in televised reality shows, or those who are interviewed by news reporters following perilous events?

5. Does Pi’s family resemble yours in any way? Who is your source of guidance and enlightenment in life? What is your equivalent to Pi’s zoo, where he discovers so much about the ways of the world?

6. Pi’s voice is politely understated, laced with a deadpan sense of humor and unflinching specificity. He also uses impeccable grammar. Choose a harrowing experience from the past year and describe it as Pi might have, noting the elements that make his voice such a distinctive one.

7. Toward the end of chapter 45, Pi “saw the first specimen of what would become a dear, reliable friend of mine…a large sea turtle.” Pi describes how the reptile’s grotesque-looking appearance defies its beautiful persona. In what other ways do “outer worlds” often contradict inner ones?

8. Chapter 90 contains the pivotal conversation between Pi and the mysterious blind man. Choose a portion of this dialogue to be read aloud by two students. What is the effect of hearing this discussion aloud? What is the reality of each speaker?

9. What survival tips would you add to those listed in chapter 58?

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. Define the following words: zoomorphism, catholicity, dorado, licit, tress, meerkat, arboreal, tarpaulin. Next, write a fictional two page survival story incorporating all eight words.

2. Research contemporary life in India. During what time period does this novel take place? How has India changed since Pi’s youth? What did you observe about India as seen through the eyes of Pi? Describe his favorite foods, the flora and fauna he sees there, and other aspects of his culture that add verisimilitude to his life.

3. Use an atlas or globe and trace Pi’s voyage. Chart the changes in climate, astronomical observations, water temperature, and topography (where applicable) that Pi would have experienced during this chapter of his life.

4. Through personal interviews or library research, create a profile and brief history of each belief system—Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam—embraced by Pi. In what geographic locations are these religions most prevalent? Does the novel reflect or contradict the teachings of these religions?

5. Among the “major lifeboat pests” accompanying Pi are a zebra, an orangutan, a hyena, and a tiger. Research these species’ behaviors both in the wild and in contemporary zoos. Does the author provide a realistic representation of how these four animals (or five, if Pi is included) would interact under these circumstances? What aspects and categories of zoology are represented by this menagerie?

6. Yann Martel studied philosophy in college. Choose two philosophers, from two distinct time periods, and consider whether Life of Pi underscores or refutes their tenets.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The child of diplomats, Yann Martel was born in Spain and raised in Costa Rica, France, Mexico, Alaska, and Canada. As an adult, he has lived in Iran, Turkey, and India. After studying philosophy, he worked at odd jobs until he began making a living as a writer at the age of twenty-seven, earning the prestigious Pushcart Prize early in his career. He now lives in Montreal, where he divides his time between yoga, writing, and volunteer work.

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