

The Life of Pi, by Yann Martel

reviewed by [Gordon Houser](#) in the [February 8, 2003](#) issue

Canadian writer Yann Martel, winner of the 2002 Booker Prize, sets up his delightful story with a clever "author's note" in which an elderly man in Pondicherry, India, tells the author, "I have a story that will make you believe in God." With little fanfare, he hooks the reader into a postmodern novel, with stories within the story, questions about the veracity of the story or storyteller, and an ending that teaches a lesson about belief.

Narrator and protagonist Piscine Patel, who shortens his name to Pi after being teased about the pronunciation of his first name (rhymes with hissing), grows up near the Pondicherry Zoo, which his father has founded, owned and directed. Pi offers fascinating facts and insights into zoo animals, which become especially pertinent in the story's second part.

In an arresting narrative voice Pi writes, "I was fourteen years old--and a contented Hindu--when I met Jesus Christ on a holiday." The boy ends up becoming not only a Christian but a Muslim as well, while remaining a Hindu. His three religious instructors meet with his parents to protest such audacity and soon get into an argument among themselves. Finally his father, who is not religious, says, "I suppose that's what we're all trying to do--love God."

While this may sound simplistic and naïve, it fits with two of the book's themes: that all life is interdependent, and that we live and breathe via belief. Elsewhere Pi claims atheists as "[his] brothers and sisters of a different faith. . . . they go as far as the legs of reason will carry them--and then they leap."

The bulk of the book concerns the 227 days Pi spends adrift in the Pacific Ocean after the Japanese freighter carrying his family and many zoo animals sinks. He is the lone human survivor on a 26-foot lifeboat, which he shares with a wounded zebra, a spotted hyena, a seasick orangutan and a 450-pound Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. Soon only Pi and the tiger remain, and Pi must find a way to survive not only hunger, the elements and shark-infested waters but also the constant fear that Richard Parker will make him his lunch.

Martel carries off this section with aplomb. He combines dramatic episodes, scientific knowledge, well-written hallucinatory passages, humor and gruesome detail to move the story along. Since the entire book is told in flashback, we know how things will turn out, yet the suspense still grips us.

The writing here is deceptively simple. Martel lets the winsome narrative voice and the intriguing plot carry us, all the while winking as he tosses out thoughts on the kinds of metaphysical questions humans have pondered for centuries. The story may not make us believe in God, but it certainly helps us enjoy asking whether we should.