

The Life of Pi: In a lifeboat alone with a tiger

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Directed by Ang Lee, screenplay by David Magee, based on the novel by Yann Martel

It is not easy to figure out what is taking place on this planet of ours. Certain people throw their hands up in the air in the face of the complexities and often painfulness of human circumstances. In the case of individuals, this is unfortunate and potentially tragic. Such an impotent and faint-hearted gesture becomes something more pernicious when artists and other public figures turn it into a positive program.

Life of Pi, directed by Taiwanese-born Ang Lee (*The Wedding Banquet*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Brokeback Mountain*), is based on the 2001 novel—winner of the Booker Prize—by Canadian author Yann Martel.

The book and film are told by an adult Piscine Molitor Patel (named after a Paris swimming pool, but known since childhood as Pi), now living in Canada, to a writer (Rafe Spall) on the lookout for a good story. The latter is assured that the tale will make him believe in God.

Pi (as an adult, Irrfan Khan) recounts—and we see—his early life in India, where his father operates a zoo in Pondicherry, an enclave in Tamil Nadu and a former French colony. Pi's father and mother are proud members of the post-independence "New India." His father in particular is a believer in rationality and science.

Pi, for reasons never explained, follows a different path. Not only does he adopt a religion, he becomes a devotee of several. To the consternation of his family (and the various clerics involved), he takes up Hinduism, Christianity and Islam simultaneously. He simply wants "to love God." Through the various faiths, we are led to understand, he comes closer to nature and his fellow creatures.

As conditions in India become more unstable in the late 1970s, Pi's parents decide the family should emigrate to Canada. They arrange to sell their various animals to zoos in North America and set sail with them aboard a freighter across the Pacific Ocean.

The bulk of the novel and film treats the consequences of a disaster at sea. An explosion apparently takes place on the vessel, which quickly sinks. By a quirk of fate (or...?), 16-year-old Pi (now Suraj Sharma) ends up the only human, a modern Noah, in a lifeboat with an injured zebra, a female orangutan, a hyena and a formidable Bengal tiger named Richard Parker. After a few violent encounters between the animals, only Pi and the 450-pound tiger remain. The boy retreats to a handmade raft dragged by the lifeboat.

Pi will spend 227 days on the open ocean, much of the time sharing the small boat with the tiger (his raft is eventually lost in a tempest). Without ever taming the ferocious creature, Pi learns how to coexist with it. He feeds the animal fish and other seafood, provides water and, at the same time, marks out his own territory and intimidates the tiger with the help of a whistle, a stick and aggressive, "super-Alpha" behavior.

Pi and Richard Parker undergo various experiences: an initially frightening school of flying fish, near submerging thanks to a curious whale, months of exposure to the punishing elements, the aforementioned storm, a brief stay on a floating island that proves to hold a sinister secret....

In the end, the boat drifts ashore in Mexico. When Pi tells Japanese officials (the shipping line was Japanese) his narrative about the tiger, the island, etc., they understandably fail to believe him. He tries another version, this one involving human brutality. That is more satisfying. However, neither story can be proven. Which do the officials prefer? The one about the animals. "And so it goes with God," says Pi.

The novel and film have reached a substantial audience. It is not so difficult to see why. The book is pleasantly and humanely written, it reads easily for the most part, with a good deal of description of exotic natural wonders (although Martel is no stranger to cliché and banality). Up to a point, the author is able to interest the reader in turning the page. Ang Lee captures some of this in the film, with the aid of remarkable contemporary film technologies.

Life of Pi urges a tolerance of peoples and creeds, and its sympathy for Hindus and Muslims no doubt strikes a chord with readers and audience members disgusted with the xenophobia and Islamophobia that dominates the Western media (and the efforts of a vile breed of "atheists" à la the late Christopher Hitchens). The passages on animal behavior and psychology have their own interest.

Ang Lee (born 1954) is an accomplished filmmaker, who has already established his ability to take on various epochs—including Regency England (Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*), the suburban US in the 1970s (*The Ice Storm*), Civil War America (*Ride with the Devil*) and China on the eve of World War II (*Lust, Caution*)—and genres. It is less clear, apart from an obvious concern with tolerance for "difference" (ethnic, gender, etc.) of various kinds, what important themes guide him. He seems something of a half-empty vessel, who comes under the influence of more assertive personalities, for better or worse.

Despite the beauties of India, the impressiveness of the Bengal tiger and gorgeous seascapes, Lee's new film is ultimately tedious.

It is not especially believable, and this reviewer at least has a weakness for relations between human beings. Ishmael had an entire crew in *Moby Dick*, and even Robinson Crusoe had Friday. As for demonstrating the existence of God, the threshold of proof here seems set very low. And, after all, if one *invents* a series of fictitious miracles and *then presents them* as evidence of a divinely ordered universe, is that likely to convince anyone but the most credulous?

Life of Pi, book and film, is not subtle in its advocacy of religious faith and irrationalism. To give the reader a sense of it, in Yann Martell's novel, there are 128 references to God, 54 uses of "religion" or "religiously," another 13 mentions of faith and 10 uses of "mystery" or "mysteriously." Poor old science comes in for 7 references, and they are not generally friendly ones.

Martell (born 1963), the son of French-Canadian parents, explained in an interview, "I'm from Quebec, which is the most secular province in Canada, was the most Catholic, then underwent something called the Quiet Revolution, which was in a matter of a year or two, people left the church in droves.... My parents are children of that revolution, so I grew up in a completely secular household and I studied philosophy at university, which is a great way of making you an atheist, a rabid atheist, or at the very least, a rabid agnostic." In other words, there is a parallel between Pi's upbringing and Martell's.

The novelist went on to explain how a trip to India changed his outlook. "So from someone who comes from a Western background, where we are so taught to be reasonable, we are so pushed to be reasonable, do things for, you know, rational reasons...it's desiccating, it dries you out, which is why I think so many people go to India and in a sense go wonderfully crazy. They suddenly want to become Buddhists, they want to become Hindus, they start wearing, you know, orange robes and, you know, praying to elephant-headed gods and they do yoga and they, you know, do funny things. Well, it's because you've been dried out and suddenly you're drenched in water, it refreshes you."

With apologies to Martell, the times had a great deal more to do with his change in philosophy than a mere visit to India. He is hardly the only artist currently at work to draw unhealthy or empty-headed conclusions from the failure of 1960s' radicalism (in different ways, *vide* Lars von Trier and Michel Houellebecq).

As Martell explains and *Life of Pi* illustrates, reason and science do perfectly well for everyday life, but they cannot begin to deal with larger questions. In the novel, Pi describes with a certain fondness his high school biology teacher, "an active Communist" and "avowed atheist," but condescendingly underscores his limitations. "When Mr. Kumar visited the zoo, it was to take the pulse of the universe, and his stethoscopic mind always confirmed to him that everything was in order, that everything *was* order. He left the zoo feeling scientifically refreshed." The reader will get the general idea.

However, if reason and science prove unreliable or worse in regard to the most difficult problems, as Pi is to discover out on the Pacific, then, in fact, they are of no real value at all. The important workings of the universe are inexplicable. God works in mysterious, even tigerish ways, and our lot is to be tested, Job-like. As Lee explained to an interviewer, "It is a journey, as a test of the

strength of our faith, of how firm we believe in it."

In Martell's case, religion is not Marx's "sigh of the oppressed," it is the response of an overwhelmed, rather intellectually lazy, perhaps panic-stricken middle class individual to the current state of the world. Social forces have to be at work, because the novel's level of reasoning is feeble. It is the equivalent of something along these lines: "That pond is shaped like a penguin! It has to be heavenly design." Or, "I don't understand how my television receives images...well, there must be a God!"

This is comforting to certain people. As a certain Canadian prime minister once told the nation after suffering an electoral defeat, "The universe is unfolding as it should." Terrible things may be going on, but they can somehow be accounted for as part of a greater scheme, above and beyond one's control. Of course, to the mundanely inclined, a Canadian author writing about a boy alone in a small boat with a tiger might bring to mind the precarious situation of a nation stuck on the same continent with the ever more bellicose United State of America.

And there's the by now extremely tired business about "stories." No story captures the truth, one or another fiction merely proves more useful in getting us over the rough spots of existence. (Have we heard this somewhere before? It's possible.) That being the case, the livelier one seems preferable.

In the novel, when his Japanese questioners inform Pi that they want the "straight facts," without "invention," he replies smugly, "I know what you want. You want a story that won't surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won't make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story.... You want dry, yeastless factuality."

In my view, people who find no drama in everyday life *and lives*, and feel obliged, for example, to ski down Mount Everest to keep themselves occupied and excited, are not to be trusted about important matters.



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