

*Life of Pi* by Yann Martel (Canongate)

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Apart from winning this year's Booker Prize, *Life of Pi* has been so unanimously praised for being enchanting, riveting, life-affirming, and, notoriously, making one believe in God, that I came to it ready to hate its guts.

And indeed, there is much in it to confirm the prejudices of the curmudgeonly critic: the young Pi, an Indian boy implausibly named Piscine Molitor Patel after a Parisian swimming pool, is so indiscriminately loving that he declares himself to be Hindu, Christian and Muslim at the same time, to the understandable perplexity of his parents and the chagrin of a pandit, an imam and a priest. His defence is that "I just want to love God", which disarms parents and religious leaders alike, and is, one suspects, intended to do the same to the reader: "You can't reprimand a boy for wanting to love God. The three wise men pulled away with stiff, grudging smiles on their faces."

The critic, his own smile stiffening grudgingly at this universal benevolence, may find young Pi's cuteness cloying; at times he comes across as the Little Lord Fauntleroy of Pondicherry: "Life is so beautiful that death has fallen in love with it, a jealous, possessive love that grabs at what it can."

Gradually, however, the book wins one over by the persistence of its charm -- and, be it added, by the sheer storytelling skill of its author. Also, more crucially, the narrative toughens up as Pi ends up in a lifeboat with an adult Bengal tiger, after the ship transporting him and his zoo-keeping family to Canada has abruptly sunk.

The tiger, the last survivor of the Patel family zoo (a zebra, a hyena and an orang-utan having been dispatched in unsparing detail), is called Richard Parker. The name, however, the consequence of a clerical error, does not signify a humanising of the animal. Indeed, one of the insights Pi shares with us is that the most dangerous animal on earth is "the animal as seen through human eyes. . . . It is an animal that is 'cute', 'friendly', 'loving', 'devoted', 'merry', 'understanding'."

Richard Parker, then, is neither cute nor friendly nor understanding. He is "a fierce, 450 pound carnivore. Each of his claws was as sharp as a knife." For much of the book, Pi's main worry is being eaten. And if he does develop a wary concern for Richard Parker, it is, paradoxically, through a sense of self-preservation, "because if he died I would be left alone with despair, an enemy even more formidable than a tiger."

Pi's problem, which generates much of the considerable narrative energy of the first half of the novel, is to define, to the satisfaction of Richard Parker, a safe territory for himself on the lifeboat. In order to do this, he has to establish himself as the alpha male, that is, get the tiger to defer to him rather than eat him: "It was rights I needed, the sort of rights that come with might. It was time to impose myself and carve out my territory."

Martel is endlessly inventive in devising ways of doing this, none of them cute. The process entails turning the gentle, vegetarian Pi into a red-in-tooth-and-claw carnivore, but not as a Lord-of-the-Flies way of scoring points against the thin veneer of civilisation, rather as a recognition that, precious as life is, it will preserve itself at any cost, including the lives of other creatures. For a book ostensibly so gentle, *Life of Pi* is at times very

violent. It is distinguished from other books of its kind, though, by preserving its reverence for life even in the midst of wholesale carnage.

Given that Pi's ordeal lasts 227 days (or, more to the point, a hundred chapters and 319 pages), it is not surprising that the narrative flags at times; what is surprising is that it does not do so sooner or more frequently. At times one can sense Martel thinking up another complication to pepper up the narrative: a storm, a carnivorous island populated with thousands of meerkat, a hallucinatory meeting with another castaway. He does all of these with great verve and energy, and the incidents are certainly not boring in themselves: it is just that they come to acquire a kind of one-damn-thing-after-another predictability.

But before the reader can get seriously restless with the apparently interminable series of disasters, Martel wraps it all up with a minimum of fuss. "I am a person who believes in form, in the harmony of order." Pi tells us, lamenting the unceremonious departure of Richard Parker into the Mexican jungle. "Where we can, we must give things a meaningful shape."

In this instance, meaningful shape is given by the reappearance of human rationality, in the figures of two Japanese officials sent to interrogate Pi as part of an inquiry into the sinking of the ship. This unexpected coda is hilarious, the solemn but playful young Pi running circles around the equally solemn and totally unplayful Japanese officials. It provides Martel with an opportunity to confront readers who are still unconvinced by his extremely tall tale. "You want a story that won't surprise you," Pi tells the officials and such readers, "You want dry, yeastless actuality."

Pi then retells his tale "without the animals", producing indeed a somewhat yeastless if hardly less gory tale. In his report, the Japanese official surprisingly comes to prefer the version with animals.

"Nothing beats reason for keeping tigers away," the precocious Pi tells his baffled inquisitors. "But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater."

Bathwater is a very mild metaphor for what this novel offers, and universe hardly an overstatement. For all its rambunctious excess, this is, yes, an enchanting and riveting book. If it doesn't make you believe in God, it won't be for want of trying.