

A matter of  
perspective: the  
invention of a story in  
martel's life of pi



In Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi*, Piscine "Pi" Patel is forced to relay his life story to condescending Japanese skeptics who refuse to believe his tale; they refer to it as nothing more than a fictional invention. Pi somewhat agrees with the men, but challenges their disbelief by saying, "Isn't telling about something—using words, English or Japanese—already something of an invention? Isn't just looking upon this world already something of an invention?" (Martel 302). Through this statement, the reader is reintroduced to a theme of the novel: the overall power of storytelling. Life really is a story, the invention of one's own mind; Pi knows this, and the events of the novel show that his life is certainly a colorful, albeit seemingly hard to believe, tale. If life truly is a story, then the different aspects of this story are certainly a matter of perspective. One of the largest debates young Pi Patel must face is the nature of his religious practices. Instead of following one set of religious principles, Pi finds comfort in three completely different religious sects: Christianity, Islam, and the religion somehow instilled in him by his overly non-religious family, Hinduism: "So it went the first time I saw a Muslim pray—quick, necessary, physical, muttered, striking. Next time I was praying in a church—on my knees, immobile, silent before Christ on the Cross—the image of this callisthenic communion with God in the middle of bags of flour kept coming to my mind" (60). Upon confrontation by the local leaders of his three religions as to why he feels the need to practice multiple belief systems, Pi asserts "I just want to love God" (69). Being as young as he is, Pi does not see anything wrong with worshiping in three different ways; he only feels a drive to have a connection with a higher power through whichever means make this happen. At first, Pi is fascinated by the many stories the different religions have to offer. In this respect, the religious

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themes of the novel seem to play into the powerful influence that storytelling has to offer. Though these stories are widely accepted as a factual basis on which religion is based, this was certainly not always the case. Because of these stories, told countless times to innumerable amounts of people, an invention was created: a complete religion with dedicated followers. Another aspect of Pi's life that is powerfully affected by the influence of stories is his relationship with animals. Having grown up in a zoo run by his father, exotic animals were a common sight to young Pi, and he formed his own relationships with them. These seemingly simple and childish relationships are stretched thin by his father: I learned the lesson that an animal is an animal, essentially and practically removed from us..." (31). By showing Pi how violently a tiger kills a goat for food, his father instills a sense of fear into his son in hopes that he will never take a situation with a potentially dangerous animal like a tiger lightly, because they are "very dangerous" (34). During his time stranded on the ocean with the Bengal tiger, humanized by the name Richard Parker, Pi is able to form a sense of mutual respect with the tiger. This could potentially be due to his father's extensive training with the animals over the years. A more likely explanation for this seemingly unbelievable phenomenon, though, is the fact that Pi apparently did not heed the warning in his father's story and gave human qualities to the animals around him, mainly Richard Parker. With no human companionship to associate with, one is prone to make due with one's surroundings and anything with which some type of bond can be made. No matter which case is more correct, Pi is able to survive because of the relationship he forms with Richard Parker. Life of Pi is a work of metafiction.

There is story upon story, upon yet another story involved within this novel.  
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In the Author's Note at the very beginning of the novel, Martel is approached by a man promising that his story will make one believe in God. The story of Pi's upbringing is told, alongside a journalist's attempt at getting a story from an older Pi. Even in regards to Pi's story of survival itself, he is asked by the Japanese men that visit him after he is found to change what really happened with the animals to something more believable involving human beings. There are several different layers to this novel, yet they all seem to play together in an altogether successful way to reveal aspects of the story that would otherwise have been left out. Stories, inventions created by their authors, no matter how big and involved or small and simple, play a large role in how we see our everyday lives. In fact, just living out our lives on a daily basis and processing the massive influx of information we receive makes us the authors of our own stories. What happens to us is completely different in someone else's eyes. Pi states this fact in a very clear way: "The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn't that make life a story?" (302). Stories can be as basic or as outlandish as we feel the need to make them. As proven by Pi Patel, though, life truly is a story; all we have to do is tell it.