

READING GROUP GUIDE

God, survival, and tiger behavior. It's hard to imagine a more invigorating combination of discussion topics. We hope that the following questions will enrich your reading of Pi's fantastic journey. After all, Pi didn't have to make his voyage alone; neither should you. May this guide serve as a pleasant companion.

1. In his introductory note Yann Martel says, "This book was born as I was hungry." What sort of emotional nourishment might *Life of Pi* have fed to its author?
2. Pondicherry is described as an anomaly, the former capital of what was once French India. Do you think the town made a significant difference in Pi's upbringing?
3. In the Author's Note, Mr. Adirubasamy boldly claims that this story "will make you believe in God," and the author, after researching and writing the story, agrees. Did Pi's tale alter your beliefs about God?
4. Chapters 21 and 22 are very short, yet the author has said that they are at the core of the novel. Can you see how?
5. Early in the novel, we discover that Pi majored in religious studies and zoology, with particular interests in a sixteenth-century Kabbalist

and the admirable three-toed sloth. In subsequent chapters, he explains the ways in which religions and zoos are both steeped in illusion. Discuss some of the other ways in which these two fields find unlikely compatibility.

6. In the Author's Note, Martel wonders whether fiction is "the selective transforming of reality, the twisting of it to bring out its essence." If this is so, what is the essence of Pi and of his story?

7. There is a lot of storytelling in this religious novel. Is there a relationship between religion and storytelling? Is religion a form of storytelling? Is there a theological dimension to storytelling?

8. Pi's full name, Piscine Molitor Patel, was inspired by a Parisian swimming pool that "the gods would have delighted to swim in." The shortened form refers to the ratio of a circle's circumference divided by its diameter, the number 3.1415926 . . . , a number that goes on forever without discernable pattern, what in mathematics is called an irrational number. Explore the significance of Pi's unusual name.

9. One reviewer said the novel contains hints of *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Pi himself measures his experience in relation to history's most famous castaways. How does *Life of Pi* compare to other maritime novels and films?

10. How might the novel's flavor have been changed if the sole surviving animal had been the zebra with the broken leg? Or Orange Juice? Or the hyena? Would Pi have survived with a harmless animal or an ugly animal, say a sheep or a turkey? Which animal would you like to find yourself with on a lifeboat?

11. In chapter 23, Pi sparks a lively debate when all three of his spiritual advisors try to claim him. At the heart of this confrontation is Pi's insistence that he cannot accept an exclusively Hindu, Christian, or Muslim faith; he can only be content with all three. What is Pi seeking that can solely be attained by this apparent contradiction? Is there something common to all religions? Are they "all the same"? If not, how are they different? Is there a difference between faith and belief?

12. What do you make of Pi's assertion at the beginning of chapter 16 that we are all "in limbo, without religion, until some figure introduces us to God"? Do you believe that Pi's faith is a response to his father's agnosticism?

13. Among Yann Martel's gifts is a rich descriptive palette. Regarding religion, he observes the green elements that represent Islam and the orange tones of Hinduism. What color would Christianity be, according to Pi's perspective?

14. How do the human beings in your world reflect the animal behavior observed by Pi? What do Pi's strategies for dealing with Richard Parker teach us about confronting the fearsome creatures in our lives?

15. Besides the loss of his family and possessions, what else did Pi lose when the Tsimtsum sank? What did he gain?

16. Nearly everyone experiences a turning point that represents the transition from youth to adulthood, albeit seldom as traumatic as Pi's. What event marked your coming of age?

17. How do Mr. Patel's zookeeping abilities compare to his parenting

skills? Discuss the scene in which he tries to teach his children a lesson in survival by arranging for them to watch a tiger devour a goat. Did this in any way prepare Pi for the most dangerous experience of his life?

18. If shock hadn't deluded him, do you think Pi would have whistled and waved at Richard Parker? What would you have done?

19. Pi imagines that his brother would have teasingly called him Noah. How does Pi's voyage compare to the biblical story of Noah, who was spared from the flood while God washed away the sinners?

20. Is *Life of Pi* a tragedy, romance, or comedy?

21. Pi defends zoos. Are you convinced? Is a zoo a good place for a wild animal?

22. What did you think of Pi's interview with the investigators from the Japanese Ministry of Transport? Do you think Pi's mother, along with a sailor and a cannibalistic cook, were in the lifeboat with him instead of the animals? Which story do you believe, the one with animals or the one without animals? When the investigators state that they think the story with animals is the better story, Pi answers "Thank you. And so it goes with God." What do you think Pi meant by that? How does it relate to the claim that this is a story "that will make you believe in God"?

23. The first part of the novel starts twenty years after Pi's ordeal at sea and ends with the words "This story has a happy ending." Do you agree?