understanding and faith.”

Publishers Weekly

said Martel takes the reader on “a fabulous romp through an

imagination by turns ecstatic, cunning, despairing and resilient.”

The New York Times

observed that as a zookeeper’s son, Pi is “attuned to the intricacies of interspecies cohabitation,” and he uses this knowledge to gain power over the tiger who accompanies him, and thereby keep himself alive. The reviewer further claimed that since Pi is “a practitioner of three major religions who also happens to have a strong background in science,” his “story inevitably takes on the quality of a parable.” Martel's book, the review continued, “could renew your faith in the ability of novelists to invest even the most outrageous scenario with plausible life.”

Not all critics were so impressed.

The Boston Globe said that its “deadpan seriousness ... can grow wearisome” while Pi discusses his three religions and that when finishing the book, it is “hard not to bristle with the skepticism that comes from having weathered a hard sell for the Lord.” The reviewer went on to say that the novel is most successful when it is both “serious and silly at the same time.” In assessing itsbalancing of fantasy and precision, many critics professed their delight in Life of Pi by discussing the fairly

straightforward narrative of Pi's journey that he tells to two researchers when he lands in Mexico.

Salon.com said that “this played-down version makes Pi's true tale, thanks to Martel's beautifully fantastical and spirited rendering, all the more tempting to believe.”

The New York Times said “it's a testimony to Martel's achievement that few readers will be tempted to think” that the more straightforward narrative is more honest than the fantastic one.

**Life of Pi: Criticism Establishing Faith Despite Opposing Realities: The Truth of Fiction in Life of Pi**

At a superficial level, Yann Martel’s Life of Pi is a simple tale of endurance after a shipwreck. However, there is much more to the novel than that. Ultimately, Martel has created an allegory for something deeper, which sets it apart from more straightforward, journalistic-style survival tales. The added twist of having a 450-pound Bengali tiger in the lifeboat adds an unreal Calvin and Hobbes element; on a literal level, a teenage boy relates to a tiger during a months-long adventure at sea, and from this he somehow learns the necessities of survival. But to summarize Life of Pi as a boy and a tiger’s tale of survival is to overlook one of its main themes—the role of religious tales in helping mankind find faith. Pi ultimately relies on his own amalgamation of religions for the faith he needs to cope with the harsh reality of survival in a lifeboat and, afterwards, with his everyday existence as an orphan in a foreign land. Without that faith, he is doomed. At its heart, Life of Pi is a deeply religious book that sets out to show that faith depends on stories for its existence. Without stories, mankind would not have the faith necessary for survival.

Since there are animals involved, one may be apt to view Life of Pi as a fable, which is often an indicator of a religious or moral theme. But the tale is a bit too long and pays too much attention to realistic detail to be a fable. Furthermore, while Pi is able to communicate with Richard Parker, the tiger does not speak a human language; speaking animals are often a criterion for fables.

If Life of Pi is not a fable in the classic sense of the word, and is too long to be a parable—the most likely genre classifications that allow for a tale to be included in a religious canon—is it fair to relegate the work as common “fiction”? The problem is that this would imply that the book is mere fancy, a concoction of a fertile imagination and nothing more. Can a work openly address religion and God and also be considered a work of "fiction"? Is it possible to classify Life of Pi then as “religious fiction”? Labelling a religious work “fiction” opens a can of worms, setting the obdurate theist against the equally stubborn atheist, both slugging it out without realizing that the two are not necessarily incompatible. From the believer's point of view, labelling a religious work as "fiction" diminishes the "truth" of the theology it address. How can a work be regarded as "fiction" and still be seriously considered as a religious text? Regardless of this apparent contradiction, Life of Pi is an enthusiastically religious tale as well as a work of fiction. What’s more, the work stands as a statement on the importance of fiction in religious belief; in order to have faith in a religion, mankind must suspend disbelief and have faith in many stories that to all logical reason should be viewed as fictional.

Many readers intent on enjoying Life of Pi as an adventure tale might casually overlook Pi’s curiosity about, and reverence for, the three major world religions, as if Pi’s all-embracing acceptance of different faiths is not a central theme of the work. How can an author make constant observations on life and death without revealing the religious beliefs of the person who narrates? Pi’s Hindu background, his forays into Christianity and Islam and the faith these elicit are ultimately as responsible for his survival as is his knowledge of zoology and animal behaviour. In fact, if one ultimately chooses to believe Pi's alternate story of survival—the one without Richard Parker—that he “concocts” to mollify the officials investigating the sinking, then one must allow that it was Pi’s faith in religious tales that helped him to keep his sanity and cope with what actually occurred on the lifeboat.

Yann Martel deliberately left the ending obscure, with no one tale predominating as the absolute “truth.” Ultimately, each reader must decide what the truth is for him or her, much in the manner that Pi does. Pi has a talent that many adults lack: he is able to comprehend the world without prejudice. This child-like, credulous quality is what allows him to delve into different religions, accepting them for what they are, while his teachers quibble over the superiority of one particular faith over another. There is a pungent sense of irony when Pi deadpans, in all innocence: “Mr. and Mr. Kumar were the prophets of my Indian youth.” Although the two are indistinguishable in name, they (as well as Father Martin and Pi’s belief in Lord Krishna) represent opposing worldviews. A non-judgmental protagonist, Pi is able to comprehend that there is one truth behind the creeds of both Mr.

Kumar and Mr. Kumar. Unlike most adults, this adolescent is able to see the inherent beauty and universal truth behind each faith without ranking them. This open-armed acceptance of differing faiths causes chagrin in the religious leaders whom he befriends. However, Pi is wiser than the adults. In this respect, the narrative voice expressing perplexity at the absurdity of adults is akin to that in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s The LittlePrince Pi instinctively senses, much like Sri Ramikrishna, to whom his father deridingly compares his son, that all religions are paths to one central truth. Without being aggressive or disrespectful, Pi easily counters his Mother’s arguments that he should choose one faith from the many, here metaphorically referred to as nations. “If there’s only one nation in the sky, shouldn’t all passports be valid for it?” Pi asks his mother. Although Pi accepts the inherent truths behind different religions, he still judges the “tales,” so to speak, on which they are based. When Pi first confronts Christianity, for instance, he remarks on the paucity of narrative splendor in the Passion. Christian tales do not have length and embellishment comparable to those in the Ramayana.

I asked for another story, one that I might find more satisfying. Surely this religion had more

than one story in its bag—religions abound with stories.... Their religion had one Story, and to

it they came back again and again, over and over. It was story enough for them. Pi comprehends instinctually that it is not one particular tale that is important; rather it is the need for each

individual to have faith in a story, almost any story, that's representative of his or her religious. Additionally, one can have faith in a scientific explanation of nature; it is acceptable to deny God. Ultimately atheism is also an act of faith in what cannot be proven—the non-existence of God. Pi remains non-judgmental so long as someone can use a philosophy or creed—any philosophy or creed—as a means to faith. He reserves his disapproval for agnostics, or those who cannot accept any faith or explanation: “Doubt is useful for a while.... But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation.”

Pi understands the importance of varying interpretations; his faith in the power of the interpretations

themselves helps him survive, both mentally and physically, on the lifeboat. While the importance of his zoological knowledge and experience with wild animals cannot be overstated, Pi clings to faith—a faith that is inherent in all the religious tales he has studied—in order to overcome his plight. Whether these religious tales are fact or fiction is unimportant, so long as they help him cope. And as part of his coping mechanism, he also needs to create a (perhaps) fictional account of the survival.

The delineation between fact and fiction is murky from the outset of the novel; the reader cannot immediately ascertain whether the “Author’s Note” which precedes the tale is simply Martel's fictional prelude to more fiction, or if it is indeed his statement of truth. Although cleverly cloaked as the confession of a struggling author grappling with finding a subject for his second novel, the incidents that Martel—a real person—relates are fictional, as is the character who proclaims, “I have a story that will make you believe in God.” In blurring the distinction between reality and fiction, Martel is, ultimately, making a statement on the need of all religions to relate a tale which clarifies, or attempts to explain, life and death. In order to believe in God, one must suspend rational skepticism and accept the fantastic, and one must do so without dismissively relegating the tale to the genre classification of “fiction.” This does not mean that to be religious we must believe that man was literally created from mud, for instance, or that Noah was responsible for saving humanity. Rather, a

person of faith can use these tales, without taking them literally, as instruments to strengthen their belief system; the tales are metaphors for universal truths, and their incredulous nature forces a person to suspend rational belief in order to have a glimpse of the unknowable.

Pi’s own survival adventure is also a blurring of fact and fiction; it reads like a biblical narrative, an extended parable complete with wild animals and elements of the story of Noah and the Ark or Jonah and the Whale. The diversion or interlude of the carnivorous island can be viewed as an allegory for the Garden of Eden and Man before the Fall. This "Paradise" crumbles when Pi discovers the "forbidden fruit" containing the teeth of a previous human inhabitant of the island. Whether one sees parallels between Pi’s island experience and the Book of Genesis, Pandora’s Box of Greek mythology, or even Bluebeard of Charles Perrault’s tales, the result is the same: the tale is too phantasmagoric for the rational, skeptical mind to accept literally. The officials sent to interview Pi in Mexico refuse to believe tales that defy logic. Instead they prod him: “But for the purposes of our investigation, we would like to know what really happened,” they ask the bedridden Pi.They want a story with less “invention” and more "facts." The story Pi ultimately relates for these skeptics is a straightforward narration of survival, cannibalism and savagery. While it is easy for the investigators to accept this unexpurgated explanation, it is painfully difficult for Pi; to him, this is the “invented” story, the true "fiction." The alternate narration—in many ways the most "believable"—is ultimately so unpalatable to Pi himself, that he quite possibly relegates it to a spot deep in his subconscious. Instead, he prefers the fantastic extended parable of existence between species which makes up

the bulk of the book. In the preferred tale, different species of herbivore and carnivore, representing different positions on the food chain, adapt to an environment of deprivation and mutual existence. The tale of naked, brutal survival and “murder,” a word that by definition only applies to the human species, is ultimately neglected precisely because it does not inspire faith.

These two opposing tales of survival—one cold and empirical, and the other inspirational—both share the same kernel of truth, much like how the differing religious stories of the Ramayana and Passion attempt to bring us all closer to a universal Truth through their different interpretations. While we can view both of Pi’s tales as subjective interpretations of reality, ultimately it is unimportant whether they are truth or fiction, so long as we can find the inspiration in them to have the faith to endure. Why should we, like the agnostic, refuse to believe any of the plethora of stories at humankind’s disposal and relegate ourselves, in Pi's words, to “dry, yeastless factuality"?

**A Christian Parable**

In Yann Martel’s Life of Pi, the novel’s protagonist, Piscine Molitor, relates an anecdote of how he came to be known by his nickname, Pi. When he first entered elementary school, a schoolmate immediately began calling him “Pissing,” a denigrating name that stuck with him throughout primary school, much to Pi’s great humiliation. When he reached secondary school, however, he resolved to overcome this problem: insisting on being called Pi, he drew the Greek symbol for pi on the blackboard of his classroom for his teachers and classmates to see, and from that point on he would be known to everyone as Pi. This small anecdote of Pi’s triumph over a childhood suffering serves to foreshadow the bigger triumph to come: Pi’s surviving as a castaway, against all odds, in the Pacific Ocean for 227 days. This anecdote, along with his experiences at sea, brings to light the parallels of Pi’s life with the life of Jesus Christ, particularly with respect to Christ’s passion, death and resurrection.

When Pi first experiences the abuse of being referred to as “Pissing,” he alludes to the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ to illustrate his own humiliation and his ultimate triumph: he refers to the classmate who gave him that name as his “Roman soldier,” and he says he wore his nickname “like a crown of thorns.” By successfully renaming himself and emerging anew with the nickname Pi—a name that would hold for the remainder of his life—Pi facilitated his own symbolic resurrection. The name itself—Pi—comes from the Greek letter pi, a letter closely associated with the circle, a geometric symbol which is often used to represent the idea of eternity and therefore, of God. Likewise, in mathematics, pi is used to represent an irrational number—that is, a number that goes on for eternity. By taking a name that symbolizes eternity, Pi’s “resurrection” effectively comes to symbolize—like Christ's resurrection, in Christian doctrine—eternal life. Also, that Pi chooses such a significant symbol for his name is strongly reminiscent of the appellation “the Alpha and the Omega” attributed to Christ (Rev. 1:8). So by the time the tanker carrying Pi and his family sinks, and Pi is left alone with Richard Parker in Part II of the novel, the parallels between Pi and Christ have been established, and the progression of Pi’s trial at sea can be more readily viewed as a retelling of Christ’s own suffering, death, and resurrection. In addition to the anecdote of the origin of Pi’s nickname, Martel establishes other parallels between Pi’s character and the figure of Christ. In Part I of his narrative, Pi establishes that he is a deeply spiritual person with an insatiable hunger for knowing God—so much so that he combines the practices of three different religions into his own daily practice. Already equipped with an extraordinary spirituality and strong faith in God, it takes an extraordinary event for Pi’s faith to be tested. During his 227 days as a castaway, he suffered

immensely, both physically and spiritually. Even through his suffering, however, he strived to maintain his faith in God through the daily practice of religious rituals, but he admits that his faith was continually tested. He says, “I would point at the sky and say aloud, ‘THIS IS GOD’S EAR!’ And in this way I would remind myself of creation and of my place in it.... But ... God’s ear didn’t seem to be listening. Despair was a heavy blackness that let no light in or out.” However much he experienced this sense of despair, though, he ultimately succeeded in not letting it defeat him: “The blackness would stir and eventually go away,” he says, “and God would remain, a shining point of light in my heart.” Pi is able to cling to his belief in God, even amidst the moments when he feels forsaken and utterly alone. This illustration of conflicted faith in the face of such extraordinary suffering echoes the complexity of Christ’s own spiritual conflict during his long and painful crucifixion. In the Gospel of Mark, 15:34, Christ calls out to God, as he is dying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” At the same time, He is shown to still believe in the ultimate goodness of God, and He calls upon God to forgive His murderers: “Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Ultimately, according to Christian teaching, Christ's resurrection from the dead is an act that forms the basis of humanity’s salvation from death. His resurrection prefigures the resurrection of all those who believe in Him; that is, a faithfulness to God ensures the defeat of death.

For Pi, faith in God is also the root of his own salvation from the spiritual death of despair that threatens him throughout his ordeal. Pi himself does not physically die as a result of his suffering, but when he arrives on the shores of Mexico he has experienced a spiritual death brought on by the loss of his family and the actions he undertook in order to survive. He says, “My suffering left me sad and gloomy,”—a severely understated description of his utter feeling of loss and despair. However, he is able to survive this death and “come back to life” by a “steady, mindful practice of religion.” In essence, he achieves a spiritual resurrection by never giving up on his belief in God, by refusing to give up his faith. Like Christ’s resurrection, Pi’s symbolic resurrection is a direct result of his own faith in God. The parallels between Pi and Christ continue into Part III. Early in the novel, Pi describes Christ as “a god who spends most of his time telling stories.” Like the New Testament’s Christ, Pi plays the storyteller in Part III. And like the lessons of Christ’s parables, the ultimate lesson behind Pi’s stories become the heart of the meaning to be found in this novel. In Part III, Pi tells two very different stories of his time as a castaway: the story of the tiger, which is a fanciful and ultimately life-affirming story, but which tests the listener’s faith in its veracity; and another

more realistic but much less enjoyable version, in which Pi witnesses the murder of his mother, and commits murder and cannibalism himself. Pi tells both of these stories to the Japanese businessmen who interview him, and who initially question the believability of his first story. The second story deeply disturbs the interviewers, and they are unable to determine which story is true. Pi gives them no clues, but he asks which story they think is “the better story.” They choose the story with animals as the better story, and he answers them, “And so it goes with God.” In essence, the novel can be read as a parable about faith in God. The account of the businessmen’s choosing of “the better story”—and Pi’s answer to them—serves to fulfill Pi’s own previous account of his survival: ultimately, for Pi, it is his conscious belief in the “better story”—that fantastic story of the existence of God, which can neither be confirmed or invalidated—that affords hope for something bigger than his suffering, mortal, human existence. Faith in that story is at the root of his own spiritual resurrection from the spiritual death. Faith, like the faith that Christ showed at his mortal death, enables Pi to survive.

The lesson Martel offers is that those who choose to believe in God choose between two stories that are ultimately unprovable—that a God exists, or that a God does not exist. The choice to believe in God is ultimately a choice made against what Pi refers to as the “dry, yeastless factuality” of predictable believability. It is the choice of “the better story”—that story which offers the simple but life-sustaining element of hope.

Works Cited Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version. NY: American Bible Society, 1989.