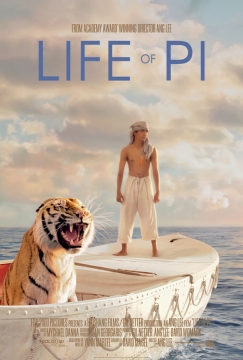
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**[Arne De Boever](http://lareviewofbooks.org/contributor/arne-de-boever) on Life of Pi**

**Allegories in an Emergency: Yann Martel's "Life of Pi"**

April 24th, 2013 [reset - +](http://lareviewofbooks.org/review/allegories-in-an-emergency-yann-martels-life-of-pi)

PERHAPS THE BIGGEST SURPRISE at the 2013 Oscar ceremony was that Ang Lee beat out Steven Spielberg for Best Director with his adaptation of Yann Martel’s novel *Life of Pi*. Martel’s novel was itself a surprising Man Booker Prize award winner in 2002. You may remember that a controversy followed: according to some, Martel’s book, about a boy in a lifeboat with a tiger, was suspiciously similar to that of Brazilian author Moacyr Scliar’s 1981 novella *Max and the Cats*, about a man in a lifeboat with a jaguar. In a short essay titled “[How I Wrote *Life of Pi*](http://www.powells.com/fromtheauthor/martel.html),” Martel has accounted for the influence that Scliar’s novel — or rather, what he recalls as John Updike’s negative review of the novel in *The New York Times Book Review* — had on him. (In fact, Updike never seems to have reviewed the book at all, and the only review that ran in *The* *Times* was positive.) Martel — who claims he only read *Max and the Cats* after the accusations of plagiarism surfaced in 2002 — borrowed Scliar’s basic premise, trying to turn it into a novel that was more successful than the one Updike had allegedly reviewed:

The novel, as far as I can remember, was about a zoo in Berlin run by a Jewish family. The year is 1933 and, not surprisingly, business is bad. The family decides to emigrate to Brazil. Alas, the ship sinks and one lone Jew ends up in a lifeboat with a black panther. What displeased Updike about the story? I don’t remember him being clear about it. Was it that the allegory marched with too heavy a tread, the parallel between the black panther and the Nazis too obvious? Did the premise wear its welcome out? Was it the tone? The style? The translation? Whatever it was, the book fatigued Updike but it had the effect on my imagination of electric caffeine. I marvelled. What perfect unity of time, action and place. What stark, rich simplicity. Oh, the wondrous things I could do with this premise. I felt that same mix of envy and frustration I had felt with Mishima’s [*The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With the Sea*](http://www.powells.com/cgi-bin/biblio?show=trade%20paper:new:0679750150:12.00), that if only I had thought of it I could have done something great with it. But — damn! — the idea had been faxed to the wrong muse.

After a conversation with Martel, Scliar ultimately decided not to pursue the matter; Martel credits him in the “Author’s Note” introducing his book as having provided “the spark of life” for the story of *Life of Pi*.

As many have pointed out, Scliar’s and Martel’s novels, in spite of their obvious similarities, are ultimately quite different works, and I’m not interested in reopening the question of Martel’s potential plagiarism here. What does interest me is how the difference between the novels is sometimes characterized: whereas Martel’s novel (and Lee’s film) is viewed as a fantasy merging the natural and the supernatural, Scliar’s is a political tale about Nazism. On the one hand, we have a magical realist fiction about animals and gods; on the other, a political fiction. However, there may be something much more political about *Life of Pi* than has been acknowledged, and it may have been precisely this that set the novel apart when it was first published in 2001.

*Life of Pi* tells the story of a young Indian boy named Piscine “Pi” Molitor Patel who survives for 227 days at sea after the ship that was supposed to take him, his family, and his father’s zoo animals from India to Canada sinks. As if the story of Pi’s survival weren’t already miraculous enough, the reader is asked to believe that Pi’s companions in the lifeboat included a hyena, a zebra with a broken leg, an orangutan, and an adult Bengal tiger. At the very end of the novel, it’s revealed that the animals in Pi’s fabulous survival story may also have been standing in for human beings. In this version of the story, after the ship goes down Pi finds himself in a lifeboat with his mother, a sailor with a broken leg, and the ship’s French cook. The cook cuts off the sailor’s leg to use it as bait. After the sailor dies, Pi’s mother catches the cook eating some of the sailor’s flesh. She and the cook get into an argument, and the cook kills Pi’s mother by cutting off her head. He then lets Pi kill him, who eats his heart and his liver. “Solitude began. I turned to God. I survived,” Pi confesses. Which of these versions of the survival story is the true one? We’re never sure, and thus the tension of allegory — a literary mode in which truth and fiction are held in suspension together — is introduced.

Martel’s novel came out in September 2001, a month that is now synonymous with international terrorism. Upon its original publication, *Life of Pi* appeared to be far from the traumatic realities of the post-9/11 world. Its popular spin on magical realism was untimely, especially in an era when, once again, the validity of the novel as a genre was up for reconsideration. “When the novelists went into newsprint about September 11,” [Martin Amis noted](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/jun/01/philosophy.society) in one of several infamous pieces published after the terror attacks and later collected in his 2008 volume *The Second Plane*, “there was a murmur to the effect that they were now being obliged to snap out of their solipsistic daydreams: to attend, as best they could, to the facts of life. For politics — once defined as ‘what’s going on’ — suddenly filled the sky.” In such a context, a fable that begs its readers to believe a miraculous survival story, and wants to make them believe in God to boot (as Martel’s “Author’s Note” announces), was unlikely to gather much critical approval. Another way of looking at it, of course, is that the naïve fiction that *Life of Pi* offered may have been exactly the kind of comforting “ideology” that the world was in need of post-9/11. It may have been precisely because it enabled us to believe in a reality that was different from the one in which we were living, in other words, that the novel was so popular.

At the end of the day, however, both these attitudes toward literature in the age of terror — the one that says that belief is the thing we need, and the one that says that belief is the last thing we need — understand *Life of Pi* in the same way: as an argument for belief — even if they judge that belief differently. But one could wonder whether that is a correct assessment of *Life of Pi* as a novel. Literature and religion are different, after all. How is that difference parsed in Martel’s book? And what might be the significance of this difference to the post-9/11 world?

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The story of Pi’s survival at sea is preceded by 36 introductory chapters in which Pi discusses his childhood in India in the mid-1970s, his father’s zoo, and his love for zoology and religion. In these chapters, it is revealed that Pi’s fantastic plight does indeed have a political origin. As Pi notes early on in the novel, the mid-1970s were “troubled times” in India. In 1975, after she had been found guilty of electoral fraud, Indira Gandhi declared a brutal state of emergency in which her political enemies were imprisoned, constitutional rights were suspended, and the press was placed under strict censorship. Pi’s father ultimately decides that he has had enough, and that the family will emigrate. Undemocratic politics are bad for the family business:

The life of a zoo, like the life of its inhabitants in the wild, is precarious. It is neither big enough a business to be above the law nor small enough to survive on its margins. To prosper, a zoo needs parliamentary government, democratic elections, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association, rule of law and everything else enshrined in India’s Constitution.

It’s because of this familiar politico-economic argument — “bad [read: undemocratic] politics are bad for business” — that the family sets sail for Canada.

Now, to come back to the comparison to Scliar’s novel: here too, the novel’s central character, the young Max Schmidt, has to leave the country where he was born, in this case due to the rise of Nazism (Schmidt is denounced to the secret police after having an affair with a married woman). Nazi Germany, of course, is one of the privileged sites for the analysis of what political theorists call “state of emergency”: a situation or state in which the normal rule of law is suspended in the name of a national emergency or security situation. The work of the German legal scholar Carl Schmitt, who joined the Nazi party in 1933, famously defined the sovereign as “he who decides on the exception.” And the post-9/11 period, too, has been analyzed as a “state of exception” or “emergency”: the United States responded to the terrorist threat, as Judith Butler puts it in the opening pages of her book *Precarious Life*, by “heightened nationalist discourse, extended surveillance mechanisms, suspended constitutional rights, and developed forms of explicit and implicit censorship.” In October 2011, Mark Danner published an essay called “[After September 11: Our State of Exception](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/oct/13/after-september-11-our-state-exception/?pagination=false)” in *The New York Review of Books*, characterizing the post-9/11 era as “these years during which, in the name of security, some of our accustomed rights and freedoms are circumscribed or set aside.” The September 2001 appearance of Martel’s novel, with its faint echoes of Scliar’s Nazi tale, at the dawn of this “*different time*” (as Danner puts it) is, if nothing else, a historical irony worth noting.

In Lee’s film, news of India’s state of emergency reaches us through the radio. The film includes a dinner table scene where Pi’s father announces that the family will leave India. There are no images of Indira Gandhi, or of the brutality she visited upon her people. The novel does not include such scenes either, but in the film the dire political situation is further eclipsed by a romantic story that is not in the novel: Pi falls in love with a young girl who’s a dancer, and when the film ultimately shows him on the departing ship, mournfully looking back toward India, we feel it is very much the girl who is on his mind, and not national politics.

Although Pi’s family emigrates from India in an attempt to leave the state of exception behind, this turns out to be easier said than done. When the ship that is supposed to take the family from India to Canada sinks, Pi ends up alone in a lifeboat with a tiger (the tiger having eaten the other animals that were also originally in the boat). Students of political theory will have no difficulty recognizing in this narrative development a predicament that’s not unrelated to Schmitt’s “state of exception”: the so-called “state of nature”, a concept most closely associated with Thomas Hobbes’s great work of political theory *Leviathan* (1651).

Whereas the Schmittian “state of exception” marks the suspension of the legal order in the name of an emergency or security situation, the Hobbesian “state of nature” is chronologically *prior* to the legal order. Characterized by Hobbes as a state of war in which human beings relate to each other like wolves and live in permanent fear of being killed, this is a state from which humans liberate themselves by forming a contract with each other. It’s through entering into the contract that we are supposed to be able to leave our animal selves behind. Seen in the light of this intellectual history, *Life of Pi*’s long, poetic meditations on animal life could arguably be read as critical supplements to a tradition of political theory in which animals, as representatives of Hobbes’s vicious state of nature, have featured quite prominently, and often negatively, as the kind of life that must be excluded from the legal and political order. If these two “states” can be brought together, it becomes possible to read Martel’s novel as a story about a human being trying — and failing — to escape from the state of exception: fleeing emergency only to fall prey to the dangers of nature.

If Pi finds himself, at sea, in something like the state of emergency that his family was trying to escape, he is still, even after he has safely reached the coast of Mexico (where his lifeboat ultimately washes up) and moved to Canada, unable to leave the state of emergency fully behind. Martel’s novel contains clear indications that Pi is traumatized by what happened to him. When the narrator of *Life of Pi* first goes to meet Pi to talk about his miraculous survival — in the film, the meeting is set in Montreal; in the novel, it is in Scarborough, a Canadian city whose name evokes trauma — he notes that it is a day with “mild fall weather,” yet Pi “puts on a big winter parka with fur-lined hood” for a short walk to a diner. A few pages later, when he is recalling a conversation they had at Pi’s house, he points out another oddity: “his cupboards are jam-packed. Behind every door, on every shelf, stand mountains of neatly stacked cans and packages. A reserve to last the siege of Leningrad.” These details indicate that Pi, more than 20 years after his survival, has still not come to terms with what happened to him in the lifeboat. His relation to the weather and to the primary needs of his body — food — is abnormal, compulsive. It’s the state of exception all over again, this time in the form of an internalized trauma: Pi is living, as it were, in a psychic state of emergency.

Except for a few tears that accompany Pi’s testimony, Lee’s film surgically removes any signs of psychic distress from its representation of the title character. In all respects, Lee’s Pi appears to be a well-adjusted individual. There are no outward signs of trauma: no food cluttering his house, no winter coats on days with mild weather. This has some consequences for how we understand the therapeutic effect of Pi’s survival story. In the film, telling the story about the animals appears to have been an effective means for Pi to work through his trauma. The film has a relatively happy ending: when Pi asks his interviewer which story is the better story, we agree with the interviewer that it is the story with the animals, and we see Pi’s survival as the evidence of its therapeutic value. We are willing to believe in the story, because it saved Pi’s life.

When in the novel, however, readers are begged, along with the Japanese officials who have come to interrogate Pi, to believe the animal story, this is much harder to do, since there we receive evidence that the story has *failed* to save Pi’s life: he is still traumatized. In fact, Martel’s book gives the distinct sense that it’s precisely the telling and retelling of the story with the animals that may have *reinforced* Pi’s trauma. When Pi confesses, toward the end of the novel’s second part, that he is “a person who believes in form and the harmony of order,” it’s very difficult to believe, in spite of (or precisely because of) all of the cues we have been given, that the narrative of *Life of Pi* can really provide such consolation:

Where we can, we must give things a meaningful shape. For example—I wonder—could you tell my jumbled story in exactly one hundred chapters, not one more, not one less? I’ll tell you, that’s one thing I hate about my nickname, the way that number runs on forever. It’s important in life to conclude things properly. Only then can you let go.

Unsurprisingly, the novel itself will end up comprising exactly 100 chapters. But that doesn’t mean we have to give in to its desire to give the events it narrates a “meaningful shape.” After all, the belief it asks us to accept permanently excludes, or excepts, the reality of the situation — the fact that Pi’s story may be masking a horrific reality involving murder and cannibalism — from Pi’s life-world. It asks us to believe in certain of the values we hold dear (animals are not really the vicious creatures Hobbes makes them out to be; humans are not, at base, murderers and cannibals), but at the cost of denying a reality that does not always confirm these values. This repressive attitude risks producing yet more trauma when the harsh reality is finally exposed.

*Belief* thus comes to operate in tension here with *fiction*; the comforting narrative that Pi presents is undermined by *Life of Pi*’s very status as a novel. Martel includes, in a third and final section, a transcript of the interview between Pi and two officials from the Japanese Ministry of Transport who have come to question him about why and how the ship sank. It’s in response to their insistent questions — they don’t believe the story with the animals — that Pi tells them the other story.

Lee includes this other version of the story (with some adjustments) as well, but this tension between belief and fiction operates in an entirely different way in the film. There, the story with the animals appears to have saved Pi from trauma, and so we happily choose to believe in it, preferring religious myth to literary allegory. In the novel, the story with the animals appears *not* to have saved Pi from trauma, and so we begin to wonder about how Pi’s insistence on belief may have actually reinforced his precarious condition. Perhaps it is time to break with belief, Martel’s novel covertly suggests: to properly introduce the tension of allegory into the survival story’s representation, and to see whether that may be more effective, as far as working through trauma goes.

Given how the state of emergency figures in all of this, we should probably consider the political implications of the tension between belief and fiction, myth and allegory, that we find in Martel’s novel but that is rendered ineffective in Lee’s film. Going back to the political context in which *Life of Pi* was first published, one might wonder whether the novel was actually asking a prescient ethical question: how are we going to respond to the state of exception in which the United States landed after 9/11? Will we respond with “belief,” with a quasi-religious attachment to values that, because of the realities they exclude, risk ultimately leaving us even *more* traumatized? Or will we respond with the tension between belief and non-belief proper to literary allegory — a mode of representation that still allows for imaginary values, but this time with at least a consideration of realities that might contradict them? Might this latter option allow us to ultimately develop an attitude that is more open to what we, because of our strong attachments, are ordinarily unwilling to see? These are ethical questions that pertain to how we want to live our lives and respond to the emergencies that regularly plague them. They are also political questions that, in a historical era riddled with crises, emergencies, and exceptions of all kinds, present themselves ever more insistently. Martel’s novel asks these questions; Lee’s film, for all its other admirable qualities, doesn’t.