**Life of Pie – By: Yann Martel Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

Yann Martel was born on June 25, 1963, in Salamanca, Spain, to Canadian parents. When Martel was a young boy, his parents joined the Canadian Foreign Services, and the family moved frequently, living in Alaska, France, Costa Rica, Ontario, and British Columbia. Martel went on to study philosophy at Trent University in Ontario, where he discovered a love for writing. After graduating in 1985, Martel lived with his parents and worked a number of odd jobs while continuing to write fiction. He published a collection of short stories, *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios,* in 1993 and a novel,*Self*, in 1996, but neither book received much critical or commercial attention. In 2002, however, Martel’s international literary reputation was sealed with the publication of *Life of Pi,* a runaway bestseller that went on to win the prestigious Man Booker Prize (awarded each year to the best English-language novel written by a Commonwealth or Irish author) and had since been translated into thirty languages.

*Life of Pi* is set against the tumultuous period of Indian history known as the Emergency. In 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty of charges related to her 1971 election campaign and was ordered to resign. Instead—and in response to a rising tide of strikes and protests that were paralyzing the government—Gandhi declared a state of emergency, suspending constitutional rights and giving herself the power to rule by decree. The Emergency lasted for eighteen months and was officially ended in March 1977 when Gandhi called for a new round of elections. The historical legacy of the Emergency has been highly controversial: while civil liberties in this emerging democracy were severely curtailed and Gandhi’s political opponents found themselves jailed, abused, and tortured, India’s economy experienced a much-needed stabilization and growth. In *Life of Pi,* Piscine (Pi) Molitor Patel’s father, a zookeeper in Pondicherry, India, grows nervous about the current political situation. Speculating that Gandhi might try to take over his zoo and faced with depressing economic conditions, Pi’s father decides to sell off his zoo animals and move his family to Canada, thus setting the main action of the novel into motion.

Though only a relatively brief section of *Life of Pi* is actually set in India, the country’s eclectic makeup is reflected throughout the novel. Pi is raised as a Hindu but as a young boy discovers both Christianity and Islam and decides to practice all three religions simultaneously. In the Author’s Note, an elderly Indian man describes the story of Pi as “a story that will make you believe in God,” and *Life of Pi* continuously grapples with questions of faith; as an adherent to the three most prominent religions in India, Pi provides a unique perspective on issues of Indian spirituality. India’s diverse culture is further reflected in Martel’s choice of Pondicherry as a setting. India was a British colony for nearly two hundred years, and consequently most of the nation has been deeply influenced by British culture. However, Pondicherry, a tiny city in southern India, was once the capital of French India and as such has retained a uniquely French flavor that sets it apart from the rest of the nation. Perhaps reflecting Yann Martel’s own nomadic childhood, Pi Patel pointedly begins his life in a diverse cultural setting before encountering French, Mexican, Japanese, and Canadian characters along his journey.

*Life of Pi* can be characterized as a postcolonial novel, because of its post-Independence Indian setting as well as its Canadian authorship. Like many postcolonial novels, such as those of Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez, *Life of Pi* can also be classified as a work of magical realism, a literary genre in which fantastical elements—such as animals with human personalities or an island with cannibalistic trees—appear in an otherwise realistic setting. Martel’s novel could equally be described as a bildungsroman (a coming-of-age tale) or an adventure story. *Life of Pi*even flirts with nonfiction genres. The Author’s Note, for example, claims that the story of Piscine Molitor Patel is a true story that the author, Yann Martel, heard while backpacking through Pondicherry, and the novel, with its first-person narrator, is structured as a memoir. At the end of the novel, we are presented with interview transcripts, another genre of nonfiction writing. This mixing of fiction and nonfiction reflects the twist ending of the novel, in which the veracity of Pi’s fantastical story is called into doubt and the reader, like Pi’s Japanese interrogators, is forced to confront unsettling questions about the nature of truth itself.

Many critics have noted the book’s resemblance to Ernest Hemingway’s novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. Both novelsfeature an epic struggle between man and beast. In *The Old Man and the Sea,* a fisherman struggles to pull in a mighty marlin, while in *Life of Pi,* **Pi and Richard Parker struggle for dominance on the lifeboat. Both the fisherman and Pi learn to respect their animal counterparts; each pair is connected in their mutual suffering, strength, and resolve. Although they are opponents, they are also partners, allies, even doubles.**

**Furthermore, both novels emphasize the importance of endurance. Because death and destruction are inevitable, both novels present life as a choice between only two options: defeat or endurance until destruction. Enduring against all odds elevates both human characters to the status of heroes.**