

BOOK REVIEW OF YANN MARTEL'S *LIFE OF PI*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Humans are considered as the most perfect creatures physiologically and psychologically to survive and socialize with one another. However, sometimes people do not realize that there is an enormous power that governs the universe and everything in it. How the planets rotate in the solar system around the sun; how the seasons change; and how everything happens perfectly are the evidences that show the power beyond humans' control. From this evolves the belief in God as the creator and controller of the universe. When people are able to do something, they tend not to feel the intervention of God in their work and forget to be grateful, but when people feel powerless or are approaching death, then they feel the force beyond their control of this life, which is God. Besides humans also want answers to the questions that are beyond their intellectual reach. Obviously science can not provide answers. Because everything comes from God, only God knows the absolute truth. Such understanding leads to something that people call religion. That is why humans really need religion to satisfy their spiritual thirst and to meet the spiritual needs of human beings.

Basically all religions are the same. They teach people to believe in God. All of them teach kindness and respect to parents and fellow human beings. They suggest to give charity and not steal or fornicate. Religions lead their followers to walk in the right way. Religion with the most followers include Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism and Buddhism. A person usually embraces

only one religion and is supposed to be like that. The said religion is usually attached to the person since he was born. However every person has the right to decide for himself which religion he wants to believe. Through a religion, a person tries to understand the meaning of life and what is happening in his life.

Literary works can offer the best representation of life, and a novel is one kind of literary works that is closest to the public because the storyline is not far from the reality of people's lives. A novel can also give a moral message with intangible religious values, including the belief in God. One of the novels that tell the power of God in human's life is Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. This novel is about a young Indian boy, Piscine Molitor Patel (Pi) who is in search of a belief to follow in life. Confusion causes Pi to try to embrace all the new religions he recently knows and alternately believes to be right. His confusion about religions is still going on until he is adult. This novel tells not only about religion but also about human's trust in God. These things lead to the conflicts in this story and make the novel interesting to examine more deeply.

1.2 Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to give a review on *Life of Pi*. What will be discussed mostly in this study are the strengths and weaknesses of this novel through the discussion of its intrinsic elements: theme, plot, setting, character and style.

1.3 Biography of Yann Martel

This description is taken from <http://www.gradesaver.com/author/yann-martel/> accessed on April 15th, 2013.

Yann Martel was not a popular author. He was born on June 25, 1963, in Salamanca, Spain. His parents were there while Martel's father was on a scholarship to complete his doctorate. Martel's family traveled a lot because his father was a teacher and a diplomat. Martel therefore grew up and spent his childhood living in a variety of different countries, including Costa Rica, France, India, Iran, Mexico, Turkey, Canada, and the United States. His parents, civil servants, were of French-Canadian descent, and their family eventually settled in Montreal.

He attended Trinity College School in Port Hope, Ontario from 1979 until his graduation two years later. He continued on and studied philosophy at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. While beginning his writing career, Martel took various jobs such as tree planting, dish washing, and working as a security guard. At the age of 27, he committed himself to writing.

Martel published his first work, *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios and Other Stories*, a collection of four short stories, in 1993. It received warm critical reception, although it did not sell well. His first novel, *Self*, was published three years later, to more mixed reviews, and to similarly small sales. It is a fictional autobiography of the first thirty years of the narrator's life and involves two spontaneous gender changes.

After these two disappointments, Martel traveled to India to work on a third novel and figure out where his life was headed. He quickly realized the

novel he was working on was going nowhere - but then he remembered something he had read about years before, and the idea for *Life of Pi* came to him.

The novel was rejected by at least five London publishing houses before being accepted by Knopf Canada which published it in September 2001, and it won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction the following year and also became an international best-seller. Many critics praised the book's ability to suspend disbelief even as it tells an amazingly fantastical tale. Those that had problems with the book most often referred to what they saw as Martel's heavy-handedness with the issue of belief in God, which they considered to underestimate both literature and religion. Other critics, however, praised Martel's handling of the potentially controversial religious material. After his book achieved popularity, a famous director, Ang Lee made it into the film, and his movie also achieved a huge success and earned 11 Oscar nominations in 2013 and scooped four trophies in the Visual Effects Society Awards in the same year.

Martel currently lives in Montreal, although he frequently lives internationally. In 2002 and 2003, Martel worked as a professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at the Free University of Berlin, Germany, and now he has become a famous and successful author.

2. Summary of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

Life of Pi is a fantasy adventure novel. This book tells about an Indian boy from Pondicherry, Pi Patel, who has discussed problems of spirituality from an early age. Pi grew up as Hindu but discovers the Catholic faith at the age of 14

from a priest by the name of Father Martin. He is soon baptized. He then meets Mr. Kumar, a Muslim of some standing and converts to Islam. Therefore, he openly practices all three religions avidly. When the three religious teachers meet up with his parents at the zoo, they demand that Pi choose a single religion.

His adventure begins when he and his family move from India to Canada in 1977. He and his family go abroad by a freighter named *Tsimtsum*. In the middle of the night, there is a big storm that sinks the ship. All the ship passengers sink along with the ship, and all that remains is Pi. He survives 227 days after a shipwreck while stranded on a boat in the Pacific Ocean with a Bengal tiger. When Pi is 16, Pi's father decides to close up the zoo and move to Toronto. He sells off a majority of the zoo animals to various zoos in America. The animals are loaded onto the same boat that the family will take to reach Winnipeg, Canada. On the journey to North America, the boat sinks by the big storm.

As the only survivor of the shipwreck, he is stuck in a lifeboat with a dying zebra and a hyena. Pi sees another survivor floating in the water, that is an orangutan named Orange Juice, and only after throwing her a life preserver and pulling her aboard they start to fight. The hyena bites the zebra and also the orangutan. Pi starts to be panic but he is afraid to break up the fight because the hyena is very wild. He also does not know if in his lifeboat, under the tarpaulin have been hide a big Bengal tiger "Richard Parker". Then he realizes that "Richard Parker" is actually the 400 pound tiger from his father zoo. Richard Parker suddenly jump into the zebra, hyena, and orangutan the kills them all. Pi is

very surprised and afraid of that, so upon reentering the boat, he wedges the tarpaulin up with an oar and decides he might survive if he can stay on top and keep Richard Parker beneath it.

Over the course of the next seven months aboard the lifeboat, Pi hides on a makeshift raft behind the boat and begins the process of taming Richard Parker with a whistle and treats from the sea, as well as marking his portion of the boat. He begins to get close to the tiger, developing the kind of bond a zookeeper does with his menagerie. After a while, Pi learns to kill and eat from the sea, sharing with the tiger. They do not eat nearly enough though, and as time passes, they become quite ill.

Still floating along alone and desperate, they come across an island made of algae. They disembark and Pi begins eating the algae, regaining his strength. Finally, after more time spent floating along in the ocean, Pi sees a land in Mexico and disembarks. Richard Parker immediately runs off into the woods and Pi is recovered by two men from the shipping company who owned the boat that sank with his family on it.

3. Review of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

This novel has an interesting story to analyze. The story manages to be awe-inspiring and beautiful. This study tries to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the novel through a closer look at its characters, plot, theme, story lines, and other aspects of the novel. Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* is an international best seller novel, sold more than ten million copies worldwide. The movie

adaption, directed by Ang Lee, is also successful. Both the novel and the movie earn prizes and awards, such as what were mentioned earlier in “Biography of Yann Martel” on page 3. *Life of Pi* must have something that makes it a bestseller. This review explores the strengths and the weaknesses of Yann Martel’s novel *Life of Pi* by revealing its elements.

3.1. The Strengths of *Life of Pi*

3.1.1. Setting

A good setting often becomes the strength of a novel. *Life of Pi* is written down with details the location and place both in its decription and its dialogues without binding the reader's imagination, so that the readers can have their own imagination about the location and the natural beauty being described.

The setting of *The Life of Pi* is very simple. There is only one main setting in the entire book. The entire novel uses one setting, that is the middle of the Pacific Ocean, with the exception of part one of the novel: the first two chapters, which are set in the past (in Pondichery) and in the present (in Toronto). The presentation of the setting is the most powerful way to get readers’ interest, and it works. The chosen setting is the ideal way for a story considering the theme of man versus wild animal. It raises interactions and conflict. In general, it is impossible for people to survive on a small lifeboat with a tiger in it, and it leaves the readers with the anticipation of conflicts to arise. It stimulates the readers to keep on reading.

Another reason this setting is ideal for a book is the location. Out in the Pacific Ocean, there is nowhere to hide. One of humans’ first instincts when

faced with danger is to run, but in the lifeboat there is no room and no place to run. Pi has no escape. Pi is alone and isolated, with no chance for help. It is not until Pi realizes there is no hope of a rescue that he actually begins to take some steps to survive. Nobody can help, so Pi starts to think that if he had sat around waiting for a boat, Richard Parker the tiger would have sensed his weakness. Pi would be dead, having put his faith in others, instead of himself.

Yann Martel creates the perfect storm in his novel. A terrific storm rages for a day and night, rolls in, and scrambles the lifeboat until it climbs up the high waves of the sea. The lifeboat, which may become big in other situations becomes very small within the storm. There is no escape from the hidden nightmare in the boat and no chance for help. It is the perfect way to write a story.

Another interesting setting is a cultural background which is used in the novel. Although the majority of the story takes place in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, the novel also sets in India and the smell of Indian culture is reflected throughout some parts of the novel. Culture which is referred in the novel does not have to be something big; it could have been small things. For example, the novel tells and illustrates several things about the culture of India, such as religious issues and family traditions, including the mention of the Gods in Hinduism like Ganesha, Lakshmi, Krishna, Vishnu. It also gives a glimpse of the political leadership of Gandhi at the time. The other cultural things are the depiction of a beautiful Indian woman with her *Sari* (traditional clothes of Indian woman) and *Bindi* (the red mark on forehead of Indian people), and the story

about purify some animals, like cows or monkey (Hanuman). It becomes an interesting thing to discover when reading this novel.

3.1.2. Moral Lessons

Reader can learn many lessons from this story, about life, faith, survival, value, etc. The first moral lesson is about religion. As a polytheist, Pi's beliefs probably would not make sense with most of people. Having something to believe in is critical in keeping people going through both good times and bad. It provides comfort and guidance when they are afraid or lost. The second lesson is about reality. Pi's grief does not overwhelm him to the point of incapacitation. Instead, he quickly gets into the habit of the new reality of his circumstances and takes whatever actions needed to stay alive. While people should dream big dreams, they must not also forget the realities of their situations. The third lesson is that life is about survival and competition. Those who are strong will be the one who survive. However, in the end people have to believe in the miracle of God. People should not ever lose hope in life, even in the worst condition. They have to keep their belief in God and communicate with God, by keep praying.

3.1.3. Single Main Character

Another strength of this novel is the presence of a single human major character. The major/main character of this novel actually is Piscine Molitor Patel (Pi), but the character of Richard Parker (the Bengal tiger) can be considered as another major character because he has an important role to Pi's life in this story. This animal character in this story can also be said as having similar traits to a human. For example, Richard Parker can feel and also show affection toward Pi.

Pi and Richard Parker develop a unique relationship. Although scared, Pi still feels pity when Richard Parker is going weak, as if realizing that they both are one.

Beside the major character, the minor characters in this novel also give a little support to the story, although the minor characters just appear in some part of the novel, notably in the beginning (chapter one) of the novel. The minor characters of the novel are Francis Adirubasamy (Mamaji, a close friend of the Patel family, the man who suggested Pi's father to give Pi a strange name), Mr. Satish Kumar (Pi's biology teacher who is an atheist, through whom Pi learns to accept atheists as believers-but of another faith), Mr. Satish Kumar (2) (a Sufi and shopkeeper in the Muslim section from town, whom Pi learns Islam), and Father Martin (the Catholic priest who exemplifies Christ's love to Pi)

With the use of the single-main character the reader is really brought to feel the emotion in Pi through the inner conflict experienced by him, so the author can build the events like suspense, climax or conflict in the novel very well to keep the reader interested in the way of the story until the end.

3.1.4. The Title and Cover of the Novel

Title and cover of the novel are two things that can not be separated. A title will sell the books. The title is the first thing that attracts readers. Title is just like a storefront of a shop that sells products in order to attract attention from customers. The more attractive the cover, the more interested the customer will be. A good title are eye catching, easy to remember, appropriate with the contents of the book, and is not boring. A good title also does not require a long words to

form sentences. It just needs two or three interesting words that represent the majority of the novel's story. The shorter the title the better, because it is easier to remember. It can also arouse the curiosity of the reader when they first see it.

Life of Pi has all of those things. It has a good title and cover illustration. These two things are related and reinforce each other in terms of developing the reader's curiosity. The title of this novel could represent the whole content of the novel. That is the life of Pi from beginning to the end. The *Life of Pi's* cover makes the readers wonder only with a glance in seeing the cover of the novel. This book cover illustrates shirtless Indian boy, wearing his shirt on his head as a turban, standing on a raft in the middle of the vast ocean. Beside it, there is a lifeboat that is bigger than his raft, with a big tiger in it. In a glance, after people see the cover illustration and the title, Pi's life instantaneously people will be also interested and wonder what's up with Pi's life? Why does the cover illustrate Pi with a tiger in the midst of the sea on the lifeboats? What happens between the tiger and the boy? Is that an adventure or a true story novel? People imagine what it is like, and how complicated and challenging Pi's life is. Surely the novel presents a good story, because the cover is good and interesting.

3.1.5. Diction and Language Style

The term diction refers to the selection of words and style of expression by the author. Diction is not only used to express ideas or tell an event, but it also includes the issue of language styles and expressions. To obtain an interesting storytelling, the author should be able to use proper diction in expressing ideas or things that will be described in the novel. In *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel is able to do

that. He can choose the right and appropriate words to use in this novel. The very rich selection of words is capable of stunning the readers. Although the author does not directly mention poetry, but there are many beautiful words/sentences that really have a very deep meaning in the novel. The reader will surely fall in love with the beautiful words contained in this novel and will be swept off feet into the story and will find it hard to divert attention when reading this novel seriously. The following quotation describes the first time Pi needs to kill a dorado fish.

Killing it was no problem. I would have spared myself the trouble—after all, it was for Richard Parker and he would have dispatched it with expert ease—but for the hook that was imbedded in its mouth. I exulted at having a dorado at the end of my line—I would be less keen if it were a tiger. I went about the job in a direct way. I took the hatchet in both my hands and vigorously beat fish on the head with the hammerhead (I still didn't have the stomach to use the sharp edge). The dorado did the most extraordinary thing as it died: it began to flash all kinds of colours in rapid succession. Blue, green, red, gold and violet flickered and shimmered neon-like on the surface as it struggled. **I felt like I was beating a rainbow to death.** (Martel, 2001:6).

Martel neatly and beautifully punches the reader with some pretty poetic language in describing Pi's guilty feeling in killing (Pi and his family are vegan). The description enables the readers to imagine the situation and the final sentence can hypnotize them. That is a very deep series of beautiful words. Another example of good diction is shown when Pi is desperate after being alone in the sea for more than 200 days and is dying.

My **life is like a memento mori** painting from European art: there is always a grinning skull at my side to remind me of the folly of human ambition. I mock this skull. I look at it and I say, "You've got the wrong fellow. You may not believe in life, but I don't believe in death. Move on!" The skull snickers and moves ever closer, but that doesn't surprise me. **The reason death sticks so closely to life isn't biological necessity—**

it's envy. Life is so beautiful that death has fallen in love with it, a jealous, possessive love that grabs at what it can. But life leaps over oblivion lightly, losing only a thing or two of no importance, and gloom is but the passing shadow of a cloud (Martel, 2001:6).

Memento mori is Latin words for 'remember that you will die'/'remember death'. It usually becomes a theme in a work of art, described/symbolized with the grinning skull in a painting (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memento_mori). Martel uses a figurative language to compare Pi's life with memento mori painting that is depicting the death. Pi imagines his death is already in sight. Through beautiful-poetic language, Yann Martel is really able to pour his idea about death. The words are string together into beautiful sentences that stunn the reader's mind. The sentences not only are pretty but also have a deep meaning of life in it. People can use beauty-poetic sentences in the novel to become their own 'quote of life' too.

3.2. The Weaknesses of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*

Apart from those strong points, *Life of Pi* also has some weak points. The novel's point of view, plot and the accuracy can be considered as the weaknesses of this novel. These weaknesses will be explained in this following discussion.

3.2.1. Point of View

The point of view in this novel is very complex and pretty confusing for the reader. The majority of the novel actually uses first person point of view/Pi's point of view. First person point of view is the classic one and still remains the most commonly used point of view. In this novel, the story is told from Pi's point of view, and it makes the story more intimate. On the other hand,

the disadvantage of the first person point of view is that the reader is told only what the main character wants to tell. Confusion starts at the beginning of the novel which is written in first person by the author who speaks as himself and explains how he came to Bombay, India to hear people's story that the reader will read from Pi himself. Part one and part two are told in first person by Pi who becomes the narrator and stays that way until part three begins. Pi is also the narrator of the notes in the novel. The final section of the book (part three) is written mainly as a transcript of a conversation between Pi and two officials, and is ended by first-person comments from the author. The point of view that changes in different parts of the novel is actually very unique but it can also be hard to understand.

3.2.2. The Ending of *Life of Pi*

Ending is a solution to the problem. *Life of Pi* gives the reader an open/twisted ending. The author leaves the conflict not fully completed and opens opportunities for different interpretations of the reader. The ending of the story of this novel is quite confusing, disappointing, and not satisfying the reader. It is just too flat and too vague in the end.

The story of Pi ends when Pi finally survives and is found stranded on the beach in Mexico. While in the hospital, he is visited by two Japanese officers. They are from the Maritime Department in the Japanese Ministry of Transport. They ask for information about the sinking ship. Pi tells his original story like in the novel, but that two Japanese people do not believe it. Then Pi tells another story. He changes the story into a version of parable. He likens the orangutan with

his mother, the hyena with the despicable ship-cook, the zebra with the injured Japanese sailor, and the tiger as himself. At the end of his story, Pi asks, “Which story would you choose?”. However, both officers find it hard to believe that a person can survive 277 days on a boat with a Bengal tiger. In the report they just write their opinion about the accident that caused the ship to sink. The story of the novel ends here, no longer telling what happen next with Pi’s life.

An open/twisted ending can make the readers curious after finish reading. Open ending can foster their imagination. However when readers read a story which has an open ending, they usually feel like there is something hanging in their mind. Therefore, some people may not like an open ending. It will be nicer if *Life of Pi* has the closed ending, with a happy story, or maybe a sad one if necessary. A closed ending, the happy one, the clear one, not a hanging ending or vague ending like this, at least can satisfy the readers because they do not have to wonder what will happen next.

4. Conclusion

Life of Pi is one of the best novels written by Yann Martel. This novel has an interesting story to analyze. The story is full of shocking, violent, terrifying and completely heartbreaking moments. Somehow it also manages to be awe-inspiring and beautiful. The strong points of the novel includes its themes, character and characterization, point of view, setting and writing style. Although there are some weak points, those weaknesses do not lessen the greatness of this book.

After revealing the strengths and the weakness of *Life of Pi*, it can be concluded that sometimes, as human beings, people often forget to be grateful of everything they have in this world. Sometimes people who have everything still feel that what they have is not enough. They still want more and more without thinking that there are many people who still need help to live. Sometimes God gives people trials of life, to know which mankind who are really faithful in God and who are not. God gives people trials because God is dear to us, and God will not give people trials beyond the ability of the mankind. To achieve a success, people must go through a series of painful trials of life processes. It will lead people into a better person. As long as people live in this world, they are definitely doomed to meet the trials and the difficulties of life. As told in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, Pi is also facing continuous trials of life, but he keeps his spirits up and strains every nerve to keep alive. He struggles courageously and mightily until finally the toughest ordeal has passed. On the other hand, people could take and learn some moral lessons from the book. *Life of Pi* shows to the readers that getting involved in any life changing accident does not mean the end of the world. In the end it can be concluded that *Life of Pi* is worth reading by all people of different ages because the story is good, and it is also full of value of life.

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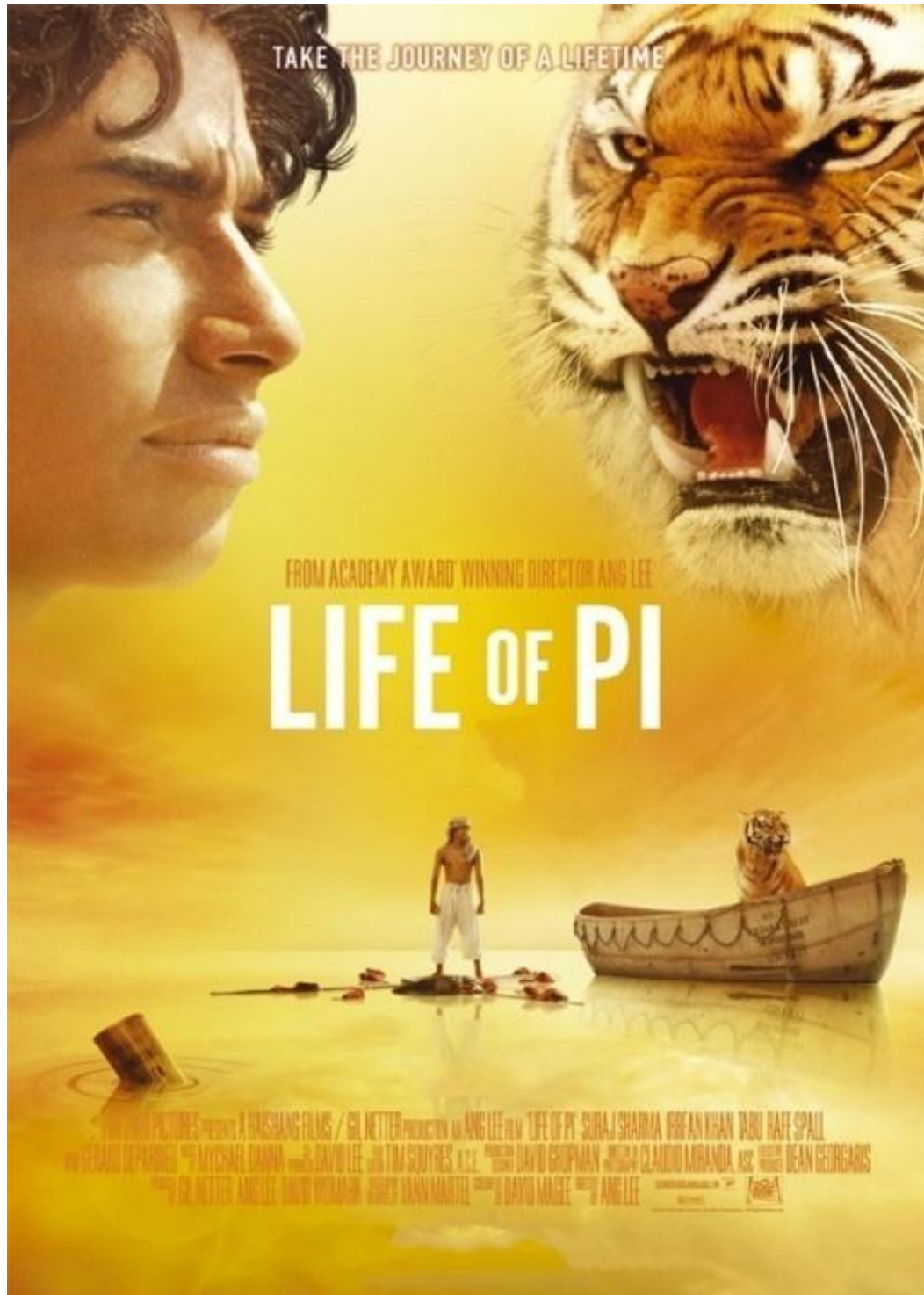
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Yann Martel biography.

<<http://www.gradesaver.com/author/yann-martel/>>

APPENDIX

Book's Cover of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*



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