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Fantasy Unanchored

Nothing embodies Canada's rich diversity and deep-rooted multilingualism better than the country's literary works - be it in English, French, or even Gaelic, Canadian literature has undoubtedly left an indelible mark in history. One does not have to be an expert to realise that Canada has blessed us with an incredibly long list of great writers, ready to indulge their readers with enthralling stories of every genre. This list, however, would not be complete without a man named Yann Martel. The majority of people might know him for having risen to fame after writing the award-winning novel *Life of Pi*, which was later adapted to a feature film, but not many are aware that his own life story is colourful enough to compete with his fictional narratives.

Dishwasher, security guard, librarian, and parking lot attendant – these are the odd jobs that Yann Martel took before deciding to become a full-time writer, a path that would lead him to become one of the most renowned Canadian writers of all time. Born in the city of Salamanca in Spain on June 25th, 1963, Martel spent his childhood days in numerous countries such as Iran, Mexico, and Turkey, prior to settling in Canada. After his early works received mixed reviews from critics, Yann Martel spoke of living a rather solitary life whilst desperately seeking a clear direction in his journey. Writing his second novel, *Life of Pi*, made him regain this sense of purpose.

Nevertheless, success did not come overnight. The book was rejected by at least five different publishing houses before it was finally put out in September 2001, making way for more than ten million copies to be sold worldwide. One of these copies eventually ventured to the other side of the planet, landed in Indonesia, and found its way to my humble bookshelf. I was 11 years old when I first read the novel and now, roughly 19 years after it was first published, I am faced with a question that only those with the privilege of having glimpsed the novel's golden age can answer: as a book that has achieved a critically acclaimed status, does *Life of Pi* truly live up to its reputation?

To be trapped on a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger is – hopefully – not a situation one would normally encounter, and yet Yann Martel succeeded in constructing one of the most heart-warming stories out of such a unique and fantasy-woven concept. *Life of Pi* playfully dances along the border between fiction and reality, making full use of unthinkable situations to constantly remind us of what makes us human.

At the very centre of the narrative, the tale of a 16-year-old vegetarian boy by the name of Pi – short for Piscine Molitor Patel – takes a dramatic turn as he finds himself adrift in the Pacific Ocean with a Royal Bengal Tiger named Richard Parker following a disastrous shipwreck. Nevertheless, it is crude to simply summarise someone's life based on the climax

of their story. Despite it being the novel's catchphrase, Pi's journey stretches far beyond the days he spends with Richard Parker on that little lifeboat.

For one, the book dives deep into how faith and storytelling are two sides of the same coin, making it one of the most recurring themes in the story. In addition to being raised as a Hindu in India, Pi also subscribes to two other religious beliefs – Christianity and Islam – which might seem contradictory or even blasphemous to the respective religions at first, but as the plot unfolds, it becomes clear as day that Pi simply falls in love with the charming story each religion offers. This unique or even strange belief system of his persists to accompany Pi into adulthood. In times of religious turmoil, having even one sentence that so much as hints at the issue could lead to a massive public outcry, but Yann Martel elegantly waltzes through this barrier and artfully wraps the message he wishes to convey in a neat package.

Furthermore, *Life of Pi* explores the animal in men and the man in animals unlike any other stories. The overwhelming yearning for a home, the anxiety of being in an alien environment, and the sheer desire to survive are vividly depicted in the roles of Piscine Molitor Patel and Richard Parker as both are orphans caught up in a once-in-a-lifetime misfortune. In the light of Pi's unusual connection to the world of zoology and with their fate hanging in the balance, the boy is compelled to step out of his comfort zone for the sake of ensuring his own survival, whilst attempting to coexist with the carnivorous tiger on board.

With that being said, although roughly six years have passed since I first read the book, I can still recall the emotions it evoked like it was yesterday. Each page harbours an exciting adventure and a myriad of valuable lessons in life, faith, and love with just the right amount of fantasy – a perfect amalgam that tends to be absent in today's literature. Every bit of compliment directed at this novel and its author is truly well-deserved, if not lacking. From my modest point of view, *Life of Pi* is truly a timeless rollercoaster ride with nothing but imagination as the entrance fee.

SOURCES

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