

'Life of Pi challenges readers to embrace "a better story" and sacrifice "dry, yeastless factuality".' Do you agree?

Yann Martel's novel Life of Pi challenges readers to embrace "a better story" and sacrifice "dry, yeastless factuality" in order to give meaning and purpose to their lives. The importance of storytelling is not lost on readers as they are introduced to the novel by a fictional character who announces to the equally fictional author that "[he has] a story that will make you believe in God". This vehicle of storytelling is paramount to the purpose of the novel in convincing readers that there can be more truth and significance behind a story than strictly adhered to facts. In part 1 of the novel, Martel introduces the reader to the ability to "choose the better story" by establishing the development of Pi's pluralistic faith, and by contrasting it to the dangers posed by fundamentalism. In part 2, he goes on to demonstrate how creating a "better story" can help one deal with adversity and hardship. In part 3, Martel finally makes clear the meaning of his parable by cementing in the readers' mind that the story that carries meaning and truth is not found in the bare recounting of facts, but something much more significant. Life of Pi invites readers to abandon their reliance on facts or risk "miss[ing] the better story to the very end".

Martel begins his novel by setting up an elaborate critique of fundamentalism and showing readers that they create "a better story" that resonates most with them. Through the central character Pi, Martel allows the reader to see the development of personal faith and a moral code by which to live that does not have to meet the perceived constraints of society and institutions. Pi finds his love for God in a hybrid of Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, discarding elements of each that he does not deem to be fitting to his needs and embracing those other that provide him with fulfillment. Christianity teaches him unconditional love, he credits Hinduism with the formation of his "religious landscape" and admires the physical devotion to Allah that Islam provides. By combining these preferred aspects of religion, Pi chooses the "better story" for himself: the one that allows him to see "divinity in the ordinary".

Martel highlights the societal reliance on "yeastless factuality" by presenting opposing opinions to Pi's pluralistic faith. In a scene involving his three religious mentors, Pi is confronted and asked to make a choice about which path to follow, as this fundamentalist idea demands that he choose only one. Ironically, it is apparent to the reader that he has already made his choice as he "just want[s] to love God" and he has the courage to embrace the "better story" to do this. In this way, Martel seeks to inspire readers to do the same, and "choose the better story" for themselves, rather than prescribe to the confines of dogma and factuality and miss out on so much.

Martel further introduces readers to the paths of the "better story" by including discussion of atheism as a form of faith, and the opportunity to find a "story" that gives meaning to the individual. This concept of faith as separate from religion is personified by Pi's biology teacher Mr Kuman. Riddled with polio in childhood and saved only by medicine, Mr Kumar is an atheist who takes his

inspiration and meaning from the world of science and nature. Having made his choice, Mr Kumar is able to appreciate the wonders of the world as something beyond himself, and appreciate a significance in all that is around him. Whilst visiting the zoo, Mr Kumar the teacher as well as the Muslim baker who is also named Mr Kumar, admire a zebra as Pi looks on. Both are able to find a deeper meaning than its factual form by expressing appreciation for its origins, whether “Allah Akbar”, meaning praise be to God, or “Equus Burchelli Boehmi”, implying a faith in its evolutionary origins. Here Pi and the reader, is able to develop an understanding of atheism and accept that atheists too have chosen “the better story”: the one that affords them meaning and significance.

Martel further convinces readers to embrace the better story through Pi’s dislike for agnostics. Agnostics here are the direct representation of full reliance on “dry, yeastless factuality” by believing that perhaps there exists some form of deity, yet perhaps there does not as it can never be factually proven. Here highlighting how much agnostics are missing out on finding a greater meaning by choosing to accept only the facts, Pi remarks that “choosing doubt as a means of belief is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation”. This indicates that by not making a choice, an agnostic is deprived of meaning and will always be in a state of “yeastless” down, meaning they are unable to grow and become something more. This is perhaps the most direct appeal to readers to embrace the “better story” and make a choice, whether it be faith in science or Got, to avoid “miss[ing] the better story to the very end”.

Martel also goes on to explore how creating a “better story” for yourself can help to combat hardship and adversity. Whilst on board the lifeboat after the sinking of the Tsimtsum, Pi is faced with unimaginable horror and suffering. When he recounts his journey to the Japanese investigators at the end of the novel, it is implied to the reader that Pi’s “story with animals” is a form of coping mechanism for him, and that “the story with animals is the better story”. Pi’s feline alter-ego Richard Parker can be interpreted as a form of story crafted by him to assist him in embracing the savage aspects of his personality in order to survive and maintain his sanity. A committed vegetarian for life, Pi remarks that he “descended to a level of savagery [he] never thought possible: by coming to enjoy the “sweet lassi” that coursed through the turtle’s veins. To help him come to terms with these, Pi often rationalises his actions by reinforcing that many of his kills are “for Richard Parker”. Regardless of facts, creating this alternate reality for himself gave Pi the will to survive.

Martel engages with the reader in a gruesome discussion of how the “better story” can also help an individual face their guilt. Pi is forever traumatised by his apparent murder of a French chef, and “something in [him] died that day that has never come back to life. However, by assigning this murderous act to Richard Parker, once more Pi is able to go on living, despite terribly unforgiving circumstances. Pi’s “murderous island” may also be interpreted as a manifestation of this guilt, created to help him work through his feelings and return to strength. By creating a “free floating organism” outside of himself to representing the part of him that committed such a murderous deed, Pi can externalise these feelings and eventually leave them behind “in search of [is] own kind”, to avoid spiritual death on this “murderous island”. Here Martel demonstrates how creating and embracing a “better story” may allow an individual to go on.

Finally, Martel encourages readers to choose the better story for themselves based on which interpretation offers them the most truth and meaning. The Japanese investigators are caught up in obtaining facts and, ironically, “the truth” that they “don’t believe [Pi’s] story”. When he offers them “another story” and confirms that what they want is “dry, yeastless factuality” they are confused, as they believe a story “possesses some element of interpretation”. This sets up the final climax of Pi’s frustration, exclaiming that if one is to be “excessively reasonable [they] risk throwing the universe out with the bathwater”. He points out that everything in life is a matter of interpretation and that we all need to choose the better story for ourselves to find any real truth or meaning, especially when it makes no difference to “how the Tsimsum sunk” or otherwise. I demands they choose and Mr Okamoto finally comes to realise that “the story with animals is the better story”, and Pi concludes that “so it goes with God”, confirming that truth and meaning is not dependent on “dry, yeastless factuality”.

Yann Martel’s novel Life of Pi focusses on encouraging readers to decrease their reliance on facts and embrace the “better story” so that they may find truth and significance. As shown in the Japanese investigators’ final report, Martel pushes readers to believe in the story that will help them find meaning in life, and not dwell on the facts that provide them with nothing.