

Fergus - City of London School

Life of Pi by Yann Martel

You can never forget the moment when the goat dies. Pi, the book's central character, has grown up in a zoo in India, and one morning his father decides to teach him and his brother a lesson. He takes them to the cage of a magnificent Bengal tiger, Manisha, and declares, 'I'm going to teach you how dangerous tigers are'. The goat, whose eyes are 'spinning orbs' is let into the cage and jumps around before the tiger sinks his jaws into it and the blood starts to flow.

'Life of Pi' is a playful novel, but it's important never to forget how dangerous the animals are. It revolves around a boy who is named after a swimming pool 'Piscine Molitor Patel', and renames himself as 'Pi' to stop people pronouncing his name like 'Pissing'. Pi upsets his parents when he experiments with not one religion but three – Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. It's the 1980s and because of problems in India his family decides to sail to Canada; when the ship they are on sinks the book turns from a comedy about growing up to an unusual tale about survival.

The biggest question is how much is real and how much takes place in the narrator's imagination. He must survive on a small boat in the Pacific Ocean, with a zebra, a hyena, an orang-utang and a tiger called Richard Parker. One question raised by the goat scene is how a boy can stay alive in the middle of the ocean for 227 days with a hungry Bengal tiger.

Richard Parker is fascinating. He doesn't talk – except for in Pi's imagination towards the end. What's most important is what he means to Pi; he starts off being an object of fear but then becomes an object of comfort. 'A part of me did not want Richard Parker to die at all, because if he died I would be left alone with despair, a foe even more formidable than a tiger,' Pi says. This is interesting, because we are made to think about the fact that feeling no hope is worse than being scared.

The worst moment is when Pi is being interviewed in a hospital in Mexico by two officials investigating why the ship sank. They tell Pi they don't believe his story. Then he tells them a different story about being stranded on the ocean, where he witnesses a bullying cook, a sailor whose leg is amputated for fish bait, cannibalism and the murder of his mother.

It's a brief part of a book which overall spends more time talking about the wonders of the world than its horrors. Yet it makes us realise that sometimes the stories people tell are more important for their future than reality. Yann Martel's story fills your head with luminous fish and islands with people-eating trees. It's a story for a world so obsessed by rationalism that sometimes it forgets that other ways of thinking might be better.

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