

# Life of Pi

By Yann Martel

Best for Seniors



*Book Summary* – When sixteen year old Pi Patel finds himself stranded in a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with a menacing 450 pound Bengal tiger for company, he quickly realizes that the only way he will survive is if he makes the tiger more afraid of him than he is of it. Finding the strength within him, Pi draws upon all of his knowledge and cunning to battle for food and shelter, overcome storms and disasters, and, in the end, makes peace with both tiger and ocean.

## Meeting 1: Setting up your Book Club

This meeting guide provides a basic outline for hosting three or four 60-minute Book Club meetings. Details for discussion questions, activities, and field trips can be found in the individual Book Club Meeting Guide for each book. You are welcome to incorporate as much or as little of this meeting guide into your meetings. This guide can also be used as the basis for a sampler troop. Consider asking a local book club to host the meetings! Please refer to the “Setting up your Book Club Guide” for more information.

## Meeting 2

*Discussion Questions (First half of book)*

### **Discover**

What are some of the major themes of this book? Is *Life of Pi* a drama, tragedy, romance, or comedy? Why? Pi believes that he is a faithful convert to Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Briefly describe what Pi likes about each religion. Is it possible to practice all three faiths faithfully? What is Pi’s reason for not choosing just one? Will readers from different religious backgrounds each read this book differently? Why or why not?

### **Connect**

How does Father’s lesson about the nature of animals in Chapter 8 figure in to the rest of the story? Aside from his name, what human characteristics does Richard Parker possess? Why did Pi try so hard to save Richard Parker at first; why did he then jump off the boat? Pi draws many parallels between the behavior of animals and humans. Discuss how the novel might unfold if it were narrated by one of the animals, particularly Richard Parker. Who would be the protagonist; who would be the antagonist? How might the novel’s tone have changed if Pi’s sole surviving companion had been the zebra or Orange Juice?

### **Take Action**

How would you have coped with Pi’s situation? What are your personal strategies for facing fear? How can you help others facing a fearful situation?

**Activity: Lost at Sea Exercise**

Girls should be divided into pairs and be given 10 minutes to discuss and rank the list of items (given below) by importance. Bring the groups together and have them read their list in order of importance. Discuss why some groups chose certain things over others. Have the entire groups decide on a master troop list. Is the master list very different from the original lists? Compare the master list with the answers given on the next page.

*Scenario:*

You and your troop have chartered a yacht. None of you have any previous sailing experience, and you have hired an experienced skipper and two-person crew. As you sail across the Pacific Ocean a fire breaks out and most of the yacht and its contents are destroyed. The yacht is slowly sinking. Your location is unclear because vital navigational and radio equipment has been damaged. The yacht skipper and crew have been lost while trying to fight the fire. You estimate that you are approximately 1000 miles away from land. You and a friend have managed to save the following 15 items, undamaged and intact after the fire.

- A sextant (an astronomical instrument used to determine latitude and longitude at sea by measuring angular distances, esp. the altitudes of sun, moon, and stars.)
- A mirror
- Mosquito netting
- 5 gallon can of water
- Case of army rations
- Maps of the Pacific Ocean
- A floating seat cushion
- 2 gallons of oil
- A small transistor radio
- 20 square feet of opaque plastic sheeting
- Shark repellent
- One quart of alcohol
- 15 feet of nylon rope
- 2 boxes of chocolate bars
- A fishing kit

In addition to the above, you have salvaged a four-man rubber life craft and you each have a box of matches and four dollar bills in your pocket.

**Your chances of survival will depend upon your ability to rank the above items in their relative order of importance. Good Luck!**

*Answers:*

According to the US Coast Guard, the basic supplies needed when a person is stranded mid-ocean are items to attract attention and items to aid survival until rescue arrives. Articles for navigation are of little importance since, even if a small life raft were capable of reaching land, it would be impossible to store enough food and water to survive for the required amount of time. Also, most require specialized training to use properly. Without signaling devices, there is almost no chance of being spotted and ultimately rescued. Furthermore, most rescues occur within the first 36 hours and a person can easily survive with only a minimum of food and water during that period.

The following is the official order of importance set by the US Coast Guard:

1. Mirror- critical for signaling
2. 2 gallons of oil- critical for signaling. The oil will float and can be ignited with the matches and a dollar bill from your pocket.
3. 5 gallon can of water- necessary to replenish fluids lost through perspiration
4. One case of army rations- basic food intake.
5. 20 square feet of opaque plastic- can collect rain water and provide shelter from the elements.
6. 2 boxes of chocolate bars- reserve food supply
7. Fishing kit- ranked below chocolate because there is no guarantee you will catch any fish.
8. 15 ft of nylon rope- could be used to tie you, or your supplies, to the boat to prevent it being washed overboard.
9. Floating seat cushion- a life preserver if someone fell overboard.
10. Shark repellent- you will be under enough stress, you do not want to deal with sharks on top of everything else!
11. One quart of alcohol- can be used as an antiseptic for any injuries, otherwise of little value.
12. Small transistor radio- of no use without a transmitter and you would most likely be out of range for any radio stations.
13. Maps of the Pacific Ocean- worthless without navigation equipment. It does not matter where you are, **but where the rescuers are!**
14. Mosquito netting- Mosquitoes do not live in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and the netting will not be of much help for getting food since you already have a fishing kit.
15. Sextant- useless unless you know how to use it and have the necessary tables and chronometer.

### *Closing*

Ask girls to consider choices for their final activity (see Meeting 4 suggestions). Remind girls to read the second half of the book for the next meeting.

## Meeting 3

### *Discussion Questions (Second half of book)*

#### **Discover**

One of the major themes of this book merges science and religion together to understanding the world. How does Pi's zoo upbringing and his relationship to the animals provide a scientific understanding of the world? How do Pi's multiple religious philosophies and relationship with God provide a spiritual understanding of the world? How does he combine these in order to survive on the lifeboat?

#### **Connect**

Throughout the story we hear about the interactions between the author and adult Pi. How do these interactions color the story? How does knowing Pi survives and has a "happy ending" with a family affect reading the rest of Pi's survival account?

Pi is forced to tell the shipping officials a more credible story. Does his story without animals change your view of the story with animals? Why or why not? Neither story can be proved, so Pi asks the official which story he prefers. Which do you prefer? Which do you believe? Why?

#### **Take Action**

What tactics does Pi undertake to reduce the risks of malnutrition, dehydration, and exposure while at sea? Is his survival mostly due to quick thinking, luck, prayer, or courage? How is Pi able to undertake so many gruesome actions? Would you be able to do the same? Discuss the many uses of the word "survivor" in contemporary society. How is Pi's survival different from that of participants in televised reality shows, or those who are interviewed by news reporters following perilous events? What survival tips would you add to those listed in chapter 58? What can we do today to help ourselves be prepared to handle negative situations (car trouble during bad weather, lost hiking in the woods, lost at sea, etc)?

#### **Activity: Write a narrative**

Yann Martel said in an interview, "The theme of this novel can be summarized in three lines. Life is a story. You can choose your story. And a story with an imaginative overlay is the better story." What does this mean? Does every writer believe in this? Have each girl think of one true life event that happened to them and then write an imaginative story (1-3 paragraphs) describing that event. Then, have each girl write a precise narrative of that event with only the facts. Have the girls pair up and switch stories. Which one was easier to write; why? Which stories are more fun to read? Which one is more fun to believe? Is the imaginative story a lie if it is based off a real event?

## Meeting 4

*Meeting 4: Extension activities (can be virtual or actual)*

These are just suggestions; feel free to brainstorm with your troop other ideas as well.

- Indian Cultural Events throughout the DC metropolitan area (<http://www.indianembassy.org/newsite/cevents.asp>): Learn about Indian culture through artists, dancers, singers, food, and much more.
- Explore the physical and cultural similarities and differences between a Christian church and Hindu and Islamic temples.
- United States Holocaust Museum, Washington, DC (<http://www.ushmm.org/>): How did Holocaust survivors survive? What stories did they tell themselves, and each other, to give each them hope? How are their stories of survival similar and/or different from Pi's?
- National Zoo, Washington, DC (<http://nationalzoo.si.edu/>): Observe the different characteristics of a tiger, an orangutan, a hyena, and a zebra. Discuss how factual the author was in his representation of each animal. Pick three different animals to observe. If they had been placed in the story, how would the dynamics of the boat have been different?

## Additional Activities

*Activities*

- Discover Sangam, one of the four World Centers of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts. <http://www.sangamworldcentre.org/en/home>
- Make an origami lotus flower. <http://www.sangamworldcentre.org/en/grab/259/1/lotusflower.pdf>
- Research the history of Pondicherry India and compare it with your home town. <http://www.pondicherry.ind.in>
- Asian Culture Patch Program (NEW!)