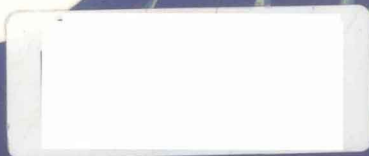


THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

YANN MARTEL

Life of Pi

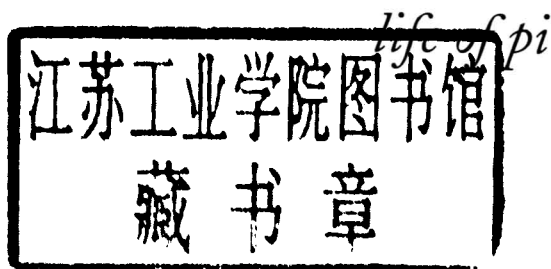


winner of

THE **Man** BOOKER PRIZE 2002

YANN MARTEL

A NOVEL



CANONGATE

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Yann Martel was born in Spain but currently lives in Montreal. He is the highly acclaimed author of *Self*, a novel, and of the story collection *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*. *Life of Pi* is his third book and was shortlisted for the Governor General Award, the Commonwealth Writers Prize and was the winner of the 2002 Man Booker Prize.

"[This] enormously loveable novel is suffused with wonder"

Guardian

"Yann Martel is a vivid and entrancing story-teller"

Sunday Telegraph

"Absurd, macabre, unreliable and sad, deeply sensual in its evoking of smells and sights, the whole trip and the narrator's insanely curious voice suggests Joseph Conrad and Salman Rushdie hallucinating together over the meaning of *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Gulliver's Travels*" *Financial Times*

"*Life of Pi* is a great adventure story, the sort that comes along rarely and enters a select canon at once. This would be enough to justify its existence, but it is also rich in metaphysics, beautifully written, moving and funny" *Scotland on Sunday*

"Martel is dazzling" *Independent on Sunday*

"A fabulous romp through an imagination by turns ecstatic, cunning, despairing and resilient, this novel is an impressive achievement . . . Martel displays the clever voice and tremendous storytelling skills of an emerging master" *Publishers Weekly (USA)*

"Impressive enough to make you, as the old man said, believe in God . . . Martel has hit on a marvellous notion and revels in elaborating it" *Scotsman*

“This is compelling storytelling, and Martel is always ready to reel in the reader with a well-turned phrase or tasty aside” *Independent*

“*Life of Pi* is a real adventure: brutal, tender, expressive, dramatic, and disarmingly funny . . . It’s difficult to stop reading when the pages run out” *San Francisco Chronicle*

“Here is a writer with a talent as fabulous as the tale that he – and his Pi – have to tell” *Spectator*

“Martel’s witty and wise novel, with its echo of William Golding’s *Pincher Martin*, has a teasing plausibility about it that taps into our desire for extraordinary stories that just might be true” *Metro*

“An engrossing and beautifully written meditation on god, man and beast. This is a rare gem: a book that you want to immediately re-read” *The List*

“*Life of Pi* could well be the book of the year” *What’s on in London*

“Martel has large amounts of intellectual fun with this outrageous fable . . . It dramatises and articulates the possibilities of storytelling, which for this writer is a kind of extremist high-wire act” *Observer*

“An impassioned defence of zoos, a death-defying trans-Pacific sea adventure à la Kon-Tiki, and a hilarious shaggy-dog story . . . This audacious novel manages to be all of these” *The New Yorker*

“Readers familiar with Margaret Atwood, Mavis Gallant, Alice Munro, Michael Ondaatje and Carol Shields should learn to make room on the map of contemporary Canadian fiction for the formidable Yann Martel” *Chicago Tribune*

“One encounters page after page of images and observations riveting in their precision and insight . . . A story to make you believe in the soul-sustaining power of fiction and its human creators, and in the original power of storytellers like Martel” *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“[Martel] demonstrates the immense power of the imagination to transform our view with the light twitch of a tiger’s tail” *India Today*

à mes parents et à mon frère

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book was born as I was hungry. Let me explain. In the spring of 1996, my second book, a novel, came out in Canada. It didn't fare well. Reviewers were puzzled, or damned it with faint praise. Then readers ignored it. Despite my best efforts at playing the clown or the trapeze artist, the media circus made no difference. The book did not move. Books lined the shelves of bookstores like kids standing in a row to play baseball or soccer, and mine was the gangly, unathletic kid that no one wanted on their team. It vanished quickly and quietly.

The fiasco did not affect me too much. I had already moved on to another story, a novel set in Portugal in 1939. Only I was feeling restless. And I had a little money.

So I flew to Bombay. This is not so illogical if you realize three things: that a stint in India will beat the restlessness out of any living creature; that a little money can go a long way there; and that a novel set in Portugal in 1939 may have very little to do with Portugal in 1939.

I had been to India before, in the north, for five months. On that first trip I had come to the subcontinent completely unprepared. Actually, I had a preparation of one word. When I told a friend who knew the country well of my travel plans, he said casually, "They speak a funny English in India. They like words like bamboozle." I remembered his words as my plane started its descent towards Delhi, so the word bamboozle was my one preparation for the rich, noisy, functioning madness of India. I used the word on occasion, and truth be told, it served me well. To a clerk at a train

station I said, "I didn't think the fare would be so expensive. You're not trying to bamboozle me, are you?" He smiled and chanted, "No sir! There is no bamboozlement here. I have quoted you the correct fare."

This second time to India I knew better what to expect and I knew what I wanted: I would settle in a hill station and write my novel. I had visions of myself sitting at a table on a large veranda, my notes spread out in front of me next to a steaming cup of tea. Green hills heavy with mists would lie at my feet and the shrill cries of monkeys would fill my ears. The weather would be just right, requiring a light sweater mornings and evenings, and something short-sleeved midday. Thus set up, pen in hand, for the sake of greater truth, I would turn Portugal into a fiction. That's what fiction is about, isn't it, the selective transforming of reality? The twisting of it to bring out its essence? What need did I have to go to Portugal?

The lady who ran the place would tell me stories about the struggle to boot the British out. We would agree on what I was to have for lunch and supper the next day. After my writing day was over, I would go for walks in the rolling hills of the tea estates.

Unfortunately, the novel sputtered, coughed and died. It happened in Matheran, not far from Bombay, a small hill station with some monkeys but no tea estates. It's a misery peculiar to would-be writers. Your theme is good, as are your sentences. Your characters are so ruddy with life they practically need birth certificates. The plot you've mapped out for them is grand, simple and gripping. You've done your research, gathering the facts—historical, social, climatic, culinary—that will give your story its feel of authenticity. The dialogue zips along, crackling with tension. The descriptions burst with colour, contrast and telling detail. Really, your story can only be great. But it all adds up to nothing. In spite of the obvious, shining promise of it, there comes a moment when you realize that the whisper that has been pestering you all along from the back of your mind is speaking the flat, awful truth: it won't work. An element is missing, that spark that

brings to life a real story, regardless of whether the history or the food is right. Your story is emotionally dead, that's the crux of it. The discovery is something soul-destroying, I tell you. It leaves you with an aching hunger.

From Matheran I mailed the notes of my failed novel. I mailed them to a fictitious address in Siberia, with a return address, equally fictitious, in Bolivia. After the clerk had stamped the envelope and thrown it into a sorting bin, I sat down, glum and disheartened. "What now, Tolstoy? What other bright ideas do you have for your life?" I asked myself.

Well, I still had a little money and I was still feeling restless. I got up and walked out of the post office to explore the south of India.

I would have liked to say, "I'm a doctor," to those who asked me what I did, doctors being the current purveyors of magic and miracle. But I'm sure we would have had a bus accident around the next bend, and with all eyes fixed on me I would have to explain, amidst the crying and moaning of victims, that I meant in law; then, to their appeal to help them sue the government over the mishap, I would have to confess that as a matter of fact it was a Bachelor's in philosophy; next, to the shouts of what meaning such a bloody tragedy could have, I would have to admit that I had hardly touched Kierkegaard; and so on. I stuck to the humble, bruised truth.

Along the way, here and there, I got the response, "A writer? Is that so? I have a story for you." Most times the stories were little more than anecdotes, short of breath and short of life.

I arrived in the town of Pondicherry, a tiny self-governing Union Territory south of Madras, on the coast of Tamil Nadu. In population and size it is an inconsequent part of India—by comparison, Prince Edward Island is a giant within Canada—but history has set it apart. For Pondicherry was once the capital of that most modest of colonial empires, French India. The French would have liked to rival the British, very much so, but the only Raj they managed to get was a handful of small ports. They clung to these for nearly three hundred years. They left Pondicherry in 1954, leaving behind nice white buildings, broad streets at right angles to

each other, street names such as rue de la Marine and rue Saint-Louis, and képis, caps, for the policemen.

I was at the Indian Coffee House, on Nehru Street. It's one big room with green walls and a high ceiling. Fans whirl above you to keep the warm, humid air moving. The place is furnished to capacity with identical square tables, each with its complement of four chairs. You sit where you can, with whoever is at a table. The coffee is good and they serve French toast. Conversation is easy to come by. And so, a spry, bright-eyed elderly man with great shocks of pure white hair was talking to me. I confirmed to him that Canada was cold and that French was indeed spoken in parts of it and that I liked India and so on and so forth—the usual light talk between friendly, curious Indians and foreign backpackers. He took in my line of work with a widening of the eyes and a nodding of the head. It was time to go. I had my hand up, trying to catch my waiter's eye to get the bill.

Then the elderly man said, "I have a story that will make you believe in God."

I stopped waving my hand. But I was suspicious. Was this a Jehovah's Witness knocking at my door? "Does your story take place two thousand years ago in a remote corner of the Roman Empire?" I asked.

"No."

Was he some sort of Muslim evangelist? "Does it take place in seventh-century Arabia?"

"No, no. It starts right here in Pondicherry just a few years back, and it ends, I am delighted to tell you, in the very country you come from."

"And it will make me believe in God?"

"Yes."

"That's a tall order."

"Not so tall that you can't reach."

My waiter appeared. I hesitated for a moment. I ordered two coffees. We introduced ourselves. His name was Francis Adirubasamy. "Please tell me your story," I said.

"You must pay proper attention," he replied.

"I will." I brought out pen and notepad.

"Tell me, have you been to the botanical garden?" he asked.

"I went yesterday."

"Did you notice the toy train tracks?"

"Yes, I did."

"A train still runs on Sundays for the amusement of the children. But it used to run twice an hour every day. Did you take note of the names of the stations?"

"One is called Roseville. It's right next to the rose garden."

"That's right. And the other?"

"I don't remember."

"The sign was taken down. The other station was once called Zootown. The toy train had two stops: Roseville and Zootown. Once upon a time there was a zoo in the Pondicherry Botanical Garden."

He went on. I took notes, the elements of the story. "You must talk to him," he said, of the main character. "I knew him very, very well. He's a grown man now. You must ask him all the questions you want."

Later, in Toronto, among nine columns of Patels in the phone book, I found him, the main character. My heart pounded as I dialed his phone number. The voice that answered had an Indian lilt to its Canadian accent, light but unmistakable, like a trace of incense in the air. "That was a very long time ago," he said. Yet he agreed to meet. We met many times. He showed me the diary he kept during the events. He showed me the yellowed newspaper clippings that made him briefly, obscurely famous. He told me his story. All the while I took notes. Nearly a year later, after considerable difficulties, I received a tape and a report from the Japanese Ministry of Transport. It was as I listened to that tape that I agreed with Mr. Adirubasamy that this was, indeed, a story to make you believe in God.

It seemed natural that Mr. Patel's story should be told mostly in the

first person—in his voice and through his eyes. But any inaccuracies or mistakes are mine.

I have a few people to thank. I am most obviously indebted to Mr. Patel. My gratitude to him is as boundless as the Pacific Ocean and I hope that my telling of his tale does not disappoint him. For getting me started on the story, I have Mr. Adirubasamy to thank. For helping me complete it, I am grateful to three officials of exemplary professionalism: Mr. Kazuhiko Oda, lately of the Japanese Embassy in Ottawa; Mr. Hiroshi Watanabe, of Oika Shipping Company; and, especially, Mr. Tomohiro Okamoto, of the Japanese Ministry of Transport, now retired. As for the spark of life, I owe it to Mr. Moacyr Scliar. Lastly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to that great institution, the Canada Council for the Arts, without whose grant I could not have brought together this story that has nothing to do with Portugal in 1939. If we, citizens, do not support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams.

PART ONE

Toronto and Pondicherry



My suffering left me sad and gloomy.

Academic study and the steady, mindful practice of religion slowly brought me back to life. I have kept up what some people would consider my strange religious practices. After one year of high school, I attended the University of Toronto and took a double-major Bachelor's degree. My majors were religious studies and zoology. My fourth-year thesis for religious studies concerned certain aspects of the cosmogony theory of Isaac Luria, the great sixteenth-century Kabbalist from Safed. My zoology thesis was a functional analysis of the thyroid gland of the three-toed sloth. I chose the sloth because its demeanour—calm, quiet and introspective—did something to soothe my shattered self.

There are two-toed sloths and there are three-toed sloths, the case being determined by the forepaws of the animals, since all sloths have three claws on their hind paws. I had the great luck one summer of studying the three-toed sloth *in situ* in the equatorial jungles of Brazil. It is a highly intriguing creature. Its only real habit is indolence. It sleeps or rests on average twenty hours a day. Our team tested the sleep habits of five wild three-toed sloths by placing on their heads, in the early evening after they had fallen asleep, bright red plastic dishes filled with water. We found them still in place late the next morning, the water of the dishes swarming with insects. The sloth is at its busiest at sunset, using the word *busy* here in the most relaxed

sense. It moves along the bough of a tree in its characteristic upside-down position at the speed of roughly 400 metres an hour. On the ground, it crawls to its next tree at the rate of 250 metres an hour, when motivated, which is 440 times slower than a motivated cheetah. Unmotivated, it covers four to five metres in an hour.

The three-toed sloth is not well informed about the outside world. On a scale of 2 to 10, where 2 represents unusual dullness and 10 extreme acuity, Beebe (1926) gave the sloth's senses of taste, touch, sight and hearing a rating of 2, and its sense of smell a rating of 3. If you come upon a sleeping three-toed sloth in the wild, two or three nudges should suffice to awaken it; it will then look sleepily in every direction but yours. Why it should look about is uncertain since the sloth sees everything in a Magoo-like blur. As for hearing, the sloth is not so much deaf as uninterested in sound. Beebe reported that firing guns next to sleeping or feeding sloths elicited little reaction. And the sloth's slightly better sense of smell should not be overestimated. They are said to be able to sniff and avoid decayed branches, but Bullock (1968) reported that sloths fall to the ground clinging to decayed branches "often".

How does it survive, you might ask.

Precisely by being so slow. Sleepiness and slothfulness keep it out of harm's way, away from the notice of jaguars, ocelots, harpy eagles and anacondas. A sloth's hairs shelter an algae that is brown during the dry season and green during the wet season, so the animal blends in with the surrounding moss and foliage and looks like a nest of white ants or of squirrels, or like nothing at all but part of a tree.

The three-toed sloth lives a peaceful, vegetarian life in perfect harmony with its environment. "A good-natured smile is forever on its lips," reported Tirler (1966). I have seen that smile with my own eyes. I am not one given to projecting human traits and emotions onto animals, but many a time during that month in Brazil, looking