

MARTEL Yann. *Life of Pi: a novel*. Toronto:  
Vintage Canada, 2001. 356p.

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*Life of Pi: a novel* – for which Yann Martel was awarded the 2002 Book Prize –, is a fascinating book that absorbs the reader until the last page. From a first person point of view, it tells Piscine Moliter Patel's story, an Indian boy that incredibly survives a shipwreck when his family is moving to Canada, being a castaway for 227 days in the company of a Bengal tiger. More than affirming the power of storytelling and contributing to a self-reflexive analysis of how fiction is constructed, Yann Martel's novel recovers the history of the formation of Canadian cultural identities.

In the first part of the book, Mr. Patel presents himself in his adulthood in Toronto and remembers his childhood. He has majored both in Zoology and Religious Studies, interests he had since he was a child in India, where his father had the Pondicherry Zoo. Also, it was due to his incredible interest in Religions when young, since he wanted to be a Hindu, a Christian and a Muslim at the same time, that he decided to major in Religious Studies. What seems, nonsense at a first sight – three

different Gods and the contact with animals is extremely important to the next part of the story that focuses on the idea of moving and having contact with new cultures, as Piscine's family decides to move to Canada.

The novel is divided into three parts: "Toronto and Pondicherry", "The Pacific Ocean" and "Benito Juárez Infirmary, Tomatlán, Mexico", but it is Piscine's time as a castaway that covers most of the pages. In "The Pacific Ocean", the longest and most fantastic part of the book, Piscine is the only human survivor of the sinking of the Japanese cargo ship *Tsimtsum*. The episode reminds us of Noah's Ark story as he is in a lifeboat with the Bengal tiger Richard Parker, a zebra with a broken leg, an orangutan called Orange Juice, and a hyena, all animals from his father's zoo. After the animals had been killed and only Richard Parker remains alive, Piscine's strategies to deal with the tiger and preserve himself tell a lot about the adventure of surviving in contact with the unknown. If, on the one hand, the idea that on the edge of surviving instincts humans become

similar to animals is explored, on the other the focus on what it means to be human emphasizes that human beings are all equals. Therefore, the novel contributes to a critique of any kind of racism, especially in the case of different peoples that immigrate and become the other inside a new culture.

Although Piscine's adventure crossing the Ocean covers most of the novel, the preface to the book and some fragments in italics by a fictional author that interrupts the first and the third parts show that it is not just an adventure story. In the preface, the fictional author explains how he or she discovered Piscine's story in a trip to India and the contact with him in Toronto. This tricky introduction to the fiction, through which the reader starts to question whose author is writing the preface – Yann Martel or a fictional one – challenges the limits between fact and fiction, a discussion that will only be present again in the last part, since the adventure on the Ocean is so absorbing that the discussion about truth and illusion, fact and fiction is momentarily forgotten.

Following the fantastic adventure on the Ocean, the end of the book brings Piscine back to the shore, and the reader back to the self-conscious analysis of facts and fiction. After being rescued on a Mexican beach, Piscine is taken to a hospital where he is interviewed by two officers from the Maritime Department in the Japanese

Ministry of Transport to find out the reasons for the accident. Readers are destabilized and get really surprised when the officers question the reliability of Piscine's story and the existence of a tiger nobody had seen, for they have been in contact with this story in the two hundred pages they have read. Moreover, they become conscious that they are reading a fictional piece, which is artistically constructed to appear as believable as possible.

The pluralism in terms of religions and Gods presented in Piscine's story is also highlighted in the possibility of alternative narratives for the shipwreck. Piscine decides to narrate another story, in which people are substitutes for the animals in the lifeboat. Also, a formal report explaining the impossibility to determine the concrete reasons for the accident is added by the fictional author. Piscine's question to the officer Mr. Okamoto and his assistant Mr. Chiba: "Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?" (p. 352), and the consensus that the best story is the one with animals raise the discussion about the function of the animals. The preference for the first story is not only explained by the power of telling a good story, but also by the fact that it is unbearable to face humans when they act instinctively as animals and destroy each other.

The last part of the book

confirms that the real existence of animals on the boat becomes less important. After all, it is the relationship established both between the animals and the human beings in a survival situation that is the target. Similar to Bhabha's idea of the other as a ghost or a monster that comes back to threaten the colonizer, the point is how we face the other as a menace and how we can destroy each other in order to preserve the homogeneity of our culture and our territory.

Besides being a wonderful storyteller that writes a very original metafictional novel, Yann Martel has also been acclaimed for the importance of his book inside the context of Canadian Literature and Canadian Studies. The story of an Indian boy crossing the Ocean to get to Canada and have a new life is not at all fantastic and not by accident in this fiction. On the contrary, it is emblematic of the history of immigration that characterizes this multicultural country. The movement of crossing the Ocean has contributed to the constitution of transnational identities, so much so that being a Canadian cannot in any sense be related to an everlasting or monocultural concept.

In spite of the excess in some zoological details in the first part, which makes reading rather slow, *Life of Pi* becomes a masterpiece for the theme and the structure of the narrative focus on the same

ideas: pluralism, destabilization of permanent truths, and openness to diversity. Deconstructing the idea of a monotheist culture, diving deeply into the limits of human nature and the elements that separate us from or approximate us to the animal world, and showing the construction of his identity as an Indian-Canadian, a character such as Piscine Moliter Patel not only confirms Yann Martel's talent as a storyteller and a writer, but also demonstrates the contribution of contemporary Canadian literature for the analysis of the construction of transcultural Canadian identities.

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