Source: Greg Wilson, Critical Essay on *Life of Pi*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Metafiction is sometimes simply described as "fiction that calls attention to the fact that it is fiction." It is usually characterized by deliberate intrusions on the reader's willing suspension of disbelief; the omniscient narrator begins making comments to the reader about characters or plot details, for example, or characters themselves express some awareness that they exist within an artificial world. However, there exists another breed of metafiction that might best be described as "fiction that actively denies that it is fiction at all." In many ways, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* is a blend of two seemingly contradictory metafictional breeds, both of which ultimately address the notions of truth and reality in storytelling.

Martel works to establish his book as double-layered metafiction from the outset. In his prefatory Author's Note, he presents what appears to be a factual explanation for how the book came about. Indeed, the first half of the Author's Note appears to parallel the author's real-life experiences quite closely. Having published two not-very-successful books, the author travels to India to clear his head and work on a third. However, his supposedly true narrative quietly slips into fiction without offering the reader any sort of clue. Indeed, the author prefaces the made-up genesis of his tale with an altogether factual history of Pondicherry, India. This sober account lulls the reader into an easy credulity, on which the author capitalizes by proclaiming that the following story of Pi Patel is quite true, and was first relayed to him by a friend of the Patel family named Mr. Adirubasamy, who told the author that the story "will make [him] believe in God."

At the same time, the author—who resembles the real-life Yann Martel, but is clearly also a participant in a larger fictional world—reminds us of the book's artificiality. He thanks both Pi Patel and Mr. Adirubasamy for their contributions to the book, yet he also thanks Mr. Moacyr Scliar for "the spark of life." It would be easy for an unknowing reader to overlook this detail; only upon further research does one discover that Moacyr Scliar is the author of a book titled *Max and the Cats* about a Jewish family that runs a zoo in Berlin in 1933; the family decides to relocate their zoo to Brazil, but their ship sinks during the journey. Ultimately, one character becomes trapped on a lifeboat with a panther. Familiar, yes? Even as he insists in his Author's Note that the story is based on real events, Martel reveals the true fictional inspiration for his work.

Martel peppers his main narrative with similarly contrasting metafictional elements. For example, the author makes it clear from the start that, although the majority of the story is conveyed from the first-person point of view of Pi, it is actually written by author Yann Martel. This is reinforced through occasional chapters written not from Pi's point of view but from the author's; these chapters describe Pi, his home, and his family in an almost journalistic style. Although this calls attention to the fictional nature of the main tale, it also serves to

authenticate Pi as a real person and suggest that his experiences, no matter who has written them down, are real.

The author—writing as Pi—also references other pieces of "real-world" literature, primarily in his discussions of sloths and zookeeping. These sections read almost like encyclopedia entries on their stated subjects, and quoting of real pieces of scientific literature again serves to lend the narrative credibility. Similarly, when Pi is lost at sea, the factual style of the survival manual he reads has a grounding effect amidst Pi's increasingly odd experiences aboard the lifeboat.

At the same time, the author self-consciously calls attention to the narrative as a story by having the narrator communicate directly to the reader on several occasions. For example, after describing his first several weeks on the lifeboat, Pi says of his continuing tribulations, "But I don't know if I can put them in order for you. My memories come in a jumble." Later, referring to the floating carnivorous plant-mass he finds, Pi tells the reader that "there will be many who disbelieve the following episode." Near the end, Pi even muses on the structure of his narrative: "For example—I wonder—could you tell my jumbled story in exactly one hundred chapters, not one more, not one less?" Similarly, the fact that Pi is stranded at sea for exactly 227 days (22 divided by 7 is the mathematical definition of pi) calls attention to the story's self-consciously crafted structure.

The overall effect of this interweaving of metafictional devices is clear: The author is leading readers to question not only the facts of the story as they have been told, but also *any* facts that are not experienced firsthand. This calls to mind Patricia Waugh's description of such works in her book *Metafiction*: "In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality outside the literary fictional text." This metafictional play culminates in part three of the book, the "transcript" portion that takes place after Pi has returned to land. The Japanese maritime officials to whom he tells his story express doubt, and they ask him instead for the "straight facts," without invention. Pi counters: "Isn't telling about something—using words, English or Japanese—already something of an invention? Isn't just looking upon this world already something of an invention?" Pi continues: "The world isn't just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn't that make life a story?" The very act of relating a "true-life" event, Pi argues, is a feat of storytelling just as much as the creation of a fantasy tale.

To satisfy his interviewers, Pi tells another story about his experiences at sea—this one without any reference to exotic animals, as the Japanese officials request. In his new tale, he shares the lifeboat with people instead of animals: The orangutan becomes his mother; the zebra becomes an Asian sailor; the hyena turns into the ship's French cook. The events in his second tale, though they closely parallel the events of the first story, are far more mundane and horrific; the cook cuts off the sailor's injured leg to use it for bait, and then dines on the sailor's flesh after he bleeds to death. Eventually, the cook kills Pi's mother, and Pi kills him and eats his heart in turn. In this version of the tale, the Japanese men note, Pi has assumed the role of the tiger.

The Japanese men find this tale easier to believe, terrible though it is, since it does not include exotic animals and undiscovered carnivorous plant-islands. The reader is left to wonder: Did Pi make up the first story, which the reader has experienced in vivid and enduring detail, as an allegory of what *really* happened aboard the lifeboat? Or did he merely craft a more believable version of the story just to satisfy the Japanese officials? Even within the context of what the reader knows is a fictional story, the reality of Pi's experiences within that fictional world are suddenly cast into doubt. That the reader feels shock at this possibility—that a fictional character might be making up a story, just as the reader *knows* the author is doing—is a testament to Martel's ability to craft a convincing protagonist. It is also the ultimate metafictional violation of the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief."

After telling this second story, Pi points out that neither story can explain the sinking of the ship, which is the mystery the Japanese officials had hoped to solve. Pi then asks:

So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can't prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with the animals or the story without the animals?

Suddenly, the author's intent becomes obvious. He does not seek to trick the reader into believing a made-up tale, nor does he aim to dismiss the objective aspects of the real world. Ultimately, Martel is not at all concerned with the differences or similarities between fiction and reality. He argues that, in a situation where all other elements are irrelevant, distinguishing fact from fiction is pointless; both are equally valid, or equally invalid. There is only one important question to ask: Which is the better story?

The first story borders on religious allegory, odd and beautiful and uplifting; the second story "won't make you see higher or further or differently," as Pi notes, and smacks of the "dry, yeast-less factuality" so often sought in the sciences. Readers have come to the author's grand message, and the business end of Mr. Adirubasamy's assertion that the tale would cause the reader to believe in God. Is the "better story" one that expands your mind, heart, and spirit (think religion), or one that merely confirms what you have already guessed (think science)? Both require equal amounts of faith, because neither can be proven.

So, which is the better story? In Pi's case, the message is clear: The one that keeps you going; the one that lends you the courage to survive in a world that can be cruel and inexplicable; the one that celebrates the wonders of the world, instead of lamenting its shortcomings. Fact, fiction, or metafiction, *that* is the better story.