

READING FRIENDS

Life of Pi by Yann Martel

Big Jubilee Read

The Big Jubilee Read is the BBC and The Reading Agency's 2022 campaign to use the proven power of reading to unite the public around the shared stories that define our social and cultural heritage. A list of 70 great books from across the Commonwealth, ten from each decade of Her Majesty the Queen's reign, have been selected by a panel of experts. We've created a Reading Friends resource for one book from each decade, with an extract and discussion questions. *Life of Pi* was published in 2001.

About the Book

After the tragic sinking of a cargo ship, a solitary lifeboat remains bobbing on the wild, blue Pacific. The only survivors from the wreck are a sixteen-year-old boy named Pi, a hyena, a zebra (with a broken leg), a female orang-utan – and a 450-pound Royal Bengal tiger. With this unlikely premise, the scene is set for one of the most extraordinary and best-loved works of fiction in recent years. Published by Canongate.

About the author

Yann Martel was born in Spain in 1963 of Canadian parents. After studying philosophy at university, he worked odds jobs and travelled before turning to writing. In addition to *Life of Pi*, he is the author of the novels *Self* and *Beatrice and Virgil*, the stories *The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios*, and the collection of letters to the Prime Minister of Canada *What is Stephen Harper Reading?*. Yann Martel lives in Saskatchewan, Canada.





Extract (p. 12-15)

Our good old nation was just seven years old as a republic when it became bigger by a small territory. Pondicherry entered the Union of India on November 1, 1954. One civic achievement called for another. A portion of the grounds of the Pondicherry Botanical Garden was made available rent-free for an exciting business opportunity and—lo and behold—India had a brand new zoo, designed and run according to the most modern, biologically sound principles.

It was a huge zoo, spread over numberless acres, big enough to require a train to explore it, though it seemed to get smaller as I grew older, train included. Now it's so small it fits in my head. You must imagine a hot and humid place, bathed in sunshine and bright colours. The riot of flowers is incessant. There are trees, shrubs and climbing plants in profusion—peepuls, gulmohurs, flames of the forest, red silk cottons, jacarandas, mangoes, jackfruits and many others that would remain unknown to you if they didn't have neat labels at their feet. There are benches. On these benches you see men sleeping, stretched out, or couples sitting, young couples, who steal glances at each other shyly and whose hands flutter in the air, happening to touch. Suddenly, amidst the tall and slim trees up ahead, you notice two giraffes quietly observing you. The sight is not the last of your surprises. The next moment you are startled by a furious outburst coming from a great troupe of monkeys, only outdone in volume by the shrill cries of strange birds. You come to a turnstile. You distractedly pay a small sum of money. You move on. You see a low wall. What can you expect beyond a low wall? Certainly not a shallow pit with two mighty Indian rhinoceros. But that is what you find. And when you turn your head you see the elephant that was there all along, so big you didn't notice it. And in the pond you realize those are hippopotamuses floating in the water. The more you look, the more you see. You are in Zootown!

Before moving to Pondicherry, Father ran a large hotel in Madras. An abiding interest in animals led him to the zoo business. A natural transition, you might think, from







hotelkeeping to zookeeping. Not so. In many ways, running a zoo is a hotelkeeper's worst nightmare. Consider: the guests never leave their rooms; they expect not only lodging but full board; they receive a constant flow of visitors, some of whom are noisy and unruly. One has to wait until they saunter to their balconies, so to speak, before one can clean their rooms, and then one has to wait until they tire of the view and return to their rooms before one can clean their balconies; and there is much cleaning to do, for the guests are as unhygienic as alcoholics. Each guest is very particular about his or her diet, constantly complains about the slowness of the service, and never, ever tips. To speak frankly, many are sexual deviants, either terribly repressed and subject to explosions of frenzied lasciviousness or openly depraved, in either case regularly affronting management with gross outrages of free sex and incest. Are these the sorts of guests you would want to welcome to your inn? The Pondicherry Zoo was the source of some pleasure and many headaches for Mr. Santosh Patel, founder, owner, director, head of a staff of fifty-three, and my father.

To me, it was paradise on earth. I have nothing but the fondest memories of growing up in a zoo. I lived the life of a prince. What maharaja's son had such vast, luxuriant grounds to play about? What palace had such a menagerie? My alarm clock during my childhood was a pride of lions. They were no Swiss clocks, but the lions could be counted upon to roar their heads off between five-thirty and six every morning. Breakfast was punctuated by the shrieks and cries of howler monkeys, hill mynahs and Moluccan cockatoos. I left for school under the benevolent gaze not only of Mother but also of bright-eyed otters and burly American bison and stretching and yawning orang-utans. I looked up as I ran under some trees, otherwise peafowl might excrete on me. Better to go by the trees that sheltered the large colonies of fruit bats; the only assault there at that early hour was the bats' discordant concerts of squeaking and chattering. On my way out I might stop by the terraria to look at some shiny frogs glazed bright, bright green, or yellow and deep blue, or brown and pale green. Or it might be birds that caught my attention: pink flamingoes or black swans or one-wattled cassowaries, or something smaller, silver diamond doves, Cape glossy starlings, peach-faced lovebirds, Nanday conures, orange-







fronted parakeets. Not likely that the elephants, the seals, the big cats or the bears would be up and doing, but the baboons, the macaques, the mangabeys, the gibbons, the deer, the tapirs, the llamas, the giraffes, the mongooses were early risers. Every morning before I was out the main gate I had one last impression that was both ordinary and unforgettable: a pyramid of turtles; the iridescent snout of a mandrill; the stately silence of a giraffe; the obese, yellow open mouth of a hippo; the beak-and-claw climbing of a macaw parrot up a wire fence; the greeting claps of a shoebill's bill; the senile, lecherous expression of a camel. And all these riches were had quickly, as I hurried to school. It was after school that I discovered in a leisurely way what it's like to have an elephant search your clothes in the friendly hope of finding a hidden nut, or an orang-utan pick through your hair for tick snacks, its wheeze of disappointment at what an empty pantry your head is. I wish I could convey the perfection of a seal slipping into water or a spider monkey swinging from point to point or a lion merely turning its head. But language founders in such seas. Better to picture it in your head if you want to feel it.













Discussion Questions

- What do you think of zoos? Have you ever visited one? Or maybe a theme park? Did you like it? Why?
- Are there any places that you remember seeming big to you as a child, that now seem much smaller? Where?
- Pi's family moved from a hotel to a zoo. Where do you think you'd prefer to grow up and why?
- What do you think it would be like to grow up living in a zoo? Would you like it? How would it be different to your own childhood?
- Pi describes growing up in the zoo as "paradise on earth". If you could choose to live anywhere in the world, where would it be?
- Pi says "My alarm clock during my childhood was a pride of lions." Can you imagine being woken up in this way? Do you use an alarm clock to wake up?
- Pi describes how the elephants search his clothes trying to find a nut, and the orangutan picks through his hair hoping to find snacks. Have you ever lived with animals or had pets? Did they have any funny habits?
- What other stories published between 1992-2001 would you recommend?

Other Big Jubilee Read books published between 1992-2001:



















