

## *Life of Pi* Part III: Excerpts

### Excerpt I: The fantasy elements

*The island was carnivorous. This explained the disappearance of the fish in the pond. [...] At night, by some chemical process unknown to me but obviously inhibited by sunlight, the predatory algae turned highly acidic and the ponds became vats of acid that digested the fish. This was why Richard Parker returned to the boat every night. This was why the meerkats slept in the trees. This was why I had never seen anything but algae on the island.*  
*Part II, Chapter 92*

Even though we already classified the novel as a mixture of contemporary and heroic fantasy, I believe that an important addition should be made to this classification. *Life of Pi* exhibits some prominent elements of the so-called Magic Realism. This is a movement that started in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century especially with paintings. European artists gave shape to the new movement with a sharp focus throughout their paintings, the juxtaposition between the near and far objects, and the limited use of aerial perspective. These artists combined mysterious and dreamlike elements with objects from everyday life. They endeavoured to infuse magic into ordinary, even banal objects. The objective of the movement was to bring us fresh presentations of the everyday world by choosing unusual points of view, mysterious juxtapositions or common objects presented in uncanny ways. Everything we see or read in Magic Realism is within the realm of the possible, although sometimes unlikely. The term Magic Realism was first applied to literature in the 1960s with authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In literature, the movement points to a reality which hovers on the edges of our own – a recognizable world, familiar in most details, but operating under a different set of rules. This unsettling of realities causes the readers to examine their own expectations and principles regarding the world that they inhabit. Magical Realist writers depict the ordinary as miraculous and the miraculous as ordinary.

In the case of *Life of Pi*, Martel uses meticulously researched details about zoological oddities such as eating and sleeping habits of sloths and tigers in order to lull the readers into believing that the world Pi inhabits is rational. Pi's survival for 227 days on a boat in the Pacific Ocean is hard to believe, but Martel is so detailed about it that our disbelief is suspended. We even come to accept that it might be possible that a huge Bengal Tiger could be tamed by the movement of the waves and the need to be fed. However, the moment when I believe Martel uses Magical Realism the most is the magical island. Pi lands on an island of self-sustaining, fresh-water generating algae covered with numerous meerkats. As delightful as this false paradise is, it is clearly impossible and Pi discovers this fact with horror, as we can see in the excerpt I have chosen. The island is carnivorous and even though it begins as a flicker of hope for Pi, it turns out to be very dangerous. The floating island symbolizes Pi's own despair. As Pi notes, it would not have killed him immediately had he stayed; rather, it would have eaten away at his soul, deadening his spirit and causing a numbing hopelessness. The carnivorous island represents Pi's pessimism, his dwindling hope that he will ever be found. To stay on the island would be to give up, to decide to end his days on a man-eating island rather than in civilization. Pi's choice to leave the island and get back into the ocean is his way of remaining optimistic, however minutely, about his odds of salvation.

# Excerpts On Life

**RJ Shavelson**



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