

## Excerpts from Interview with Yann Martel

### Components of the Book:

A. Dear Wilson, Much research, much reality. I started this novel in 1997 in India while on a six-month trip. I did practical research there, visiting zoos, going to churches, temples and mosques, spending time in Pondicherry and Munnar, absorbing Indianness through every pore. I spent another two years or so doing more bookish research in Montreal. Then I wrote the book, which took me another two years or so. Part research, part reality, part influence, part inspiration, much hard work — the usual ingredients for a novel, I think.

### The Name Richard Parker:

Dear Deborah, During my research I came upon a curious coincidence. Edgar Allan Poe published his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, in the 1830s. In it, Pym and a friend leave Nantucket on a ship. It capsizes and the two find themselves on the hull of the ship with another survivor. Starvation leads them to killing him and eating him. The character who is lunched upon has the name of Richard Parker. Forty years later, in real life, a yacht called the *Mignonette* left Southampton for Australia. In the Atlantic it broke apart and the crew of four scrambled onto a dingy. They survived for 17 days. On the 17th day the captain killed the cabin boy, who was in a coma, and he and another crew member ate him. Two days later the three survivors were rescued by a Swedish ship and brought back to Southampton. They spoke openly of what had happened to them. For the first time in British history, they were tried and convicted of murder. Up till then, cannibalism in the high seas was taken as a given, a terrible thing that had to be done when your ship sank and push came to shove. The cabin boy's name was Richard Parker. There was a third Richard Parker in another ship that foundered. I liked that coincidence, that name that kept on coming up in my research. I decided that would be the tiger's name.

### The Creating of the Story:

A. Dear Carolyn, I think creativity is sometimes a question of being open. For *Life of Pi* that openness started in 1990 when I happened to read a review of a novel by a Brazilian writer named Moacyr Scliar. The review mentioned in passing that part of the novel took place in a lifeboat where the main character is stranded with a wild animal. I thought, "What a wondrous premise. I could do something with that." But the book was written, so I moved on. I completely forgot that review. Seven years later I was in India, meaning to work on a novel set in Portugal, much as I describe in the Author's Note. But that novel wasn't coming alive. I put it aside — and fell into despondency. What had I done with my life? Where was it going? The usual lamentations about a life unlived. Quick, quick, I need a story, said my unconscious. That's when India spoke to me, India where gods and animals abound and rub shoulders, India where all stories are possible. Suddenly, that long ago premise burst into my consciousness and *Life of Pi* tumbled into my imagination. The whole novel came to me in twenty minutes, half an hour, story, theme, incidents, everything: the family, the zoo, the ship, the sinking, the blind Frenchman, the island, the Japanese, the two stories, the idea that life is an interpretation, that between us and reality lies our imagination, which shapes our vision of reality and why not believe the better story, etc. I spent the next four years doing research and writing the novel. That's how *Life of Pi* came to life. The premise for my next novel came to me after seeing a show of Goya prints. The idea just popped into my head. But you don't need much to start with. One little good idea leads to another little good idea leads to another one, to another one, etc, until you have an entire novel before your eyes.

### The Magic of Magical Realism:

A. Dear Ruth, The island, ah, the island. The most frequently asked question: What does the island mean? It means what you choose to see in it. My narrative strategy in writing this book was to write a story that was progressively harder to believe. Will you believe that a boy could survive with a tiger? Yes? Good. Will you believe that the boy could go blind, the tiger could go blind and they could meet another blind man in another lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific? Yes? Great. Now will you believe in this crazy carnivorous island? I figure most readers will not believe it. Their suspension of disbelief will break down and readers will start making excuses for Pi: He's starving and hallucinating. In other words, reason will kick in. That's fine with me. But I hope that when readers get to Part Three of the novel and read the other story, the one without animals, that their revulsion at that story will be such that they, like the investigators, will choose the first story as the BETTER story. But I wanted that better story to have something unbelievable about it. I wanted it to get beyond the reasonable and the plausible. BECAUSE every great thing in life — be it religion, love, any ideal — has an element of the unreasonable to it. We are not computers. We need the pull of the unreasonable to get us through life. The island represents that unreasonable element in the first story.