Discussing *Life of Pi*:
Some Questions to Ponder

1. What is truth? What is its relation to "the facts"?

2. Pi is polytheistic. Is that really possible or believable? Think about the similarities between world religions. Is it difficult to embrace several religions at once? Why? What is the difference between an agnostic and an atheist?

3. Consider the ideas about zoos, captive animals, and animal behavior expressed in this book. How do these concepts apply to animals in areas where you live, play, and work? Do you agree that humans are the most dangerous of animals? Why or why not?

4. What does the island signify?

5. In Chapter 56, Pi calls fear "life's only true opponent." What does he mean by this? How does fear hold us back during times of change?

6. Early in the novel, we discover that the narrator majored in religious studies and zoology, with particular interests in a sixteenth-century Kabbalist and the admirable three-toed sloth. In subsequent chapters, he explains the ways in which religions and zoos are both steeped in illusion. Discuss some of the other ways in which these two fields find unlikely compatibility.

7. What does the name of the *Tsimtsum* signify? Besides the loss of his family and possessions, what else did Pi lose when the *Tsimtsum* sank? What did he gain?

8. Pi's full name, Piscine Molitor Patel, was inspired by a Parisian swimming pool that "the gods would have delighted to swim in." The shortened form refers to the ratio of a circle's circumference divided by its diameter. Explore the significance of Pi's name.

9. One reviewer thinks that the novel contains hints of *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Pi himself measures his experience in relation to history's most famous castaways. Consider this book in comparison with other survival stories (fiction or non-fiction) that you've read. How does it compare?

10. Whose voice do we hear in the "Author's Note" at the beginning of the book? How do you know who is speaking in this section? Why does Martel use this device?

11. Who is YOUR Richard Parker? How do the human beings in your world reflect the animal behavior observed by Pi? What do Pi's strategies for dealing with Richard Parker teach us about confronting the fearsome creatures in our lives?

12. Nearly everyone experiences a turning point that represents the transition from youth to adulthood, albeit seldom as traumatic as Pi's. What event marks your coming of age? What survival skills did you need to learn? What skills did you already have?

13. Is *Life of Pi* a tragedy, adventure story, fantasy, romance, or comedy? Or is it something else altogether?

14. Which story do YOU think is true? Do you feel you have been personally tricked by Pi or by Martel? Does the trick affect how you see Pi or how you feel about the book?

15. In Chapter 31, we hear about Mr. Kumar the baker and Mr. Kumar the teacher visiting the zoo together with Pi. In one interview, Martel describes this part of the book as "the whole novel in one scene." How so?

16. Time flows irregularly in the novel. We lose years, hundreds of days on the lifeboat, and we start at the end and end in the middle. Time is a feature of many stories in many novels: how do the pace and pattern of Martel's tale create Pi?

17. More than sympathy for Pi, we feel affection for him. We become emotionally invested in Pi like a friend. Why?

18. How did you react to the story of Pi meeting the blind man? What did this add to the overall story? Or did it detract? Why?

19. What does it mean to sacrifice our imagination? What do we lose when we do? Is crude reality made up of worthless dreams? Is this a book about the power of religion or the power of imagination? Or both?

20. Why are stories important? What does fiction do for or to the reader/listener?

For more information…

- about Yann Martel, see **http://guides.lib.montana.edu/yannmartel**
- about the MSU Freshman Convocation, see **http://www.montana.edu/convocation/**
- about MSU's Year of Engaged Leadership program, see **http://www.montana.edu/year/listen**