

Captivating Creatures

Zoos, Marketing, and the Commercial Success of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*¹

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ABSTRACT

The visually striking tiger on the cover of Man Booker Prize-winning novel "Life of Pi", originally published in 2001, highlights the role of exotic, charismatic animals for the marketing of fiction to a world-wide readership. Deploying zoo and circus animal imagery, "Life of Pi" emphasises commercially attractive animals in packaging and content. Indeed, the notion that animal entertainment within zoos especially is not only attractive, but also beneficial to the animals themselves, reassures consumers and alleviates feelings of guilt. "Life of Pi" succeeds commercially for many of the same reasons that zoos profit from exhibiting non-human animals. It portrays a mythology of "good zoos" as a kind of Ark, ostensibly underpinned by science and research, and thus represents a deeply conservative reaction to growing calls that for ethical and environmental reasons we need to rethink our consumption-based relationship to animals. This paper examines some of the novel's arguments in favour of zoos and discusses the ways in which a "story with animals is the better story". This paper makes use of an activist approach to literature and starts from the premise that an Animal Studies approach necessarily takes the interests of animals and their subjectivity as the central concern.

Keywords: Life of Pi, Yann Martel, zoo, entertainment, charismatic, exotic, animal studies, critical animal studies, literary criticism, marketing.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an online interview with Craig Rintoul in 2007, Yann Martel, author of *Life of Pi*, asserts that his best-selling novel is "taking on zoos, which no-one likes. You know, it's unfashionable, in fact in some ways objectionable.

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Who's gonna want to read this? So yeah, I was as surprised as anyone else that it did so well" (Martel 2007e; my transcript). This paper argues that, contrary to Martel's comment here, and in keeping with other comments he makes elsewhere, *Life of Pi* advocates for the zoo as an important and necessary institution – at least in principle, and that, moreover, *Life of Pi*'s commercial success rests on the very same strategies that zoos use to promote themselves. Indeed, by deploying zoo animal imagery, *Life of Pi* emphasises commercially attractive animals in packaging and content, as Martel constructs a colourful spectacle for his international audiences. In particular, the visually striking tiger on the cover of *Life of Pi* highlights the role of exotic, charismatic animals for the marketing of fiction to a global readership.

The notion that animal entertainment within zoos especially is not only attractive, but also beneficial to the animals themselves, reassures consumers and alleviates any feelings of guilt arising from the animals' incarceration. *Life of Pi* portrays a particular mythology of "good zoos" as a kind of Ark, underpinned ostensibly not only by Pi's expertise as zoologist, but also by the fact that Martel himself has repeatedly stressed that he carried out research – amateur research, as it were – into zoos and animal behaviour, prior to writing *Life of Pi*. This paper examines some of the arguments put forward in the novel that are in favour of zoos, and discusses the ways in which, to borrow the words of one of Martel's characters, a "story with animals is the better story".

1.1. *An Animal Studies approach*

This paper makes use of an activist approach to literature. In response to a number of discussions at the *Minding Animals 2 Conference* (Utrecht, Netherlands, July 3-6, 2012) about the role and definition of Animal Studies as an academic field, and the kinds of unique contributions it can and does make to a number of disciplines, I find it necessary here to explicitly outline my approach and method, and highlight its difference to a conventional literary critique. In *The Institute of Critical Animal Studies' Minding Animals 2 Satellite Event* (Utrecht, Netherlands, 3 July, 2012), Lynda Birke voiced the key question that sets Animal Studies apart from other academic fields. She asked "What's in it for the animals?", "What's in it for *them*?". Outside of Animal Studies, a paper on *Life of Pi* might, for example, analyse the way Martel's animals are allegorical representations of human traits or the human characters in the story. Without questioning what such an allegorical use of animal imagery means in relation to our understanding of actual animals, and what the possible implications are for our treatment of them, such a paper would

be a literary critique that merely happens to look at animals. At the very least, a contribution to the field of Animals Studies would require the preparedness to undergo the scrutiny of such questions. To do Animal Studies is not only to take animals as subject matter, but also as subjects who matter, or as “subjects of their own experience”, to use John Simons’ phrase (2002, 21).

Following this premise, the focus in this paper is on an examination of the relationship between context and content: that is, what we say and think about non-human animals profoundly affects the way we treat them; in turn, how we treat animals affects the way we think and speak about them. *Life of Pi* is well suited to demonstrating this approach. An Animal Studies reading of Martel’s novel uncovers this relationship of mutual reinforcement between cultural production on the one hand and animal practices on the other. This paper, then, questions common assumptions about animal use and welfare, and aims to demonstrate that *Life of Pi* is a deeply conservative reaction to growing calls that, ethically and environmentally, we need to fundamentally rethink our consumption-based relationship to animals.

2. CHARISMATIC ANIMALS

Life of Pi is the story of an Indian boy called Pi Patel whose family owns a zoo, and when they migrate to Canada with a number of the zoo animals, their ship sinks and Pi finds himself on a lifeboat with a Bengal Tiger called Richard Parker. The plot follows Pi’s struggle for survival, as he negotiates the situation with his knowledge of zoo animal behaviour and circus animal training. *Life of Pi* was an unprecedented success for publishing house Canongate and sold millions of copies world-wide. After winning The Man Booker Prize, the novel went on, according to *The Man Booker Prize* website, to “become one of the biggest selling Man Booker Prize winners in the prize’s 40 year history” (The Man Booker Prize 2012). In the context of marketing the book, Jamie Byng, the Publisher and Managing Director of Canongate Books, comments:

From the moment I first read Yann Martel’s novel *Life of Pi* I was astounded by its intensely visual nature. It seemed a book writ in colours, a book of painterly qualities, and so when we started to discuss at Canongate how we might best clothe this book, we all felt instinctively that it should be an illustrated jacket. And the illustrations that Andy Bridge created for the original UK edition managed to achieve all that we hoped for and more. So much so that over thirty of Yann’s forty international publishers also used Andy’s iconic cover art. (2009)

Indeed, the tiger gracing the covers of all *Life of Pi* editions in some variation or another, at least until the recent promotional covers for Ang Lee's film appeared, illustrates the wide appeal of animals as marketable and spectacular commodities; images of animals are everywhere. John Berger's observation about consumer items relating to childhood still holds true decades later: "No other source of imagery can begin to compete with that of animals" (1977, 122). In short, animals sell, and evidently very effectively so.

As Adrian Franklin observes, "the formation of mass markets, generalized affluence and mass popular culture" had "the greatest impact" on human-animal relationships in the twentieth century (1999, 38). Animals were turned into mass market products in the process, which, as Franklin points out, "stimulated the demand for mass media representations of animals" (1999, 39). Moreover, the dominant visual media, in which I include zoos, produce for the most part images of so-called charismatic animals, usually visually attractive mammals, birds or reptiles, with a particular focus on the cute, the colourful, and the carnivorous.

Martel's novel reflects this trend of using especially exotic animals as glamorous commodities, as both the packaging and the content of *Life of Pi* place great emphasis on the instant visual appeal of Richard Parker. In an online chat with Yann Martel, one reader commented that it was specifically the book's cover that "drew" them to the book (Martel 2002b). As *Life of Pi*'s narrator remarks, "[t]he sudden appearance of a tiger is arresting in any environment" (Martel 2003, 160). Such an environment can, of course, be the window of a bookshop. The reader is visually seduced by the cover, and this seduction continues inside the novel, where Richard Parker is described in vivid colours. This virtually cinematic effect gave rise to the illustrated edition of the novel with images by Tomislav Torjanac (2007), and it has now been adapted for cinema (*Life of Pi* [2012], dir. by Ang Lee).

Ironically, Pi charges zoo critics with being fixated upon charismatic animals: "These people usually have a large, handsome predator in mind, a lion or a cheetah (the life of a gnu or of an aardvark is rarely exalted)" (Martel 2003, 15). Charismatic animals are the bread and butter of zoos, and Martel uses precisely this tool to attract his readers. There are, for example, no images of cockroaches in the illustrations or book covers that accompany *Life of Pi*'s marketing. Although they, too, are survivors of the sinking of the *Tsimtsum*, they have no place in the floating life-boat ark cum circus arena. Indeed, they are thrown overboard with the stroke of a pen, so to speak, and, like the rat and the flies, they are usually forgotten by reviewers when the *Tsimtsum* survivors are listed (a human, a tiger, a hyena, a zebra, an orang-utan, flies, a rat, and cockroaches). Even Martel himself overlooks them completely, listing "only five survivors", when discussing

the novel (Martel 2007a; see also 2007d). This oversight reflects the fact that insects, with few notable exceptions such as butterflies, are unpopular, commonly reviled as pests, and overlooked as unworthy of consideration. In any case, the presence of flies and cockroaches would undermine the idea of Pi's mastery of the ark and all its inhabitants: the mistaken, but popular notion that large predators and humans are at the top of the food chain is on shaky ground, when there is a suggestion of flies and cockroaches feasting on corpses and proving themselves to be the ultimate survivors.

3. IN DEFENCE OF ZOOS

Originally showcases for imperial conquest, zoos and circuses have taken on new meanings in the context of the global environmental crisis, and yet the historical relationship between human masters and trained or exhibited animals remains essentially intact. As Randy Malamud comments: "The zoo's forte is its construction of zoogoers as paramount, masters of all they survey, and zoo animals as subalterns" (Malamud 1998, 58). Rather than a critique of zoos – or circuses, for that matter – Pi's mastery of Richard Parker through zoo animal management and circus animal training methods is not only rationalised for the situation at hand, but also naturalised in a general context.

Pi's methods are "given" through nature, rather than culture. As a result, the narrative is perceived as an endorsement especially of zoos. Indeed, the frontmatter of the 2003 Canongate paperback edition promotes *Life of Pi* as "[a]n impassioned defence of zoos" (*The New Yorker Review*). Moreover, Yann Martel has variously talked about his views on zoos. The title of his article *A Giraffe in a Cage Is Worth Two on the Box* is as programmatic as it is self-explanatory (2002a). Martel's core argument, in that article and elsewhere, is that a zoo is an important educational tool, which serves to protect endangered species and has much to teach especially children about animals, much more than a nature documentary on TV ever could. What Martel does criticise is what he perceives as the welfare issues associated with "bad zoos" – as opposed to "good zoos". He says it is "better to have a good zoo – note the adjective – than not" (2002a). So, according to Martel, zoos are good in principle, if not always in practice. His views are closely reflected by his creation Pi Patel, with the one exception that Pi argues zoos are ultimately better places for animals than their natural habitat – comparable to luxury hotels, even (Martel 2003, 13, 18).

The views put forward in *Life of Pi* are reassuring to mainstream readers, who are used to the zoo as a cultural given in the western world. Zoos are marketed nowadays as institutions not only for entertainment and education, but also for species conservation. At the same time, despite the best efforts of zoo landscapers and architects to render the confining structures of the zoo invisible, to replace bars and cages – sometimes – with moats and hedges or immersion exhibits, people are increasingly aware that zoo animals are deprived of freedom, space and the stimuli a natural habitat would provide. People still want to and do visit the zoo, not least because it is considered an essential part of childhood experience, but they feel uneasy about it. *Life of Pi* is successful not only because it employs the kinds of strategies that zoos use to attract people in the first place, but also because it reassures: visiting a zoo, the novel suggests, is a good thing to do.

To this end, Pi speaks of ideal enclosures that contain the supposed essence of any given animal's natural habitat, which meets all of the animal's needs, and provides stimuli and protection.

Philip Armstrong, citing Marian Scholtmeijer, argues that science in *Life of Pi* represents a reduction of animals to “a system of behaviours to be isolated, manipulated, and tabulated”. They effectively become “Cartesian beast-machine[s]” through Pi's knowledge of zoology and behavioural science, as the lives of Richard Parker, trained like a circus animal, and the other Pondicherry Zoo animals are governed by flight distances and stimulus responses (Armstrong 2007, 216-7). Martel's view of zoos, in and outside of the novel, is thus underpinned by the supposed weight of scientific authority. He sets up his protagonist and himself as rational, unbiased authorities on the topic, and contrasts Pi's opinions to the “non-sense” circulated by “[w]ell-meaning but misinformed people” (Martel 2003, 15).

Martel stresses, and is frequently asked about, his research into the topics his novel deals with. And frequently he points out: “I read a history of zoos, some books on zoo biology, on animal psychology. And I visited zoos. I interviewed someone at the Toronto Zoo as well as the director of the Trivandrum Zoo in India” (cited in Sielke 2003, 27; see also Martel 2007b and 2007c). He projects this role as researcher by creating a protagonist with a zoology degree, frequently citing “the literature” by which he implies expert publications (see Martel 2003, 19, 29, 85, 163, 265). He produces a semblance of a scientific text by citing “Beebe (1926)”, “Bullock (1968)”, “Tirler (1966)”, and “Hediger (1950)” (Martel 2003, 4, 44), complete with publication dates in brackets in the manner of a professional scientific journal article. For all that, it is – unintentionally – ironic

that Pi, as an expert on sloths with “an algae” in their fur (Martel 2003, 4), does not know that the singular of “algae” is “alga”².

Nonetheless, many readers and reviewers accept Martel’s and Pi’s authority on zoo animal welfare and behaviour. The arguments put forward in *Life of Pi* apparently even manage to convince some people who were previously critical of zoos. Martel, after all, is a convert himself, so to speak. He explains:

A zoo is not an ideal place for an animal – of course the best place for a chimp is the wilds of Tanzania – but a good zoo is a decent, acceptable place. Animals are far more flexible than we realize. If they weren’t, they wouldn’t have survived. But my opinion about zoos came after research. Initially I had the opinion that most people have, that they are jails. (Martel 2002b)

Accordingly, readers comment in an online interview with Martel that his “research on the zoos was good. After reading your book, I started thinking that zoos are not such bad places”, that his book made them “look at zoos in a new light”, and one person writes: “I have to admit that you certainly changed my mind on the whole zoo thing. My husband is delighted that he can now take our son to one without feeling my wrath” (cited in Martel 2002b).

In contrast to the supposed weight of evidence for “good zoos” provided in the novel is a study by Ros Clubb and Georgia Mason, partly funded by “a number of British Zoos keen to learn more about how best to handle the animals in their care”, has shown zoos to be utterly unsuitable environments for wide-ranging carnivores such as tigers and lions, with polar bears the worst affected species (BBC 2003). Clubb and Mason recommend that “the keeping of naturally wide-ranging carnivores should be either fundamentally improved or phased out”, keeping in mind, for example, that “a polar bear’s typical enclosure size [...] is about one-millionth of its minimum home-range size”, a measure on which their wellbeing depends (2003, 473). Correspondingly, Philip Armstrong argues:

Of course, the merest knowledge of either zoos or zoology is sufficient to discredit Pi’s claims, which cannot account (among other things) for the pathologically repetitive behaviour of many confined animals, the needs of migratory species whose territories are defined not by boundaries but by vastly extensive paths of travel, the distress produced by inappropriate climatic conditions, or the other incalculable effects of removing organisms from the network of relationships that comprise their native habitats. (2007, 178)

² Pi (and/or Martel) makes this mistake two more times: “I wondered whether this algae would ever cease to amaze me with its botanical strangeness” (Martel 2003, 278); “A fish-eating algae that produces fresh water?” (Martel 2003, 294).

Yet, Pi's response would be that any zoos that do not meet these needs by recreating the essence of the animals' habitats would simply need to improve. As Martel suggests, "[b]etter to work at making zoos better" than not have them at all (2002a, 37). Pi's argument, however, is based on an impossible ideal, which is used to justify the institution of the zoo *per se*. Readers are reassured that their spectatorship actually amounts to doing something good for animals, and once the idea that the institution as such is "good" is accepted, it justifies the practice regardless of whether the particular zoos subsequently visited actually meet the ideal. The matter of improvement becomes incidental, an issue for experts to worry about.

Life of Pi appeals to contemporary audiences influenced by what Franklin describes as a shift from a "mood of entertainment and spectacle [...] to one of empathy and moral support" (1999, 48), as people seek reassurance that their zoo visit and entrance fee serve the greater good of animal welfare, conservation and education. As Pi declares:

A zoo is a cultural institution. Like a public library, like a museum, it is at the service of popular education and science. And by this token, not much of a money-making venture, for the Greater Good and the Greater Profit are not compatible aims, much to Father's chagrin. (Martel 2003, 78)

What zoo visitors therefore see is the ideal of the zoo, not the reality, as mythical discourse sets them up to disregard cages, zoochotic behaviour, and the inadequacy of the zoo "habitat". As Malamud writes, "[t]hey see what they want to see, rather than the thing itself" (1998, 134). Indeed, it seems extraordinary that Pi does not report what must have been signs of zoochosis, caused by extreme confinement, after "spen[ding] hours observing" Richard Parker for 227 days at sea (Martel 2003, 191). There is no swaying, chewing, or pacing. Arguably, learning about the symptoms of zoochotic behaviour would have been a valuable lesson for readers concerned about zoo animal welfare, but like the educational institutions that zoos present themselves to be, Martel's fictional menagerie, his book that itself presents an image of being "at the service of popular education and science", does not inform about zoochosis.

The keyword here is "popular". Despite Pi's protestations, zoos are indeed money-making ventures. And despite Martel's assumption of scientific authority, his book is meant to be bought. The fact that Pi highlights the San Diego Zoo as a particularly good zoo (Martel 2003, 40) is instructive here in terms of showing the connection between marketing zoos and marketing *Life of Pi*. On their website, the San Diego Zoo appeals to potential corporate sponsors as "one of the most powerful and impactful [*sic*] brands in Southern California". In 2007, their advert succinctly stated:

“Nothing draws customers like a good cause. That’s what cause marketing can do for you. Companies can see strong sales when linking their products to saving endangered species and their habitats” (San Diego Zoo 2007). Malamud argues that an institution governed by the principles of supply and demand cannot ever be adequate: “[E]ven in the hands of the most enlightened emperors of commerce, consumer culture cannot beneficially mediate people’s relationship with animals, and nature can prosper only to the extent that it can be divorced – rescued – from consumerist forces” (1998, 98). After all, the priority of consumer culture lies not with the question of “what it would take to make the animals happy” (Masson and McCarthy 1996, 146), but with the question of what makes producer or provider and consumers – and that includes readers – happy.

4. CONCLUSION

Life of Pi’s commercial success rests on its reassuring reinforcement of the status quo in human-animal relationships. For whatever novelty this novel possesses, it is the familiar that is ultimately attractive to its global readership. Reading this book with the question “what’s in it for the animals” in mind reveals the dynamic between representation and exploitation and uncovers disingenuous arguments – perhaps well-meaning but misguided, even – in welfarist discourse. *Life of Pi*, given its popularity and the general acceptance of the zoo defence its human protagonist Pi puts forward, thus makes an appropriate resource for teaching new ways of reading, looking and thinking with an Animal Studies approach. Teaching compassion in reading and critical practice fosters, hopefully, compassion elsewhere, as well as the recognition that we, too, are animals, one species amongst many. Finally, encouraging the question “What’s in it for the animals?” at every turn, both in scholarly practice as well as in daily life, has, after all, implications in a much wider context. Given the environmental crises we face, the animals’ – and with that, ultimately, our own – survival depends on it.

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