

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016

Massachusetts Center for the Book

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Level III Honors Award

Dear Yann Martel,

They say that a leopard cannot change its spots. I politely disagree with that idiom. If we are self-aware in our effort to be better, then we can adjust and consciously change our old ways. I have learned that first hand. Ever since I was a child, I have been stubborn in my beliefs. I struck down others' arguments promptly with wit and tenacity. I like to think that I have come a long way in my tolerance. Your book, *The Life of Pi*, broadened my opinions and caused me to look at my stubbornness in a new light.

One of my strongest convictions had to do with religion and my certainty that there was no God. Growing up, I was shuffled from church to church and denomination to denomination by my parents. The first church we went to, a Catholic church, did not accept that my father was divorced to his ex-wife, and so we left on his accord. The next church, a Baptist church, asked for large sums of money often and so we left for financial reasons. I have never truly felt a connection to religion in my life. Since I was ten, I have declared myself as an atheist.

Although I have had many friends who have practiced religions, to me it made no sense. In my mind, one could either believe in God or science and there was no in-between. Everything I was taught in school refuted religion and caused my atheism to grow even stronger. I whole-heartedly did not believe in God and it baffled me that anyone would. However, when I read your book, I began to understand.

The main character in *The Life of Pi* was a Christian, a Muslim, and a Hindu. When I first started reading the book, I had prepared myself to dislike it. I figured a book about religion would mean absolutely nothing to an atheist. But I found that I had a very strong connection with Pi Patel and the story in general.

Similar to me, Pi did not follow the herd when it came to his strong beliefs. He was constantly told that he could not practice all three religions, yet he continued. In a completely different way, I have been told that my beliefs are incorrect as well. There have always been people who try to convince me that there is no sense in being atheist. Both Pi and I never conformed to fit in with everyone else. I was surprised by how similar Pi and I were. Perhaps if I did not learn to hate religion at a young age, I, too, would practice multiple religions.

I never understood the importance of religion, as I have made clear by now. I thought of it as more of a way to give a moral compass to lost souls than to bond a community. I saw the divergences in religions as divisive. The differences of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hindu, and other religions made me believe that peaceful coexistence between multiple separate religions was nearly impossible. In my academic career, I have learned about the Holocaust in which a Christian population committed genocide to a Jewish population. I have learned about the Armenian genocide in which Muslims killed Christians for their faith. I have learned about so many separate events in which religion was the cause of the divide. So, in my mind, I had no hope for religions peacefully existing alongside each other.

Pi was the catalyst that caused me to alter my opinion. His character constantly insisted that every God is the same no matter the religion. He spoke of the peace in religion's beliefs and the positivity in the word of their scripture. Whereas I had always suspected that scripture was an excuse to justify antiquated views such as homophobia and sexism, Pi preached of the love in the scripture. He spoke of how God loves everyone and we must always try to be our best for Him. I had never seen religion portrayed in that way and I suddenly saw the good in it.

To this day I still doubt God. But I am not willing to completely say that he does not exist. Before reading *The Life of Pi*, I was an atheist. Now, I am an agnostic. That, in simple terms, means that I do not believe nor disbelieve in God. I have always known that there is no conclusive evidence of God. Now, I also know that there is no conclusive evidence that there is *no* God. *The Life of Pi* opened me up to a whole new world in which religion is not the enemy.

The Life of Pi had a large effect on my life. I have been introduced to an entirely different way of thinking. I know now that it is not best to be stubborn in your beliefs because they are subject to change. Unlike Pi, I am not a Christian, a Muslim, and a Hindu. But I do believe that it is a possibility for me to be so. I have learned not to discount any certain set of ideas until I have completely educated myself. *The Life of Pi* taught me to be open to hearing about opinions that are different from mine. And it also taught me that perhaps there really is a God.

Sincerely,

Rachel

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