



Making the Unbelievable Believable

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This curriculum unit is recommended for:
Honors English II IB MYP/English/Grade 10

Keywords: *Life of Pi*, prosthetic narrative, disability studies

Teaching Standards: See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

Synopsis: We find truth in ourselves, our stories, and what we “will” or shape into being by using words. *Life of Pi* is a text in which the protagonist tells an extraordinary story of survival. This fantastical, metaphoric story is a prosthetic narrative: a crutch. In this five-week *Life of Pi* unit, I connect my students with ideas about disability and instruct them in reading and developing those ideas in close reading activities, journaling, color marking, and a Socratic seminar. By inviting my students to make assertions and explore their understanding of disability, in particular the prosthetic narrative, they begin seeing disability in other texts they study. The art of storytelling and close reading of stories makes even more sense as students recognize the essence of the prosthetic narrative; we lean on disability to foster truth, or what we will. We learn from Pi that we have choices. We can try to be reasonable, rational creatures, or we can exercise our imagination, listen to our heart—not our head—and allow stories to serve as prosthetic narratives, which in turn serves to save us by making the unbelievable believable.

I plan to teach this unit during the coming year in to (96) students in Honors English II IB MYP.

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Jennifer Osburn

Context

When I began teaching over twenty years ago, I spent a great deal of time on the classics; I used large, bulky textbooks in the classroom and saved contemporary literature for my reading pleasure or independent reading assignments. Perhaps it was the location—I was, after all, in rural Indiana at one of the few remaining K-12 facilities. Still, it seemed unusual to teach contemporary fiction in the classroom. As I moved from teaching for two years in that public school to many years at two independent schools, the emphasis shifted, and I adjusted by incorporating recent, relevant texts into the curriculum. *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel endures as one such text, and while I taught it for several years as a summer reading text for seniors in an independent school in New Jersey, last year I introduced it to students in public school: my sophomores in Honors English II and Honors English II IB MYP. Their interest levels were high, due in part to the highly anticipated film released around Thanksgiving in 2012, but also because the text itself is rich with symbolism, expressive writing, and a lovely twist at the end. What fifteen-year-old student would not enjoy reading about the fictional sixteen-year-old Piscine Molitor, who manages to survive for 227 days while stranded on a lifeboat with a 450 lb. Bengal tiger? *Life of Pi* works well with the global texts I teach, which are mostly contemporary pieces, not the classics with which my career began. So the pendulum has swung.

Now that *Life of Pi* is firmly part of the curriculum, I want to explore how Pi's delusions lead to disability, considering disability studies scholar David Mitchell's assertions, "The very need for a story is called into being when something has gone amiss with the known world, and thus the language of a tale seeks to comprehend that which has stepped out of line. In this sense, stories compensate for an unknown or unnatural deviance that begs for an explanation" (Mitchell 20). So Pi constructs a new belief system, one in which his animalistic tendencies are manifested in Richard Parker, a 450-lb. Bengal tiger. As Lennard Davis directs in his introduction of *The Disability Studies Reader*, "a disabilities studies consciousness can alter the way we see not only just novels that have main characters who are disabled but any novel," which led me to examine Pi more closely, and I was amazed with my discoveries (Davis 23). As Pi struggles to survive at sea, he encounters a range of obstacles: thirst & hunger, the tiger, a carnivorous island, and blindness. Pi's "disability inaugurates narrative, but narrative inevitably punishes its own prurient interests by overseeing the extermination of the object of its fascination" (Mitchell 24). This explains why Richard Parker simply slips away into the jungle, never to be seen again. Once the need to perform difference ends, disability can quite literally slip away. As Mitchell explains, "The passage through a bodily form helps secure a knowledge that would otherwise drift away of its own insubstantiality. The

corporeal metaphor offers narrative the one thing it cannot possess—an anchor in materiality” (28).

Investigators from the shipping company interview Pi, eager to learn what caused the ship to sink, and in hearing Pi's two versions of his ordeal, the investigators agree that the fantastical one—the story Pi created as a coping mechanism—is the better story. Thus, fiction transforms to fact.

Close to the beginning of telling his story, Pi remarks, “All living things contain a measure of madness that moves them in strange, sometimes inexplicable ways. This madness can be saving; it is part and parcel of the ability to adapt. Without it, no species would survive” (Martel 41). Indeed, the madness that places Richard Parker in the lifeboat with Pi is lifesaving because Richard Parker serves as Pi's companion. Richard Parker serves as Pi's Prosthetic Narrative. David T. Mitchell writes, “The coinage of the phrase ‘prosthetic narrative’ argues that disability has been used throughout history as a crutch on which literary narratives lean their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and social critique. Yet, at the same time, literature avoids designating disability itself as a source for derisive social myths that need to be interrogated. Instead, disability plays host to a panoply of other social maladies that writers seek to address” (Mitchell 17). So as we examine the prosthetic narrative in *Life of Pi*, we make connections across the texts taught over the course of the semester: *Big Fish*, *The Things They Carried*, *The Book Thief*, and *Twelfth Night: Or What You Will*. To begin, *Big Fish* emphasizes the value of flavor, not just fact, when telling stories. Next, *The Things They Carried* demonstrates how stories change over time, especially those stories set in times of war. Then, set in an earlier period of war in Nazi Germany, *The Book Thief* is narrated by Death, who reinforces the power of words and books. Finally, in *Twelfth Night: Or What You Will* where appearances are deceiving, so too are words characters utter. Specifically, Viola in disguise as Cesario protests, “I am not what I am,” a phrase uttered by the villainous Iago in *Othello*. This could almost be modified to a statement like, “I am not exactly as I appear to be in my stories, and my stories are not exactly what really happened.” In other words, these texts each have an element of the prosthetic narrative. What is real to one is not precisely true to another. Our experiences and belief systems tailor our perspectives. We find truth in ourselves, our stories, and what we *will* or shape into being by using words. This is the essence of the prosthetic narrative; we lean on disability to foster truth, or what we will.

In reading “‘Fluster’d with flowing cups’: Alcoholism, Humoralism, and the Prosthetic Narrative in *Othello*,” a clearer understanding of the prosthetic narrative is offered. David Wood breaks down Mitchell and Snyder's four parts of the prosthetic narrative:

1. Deviance is exposed to a reader;
2. Narrative calls for the origin of deviance and formative consequences;

3. Deviance is brought center-stage; and
4. There is rehabilitation or an effort to fix the deviance in some manner, shape, or form (Wood 2).

Applying this to *Life of Pi*, Part One of the novel exposes deviance in Pi trying to practice three religions simultaneously. Second, Pi's father teaches him a lesson about the savagery of the tiger in the zoo. Third, Pi is shipwrecked and turns savage. Fourth, the creation of Richard Parker as Pi's companion during his 227-day ordeal serves as his effort to rehabilitate—to affix his actions to a companion. That companion's disappearance upon Pi's rescue, united with the inspectors' validation of Pi's explanation by acknowledging the tiger's existence in the final portion of their report, rehabilitates the deviation, which in turn creates a new reality.

So, while the text leads the reader to an understanding of Pi's experiences justifying his new belief system, we actually understand by the end of the text that these experiences have been delusions. Coping mechanisms. Pi is disabled; he cannot distinguish fact from fantasy. The inspectors who should use only facts in their report choose to mention the tiger, even though there is no physical evidence of its existence. We are left questioning what is real and what is unreal, which is exactly where we began: questioning belief systems.

I am interested in exploring how Pi's delusions are disabilities. They shift his view of reality, help him survive a horrific ordeal, and convince officials to shift their perspective. The inspectors, like the reader of the text, believe the unbelievable with no physical evidence. What makes them buy in? Perhaps feeling less fearful of the story *with* the animals versus the story *without* the animals. The former fosters less fear while the latter generates great tension and distress. In the latter, the protagonist describes participating in killing and cannibalism, acts, which told in a different manner, paint a picture of what aids his survival. The story with animals facilitates Pi's survival. His madness—his disability—creates a new reality that sustains him, and it raises compelling questions about what constitutes a disability. In particular, it asks us to view disability in an entirely new light: as creative and sustaining. “To make the body speak its experience, one must give a language to it” (Mitchell 28). Pi's stories, the one with animals and the other with humans, confirm the text's value. It is worth examining closely. Therein lies the main objective of this unit: guiding students to a clear understanding of author's purpose through a thorough analysis of the text.

A secondary objective of the unit involves encouraging my students to consider questions about the place and presence of disability in this and other texts we study. *Life of Pi* helps us see delusion as a positive point, as it invites us to feel real sympathy for mental illness when the delusion serves as a means of survival; whereas, delusion in *The Poisonwood Bible*, *The Things They Carried*, *Twelfth Night: Or What You Will*, and *The Book Thief* will not elicit the same response. Guiding my students in the myriad ways to

read disability requires building on prior knowledge, discussion, and close analysis of what each work says about the universal human condition, which involves disability and how we respond to or with it. We determine the emotional responses each text elicits; how place, circumstance, and presence bring forth different responses; and where these points overlap. In all, the prosthetic narrative establishes itself an essential element in the truth each of us discovers and uses to shape his purpose in the universe.

The School

Myers Park High School is the largest public high school in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School system and one of the largest in North Carolina. The student body has an international flavor with over 32 countries represented in the school population: 59% white, 26% African-American, 8% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 2% other. Thirty-four percent of the student body receives free or reduced lunch. International Baccalaureate (IB), Advanced Placement (AP), and Honors courses are offered in most academic areas; general and remedial instruction are also available. Over 600 students are enrolled in the IB program. Additionally, wide arrays of AP courses are offered, and enrollment is approximately 876. With around 150 teachers and nearly 3000 students, class sizes vary.

The Class

Honors English II IB MYP classes are comprised of 30+ students. The energy level runs high for this discussion-based semester-long class, which meets for 90 minutes every day. Approximately two-thirds of these sophomores fulfill the requirements for advancing to the IB diploma classes; those switching tracks tend to take AP Language Composition. This is my second year teaching Honors English II IB MYP, and I strive to use texts that move students around the globe, starting in Mesopotamia (*Gilgamesh*), moving to Spain (*The Alchemist*), Africa (*The Poisonwood Bible*), Asia, the Pacific, & Mexico (*Life of Pi*), Vietnam/North America (*The Things They Carried*), Illyria (*Twelfth Night: Or What You Will*), and finally Europe (*The Book Thief*). Students track connections among the texts, ranging from the significance of the journey instead of the destination, to distinguishing between what's real and what's unreal, and ultimately trying to discern the author's purpose. All of these aspects meet in *Life of Pi*.

Content Objectives

Life of Pi is told in three parts: Pi's childhood in India, Pi's survival at sea, and Pi's recovery from his ordeal. I teach *Life of Pi* over a five-week period, allowing time for my students to read, annotate, and absorb the text. We begin by reading the Author's Note aloud in class, and I break the reading assignments into chunks, encouraging my students to immerse themselves in the story, which we begin discussing a few days later, once they have finished reading all of Part One. One of the obstacles students usually encounter is identifying who is speaking when the text is italicized (the "author") and

regular font (Pi), and they also are confused when Part Two begins, as Pi tells the story in a non-linear fashion. Frankly, they are disappointed that Part One contains nothing of the boy on the lifeboat, as the ship sinks in Part Two. Still, Part One is essential background information, and once they have read the entire text, it is helpful to go through some of the defining moments together.

As indicated in the reading group discussion questions included in earlier editions of *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel considers Chapters 21 and 22 the “core” of the novel, so I like to spend time examining those brief chapters with my students, pointing out that Chapter 21 follows Pi’s description of God’s presence in Chapter 20 and is an italicized chapter in which the “author” ruminates on Pi’s faith. Chapter 22 is in the form of a parable, reflecting Pi’s belief that one misses the “better story” when one steadfastly refuses to believe in God simply because the facts cannot support God’s existence. Pi suggests that an atheist may experience a deathbed conversion, but an agnostic who remains “true to his reasonable self, if he stays beholden to dry, yeastless factuality [...] to the very end, [will] lack imagination, and miss the better story” (Martel 64). This is a critical point to understand, and I often create greater confusion in attempting to explain the distinctions between atheism and agnosticism. Essentially, the point about agnostics that sticks in Pi’s craw is their unwillingness to suspend disbelief and believe that which cannot be seen but can, he contends, be felt. They remain immobile because they lack certainty and reason, which Pi suggests are necessary for movement.

Pi’s tale of surviving on a lifeboat with a tiger is told with such insistence and so many visual descriptions, that it almost seems to be his sole purpose in telling the story. The “author” contends that Pi’s is a story that makes one believe in God. After my students have read the text, I have them look back through the text, searching for references to seeing, examining the italicized chapters for clues that Pi and Richard Parker are symbiotic beings, and so on. The “author’s” mention of finding clues of Pi being married parallels the hints about Pi and Richard Parker: “*The house is more than a box full of icons. I start noticing small signs of conjugal existence. They were there all along, but I hadn’t seen them because I wasn’t looking for them*” (Martel 80). We find moments when Pi is mobile and Richard Parker is immobile, and vice versa, and these become more obvious through color marking an extract from Chapter 53, where my students use one color to mark words showing movement and a different color to mark words indicating immobility. Then we explore how movement indicates certainty while immobility indicates doubt. Color marking empowers the students, as it fosters critical thinking and ideas when the words emerge from the page.

Next, we explore and color mark Chapter 56. This chapter begins, “I must say a word about fear,” and describes how fear leads to doubt, then anxiety, and eventually dread (Martel 161). The effects of fear begin in one’s mind and gradually work their way into one’s body, affecting every part except the eyes, which “always pay proper attention to fear” (161). Although one can still see, one’s ability to act based on what he sees has

been compromised, leading to defeat. The final paragraph of the chapter describes how fear

nestles in your memory like a gangrene: it seeks to rot everything, even the words with which to speak of it. So you must fight hard to express it. You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it. Because if you don't, if your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks of fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you (162).

This chapter clearly shows Pi's development of his prosthetic narrative. He describes how fear leads to doubt, disbelief and dread, which destroys one's body and leaves one wordless and defeated. His animal story of survival serves as his prosthetic narrative, the crutch he needs for recovering memory of his horrific experiences as he struggle to survive on the lifeboat. Pi's eyes work throughout most of his journey, and we cannot help but notice how often he describes what he sees until he goes blind.

This is the point in the story when I find most of my students need my assistance understanding the text, and I usually read Chapter 90 aloud. Chapter 90 begins with Pi noticing Richard Parker has gone blind. Pi gradually senses his own vision fading and remarks, "It's astonishing what you hear when you're alone in the blackness of your dying mind. A sound without shape or colour sounds strange. To be blind is to hear otherwise" (Martel 242). He then begins hearing a voice. "I laughed. I knew it. I wasn't hearing voices. I hadn't gone mad. It was Richard Parker who was speaking to me!" (246). Actually, he is alone. This is part of his prosthetic narrative as he explains murdering the French cook and eating some of the flesh. Pi explains, "This was the terrible cost of Richard Parker. He gave me life, my own, but at the expense of taking one. He ripped the flesh off the man's frame and cracked his bones. The smell of blood filled my nose. Something in me died then that has never come back to life" (255). Pi justifies his actions by ascribing them to a carnivorous tiger. He uses words to save himself, words that outright state the tiger killed the man. This seems justified, too, when examining the text and witnessing how Pi describes saving Richard Parker earlier in the text. Pi says to Richard Parker: "Hold on tight, I'll pull you in. Don't let go. Pull with your eyes while I pull with my hands. In a few seconds you'll be aboard and we'll be together. Wait a second. Together? We'll be *together*? Have I gone mad?" (99). Pi outright questions his mental state and uses this as an opportunity to demonstrate how when he is using his arms, Richard Parker needs to use his eyes. They cannot be activating similar body parts, for they cannot function in this manner. Their actions must be at odds with one another. Knowing this, it no longer seems strange that Pi tells Richard Parker to use his eyes to get on the lifeboat. When Pi moves, Richard Parker is immobile, and vice versa.

Upon making landfall, Richard Parker unceremoniously walks into the jungle without even a look over his shoulder at Pi. As I tell my students, Richard Parker is no longer needed, nor is it possible for him to stay, for that savage behavior will not be tolerated in civilized places. In fact, I should ask my students why they think Richard Parker is no longer needed, as my explanation suggests an unintentional insensitivity by aligning disability with savagery. What I really mean is that while most of the “civilized” members of society do not encourage savagery, those same members of society advocate for equal access and rights for the disabled. Savagery is polarizing behavior; madness is not. Pi creates a keen expectation that doubt leads us to unimaginative arenas. He scolds the inspectors, saying, “Don’t you bully me with your politeness! Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?” (297). This is an intriguing point, for Pi has constructed a story, a prosthetic narrative, that *is* hard to believe. As Mitchell concludes, “If the nondysfunctional body proves too ordinary to narrate, the disabled body becomes a paramount device of characterization in this process. Narrative prosthesis or the dependency on disability proves essential to, even the essence of, the story of difference” (Mitchell 29).

Pi tells the inspectors in Part Three, “I know what you want. You want a story that won’t surprise you. That will confirm what you already know. That won’t make you see higher or further or differently. You want a flat story. An immobile story. You want dry, yeastless factuality” (Martel 302). This echoes what Pi says about feeling God’s presence in Chapter 20 and what the “author” reports in Chapter 21. We are meant to learn from his narrative that a flat story lacks flavor and thus fails to move the reader; whereas, a story requiring imagination moves the reader to feel something. Pi acknowledges that, “You must make adjustments if you want to survive. Much becomes expendable. You get your happiness where you can” (217). By the end of *Life of Pi*, we have a keen understanding that we must learn to take leaps of faith—just believe the unbelievable—to witness greater possibilities.

Ultimately, I want my students to understand that we do not notice a great deal around us until we look closely. Then, when we look closely, we see the clues were there all along, but we just failed to notice them. This is beautifully illustrated in *Life of Pi*.

Yann Martel published this story of survival just when the public needed it; *Life of Pi* was released in September 2001. The First Harvest edition 2003 has, I recently discovered, an interesting omission on page 317, where Mr. Okamoto declares, “The story with animals is the better story,” and Pi responds, “Thank you.” The later editions of the text include Mr. Okamoto making the same declaration, but Pi’s response has changed to “Thank you. And so it goes with God” (317). This serves as an illustration to my students about how close examination of a text leads us to ask more questions. I have sought explanations about the change and offer a few theories to my students. First, the publisher may have made an error. Second, Martel may simply have modified Pi’s

dialogue in response to criticism that Part Three made too little mention of God for this being a story that “makes one believe in God.” Third, and most likely, Martel added the words in considering modern concerns, for the book was very popular almost immediately upon its release. Considering the historical context, the attacks of September 11, 2001, generated fear, a catalyst, as we witness in Pi, for disability. Instead of focusing on the visible and emotional effects of these traumatic events, Martel offered a solution to the disabling fear through Pi’s words. Pi and the inspectors, knowing that the horrible circumstances have already taken place and nothing will change that, choose a highly fantastical story as the better one. So while the timing of *Life of Pi*’s publication and popularity might be described as serendipitous, the message remains powerful, for we witness the power words possess, helping Pi move forward from a challenging experience to a meaningful life. Pi, the faithful yet irrational teenager who survives 227 days on a lifeboat, reminds us that we have choices: we can choose to be reasonable, rational creatures, or we can seize opportunities to exercise our imagination, listen to our heart—not our head—and allow stories to serve as prosthetic narratives, which in turn serves to save us by making the unbelievable believable. The choice is clear.

Teaching Strategies

Journaling

I encourage my students to spend time ruminating in their journal by beginning most classes with a prompt and modeling the practice of writing in my journal while they write in theirs. Not all writing needs to be graded, so the journal can be used as a safe place to put anything into words. I have noticed that the more practice we have in our journals, the easier the ideas flow in on-demand prompts. Furthermore, students realize what it feels like to achieve “flow” by the time they hit the second page in responding to a prompt. We share our responses and offer feedback about what we notice in each other’s voice, thinking, etc.

Close reading—Chapters 21 & 22 “the core of the text”

Reality and doubt are juxtaposed against each other in Chapters 21 & 22 as the author describes Pi Patel’s state as he explained being in the presence of God and then Pi describes an atheist’s “deathbed leap of faith” and an agnostic on his deathbed, explaining a white light in a scientific manner, steadfastly refusing to accept God’s existence. These chapters point to Pi’s remarks in Part Three, where Pi chides the inspectors for bullying him; these two chapters also highlight the significance of Pi equating the inspectors’ choice of the “better story” to choosing to believe in God. They have cast aside the dry story for the flavorful one.

Color Marking

Color marking involves visually marking text, which aids in analyzing, drawing inferences about author's purpose, and making assertions. As described by colleagues, color marking is like creating a map, a visible way in, to a text. The text can be prose or verse. The colors on the page make ideas emerge for all levels of learners. Chapters 53 & 56 are examined closely in color marking.

Socratic seminar

We prepare for and conduct a Socratic seminar to analyze the text's central idea and its development over the course of the text. This strategy is widely practiced across disciplines. A concise description of how to conduct a Socratic seminar is available at ReadWriteThink.com.

Classroom Activities

Journaling

Students select a powerful quotation from the text, copy it into their journals, and cite it properly. The quotation should have layers of meaning, which they will explain in their entries, as they strive to fill two pages examining the quotation.

Close reading: "Conjuring Our Own Gods," "Credulity," "Taming the Tiger," and "How I Wrote *Life of Pi*" [all available online]

In "Conjuring Up Our Own Gods," *New York Times* guest editor T. M. Luhrmann, an anthropologist at Stanford, explores belief in the supernatural—how we move from that which is imagined to that which feels real. Luhrmann describes interviewing a young man who started meditating and made a tulpa, an imagined creature made to feel real, and the tulpa became real to him, appearing or speaking to him without provocation. Once he stopped meditating, the tulpa disappeared, supporting the "claim that the idea of an invisible agent is basic to our psyche." I distribute a copy of "Conjuring Up Our Own Gods" to my students and have them connect it with *Life of Pi*. I want them to recognize how even the most unbelievable stories contain elements of truth. Stories serve us in our quest for finding the unknowable; in doing so, stories function as prosthetic narratives.

Color marking—Prezi, handout with instructions, and several extracts

After viewing and discussing the Prezi that explains what color marking is, students color mark an extract together. I have included a handout that explains the steps of Color Marking. Next, we discuss what we find in viewing the color marked text. I then have the students work through another extract and have them share their findings with elbow partners and eventually the large group.

Socratic seminar—“*Life of Pi* Socratic Seminar Questions” and “Quotations to reconsider once we know the complete story in *Life of Pi*” handouts

The final discussion of *Life of Pi* is conducted as a Socratic seminar, where students in the inner circle speak while students in the outer circle critique the discussion. The primary objective is to analyze the text’s central idea and its development over the course of the text. This entails having read the entire text, as we examine how the “author’s” growing awareness of Pi’s life (his marriage, children, pets, etc.) hints at the reader’s awareness of Pi’s fantastical story of survival. One question we address: Why does Richard Parker simply disappear into the jungles of Mexico once Pi is rescued? Mitchell’s exploration of the prosthetic narrative aids in understanding these points. All students are given two handouts, “*Life of Pi* Socratic Seminar Questions” and “Quotations to reconsider once we know the complete story in *Life of Pi*,” to prepare for the discussion, which is conducted the next day. A set of norms is agreed upon at the onset of the discussion, and the discussion commences. I may have to guide the discussion for a few minutes, but generally, students police themselves well and abide by the norms established. At the conclusion of the discussion, each student writes a reflection, describing his participation and what he learned in the discussion.

In all, these activities are places where I link my students to ideas about disability and ways to read and/or develop those ideas. For example, I think it is critical that I ask my students to make assertions and explore their understanding of disability. What makes something a disability? After noting the place and presence of disability, I invite them to explore what the text is saying about disability. How does it connect to the universal human condition? What emotions does the text elicit? As my students should have noticed, with Pi, disability related to trauma presents itself as creative and sustaining. Is this a typical response for disability related to trauma? Will this be what we find in other texts, or are we being encouraged to view disability in new ways? I will also invite my students to consider the isolation Pi experiences and the effects the isolation produces: madness and blindness. What do these look in the other texts? Where do we witness the prosthetic narrative emerging in those other texts? Why? Is fear always the catalyst? What role does doubt play in disability? In truth, my students are already engaging in keen observations and making more connections to disability than I had anticipated. Perhaps it has something to do with Dr. Ann Fox making disability visible to me in *Imagining Modern Bodies: Disability and Art at the Bechtler Museum of Art*. Disability is, indeed, invisible no more.

Life of Pi Socratic Seminar Questions

Opening Questions:

Yes or No: Does Pi's story, as the author purports, make you believe in God? (Go around the circle so everyone has a chance to speak.)

Have the responders who were in the minority explain their position.

What do you notice about the title of the book?

What do you notice about the characters' names?

Core Questions:

What is the main character's first statement? What might this mean?

What role does religion play in Part One of the text?

What similarities do religions and zoos share? Differences?

Color is an important feature in Pi's descriptions. What do you notice, and what do you think it means?

Re-examine the passages in italics. Explain what you notice from the beginning to the end of the text. How does this differ from your initial reading of the text?

Explain the deeper significance of the following quotation, "Alone or not, lost or not, I was thirsty and hungry" (169).

Can you find another quotation in the text that has deeper meaning?

What is the significance of the island?

Ch 73: Explain what Pi means when he says, "My greatest wish—other than salvation—was to have a book. A long book with a never-ending story. One I could read again and again, with new eyes and a fresh understanding each time. Alas, there was no scripture in the lifeboat" (207).

Explain how "Conjuring Up Our Own Gods" relates to *Life of Pi* and whether or not you believe it is possible to create a tulpa.

Closing Questions:

What do we learn about ourselves in reading Pi's story? What is our prosthetic narrative?

Is this text what you thought it would be? Explain. What did you notice in our discussion? Explain.

Quotations to reconsider once we know the complete story in *Life of Pi*

"He was too fast. He reached up and pulled himself aboard.

'Oh my God!'

Ravi was right. Truly I was going to be the next goat. I had a wet, trembling, half-drowned, heaving and coughing three-year-old adult Bengal tiger in my lifeboat. Richard

Parker rose unsteadily to his feet on the tarpaulin, eyes blazing as they met mine, ears laid tight to his head, all weapons drawn. His head was the size and color of the lifebuoy, with teeth.

I turned around, stepped over the zebra and threw myself overboard” (Martel 99-100).

“Fear and reason fought over the answer. Fear said Yes. He was a fierce, 450-pound carnivore. Each of his claws was as sharp as a knife. Reason said No. The tarpaulin was sturdy canvas, not a Japanese paper wall. I had landed upon it from a height. Richard Parker could shred it with his claws with a little time and effort, but he couldn’t pop through it like a jack-in-the-box. And he had not seen me. Since he had not seen me, he had no reason to claw his way through it” (108).

“I did not grasp all these details—and many more—right away. They came to my notice with time and as a result of necessity. I would be in the direst of dire straits, facing a bleak future, when some small thing, some detail, would transform itself and appear in my mind in a new light. It would no longer be the small thing it was before, but the most important thing in the world, the thing that would save my life. This happened time and again. How true it is that necessity is the mother of invention, how very true” (139).

“I looked at him, full of fearful wonder. There being no immediate threat, my breath slowed down, my heart stopped knocking about in my chest, and I began to regain my senses.

I had to tame him. It was at that moment that I realized this necessity. It was not a question of him or me, but of him *and* me. We were, literally and figuratively, in the same boat. We would live—or we would die—together” (164).

“You must make adjustments if you want to survive. Much becomes expendable. You get your happiness where you can” (217).

“Don’t you bully me with your politeness! Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?” (Martel 297).

What follows is a portion of the conversation between Mr. Okamoto and Pi Patel:

“Isn’t telling about something—using words, English or Japanese—already something of an invention? Isn’t just looking upon this world already something of an invention?”

“Uh...”

“The world isn’t just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? And in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn’t that make life a story?”

[...]

Pi Patel: “You want words that reflect reality?”

“Yes.”

“Words that do not contradict reality?”

“Exactly.”

“But tigers don’t contradict reality.”

“Oh please, no more tigers.”

“So tell me, since it makes no factual difference to you and you can’t prove the question either way, which story do you prefer? Which is the better story, the story with animals or the story without animals?”

Mr. Okamoto: “That’s an interesting question…”

Mr. Chiba: “The story with the animals.”

Mr. Okamoto: “Yes. The story with the animals is the better story.”

Pi Patel: “Thank you. And so it goes with God” (317).

From Mr. Okamoto’s report: “*Very few castaways can claim to have survived so long at sea as Mr. Patel, and none in the company of an adult Bengal tiger*” (319).

Color Marking

Color marking involves visually marking text, which aids in analyzing, drawing inferences about author's purpose, and making assertions. As described by colleagues, color marking is like creating a map, a visible way in, to a text. The text can be prose or verse. The colors on the page make ideas emerge for all levels of learners.

Directions:

1. Read the passage/extract.
2. Identify important features in the text. These may include:
 - Specific Diction (formal, informal, colloquial, religious, directional, etc.)
 - Syntax—what do you notice about the sentence structures?
 - Punctuation—is anything unusual in the punctuation?
 - Repetition—words, phrases and structures that are repeated are worth noting.
 - Literary devices—allusion, analogy, metaphor, simile, personification, paradox, etc.
 - Imagery—words appealing to one of the five senses, eliciting a response from the reader
 - Image pattern—repetition of three images close together (may/may not be uninterrupted)
 - Motif—recurring symbol, feature, or expression that occurs in or throughout a work
3. Using different highlighters or colored pencils, create a key on the page, identifying the color and item noted. For example, green = words pertaining to nature; red = words pertaining to warlike diction. Do not worry if colors overlap; that means the words contain multiple layers of meaning.
4. After marking, study the color marked passage and answer these questions:
 - Is one color predominant? Why?
 - Is there a logical or an illogical progression of imagery/motifs? Why?
 - How do the marked words reinforce and/or illustrate the passage's content?
 - What is the emphasis of the passage now? Is this a fresh idea? Is the writer contradicting the content or adding irony?
 - What tone (writer's attitude) or mood (the way a reader feels) do the colors create? Consider, too, where you see the colors changing, why the tone or mood changes. What do you make of the absence of a color earlier or later in the extract?

5. Now, based on all that you have discovered through examining the text closely and answering these questions, what inferences can you make about what the author was trying to accomplish? Make some assertions based on your inferences.

Appendix 1: Teaching Standards

Implementing Common Core Standards

Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

Beginning with journaling about stunning quotations from early reading assignments and discussing the questions and observations my students share, we gradually come to a keener understanding of Pi's complex characterization. His interactions with Mr. Kumar and the other Mr. Kumar initiate a bit of skepticism with my students, as they challenge one another to understand the significance of two influential characters in Pi's life having the same name. Students read and annotate the entire text, and we focus discussions on a few key passages throughout our study of the novel.

Next, we examine the development of Richard Parker through color-marking an extract from the text (pp. 150-2). Students mark words indicating **immobility** in one color and words suggesting or showing **movement** in a different color. What do we see as a result? Students should discover that when Pi is immobile, Richard Parker is moving. And vice versa. Pi and Richard Parker are a study in contrasts. We discuss what this means and how it is similar to Mr. & Mr. Kumar. Next, I lead students to make a connection between immobility/movement to doubt/certainty. How does this relate to faith? Survival? Are these connected?

We will also color mark all of Chapter 56 ("I must say a word about fear..."), as this chapter shows the development of Pi's prosthetic narrative, which incorporates my disabilities studies with Pi's delusions. Students will use one color to mark warlike words and another color to mark peaceful ones. They will circle words that are repeated and explain what they find with these three markings. Once students are able to articulate what is necessary for survival, they should have a clear understanding of the text's theme.

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

Three articles related to *Life of Pi* are distributed to students: "Conjuring Up Our Own Gods," "Credulity," and "Taming the Tiger." These are read and annotated by the students. They find a connection between "Conjuring Up Our Own Gods" and the text, which we discuss in the Socratic seminar. Students then choose which of the latter two articles are more palatable to them and complete a "quick write" review.

I have included the list of opening, core, and closing questions for the Socratic Seminar. Additionally, I have a list of quotations to reconsider once we know the complete story in *Life of Pi*.

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure the text, order events within it, and manipulate time create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

There is much to discuss concerning Martel's choices in how he structured the text: Why 100 chapters? Why three parts? Why an "author" in addition to Pi's voice? What effect is achieved with the interruptions of the "author"? Why a tiger? What is the significance of the characters' names? What inspired the floating island? Many of these questions will be answered in our discussions and by reading Yann Martel's essay "How I Wrote *Life of Pi*." The mystery, tension and surprise will be discussed in the Socratic seminar. Does the story make one believe in God? Which is the better story? Why? When did the connection between Richard Parker and Pi become obvious? How does the carnivorous island with the symbiotic relationship between plants and animals become an extended metaphor of Pi (vegetarian) and Richard Parker (carnivore) in their lifeboat?

Ultimately, an effect is achieved by Pi's story being a prosthetic narrative. Does it help us understand how we can believe in something that we cannot see? Are we likelier to examine details more closely in stories we hear, tell, and retell having learned of the prosthetic narrative? How does the final sentence in the story affect the text? Explain.

Bibliography for Teachers

Davis, Lennard J., ed. *The Disability Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

This text helps firmly place the reader into a clear understanding of disability issues. I found it especially useful in raising my awareness and leading me to new ways of “thinking about the abnormal” (26).

Krist, Gary. “Taming the Tiger.” *New York Times*. 7 July 2002

<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/07/books/taming-the-tiger.html>

This review is one of the best available online. Without giving away the ending, Krist manages to raise the level of intrigue and point the reader back to the text. He asks, “But is this straightforward (and tigerless) version of events actually closer to the deeper truth of his adventure? It’s a testimony to Martel’s achievement that few readers will be tempted to think so.” Accessible and concise, I have my students read this review and explain what they notice.

Luhrmann, T.M. “Conjuring Up Our Own Gods.” *New York Times*. 15 October 2013.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/15/opinion/luhrmann-conjuring-up-our-own-gods.html>

Discovering this piece in the midst of my research was serendipitous, for I could imagine Pi calling forth a tulpa, Richard Parker, in moments of intense meditation. I was especially taken by the conclusion of the piece: “Secular liberals sometimes take evolutionary psychology to mean that believing in God is the lazy option. But many churchgoers will tell you that keeping God real is what’s hard.” Pi would argue that the better story is the one with God, and this piece supports that the better story requires discipline and concentration. How fascinating.

Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi: A Novel*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 2001.

My copy of *Life of Pi* has been heavily annotated, and while I have a newer copy, I still prefer this beaten up one, the one with the missing line on p. 317. As I mentioned earlier, I only recently discovered this omission and have since been contemplating its meaning. As “the author” realizes in his interviews with Pi, small details that he had not noticed but were there all along appear and suddenly a story emerges. Hmm.

---. “How I Wrote *Life of Pi*” <<http://www.powells.com/fromtheauthor/martel.html>>

If an author is willing to share details about his creation of a text, I always pay attention, and this is a fine essay about Martel’s creation of *Life of Pi*. Of particular interest is his explanation the animals he considered. I like having my students read this and then assess his explanation and state in their own words what inspired Martel to write *Life of Pi*.

Mitchell, David T. and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

This is THE source for the disability I explore in the unit: narrative prosthesis. Mitchell and Snyder describe how disability functions as a metaphoric device in *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*, a children's book. They show how the body functions as an anchor and discuss the "potent symbolism of disabled bodies" (28). This is an excellent resource.

Wood, David Houston. "Fluster'd with flowing cups" 1: Alcoholism, Humoralism, and the Prosthetic Narrative in *Othello*. *Disability Studies Quarterly*. Vol 29, No 4 (2009). 9/24/13 8:43 PM.

In preparing to teach *Othello* in another class, I read this article purely out of curiosity and gleaned useful information for my *Life of Pi* curriculum unit. Both texts deal with appearance versus reality, in particular, "making the invisible manifest" (17). This article then reinforces that narrative prosthesis has a strong presence in canonical texts. Very cool.

Wood, James. "Credulity." *London Review of Books*. <www.lrb.co.uk > Vol. 24 No. 22 · 14 November 2002.

This review is less praiseworthy of a text that won the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2002. Still, I think it offers keen insights and descriptions of the "jaunty" and "charming" Pi, and it also contains a few remarks concerning India in the 1970s and other texts mentioned in *Life of Pi*. Worthy of review by students, to be sure.

Reading List for Students

Krist, Gary. "Taming the Tiger." *New York Times*. 7 July 2002

<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/07/books/taming-the-tiger.html>

Luhrmann, T.M. "Conjuring Up Our Own Gods." *New York Times*. 15 October 2013.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/15/opinion/luhrmann-conjuring-up-our-own-gods.html>

Martel, Yann. *Life of Pi: A Novel*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 2001.

---. "How I Wrote *Life of Pi*" <<http://www.powells.com/fromtheauthor/martel.html>>

Wood, James. "Credulity." *London Review of Books*. <www.lrb.co.uk > Vol. 24 No. 22 · 14 November 2002.

List of Materials for Classroom Use

- *Life of Pi* text
- Colored pencils and/or highlighters for color marking exercises
- Copies of color marking directions
- Extracts for color marking: Chapter 53 (pp. 150-152) and Chapter 56 (pp. 161-162)
- Copies of *Life of Pi* Socratic Seminar Questions” and “Quotations to reconsider once we know the complete story in *Life of Pi*”
- Copies of (or links to) “Conjuring Up Our Own Gods,” “Credulity,” and “Taming the Tiger”