Life of Pi

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Features of a novel

What is a novel?

A novel is a sustained piece of writing, usually over 100 pages, written in **prose**, which follows the natural rhythms of everyday speech as opposed to the rhythmical structures of poetry.

The most important thing to know about a novel is that it always tells a story. These stories are usually driven by conflict, whether between characters, or attitudes, or lifestyles.

When you read a novel, you enter a fictional world created by the author of the novel. There are many types (genres) of novels, such as mystery, action-adventure, thriller, crime, adventure, historical, science-fiction, horror, fantasy and, of course, novels that reflect real life.

Novel Features

All novels have the following features that are important for you to understand:
1. Narrative and plot
2. Characters and characterisation
3. Setting
4. Narrator
5. Themes
6. Style.

1   Narrative and plot

A story is made up of a series of events. This is also called a **narrative**. It is *what* happens next in the story. For example, *The king died and then the queen died*. The **plot** is *why it happens*. For example, *The king died and then the queen died of grief*.

A simple story contains a beginning, a middle and an end. Below is a very simple plot diagram – bear in mind that every novel differs, so the plot diagram will vary for every novel. For example: there may be more than one climax, or the plot may contain a subplot. A **subplot** is a second story, complete in its own right within the larger story, that enhances our understanding of the whole story.

Introduction to the novel

The narrators

This novel is the story of an Indian boy, Piscine Molitor Patel, who chooses to be known as Pi. The story has two narrators. One is an author who is referred to as "the narrator". The other narrator is the main character (protagonist), Pi Patel. The *Life of Pi* is a story within another story:

   The narrator speaks directly to the reader. He is partly the author himself, and partly a fictitious character. His sections are in italics, so are easy to identify. He introduces us to the novel in the partly fictitious *Author's note*. His text frames the novel, and connects other parts of the story as told to him by Pi. In the final part of the novel he receives a sound recording of an interview between Japanese shipping officials and Pi, and transcribes it. Through the narrator, we also have short but telling glimpses of Pi as an adult in Toronto. Essentially the narrator acts as Pi's scribe, telling Pi's story "in the first person – in his voice and through his eyes".

Before reading activities

The following activities are to be completed before learners read the novel.

1. What do you think of when you read the title of this play? What do the words mean to you? What do you associate with the word "pi"? Discuss your ideas with a partner.

2. Read the *Introduction* on pp. xiii-xv. The information about the setting of each part of this novel will help you as you read the book. Consider that most of this story takes place in the Pacific Ocean and talk in groups about what kind of story you expecting to read.

3. Read the information in the *Features of a novel* on pages vi-xii to remind yourself about the key literary features of this genre of literature. Skim some of the notes in the margins of the novel section and take note how these notes link to the information in the Novel Toolbox. The notes in the margin of the novel section will guide your thinking and understanding of the story as you read.

4. Talk in groups about epic stories you have heard about. Do you think that great adventures make great stories? Do you like to read real adventure stories or do you prefer fictional adventure stories?
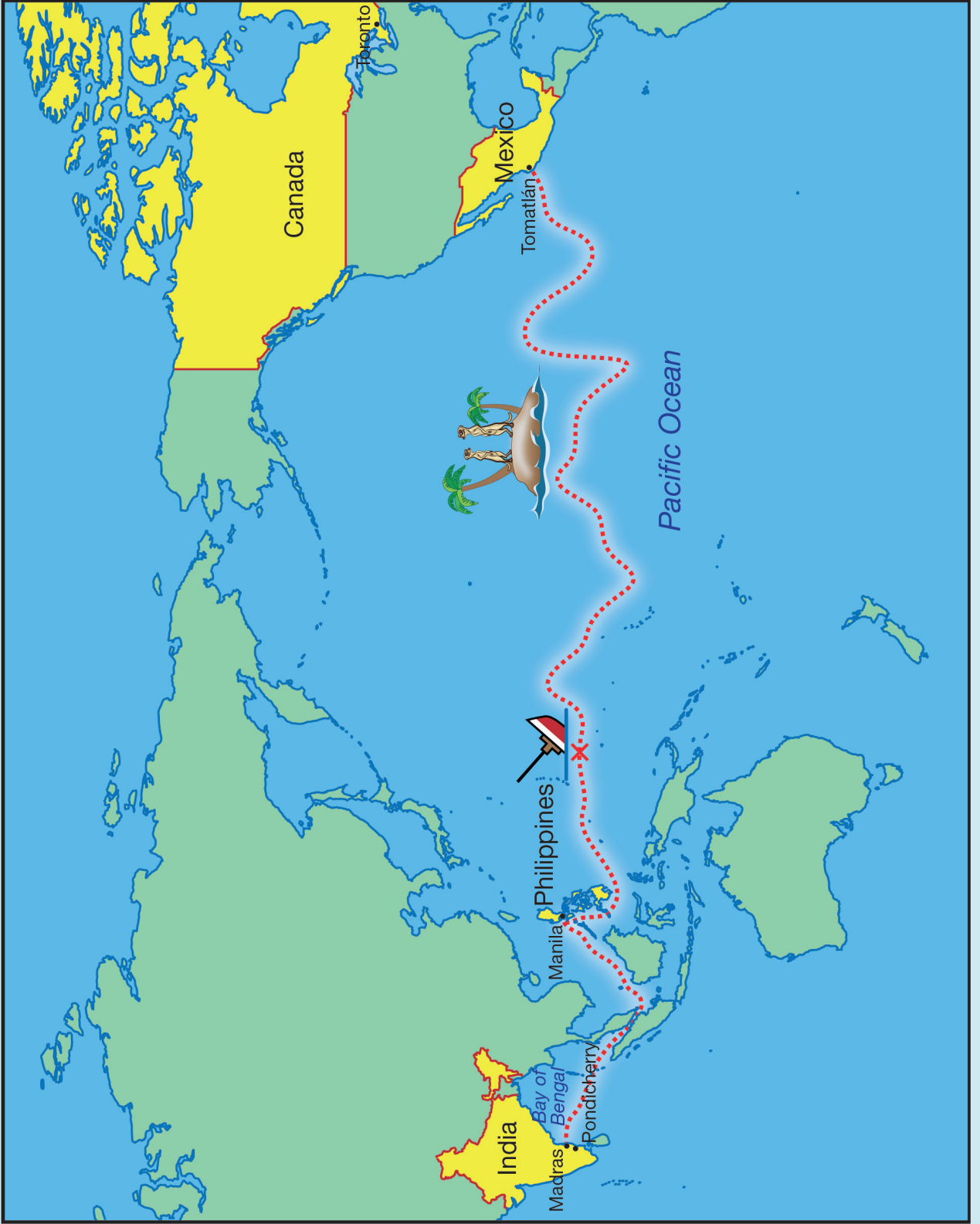
Toronto and Pondicherry

Chapter 1

My suffering left me sad and gloomy.

Academic study and the steady, mindful practice of religion slowly brought me back to life. I have kept up what some people would consider my strange religious practices. After one year of high school, I attended the University of Toronto and took a double-major Bachelor's degree. My majors were religious studies and zoology. My fourth-year thesis for religious studies concerned certain aspects of the **cosmogony**[1] theory of Isaac Luria, the great sixteenth-century **Kabbalist**[2] from Safed. My zoology thesis was a functional analysis of the thyroid gland of the three-toed sloth. I chose the sloth

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1   **cosmogony:** a branch of science concerned with studying the origins of the universe

2   **Kabbalist:** a person who studies the teachings of the Bible, in Jewish tradition

because its **demeanour**[3] – calm, quiet and **introspective**[4] – did something to soothe my shattered self.

There are two-toed sloths and there are three-toed sloths, the case being determined by the forepaws of the animals, since all sloths have three claws on their hind paws. I had the great luck one summer of studying the three-toed sloth *in situ*[5] in the equatorial jungles of Brazil. It is a highly intriguing creature. Its only real habit is **_indolence_**[6]. It sleeps or rests on average twenty hours a day. Our team tested the sleep habits of five wild three-toed sloths by placing on their heads, in the early evening after they had fallen asleep, bright red plastic dishes filled with water. We found them still in place late the next morning, the water of the dishes swarming with insects. The sloth is at its busiest at sunset, using the word *busy* here in the most relaxed sense. It moves along the bough of a tree in its characteristic upside-down position at the speed of roughly 400 metres an hour. On the ground, it crawls to its next tree at the rate of 250 metres an hour, when motivated, which is 440 times slower than a motivated cheetah. Unmotivated, it covers four to five metres in an hour.

The three-toed sloth is not well informed about the outside world. On a scale of 2 to 10, where 2 represents unusual dullness and 10 extreme **acuity**[7], Beebe (1926) gave the sloth's senses of taste, touch, sight and hearing a rating of 2, and its sense of smell a rating of 3. If you come upon a sleeping three-toed sloth in the wild, two or three nudges should suffice to awaken it; it will then look sleepily in every direction but yours. Why it should look about is uncertain since the sloth sees everything in a **Magoo**[8]-like blur. As for hearing, the sloth is not so much deaf as uninterested in sound. Beebe reported that firing guns next to sleeping or feeding sloths elicited little

3   **demeanour:** behaviour that shows what type of personality a person or animal has

4   **introspective:** carefully thinking about one's own feelings and reasons for doing things

5   **in situ:** in the correct place (in this case, where sloths normally live)

6   *indolence:* laziness

7   **acuity:** sharpness, especially in the ability to think, see or hear

8   **Magoo:** from Mr Magoo, a near-sighted cartoon character

My fellow castaway came into view

and brought me a small measure of comfort, though I couldn't recall for the life of me what Plan Number Six was. Warmth started coming to my bones. I closed the rain catcher. I wrapped myself with the blanket and curled up on my side in such a way that no part of me touched the water. I fell asleep. I don't know how long I slept. It was mid-morning when I awoke, and hot. The blanket was nearly dry. It had been a brief bout of deep sleep. I lifted myself onto an elbow.

All about me was flatness and infinity, an endless panorama of blue. There was nothing to block my view. The vastness hit me like a punch in the stomach. I fell back, winded. This raft was a joke. It was nothing but a few sticks and a little cork held together by string. Water came through every crack. The depth beneath would make a bird dizzy. I caught sight of the lifeboat. It was no better than half a walnut shell. It held on to the surface of the water like fingers gripping the edge of a cliff. It was only a matter of time before gravity pulled it down.

Setting:

How does this setting emphasise Pi's situation? When a setting reflects a character's mood or situation, it is called "pathetic fallacy".

Self-assessment: Short questions

How well did you follow the novel? These are straightforward questions that test your reading of *Life of Pi*. Most of the questions focus on an important event or theme in the novel. As they run consecutively through the novel, you can use them as a quick check of how much you are taking in as you read. The marks after each question indicate the approximate number of facts or reasons that you should be able to give in your answer.

Part 1 (pages 1–97)

1. a. It's clear that the narrator of Chapter 1 has been through a difficult time. What does he say has helped him to recover? (page 9) (2)
    b. In what country did the narrator of Chapter 1 grow up? To what country did he move? (pages 12–13) (2)
2. a. What was Mamaji's full name, and what did he teach the young Piscine Patel to do? (pages 14–18) (2)
    b. What was the Piscine Molitor in Paris? What character in the novel knew it well? (page 18) (2)
3. Piscine Patel knows a lot about animals. How did he acquire this knowledge, and where? (pages 9–12 and 19–22) (4)
4. Why did the young Piscine Patel want to change his name, and what name did he choose to be known by? (pages 26–29) (2)
5. What did Mr Patel do to teach his sons Ravi and Pi about the dangers of wild animals? (pages 38–43) (2)
6. Why, according to Pi, is it important for a circus trainer of animals to walk into the performance ring first, ahead of the animal? (page 49) (1)
7. Which was the first religion to play an important part in Pi's life, and which of his relatives introduced him to it? (pages 53–56) (2)
8. Who was Father Martin, and what important role did he play in Pi's life? (pages 58–64) (2)
9. Pi knew two men called Satish Kumar. What work did each of these men do? (pages 32 and 67) (2)
10. What did Pi's parents discover about him when they met the imam, the priest and the pandit on the sea front? (pages 70–76) (3)
11. Why did Pi's parents decide the family must leave India, and where did they plan to settle? (pages 82–84) (2)
12. Why did the Patels leave India on a cargo ship? What was the ship's name? (pages 92–95) (2)

Assessment: Contextual questions

The questions that follow test your understanding of the overarching themes in this novel as well as your understanding of specific themes dealt with in each extract below. These questions will also help you prepare for your final Literature exam. The answers have been provided so you can check your work.

We have provided examples of eight short extracts followed by questions worth approximately half of 25 marks. Remember that in your final exam you will need to complete questions based on short extracts with marks adding up to 25. We have also included an example of a longer extract (Contextual question 9) with questions totalling 25 marks. If you use the suggested answers to check your work, note that there are often more ticks (representing points) than the marks required, but make sure you have answered every element of a question before awarding points to yourself.

1.1   Contextual question 1 (Part 1)

The class started the way all new classes start, with the stating of names. We   1
called them out from our desks in the order in which we happened to be sitting.
  "Ganapathy Kumar," said Ganapathy Kumar. Each name elicited a tick on a list
and a brief mnemonic stare from the teacher. I was terribly nervous . . .
  "Sampath Saroja," said Sampath Saroja, three away . . .   5
  "Stanley Kumar," said Stanley Kumar, two away . . .
  "Sylvester Naveen," said Sylvester Naveen, right in front of me.
  It was my turn. Time to put down Satan. Medina, here I come.
  I got up from my desk and hurried to the blackboard. Before the teacher could
say a word, I picked up a piece of chalk and said as I wrote: 10

My name is

Piscine Molitor Patel,

known to all as

– I double underlined the first two letters of my given name –

15

Pi Patel

For good measure I added

$\pi = 3.14$

and I drew a large circle, which I then sliced in two with a diameter, to evoke that basic lesson of geometry.

There was silence. The teacher was staring at the board. I was holding my breath. Then he said, "Very well, Pi. Sit down. Next time you will ask permission before leaving your desk."   20

"Yes, sir."

He ticked my name off. And looked at the next boy.

"Mansoor Ahamad," said Mansoor Ahamad.   25

I was saved.

"Gautham Selvaraj," said Gautham Selvaraj.

I could breathe.

"Arun Annaji," said Arun Annaji.   30

A new beginning.

I repeated the stunt with every teacher. Repetition is important in the training not only of animals but also of humans.

1.1.1   Place the extract in context, and say who the narrator is.   (2)

1.1.2.1 Summarise how the boy came to be called Piscine Molitor.   (2)

1.1.2.2 Comment on the original intention of the person who named him.   (2)

1.1.3   Explain why Pi wanted to rename himself.   (2)

1.1.4   Piscine tells the class he is "known to all as Pi Patel". Discuss his strategy for renaming himself, and its outcome.   (2)

1.1.5   Discuss the effectiveness of the writer's style in evoking Pi's feelings in the extract.   (3)   **[13]**

Answers to short questions

Part 1 (pages 1–97)

1. a. His academic studies ✓ in religion and zoology, and practising religion/living a religious life ✓. (2)
    b. He grew up in India ✓ and moved to Canada ✓. (2)
2. a. Francis Adirubasamy ✓. He taught Piscine to swim ✓. (2)
    b. It was a public swimming pool ✓. Mr Adirubasamy (Mamaji) knew it well ✓. (2)
3. From observing animals ✓ and learning from his father and the zookeepers ✓ in his father's zoo in Pondicherry when he was a child, and from studying zoology ✓ at university in Toronto ✓. (4)
4. Piscine sounded like "Pissing", and boys at school teased him ✓. He chose to be called Pi ✓. (2)
5. He made them watch a hungry tiger killing a goat ✓, and he took them round the zoo, explaining the dangers of different animals ✓. (2)
6. Because this makes the animal believe that the ring is the trainer's territory and not the animal's ✓, therefore the animal is not in authority there. (1)
7. Hinduism ✓. Auntie Rohini ✓. (2)
8. A Catholic (or Christian) priest ✓. He introduced Pi to Christianity ✓ (or inspired him to become a Christian). (2)
9. One was a biology teacher ✓; one was a baker ✓. (2)
10. They discovered he was a Hindu ✓ a Muslim ✓ and a Christian ✓ at the same time. (3)
11. Political instability/Political trouble ✓ in India made them decide to leave and move to Canada ✓. (2)
12. Because they had to transport large animals to zoos in America ✓. The ship was the *Tsimtsum* ✓. (2)
13. His wife, Meena ✓, son, Nikhil ✓ and daughter, Usha ✓. (3)

Part 2 (pages 99–279)

1. Richard Parker was a tiger ✓ from the Patels' zoo. He was on the ship when it sank ✓, but managed to get off and was swimming to try and stay alive ✓. (3)
2. The zebra ✓, the hyena ✓ and the tiger ✓ were on the boat, and sharks ✓ were around it. (4)
3. a. An orang-utan ✓. She was on a huge floating bunch of bananas ✓ bought earlier to feed the zoo animals. (2)
    b. Pi felt joy/love ✓, and pain ✓. (2)
    c. A rescue ship would find and save him ✓, and he would be reunited with his family ✓. (2)
4. a. The hyena ran in circles continually ✓, making a *yip yip* noise ✓. (2)
    b. Pi was afraid of the hyena ✓ and very annoyed by its noise ✓. (2)
    c. The hyena ate the zebra alive ✓ and eventually killed it ✓. (2)
5. a. Orange Juice hit the hyena hard on the head ✓ and knocked it down ✓, and then she hit it again and pulled its fur ✓. The hyena grabbed her by the throat and killed her ✓. (4)
    b. Pi was filled with admiration and love ✓ for the orang-utan and then with pain ✓ and horror ✓ at the sight of her death. (3)
    c. The tiger got his name through a clerical error ✓. When he was a cub, a hunter called Richard Parker ✓, who had been hired to kill a panther that was troubling people, found instead, a tiger (the cub's mother). He fired an immobilising dart into her, and she and the cub were taken by train to the Pondicherry zoo. A clerk at the station filled in the forms incorrectly, putting Richard Parker's name where the cub's name should have been, and the name stuck ✓. (3)

On the third day on the lifeboat, after Orange Juice had been killed, when Pi was about to attack the hyena ✓. He looked down and saw the tiger's head and paws under a bench on the deck. ✓ (2)

6. a. Water to drink. ✓ (1)

 b. He was probably feeling seasick ✓, and may still have felt the effect of sedatives ✓ given to relieve stress on the *Tsimtsum*. (2)

 c. It was difficult mainly because the presence of Richard Parker and the hyena made it very dangerous to search✓; also because it was concealed in a locker in the bow of the boat ✓ (the front part), under a section covered by a tarpaulin✓. Richard Parker had settled into this section. (3)

7. Pi wanted food ✓. He ate biscuits found in the emergency supplies ✓. (2)

8. He built a raft ✓ using buoyant oars ✓, a lifebuoy ✓, rope ✓ and lifejackets ✓, and tied this to the boat using a long rope ✓, which he let out to create distance between himself and the boat. (6)

9. The rolling motion of the boat unsettled the tiger ✓. Pi could see this from the tiger's attitude ✓. He also saw that the tiger had vomited, confirming that he was seasick. ✓ (3)

10. a. Pi realised that if the tiger died, he would be alone with despair ✓ - an even worse enemy than a tiger. The tiger kept him from thinking too much about his lost family and his terrible situation ✓. (2)

 b. To keep the tiger alive ✓. (1)

11. a. When the raft was away from the boat, the boat's bow (its front) turned to face the waves, i.e. was perpendicular to the waves ✓. This made the boat pitch in a back-to-front motion ✓. When the raft was near the boat, the boat turned so that its side was parallel to the waves (broadside to the waves) ✓ causing side-to-side rolling ✓, which was likely to unsettle anyone on the boat and make them seasick ✓(unlike back-to-front pitching, which is much less unsettling) ✓. The reason for the difference was because when it was at a distance from the boat, the raft acted as a sea anchor, steadying it and turning it perpendicular to the waves ✓. (7)

 b. Richard Parker saw the floor of the boat below the tarpaulin ✓ (which covered an area at the front of the boat) as his territory. He had marked this area with his urine ✓ (normal behaviour for tigers). It gave Pi the idea of splashing his urine on the tarpaulin and over the locker ✓ so that the tiger would see them as Pi's territory. (3)

 c. It produces drinkable water ✓ from sea water ✓. (Sea water evaporates under a sealed cone, then the pure water vapour condenses on the surface of the cone and runs down its sides, into a gully, and then into a sealed pouch.) (2)

12. a. Pi had to feed Richard Parker ✓ (or be eaten himself). (1)

 b. Because he believed life was sacred, and to kill another creature was wrong ✓. He had never killed anything before. ✓ This was probably linked to his vegetarian way of life. (2)

 c. Later he found it easy to kill ✓. He realised it was necessary if he was to live: he had to kill, or be killed himself (by the tiger) ✓. Also, he pointed out that a person can get used to anything, even killing. (2)

13. Because Pi did not know when next it would rain ✓. He had cans of water in the survival kit ✓, and solar stills ✓ to distill water from sea water. (3)

14. a. Pi slept for short spells ✓, seldom more than an hour. He had to lie in a foetal position (curled up) to fit on the raft ✓. (2)

 b. Pi aimed to tame the tiger by imposing his authority over him. His plan was to annoy the animal ✓, e.g. by going close to its territory and blowing a whistle while keeping eye contact with it. This would make the animal cross into the tamer's territory ✓. Then the tamer would blow

b. No ✓, it gave them a different version of Pi's 227 days on the lifeboat ✓. (2)

4. a. Like Orange Juice, Pi's mother fought back and hit her killer ✓; both had their wrists twisted ✓; both were decapitated ✓. (Also, Orange Juice was a fruit-eater, not trained to kill; Pi's mother was gentle and a vegetarian.) (3)

b. His focus was the conditions on the ship before it sank ✓. He wanted to know why it sank ✓. He did not ask about Pi's time on the boat ✓. (3)

5. a. He probably concluded that the second story was the factually true version, and that Pi's first story was a metaphor for it ✓, in which he replaced people with animals that had similar characteristics, and gave them parallel stories ✓. Pi had represented himself as a fierce, magnificent tiger that did what animals must do to survive (i.e. kill) ✓ - but that part of him had now disappeared. (3)

b. He remembers the first story (the story with the tiger) ✓. (1)

Answers to contextual questions

1.1   Contextual question 1 (Part 1)

1.1.1   This extract is set in Pondicherry,✓ on Pi's first day at a new school/at the Petit Seminaire school. The narrator is Pi himself.✓ (2)

1.1.2.1   The name was suggested by Mamaji/ Francis Adirubasamy,✓ a close friend of Pi's parents. He was a keen swimmer and had very fond memories of the Piscine Molitor,✓ a particularly fine swimming pool in Paris. (2)

1.1.2.2   Mamaji's intention was to name the child after a place that had been a source of great happiness to him – in other words,

to honour this child.✓ (He described the pool as one "the gods would have delighted to swim in." He was also hoping to steer the child towards wanting to learn to swim when he was old enough.✓ (Mamaji had failed to persuade the rest of the Patel family to learn to swim.) (2)

1.1.3   Piscine had been nicknamed "Pissing". He found his nickname humiliating/ He hated his nickname ✓ and decided to take steps that would change it.✓ (Also, "Pi" is a logical shortening of "Piscine".✓ The symbolism attached to pi in mathematics also appealed to him: it refers to the ratio of a circle's radius to its circumference, often abbreviated to 3.14, though the actual figure has a seemingly infinite number of decimal places, perhaps reflecting the limitless nature of Pi's mind.✓) (any 2)

1.1.4   When he makes this statement, it is not true that Piscine is "known to all as Pi Patel". He is known to many of his schoolmates as Pissing, and to others as Piscine. His strategy is a very assertive one:✓ by going up to the board and writing" … known to all as Pi Patel" he makes the change very clear, verbally and in writing, and he presents it as an established fact. ✓ He reinforces it with the familiar mathematical symbol for pi.✓ The outcome is successful: the teacher responds, "very well, Pi"; his classmates do not laugh (as he feared they would) and they also call him Pi. ✓ (The idea takes hold among other boys, who take on names such a Omega and Lambda, drawn, like Pi, from the Greek alphabet, and symbolising mathematical or scientific concepts.) ✓ (any 2)

1.1.5   He shows Pi's feelings effectively by creating rising tension✓ that reaches a climax and is followed by relief.✓ First, he tells us that he is nervous, and then the tension rises when Pi's turn approaches and he says "three away" and then "two away"✓. The imagery in the references to Satan and Medina raise the importance of this event for Pi✓. The teacher's silence

swimmer (for example, when he escapes to the raft, just before the cook kills his mother). (any 2)

1.9.9 (Answers will vary. This is a suggestion.) No, I do not agree that all the photographs are "nearly irrelevant". The swimming pool was a very important part of Pi's young life, as explained in Question 9.✓ The picture of the school gate would have had some importance for Pi; it was at this school where he made a new beginning by determining that he would known as Pi, thus ending the unhappy experience of being called "Pissing".✓ The words above the school gates were likely to have had some influence in shaping Pi's values.✓ The picture of schoolchildren at the zoo would probably have been interesting, not only as a memento of the zoo, but because there would probably have been children whom he knew there✓. The picture of the V.I.P.s visit was probably unimportant to him, though it does reveal that his father's zoo was seen as an important place (a fact that Pi was proud of as a child).✓ It is true, however, that there are many other subjects that would have been more relevant to Pi: family photographs, pictures of the individual zoo animals that he loved, places where he practiced religion and Mr and Mr Kumar, for example, would all have been valuable mementoes. ✓ (any 3)

1.9.10 Throughout the novel, Pi shows determination to be positive and make the best of his situation. As an adult, he smiles for photographs, presenting a happy front.✓ (And there are clearly things that have indeed brought him happiness, for example, his wife and children, his scientific and religious studies, and the kindness of people in Canada.) But underlying this happiness there is the inescapable fact that he has suffered greatly in his life.✓ He lost his entire family following the sinking of the ship they were on.✓ [OR His brother and father drowned when the ship they were on sank.✓] His

beloved mother was brutally killed and decapitated on the lifeboat by the cook in front of the teenaged Pi.✓ He lives with the memory that he did nothing but watch when she was being killed, and that his weakness led to the fight in which she died. (He was not strong enough to haul a heavy turtle on board.)✓ He also lives with the memory of what extreme anger and hunger made him do: he killed the cook and ate him.✓ For a boy who had been a gentle, religious vegetarian, this was a shocking revelation of how far people will go when their survival is at stake. And there were times on the boat when, driven by the will to survive, he behaved selfishly, for example, when he joined the cook in finishing the store of biscuits, something that shocked and disappointed his mother profoundly.✓ (At the same time, the will to survive is important to him so it is likely that he could forgive himself for these acts.) Pi points out that when you have suffered greatly in life, additional pains can seem unbearable; an example was seeing the "beef-eating pink boy" receive the Governor General's Academic Medal and the Rhodes Scholarship that he narrowly missed winning himself.✓ There was also the pain of losing Richard Parker, which is more difficult to explain. Assuming the tiger was an invention of Pi's imagination, this could mean that he mourns the loss of "his other self", the self that would go to any lengths to survive. Or it could mean that he misses the presence of the fearsome creature that drove him to defeat every obstacle, and to use his wits, strength and skill to survive every challenge he was faced with.✓ Pi cannot entirely hide the pain of these memories behind his smiles. (any 4)

[25]

Assessment: Essay question

In his account of the journey with Richard Parker, Pi does, indeed, create a story that replaces the real