



Magic versus dirt: two novels in conflict

GREG CLARKE

Dirt Music
Tim Winton
Picador, Sydney, 2001.

Life of Pi
Yann Martel
Canongate, Edinburgh, 2002.

The Booker Prize¹ for literature is not usually accompanied by theological proclamations, but 2002 was different. The Booker is given each year to what is judged as the best work of contemporary fiction by a writer from the Commonwealth or the Republic of Ireland. In 2002, it was won by *Life of Pi*, written by Yann Martel, a previously obscure writer who begins his novel with an author's note on how he came to be given "a story to make you believe in God". It recounts the voyage of Piscine Molitor Patel ('Pi'), the

son of an Indian zookeeper who, in a reversal of the Noah's ark story, gets shipwrecked along with his family and zoo animals en route to Canada. Pi finds himself in a lifeboat with very few supplies for 227 days, accompanied by an enormous Bengal tiger, a zebra, a hyena and an orang-utan. He survives to tell his tale a couple of investigators, who can't bring themselves to believe it. *Life of Pi* is delightful in parts, written with a whimsical touch, combining fantasy, graphic horror, folklore and humour to carry the reader happily along to an optimistic ending.

And yet, I hated it. It is one of the most unhelpful and unbelievable novels I have read in a long while. It is a surrender to a pluralism of religion and relativism of knowledge that traps people in a happy ignorance and is simply not honest about religious history and theology. In 1995, Helen Darville-Demidenko had the Miles Franklin Literary Award stripped from her in all

but fact for historically misrepresenting the concerns of Ukrainians in her novel *The Hand That Signed the Paper*. If the reasoning behind that act of political policing was correct, then Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* ought to undergo a similar fate for theological misrepresentation.

But I am not one for advocating book burning nor the jailing or condemning, Rushdie-fatwa style, of dissident novelists. Rather, let us examine and debate them on their merits, accepting what is good and admirable, and labelling the rest appropriately, too. Martel's novel blurs the boundaries of fiction, history and religious belief in order to tell its story. This produces some marvellous writing, especially his depiction of the developing relationship between Pi and the animals that accompany him. Martel has a plain, open style which suits his life-affirming character, Pi. But Martel also plays with the reader's ability to hold a number of conflicting beliefs in tension, carried along by narrative force, and to side with the sufferer even when the sufferer is being irrational.

Martel employs the generousities of the genre known as 'magical realism' in order to deliver what is in the end quite a didactic postmodern account of 'religion as story'.

So, should we complain to the Booker committee? Should we stoke the bonfires?

In order to address the issue, I wish to contrast *Life of Pi* with another novel that was on the Booker shortlist, and one which many thought would take out the prize—Tim Winton's *Dirt Music*. Over 20 years, Winton has developed a reputation as the foremost chronicler of contemporary Australian life, mastering the vernacular of contemporary Australia—at least coastal Western Australia—and giving us stories which drive us into the new millennium in an old Ford, wearing cossies, eating fish off the barbie and quoting the Bible all the while. He also calls himself a Christian, and has been described as the original supplier of the 'Australian Christian novel'.²

Dirt Music tells the story of Georgie Jutland, a world-weary ex-nurse who is struggling to settle down with a legendary fisherman, Jim Buckridge, in the fictional Western Australian town of White Point. Her encounter with another wayward soul, Luther Fox, a poacher (or 'shamateur') whose family died in a motor accident, provides the impetus of the plot, which ends restoratively in Coronation Gulf, a remote island plateau north of Broome.

It is a tough novel, tough in the sense of depicting life as rugged, disappointing, savage and visceral. The *Guardian* review of *Dirt Music* provided a travel warning: "Over everything and everybody looms an Australia of hard options, relieved and yet benighted by technology. World travellers, beware!"³ The harsh landscape, some brutal elements of the plot, and the unrelenting hard-

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ness of the characters made the British reviewer shiver. There may be readers for whom *Dirt Music* could never qualify as a 'Christian' novel—characters often use language that is below street level; the lives of the characters are bleak and the families broken; there are no demonstrably Christian characters; and the narrator's voice is somewhat in the background, not passing judgement but alternately compassionate and exasperated. Yet, I suggest, the view of life that undergirds *Dirt Music* and makes it 'work' as a novel depicting difficult Western Australian coastal lives is implicitly Christian, and needs to be so. In contrast, the pluralistic worldview behind and within *Life of Pi* is ultimately implausible, asking the reader to accept the 'magically real' as the metaphysically real. It is a difficult request, and when contrasted with the harsh realism of *Dirt Music*, offers less for the reader's life after the book is closed.

The biggest miracle of existence: *Dirt Music*

What identifies Winton's approach as one of a Christian writer's mind? How is his own faith revealed in the story he has written? First, it must be said that it is not explicit. Christianity is not to the fore, neither in the narration, nor in the lives of any of the characters. In the world of this novel, Christian ideas have to emerge from the sea bed, old, sunken ideas that are forced to the surface by deep distur-

bances. White Point is set in very much a post-Christian milieu—twenty-first century Australia. The church as an institution has no bearing upon it; the Scriptures are a faint echo or half-remembered rhyme; Christ himself is a meaningless cuss-word (most of the time); and salvation is as remote as the novel's northern destination.

But there are a number of ways in which a Christian worldview exerts its force upon the novel, some more explicit than others.

1. Approach to death.

Death is hated, not welcomed. The novel is laced with dramatic and awful deaths, and their impact is never underplayed. All the deaths in this novel are violent.

The scene describing the death of Luther Fox's family in a car accident is one of the most awfully believable accounts I have read. Cancer, asbestos poisoning, a mother speared by a branch in a storm—death is a frightening invader, not simply an element of life that must be accepted. Fox is the most death-haunted: "All his life it seems he's been walking in the slipstream of the dead and he hates it" (p.360).

Georgie has recurring dreams and memories of a patient she nursed in Saudi Arabia, a Mrs Jubail, who died a slow and horrific death from a fungating sarcoma. The tough attitude of the

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oncology nurse—"tough and tender, that's how the girls in oncology saw themselves"—is eventually reduced by the sheer physical repulsiveness of the cancer's work, and Georgie reacts in the way of someone who will never make peace with death. She laughs maniacally

before dissolving into sobs and wretching. Her approach to death has always had an element of survival in it, too: "Somehow it'd always felt like a future, not the end" (p. 457).

Such a strong oppositional attitude to death arises from a Christian framework, where death

is the world's enemy, a consequence of sin. One of the novel's ongoing themes is the human struggle to understand how a world of enduring beauty and wonder can also harbour death and destruction.

"Holy, holy, holy", says one character, describing "God's good earth".

"Shit and gristle, that's all, it doesn't matter", objects another.

Luther Fox's struggle is to work out which view of the world is the stronger one. In the end, it is the unacceptability of death that draws him toward the conclusion that God is good and sovereign.

2. *A belief in human depravity.* Many of the characters in *Dirt Music* make the reader's skin crawl. "Some of the red-necks he encounters on his trip," wrote one critic, "are worthy of any Bumper

Book of Monsters."⁴ They are an unappealing collection of wastrels, rednecks, embittered failures and abusers. They are 'White Pointers', shark-like in their approach to each other. They use strangers for desperate sex on dusty backtracks. They brawl in bars and hate Asians. And so, they exist in the novel's imaginary realm, as real, sinful people with occasional glimmers of the *imago dei* flickering through. Winton's belief in the depravity of humanity, the fall of the created order and the subsequent inability of human beings to live up to their own moral and spiritual capacity, undergirds his fictional characters. He also allows many of them the experience of guilt and regret, and the longing for reparation. Beaver, owner of the roadhouse and something of a backyard philosopher, speaks for many of the characters as he contrasts Georgie's indifference with male self-loathing:

Someone like you, the past is just an awkward place to visit. That's how much regret there is. Some people...you can't even imagine, Georgie.

Because I went to a flash school? The silver spoon in my mouth?

And because you're a woman.

That's a load of crap and you know it.

Some men, he hissed, some men aren't embarrassed about things they've done, Georgie. They don't get pangs about their past. They're fucking terrified of what

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they've been. And they're scared that they might be the same person they used to be (p.287).

The reality of personal guilt, and of conscience, springs from Winton's Christian universe. Jim Buckridge, Georgie Jutland's partner, has a burden which he needs to unload. It isn't revealed until late in the novel that he committed adultery on the night his wife was delivering their first child. It comes as an immense shock, and a relief, for we know that the man has been carrying a great and terrible weight. One of Winton's great skills is this gradual revelation of a character's past. The slow discovery of the inevitable stains and scars and skeletons in an individual's closet heightens the need for a redemptive intervention.

Surrounding the plot developments where characters seek redemption are simple symbols of the Christian hope. The night Georgie finds out about Jim's quest for grace and restoration, she sees a silhouette at the edge of the sea: "It billowed fabric like a Sunday School Christ". As Luther Fox moves towards his goal, he finds himself signing the cross like he used to long ago. These gentle, yet obvious invocations of gospel imagery serve to remind the reader that there is a Christian story behind and betwixt the novel's unfolding human stories.

3. *A high price for salvation.* In interview, Winton has said:

The biggest miracle of existence for most humans is that life isn't

worse...and any serious spirituality takes that into account, absorbs that reality, helps a person to see it more clearly, more honestly, more accountably. But also to see what lies twisted up in that weird reality—strands of joy, moments of wildness, much laughter and love, love.⁵

None of the novel's characters expect their actions to be without consequences. They recognise that pardon is costly; and while grace triumphs in the novel, it is not before the reader has seen how much worse things could be. Georgie describes Jim as knowing that "his past is catching up with him and that the world or God or whatever will keep taking revenge on him and his family if he doesn't put things right" (p. 429). It is hardly a statement of trust in God's mercy, but

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it suggests an understanding of the deep consequences of doing wrong. The novel ends with the main characters surviving a plane crash, and with Georgie 'rescuing' Luther, as she performs mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on his blue body. The novel's last words are "She's real", and this realism is found in the act of saving, of giving oneself for another, and of dealing in a gracious act with the murky reality of people's lives.

Packed with discussion of religious ideas, by and large from a Christian

theological framework, *Dirt Music* is nevertheless not 'preachy' in the manner of *Life of Pi*. Instead, it offers 'dirt theology', theology from the point of view of the earth-bound, fallen characters which inhabit it, and it is powerful and effective in bringing these characters to life.

Believing everything: *Life of Pi*

In contrast with *Dirt Music*, *Life of Pi* begins in a somewhat twee fashion. Pi tells us that he chose as an undergraduate to study the three-toed sloth "because its demeanour—calm, quiet and introspective—did something to soothe my shattered self" (p.3). This pursuit of the irenic spirit is a key to the book.

The novel has a complex narrative structure. The story is recounted in the first person, but by three different narrators—the authorial voice; a man called Mr Adirubasamy who told the author the tale; and Pi himself (although we are told that his first-person account has been

'faithfully reconstructed' by the author). As it unfolds, the author comments on Pi's telling of his story. Such playing with the narrative voice and with time is a common postmodern literary device, one which leads us to reflect on the process of storytelling as much (or

more so) than the story itself.

Life of Pi is more a religious biography than a novel, a deliberate genre conflict which disturbs the reader's sense for what is fiction and what is history. There is little character development (apart from Pi, the main characters are animals), and the plot itself is surprisingly linear for a novel with such post-modern interests. Part One is an introduction to Pi, his childhood, and his religious beliefs. Part Two, the bulk of the novel, is the shipwreck and the journey. And Part Three is Pi's interrogation by two Japanese Marine Transport officials, and their difficulty with believing his story.

Long sections of the novel are devoted to Pi's explanations of animal behaviour, a feature which is likely to divide readers. Some of it I found fascinating—sloths do not respond to sound, even a gun being shot near their heads; some commonplace—dolphins sometimes push swimming humans to the surface; some indulgent—did I need a paragraph-long list of zoo animals that have died because the public fed them? It does communicate Pi's own devotion to animals, but you have to be willing to indulge him, and I often struggled to empathise. It seemed a bit too mannered. In contrast with Winton, who doesn't comment on the theological potential of Luther Fox's name, Martel's narrator gives us pages of explanation of the name 'Pi'.⁶ Again, I found it too cute and overwrought, as if begging to be given its full profundity.

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To turn from literary considerations to religious ones, it would not be an understatement to suggest that *Life of Pi* endeavours to be a religious manifesto for our age. It is explicitly “a tale to make you believe in God”(p. x). However, the nature of this God—or even his/her/its very existence—is a question which the novel claims can’t be answered. Instead, in religion there is “no factual difference”, just “which is the better story” (p. 317).

Pi is concerned that people ‘recover God’, having lost him somewhere during adolescence. His motivations for religion are not primarily doctrinal, nor moral, but aesthetic: “I am a Hindu because of the sculptured cones of red kumkum powder...I became loyal to these sense impressions even before I knew what they meant or what they were for” (p.47). God is a sense impression, coming closest to him in the beauty of winter and the splashing warmth of the sun. But there is in fact a strong doctrinal direction to the main character—towards religious pluralism. In correcting his mother’s amusing mispronunciation of Hare Krishnas as ‘hairless Christians’, Pi says:

When I corrected her, I told her that in fact she was not wrong; that Hindus, in their capacity for love, are indeed hairless Christians, just as Muslims, in the way they see God in everything, are bearded Hindus, and Christians, in their devotion to God, are hat-wearing Muslims (p.50).

Pi ‘becomes a Christian’ after talking with a priest while on holidays at the age of fourteen. He struggles over the apparent absurdity of the story of Christ, how God could offer his Son to die for humanity, and tries to fit an understanding of it into his Hindu polytheistic worldview—which he manages. He accepts the salvific power of Christ, but not Christ’s lordship. After receiving the priest’s blessing, he offers a prayer of thanks to Lord Krishna for putting Jesus of Nazareth in his way.

A year later, he also takes on Sufism, a Muslim form of mysticism, after meeting a devout Islamic baker. Again, the emphasis is on the attractiveness of the aesthetic dimension—the physical gestures of prayer, the noise of chanting, an atmosphere of domestic peace. “I challenge anyone to understand Islam, its spirit, and not to love it”, Pi preaches (p. 61).

Piscine Patel—Hindu, Muslim, Christian. His syncretism could be a kind of nascent faith that many sensitive teenagers have. However, it is portrayed in the novel as the height of spiritual maturity. The narrator informs us solemnly that Pi’s house is a kind of temple, with depictions of various gods and saints in each room—Lord Ganesha in the entrance hall, the Virgin Mary in the living room, with an Islamic holy man, Kaaba, next to her. But the peaceful proximity of these depictions does not flow through to their followers. In

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an unlikely chance meeting between his three different religious mentors, they attempt to out-argue each other, resorting to crude accusations, defamation and screaming. At the end of this dramatic bun-fight, Pi is told he will have to choose between faiths. He replies, “Bapu Gandhi said, ‘All religions are true.’ I just want to love God”. This fairly lame adolescent response shames and silences

the religious leaders, who leave with their tails between their legs.

The scene is simply implausible. What religious leaders would enter into such an unwieldy display of antagonism in front of a teenage enquirer and his parents? Anyone who has actually experienced any interfaith dialogue would have great difficulty in accepting the

scene; I suspect that those who do accept it have little knowledge of how religious teachers go about discussion. The story seems to be at the mercy of the pluralist doctrine at this point.

The scene of the shipwreck again asked too much of the reader. While watching, from the relative safety of a lifeboat, the ship sink with his parents on board, Pi begins exploring metaphysical questions aloud: “Why can we throw a question further than we can pull in an answer?” As bananas come floating across the water to him, he

makes jokes about ‘banana manna’ and banana splits. The emotional impact of the shipwreck seems all awry.

OK, yes. This is magical realism. It allows for extraordinary occurrences which break emotional and physical rules of narrative. However, I was not convinced by the extreme contrast between Pi’s lack of trauma over his parents drowning, and his exquisite, tortured response to the death of a zebra which survived in the lifeboat with him. “It was not only the day that died and the poor zebra,” Pi says quietly, “but my family as well.” This is magical unrealism.

The strength of this novel is certainly in the adventure elements—surviving a shipwreck makes for a good story. But what I find unusual is that the strongest narrative section is the account of the survival battles between the four animals that are in the lifeboat with Pi. Having primed the reader earlier with accounts of how animals behave in strange situations, here we are given an extraordinary scenario within which to consider their reactions. Here, Martel reveals a remarkable ability—like that of an expert nature-watcher—to tell animal stories using human narrative tools. The animals respond to each other emotionally, with love and hate; they make plans and pursue them; they make moral judgements over who should attack whom; and they experience horror and happiness as a consequence of their actions. These human characteristics are compellingly granted to the hyena, zebra, orang-utan and tiger on board the 26-foot lifeboat.

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In *Life of Pi*, animals are given abilities that humans are denied. They make clearer decisions; they use reason; they utilise the world well.

It makes a lot of sense that Pi is a vegetarian who prays for the animals that die in front of him, and that he eventually has to eat to survive. Here, too, is an element of a postmodern worldview where the order between human beings and animals is challenged.

In the final stages of the survival on board the lifeboat, the tiger begins to talk. Here, the magical realism works remarkably well. Evoking a Beckett-like obsession with the minutiae of discussion, Pi and the tiger talk about what they want to eat, about going blind, and the feel of leather (a difficult subject for a Hindu). Another imagined survivor appears, Pi's 'brother', and the reader is drawn into the half-delirious world of the dying mind. This 'in-breaking' of magical elements (which also includes a devouring tree which keeps the teeth of its victims wrapped in leaves) is very exciting and satisfying, and contrasts with the didacticism concerning religious faith and knowledge. The whimsy gets crushed by the ideology.

In the end, all is story in the *Life of Pi*. "Isn't telling about something...using words...already something of an invention? Isn't just looking upon this world already something of an invention?", Pi philosophizes to his Japanese interviewers at the novel's close. Knowledge is a kind of story. In this pluralistic statement of the nature of religious knowledge,

agnosticism is the worst position because it refuses to choose a story and thereby offers the least satisfying life. "To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation", Pi says (p.28). He sees agnosticism as a failure of imagination:

I can well imagine an atheist's last words: "White, white! L-L-Love! My God!"—and the deathbed leap of faith. Whereas the agnostic, if he stays true to his reasonable self, if he stays beholden to dry, yeast-less factuality, might try to explain the warm light bathing him by saying, "Possibly a f-f-failing oxygenation of the b-b-brain," and, to the very end, lack imagination and miss the better story (p.64).

Pi sees no persuasive reasons for favouring one religion as true and others false; but his response is to take them all and put reason aside. It is a remarkable statement of pluralism, and one which beggars belief.

For in the final account, Pi actually believes in nothing. Nothing is in fact true, so everything is acceptable as imaginary belief. Ironically, Pi turns out to be an atheist in practice.

There are some lovely, desirable aspects to theoretical pluralism, and some of them are seen in this novel—a desire for peace, an ability to cross cultural frontiers, a love of dialogue and

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understanding, a sweetness and lightness about life, appreciating natural beauty, the delights and mysteries of animals, and the small pleasures of the world. However, these are bought with fake currency in *Life of Pi* and we are asked not only to suspend disbelief, but also reason, history, ethics and philosophy. That's just too much suspending.

Characters we believe

I have asked myself whether my strong negative reaction toward *Life of Pi*, despite enjoying much of the experience of reading it, springs entirely from my own religious convictions. This alone could be defended as a critical position (the main objection to Darville-Demidenko's *The Hand That Signed The Paper* was anti-Semitism), but I think

there is another perspective from which a similarly negative account of the novel arises, that of realism of character.

We have to be able to believe in fictional characters as 'real fictions'.

Whether it be fantasy, Joyce's *Ulysses* or Bryce Courtney, we have to imagine some correspondence between the fictional person that the words construct in our heads, and someone who could exist in the right kind of world. No one is deluded into thinking that Georgie Jutland from *Dirt Music* is in fact a person—that this is an historical retelling of

her life and depiction of her character. Only people with clinical disorders make this mistake. But we do need to believe that, within the narrative framework of the novel, Georgie is behaving and speaking in a realistic and familiar manner. There are many conventions of representation available to the author—this is not a plea for some sort of narrowing of style. What the reader requires is an appeal to something that is durably human in the character, something which is recognised as human behaviour and speech across time and space.

Robert Alter discusses this idea in a book called *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*. In the chapter, "Character and the Connection with Reality", Alter notes that today's ideologically driven criticism views the notion of realistic character as "a camouflage device or a mask...or worse, a pernicious illusion working to sustain an oppressive ideology" (p.52). The idea of a coherent self being represented by a realistic character is seen by Foucauldian and Derridean critics as a way of perpetuating the definitions of human nature which the Church, the State and the Industry have foisted upon us.

But this politicizing of fictional conventions ignores what all people everywhere know: stories with characters in them work. Stories without characters devolve into something else—philosophical experiment, poetry, fable or perhaps symbol or allegory. The literary conventions of character do in fact add up to something which many people

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can imagine as a ‘real person’. Robert Alter again expresses this idea:

[A] good many of the cultural codes invoked in literature may not be arbitrary but rather may be stylizations of certain perdurable aspects of human existence perpetuated from one era to another—perpetuated precisely because they answer so well to what we share as people.

Why is this notion important to a critique of the two novels before us? It is because Winton provides characters which connect with reality, but Martel does not. Pi is finally incredible as a character. His multifaith position does not carry through in his actions; he is surprisingly irreligious during his 227 days afloat in the lifeboat; he does not think like a 16 year-old Indian boy who has just lost his parents overboard; and his ‘turning the tables’ on his Japanese interrogator and ‘converting’ them to epistemological scepticism really stretches the credulity elastic. Occasionally, Winton heads off into dangerous territory with regards to a character’s believability. For instance, I found the detailed references to poets such as Emily Dickinson by some of the outback characters a little unlikely (I’ve lived out there, so I’m not just guessing!); and an occasional spray of lingo was just a little too florid to be ‘fair dinkum’. But, by and large, Winton’s characters all spring to life in their language, behaviour and choices.

Another element of criticism refers to

the suspension of disbelief that is required to read fiction. Not only do we need to believe in the characters; we also need to believe in the plot that is unfolding. There is plenty of scope for imagination here—we find it possible to believe in deep space civilisations set millions of years in the future (despite having no information about what such a civilisation would be); we find it possible to believe in a battery-activated space ranger who saves the planet from the evil emperor Zurg. Why can we believe such imaginary scenarios? Because they are *probable*. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, wrote, “the poet [a term which would include novelists] should prefer probable impossibilities to implausible possibilities” (60a30). Discussing this phrase, the Christian and novelist

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Madeleine L’Engle remarks that “the imaginary work must have such an effect on us that it enlarges our sense of reality” (p. 89). New ‘people’ are added to our mental world; new ‘histories’ are now part of our memory; new ‘decisions’ and ‘dilemmas’ now exist as part of the way we approach matters in the world. Probabilities are invoked, without total impossibilities being required.

Winton’s gripping story of outback survival is entirely probable, even if the survival of the characters seemed very unlikely. However, Pi’s journey is improbable by arrangement. Martel has deliberately written a ‘magic realism’ tale

which we will find improbable. We could have enjoyed that for its merits were it not for the fact that he book-ends this story with Pi's improbable childhood religious quest at the beginning, and his improbable encounter with the silly modernistic investigators at the end. Because of the genre disturbance, the plot of *Life of Pi* doesn't really work.

Finally, an element of critical reading which highlights the contrasts between our two novels is *ethical outcomes*. This term sounds awkward when applied to

reading fiction, but it refers to the way in which believable (probable) stories act upon our minds and hearts to change us, develop our thinking, shape or influence our responses to people and situations, and variously have an

impact upon our lives. Imaginative literature offers more than mere diversion (as good as this gift is); because of its verisimilitude, it lives on in our lives after the reading experience has finished. In his cheekily titled book, *Reading is Believing*, professor of theology, David S. Cunningham explores works of fiction which he thinks help us to understand and 'live out' each phrase of the Apostle's Creed. For example, he explores Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times* for the light it sheds on what it means to suffer under an unjust ruler ("suffered under Pontius Pilate"). And he examines the character Sarah Miles's ongoing struggle with flesh

and spirit in Graham Greene's novel, *The End of the Affair*, as an expansion of what it means to believe in "the resurrection of the flesh". Cunningham takes a risk with his title, that the casual reader will think he is advocating a version of the 'salvation through the arts' argument; he is not. Rather, he is suggesting that 'reading', in the sense that you 'read a situation'—comprehending it, reflecting on it, putting it in context, weighing up its pros and cons, interpreting it—is a way of sorting out what we do and don't believe. In other words, our responses to a film or book reveal to us the depths and the consequences of our beliefs. Addressing an explicitly Christian readership, Cunningham proposes reading as a tool for applying one's faith:

I'm not trying to suggest that reading makes a person into a believer, nor that one can only come to belief through reading. (In fact, most people come to the Christian faith through other people—parents, teachers, pastors, and friends—and often primarily through actions rather than words.) But I do want to suggest that *reading* can frequently lead Christians to a clearer and deeper understanding of their own beliefs, and thereby to a deeper faith. In this sense, then, for Christians, "reading is believing" (p.23).

When such an approach is applied to our two novels, *Dirt Music* and *Life of Pi*, we see some of the impossibilities of the

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latter novel. Where *Dirt Music* allows the reader to reflect on sin and its consequences for the main characters, Georgie, Luther and Jim, *Life of Pi* allows for no such reflection, instead evading the question of sin (despite it being central to the three religions that Pi professes). *Life of Pi* does allow reflection on theological questions, but dismisses the argument about their answers—for it claims that in the end there are none. It replaces theological debate with a self-consciousness about story-telling—in other words, offering nothing to the reader for life beyond the reading experience. Lest this be considered the ranting and perspectivalism of merely a Christian critic, the avowed unbeliever James Wood comes to a similar conclusion in his review of *Life of Pi*:

Nothing marks *Life of Pi* as a contemporary Postmodern novel more strongly than its theological impoverishment (for all that it seems to scream theological richness): instead of being interested in the theological basis of Pi's soul, it is really interested only in the theological basis of story-telling. The former is or could be a day to day, lived reality; the latter is only a piquant but now familiar contemporary abstraction.

Whereas Winton's realism of character and plot enables exploration of ethical outcomes, Martel's *Life of Pi* curtails the discussion by offering an implausible main character, a plot which jumps between the

fantastical and the didactic, and elevating the discussion of meta-questions about knowledge and belief beyond the character's (and the reader's) grasp.

Fiction and life

What did the Booker Prize reward in 2002? Was it the powerful and affecting narrative of animal behaviour in *Life of Pi*? Was it Martel's sweet style, his story-telling skill, his amusing turn of phrase? Or was it the ideology which drives the novel right out of its magical realism genre? These are not questions which a critical essay can answer, other than to draw people's attention to the usual questions that a critic asks of a novel, and see what stands out. For me, the contrast between reading Winton and Martel

was a strong reminder that there are views of human nature, human behaviour and human belief which seem to hold true, and there are views which, though appealing in many ways, fracture under interrogation. This observation seems to be as valid in fiction as it is in life. ☞

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WORKS CONSULTED

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Officially, the Man Booker Prize. The sponsor is The Man Group, a global financial firm.
- 2 By fellow-novelist, Helen Garner.
- 3 http://www.bookerprize.co.uk/review6_guardian.htm.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 J. Sinclair, 'Tim Winton's holy lands', *Zadok Perspectives*, 74, Autumn 2002, p.7.
- 6 To be fair, Winton does provide a character called Axle, a boy who believes the world revolves around him (p.309).