Benjamin Franklin: An American Life Study Guide

Benjamin Franklin: An American Life by Walter Isaacson

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Plot Summary

Benjamin Franklin: An American Life is an account of the deeds of founding father Benjamin Franklin from his humble beginnings as the apprentice of a printer to his international status as wise sage and practical philosopher. Franklin is always clever and practical. He outshines his brother James the printer, to whom he is apprenticed, and James' jealousy over Benjamin's talent causes him to run away to New York. He meets another printer on his journey who recommends Philadelphia, which becomes Franklin's home. After a brief trip to London where he expels his boyish immaturities, he returns to Philadelphia and marries Deborah Read. In Philadelphia he works as a printer and forms the Junto, a collective of intellectuals. He wasisvery interested in public works and creates a list of moral traits he tries to incorporate into his everyday life. Franklin has three children: William, a bastard, Frances, who dies from smallpox, and Sally. Franklin is civic-minded and dislikes the Penn Family's Proprietorship. He is elected a member of the Assembly and retires as a printer to focus on other interests. He obtains international fame with his invention of the lightening rod, ending the threat from lightening and the fear of its supernatural powers. He forms casual relationships easily, especially with women, but has difficulty maintaining long-term meaningful male relationships, including with his son William. Franklin is sent to London to argue against the Proprietors in 1757. He is sent to discuss taxation, and will return in 1771 to discuss similar issues, including Britain treating the colonists as second-class citizens. Through most of the discussions he seeks to gain for the colonies equal standing in Britain, though eventually it becomes clear the only course of action is for the colonies to break with the Empire. He suffers a humiliating defeat in the Cockpit of the King's court, and in later years will wear the same suit when he triumphantly brings about the French treaty. During his second stint in London Deborah dies, and he does not return though William begs him. As the Revolution erupts Franklin is made Postmaster and has to devise a route to include Canada. William remains a Royalist and father and son irrevocably split. In 1776 he is sent to France to solicit French aid in the American conflict. He is a celebrity in France because of his famed lightening rod and plays well the roles of politician and backwoods sage, even famously donning a fur cap and plain clothes. He is notoriously flirtatious and forms relationships with notable Frenchwomen. He negotiates France's aid by playing France and Britain off one another, and later helps solidify the peace agreement with Britain after the war is decided. In returning to Philadelphia he lives with his daughter Sally and her family, and expands his house. He is much closer to his grandchildren than his own children. He serves in the Pennsylvania Assembly and helps draft the Constitution, which benefits from his willingness to compromise and his pragmatism. His wry humor and folksy anecdotes become part of American culture, as does his belief in the middle class and the ability of a man to better himself based on hard work and merit.

Chapter One and Chapter Two

Chapter One and Chapter Two Summary and Analysis

This work follows the life of Benjamin Franklin, a founding father of America. The author focuses on conveying Franklin through his deeds, and how Franklin contributes to American ideals.

Chapter One recounts Benjamin Franklin's arrival in Philadelphia as a famous scene in autobiographical literature and provides an overview of the subject. He is a printer, inventor, statesman, and politician, but always seeks to work through the "middling people" (p. 3) that are the backbones of the community: merchants, tradesman, and people who wear leather aprons. Franklin carefully crafts a persona for himself and is essentially the country's first publicist. He is vilified by some for his focus on practicality, though he always tries to link his private virtue and civic virtues. Chapter One is an overview of Franklin's character, weaving together the significance of different points in his life. The author has clear opinions about his subject that he hints at, but will undoubtedly explore in depth later in the work. Franklin typifies the American ideal of upward mobility: no matter where you come from, in America you can make of yourself whatever you want. Franklin's interest and concern over national identity foreshadows his eventual involvement with the Revolution, though mostly he is mild in his arguments and chooses cleverness and sense over hotheaded argument.

Chapter Two contains an explanation of Franklin's family. Their surname dates back to the Middle Ages and means freeman, the independent middle class. Franklin is the youngest son of the youngest sons for five generations, which means one has to strike out on one's own. Possibly, some of his impetuousness and individuality springs from his ancestor's middle class status and the youngest sons' impetuousness. Franklin, Benjamin's father, and his family migrate to America for mostly economic reasons, though religious freedom is a factor. Upon arrival in Boston Josiah becomes a tallow chandler, making candles and soap. Josiah's first wife dies and he weds Abiah Folger, Benjamin's mother. Benjamin is born on January 17, 1706. He loves swimming and kites, and his younger sister Jane is his favorite sibling. Benjamin the Elder, Josiah's older brother, comes to stay with the family after they move into the new house on Hanover and Union street. Benjamin is sent to Boston Latin School at age 8, and though he excels in school his father takes him out. Probably Josiah realizes Benjamin is not a good fit for the clergy and instead he is enrolled in a writing and arithmetic school and at age 10 apprenticed to his older brother James, a printer. The apprenticeship sparks his interest in printing and writing, and gives him an outlet for his new unique brand of satire. James publishes the first truly independent paper in the colonies, the New England Courant. Benjamin is an avid reader and his favorite books are about voyages. From these books he gleans some of the central ideas of his life: the power of the individual to do good for the public. Franklin adopts the Socratic method for his arguments, preferring to ask gentle questions of his opponents to lead them to his point. He naturally segues into writing and his first character was Silence

Dogood. She is the prototype for what becomes a quintessentially American viewpoint: a wry mix of homespun humor and common sense. He writes the Silence Dogood piece without telling his brother James, who is a tyrant. When James is arrested for his political views, Benjamin officially takes over the Courant. James makes him sign a secret agreement that keeps him an apprentice, but Benjamin runs away to New York. Though James's reputation pales in comparison to his famous younger brother, he is the first fighter for free press in the colonies.

Chapter Three and Chapter Four

Chapter Three and Chapter Four Summary and Analysis

Chapter Three examines Franklin's first years in Philadelphia and his time in London, 1723-1726. On his journey from Boston, Franklin meets William Bradford, a printer in New York. He recommends Franklin to Samuel Keimer, a printer in Philadelphia. Franklin makes friends easily, which contributes to his success. He learns how to get people to admire his work without being jealous of him. He meets Governor William Keith who offers to set Franklin up with his own printing shop—an example of how Franklin can attract patrons. He visits Boston full of his new status in life, though is reminded to be humble by Cotton Mather when he bumps his head on a beam: "Stoop, young man, stoop—as you go through this world—and you'll miss many hard thumps," (p. 41). In this period Franklin learns the importance of humility and develops his self-deprecating style of humor. Keith sends him to London so he can pick out fonts for the printing shop, though forgets to send him letters of credit. Franklin courts his landlady's daughter Deborah, but her mother insists they wait to marry until Franklin's return. He and James Ralph live as carefree bachelors in London, but their friendship ends over a woman. Franklin easily makes casual male friends but has few lasting male relationships. His trademark practicality continues to develop while he is in London. He becomes more of a Deist than specifically religious, though he approves religion's focus on morality and virtue. He attempts to explore these ideas in his Dissertation, but prints only 100 copies before he realizes his philosophies are mediocre. Franklin is a realist: uncomfortable exploring metaphysical issues, he seeks to find practical solutions that are useful for everyday people. He meets Mr. Denham on the passage to London and he offers to pay for Franklin's passage back if he agrees to work as a clerk in his general store. On the voyage Franklin writes his "Plan for Future Conduct" (p. 48) which designs his future behavior. He resolves to be frugal, sincere, rational, industrious and to speak ill of no one. This journey to London cements many traits of Franklin, and helps him realize he wants to go home to Philadelphia and contribute to his community.

Chapter Four details Franklin as a printer in Philadelphia from 1726-1732. Though he works as a merchant for a short time, Denham dies and Franklin returns to Keimer's shop. Keimer secretly is training Franklin's replacement, so Franklin and Hugh Meredith set up their own printing business on Market Street. Franklin buys the whole business and learns the importance of being—and appearing to be—industrious. Franklin carefully cultivates his public persona. He is an excellent networker and forms the Junto to further his business life. He is adept at mixing his professional and social lives. In the Junto he learns to listen to others—by indulging their vanity, he can win their favor. Franklin uses the Junto to discuss many of his public service ideas. He wants to start his own paper, but begins writing amusing letters and essays for Bradford's paper in an effort to sink Keimer, who has stolen his magazine idea. Franklin uses the Busy-Body essays to tell clever stories and to extol his favorite virtues. Keimer sells out to Franklin,

who trims the paper's name to The Pennsylvania Gazette. He turns the paper into a success with a combination of essays, fables, news, and gossip. Having established a successful business, Franklin needs a wife. Deborah Read has married a potter named John Rogers, but Rogers disappears into the West Indies and Deborah moves back in with her mother. Franklin and Deborah cannot officially marry because technically she is still married, but they enter into a common-law arrangement which Franklin feels balances the accounts for his desertion years before. He is not a romantic, but does believe that affection grows out of common interest and partnership. Throughout his life he appreciates his arrangement with Deborah. Around the same time Franklin fathers an illegitimate son. Some historians theorize that William is Deborah's son with Franklin and that they lie to avoid bigamy charges should Rogers reappear. This is probably false. Though Franklin is less sexist than most men of the time, he has specific ideas about women's roles: they should be obedient wives and mothers. Franklin and Deborah have a son, Francis, who dies of smallpox when he is four. This is bitterly ironic, as Franklin is a supporter of smallpox vaccination. Franklin's religious beliefs are fueled by pragmatism, and he creates for himself the Moral Perfection Project. He focuses on traits that will help him succeed in life, not the afterlife. He tries to strengthen each virtue weekly. He typifies the Enlightenment Age of Reason, though his ideas are excluded from the canon of philosophy because of their simplicity. He famously writes Poor Richard's Almanack using characters he creates. They boldly state his opinions, but wisely disguise them as the opinions of others so Franklin avoids flak.

Chapter Five

Chapter Five Summary and Analysis

Chapter Five examines Franklin's first years as a public citizen, 1731-1748. He is civic-minded and "more interested in building the City of Man than the City of God" (p. 102). Franklin believes that individualism and communitarianism are intertwined and needed for survival. The Library Company of Philadelphia is started in the Junto when Franklin suggests members bring books to the meetings so others can use them. While the Junto is mostly poor tradesmen, the Library Company allows Franklin to interact with the town's upper class. Franklin often writes under pseudonyms in his paper to try out new ideas for public service. This is how the Union Fire Company comes into existence: a volunteer fire company and social club. He also founds the American Philosophical Society and the Pennsylvania Militia. Upward mobility is a mission of Franklin's and becomes part of the American Dream: "that a tradesman could rise in the world and stand before kings" (p. 106). In December 1730 he is invited to join the Freemasons. Franklin does not buy into church dogma like many of his contemporaries. Though he is generally tolerant of others' religions, as the Great Awakening sweeps through the colonies he uncharacteristically is drawn into a debate defending Rev. Hemphill. He also is partial to George Whitefield, a traveling preacher, and publishes many of his sermons and journals. Though he does not necessarily agree with Whitefield's message, he admires his ability to challenge the established leaders of the community. As a result of his success as a printer, Andrew Bradford constantly competes against Franklin. Bradford's paper is aligned with the "Proprietary faction" siding with the Penn family, and Franklin's paper supports the elected Assembly's rights. The Assembly speaker Andrew Hamilton chooses Franklin to be a clerk of the Assembly, giving Franklin a platform to take the postmastership from Bradford. This means that Franklin can send his paper through the mail but deny Bradford access, a reverse of their former situation. Thus, the postage service becomes a public issue instead of a private interest. In 1743 Deborah gives birth to a daughter, Sally Franklin. She does not receive a formal education, though Franklin's ideas about women are slightly more modern than average. Franklin creates the Pennsylvania Militia because of threats from the French and Indian war. It is radical for a private organization to take over public safety from the government and it foreshadows the Revolution to come. In 1748 Franklin retires from his printing business to focus on other efforts.

Chapter Six and Chapter Seven

Chapter Six and Chapter Seven Summary and Analysis

Chapter Six examines Franklin's life as a scientist in Philadelphia from 1744-1751. Though his experiments are mostly driven by curiosity, he always tries to find a practical application for them, like the Pennsylvania Fireplace. He invents the first urinary catheter for his brother John and is the first to scientifically predict the weather. Franklin's work with electricity is the cornerstone of his scientific research and many of his coined terms are still used in the modern world. He begins storing electricity he generates in Leyden Jars, even creating the first battery by wiring the glass plates together. Before Franklin's work, lightening is considered supernatural or an act of God and church bells are rung to attempt to fend it off. Franklin realizes that lightening is drawn to the church bells and suggests the use of a lightening rod to draw the electricity away. The experiment is successfully performed in France, solidifying Franklin's international reputation. Before news from France can reach the colonies, Franklin experiments with a kite and a key in a thunderstorm. This experiment is also successful and becomes part of American folklore. Franklin waits to report his results for four months, causing some historians to think that the experiment is faked. Pennsylvania is the first town in history to make use of the lightening rod as a defense from storms. The same traits that Franklin possesses as a scientist work in his favor as a statesman.

Chapter Seven examines Franklin's beginnings as a politician from 1749-1756. He opens a nonsectarian college, later known as the University of Pennsylvania, that focuses on practical instruction and skills. He raises money for a hospital by getting the Assembly to agree the money raised will be matched with public money. Franklin believes in providing all people the tools to become successful and that position in life should be awarded based on merit, not on a preexisting aristocracy. This idea will segue into the Revolution. Franklin already chafes at Britain's restrictions on the colonies—for example, they want to put a cap on manufacturing in America. Britain exports convicts to the colonies under the weak explanation that the change in climate will affect in them a change in heart. Though he owns slaves in his life Franklin dislikes slavery and thinks it is a waste of money. He dislikes the German immigrants and for a time believes America should be settled by whites of English ancestry. Later in his life those opinions change. Franklin moves from a clerk in the Assembly to a member in 1751, handing the clerkship down to his son William. He suggests paving the streets and paying out of a public fund. He is very involved in Indian affairs, thinking the Indians live a romantically simple existence. The colony's safety depends on having good Indian relations. The French and Indian war makes Franklin an opponent of the Proprietors' control of the colonies. Franklin makes public his desire for the colonies to unite as one, believing they will be stronger as a single unit. Franklin is appointed Deputy Postmaster for the colonies. He uses the position to social and professional advantages. In 1754 the Board of Trade in London hold a conference in Albany, New York, and request each colony to

send a delegation. Franklin, allied with Thomas Hutchinson, attends the conference touting his new idea about a General Government and federalism. The plan does not pass, though Franklin is convinced that if it had, the Revolutionary War could have been avoided. As a defense against the French, Britain sends General Edward Braddock to America to push France out of the Ohio valley. Braddock underestimates the threat his army faces, but Franklin rises to his cause, reaching out to the public to supply the army. One of the survivors from Braddock's campaign is Colonel George Washington. This disaster stirs up more political strife. The Assembly insists on taxation for public defense and the Proprietors insist their lands are exempt. Franklin's militia bill passes in the Assembly and the members vote to send Franklin to London. He lobbies the Proprietors over taxation issues and uniting the colonies, but he does not yet think the colonies should break with the Empire. His rising status in life makes it a battle for him to remain humble, according to the rules he set for himself many years before. Franklin has difficulty maintaining the bonds of male friendship, though he makes and remains close with many women friends. The first is Caty Ray, with whom he corresponds throughout his life. He gains a reputation for lechery, but there is no real evidence that he has sexual affairs after marrying Deborah.

Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight Summary and Analysis

Chapter Eight details Franklin's time as an agent in London from 1757-1762. Throughout his life and career Franklin, like his oil and water experiments, tries to find ways to calm the roiling waves. Though he thinks his work in London will be done in five months, he stays five years. He stays with the widowed Margaret Stevenson and her daughter Polly, who forms a relationship with Franklin much like Caty Ray does years earlier. Franklin respects Deborah, but knows she will not be comfortable in London society. Franklin recreates the atmosphere of the Junto, surrounding himself with intellectuals who have middle-class values. Franklin comes to London fully believing in the Crown and the Empire, but realizes Americans are regarded as second-class citizens. In his debates against the Penns, Franklin believes the colonists have been deceived over their right to the Assembly—the bill is poorly worded and purposefully open to interpretation by the Proprietors. Franklin's pragmatism fails him during these meetings and he is openly hostile to the Penns, ending his stint as an agent for Philadelphia. Instead of returning to Pennsylvania he travels with his son William. Franklin hopes William will wed Polly Stevenson, though William hopes for a bride with more social standing. Franklin continues his studies of heat and refrigeration.

Franklin cannot deal directly with the Penns, but he wasisabreast of the taxation debates. When the Penns finally respond it is vague, and Franklin suggests that Pennsylvania be taken away from the Penn family and made a royal Crown colony. This idea is ludicrous at the time. Franklin's anger at the Penns and enthusiasm for the Empire influences him. He attacks them on three issues: their mishandling of Indian affairs, a libel case the Pennsylvania assembly wins against William Smith, and the case of Govenor William Denny, who violates his post by passing bills that tax the Proprietor's estates. Eventually a compromise about the tax issue is reached, but the Penns retain the Proprietorship of Pennsylvania.

On his summer travels with William, Franklin meets many members of the intellectual elite, including the famed philosopher David Hume. Franklin still hopes for Sally and Deborah to come and live with him in London, and attempts to make a match for Sally. In 1760 William fathers an illegitimate child, William Temple Franklin, called Temple. He sends Temple to a foster family in secret, though the boy will later become a dear grandchild to Franklin. Father and son cut their trip short to attend the coronation of King George III in London in 1761, under whom he hopes the situation for the colonies will improve. Franklin argues that Britain should retain control of Canada and voices his zeal for the united Empire, including the colonies. Franklin finally returns home in the summer of 1762, and William obtains the governorship of New Jersey. He marries a wealthy planter's daughter, Elizabeth Downes, though Franklin does not attend their wedding. Franklin is troubled by William's obsession with social status. William is not willing to champion the middle class.

Chapter Nine and Chapter Ten

Chapter Nine and Chapter Ten Summary and Analysis

Chapter Nine recounts Franklin's life in Philadelphia from 1763-1764. After the death of co-Postmaster William Hunter, Franklin hopes to be assigned the sole responsibility of the Postmastership, but John Foxcroft is announced as his partner. They extend the postal system to include Canada, and Franklin takes his daughter Sally on the surveying trip. They visit William and Elizabeth in New Jersey. William receives a royal appointment: the beginning of strife between father and son. Though he has only just returned to Philadelphia, first from England and then from the seven month postal tour of the colonies, Franklin is restless. He becomes embroiled in a pamphlet war over the Paxton Boys, a mob of frontiersmen who murder six unarmed Indians and march on Philadelphia. Franklin defends the Indians, but he is prejudiced against German immigrants and Calvinists. The Penn family sends a delegation to negotiate with the Paxton Boys instead of punishing them for murder. This refuels Franklin's determination to get the Penn's Proprietorship revoked. The Assembly votes to send Franklin back to England to present a petition against the Proprietors in November 1764. His mood grows darker during these events: he is older and losing some of his youthful enthusiasm and naivete.

In Chapter Ten Franklin returns to England. He promises he will be away only months, but stays for ten years. Franklin's goals are: 1) to get the Proprietorship revoked from the Penns; 2) protect his Postmastership and obtain a land grant; and 3) promote conversation between Parliament and the colonies. Franklin returns to Craven Street and Mrs. Stevenson, renewing his friendship with John Pringle and Polly Stevenson. Polly is Franklin's surrogate daughter, another in the line of flirtatious and intelligent young women Franklin enjoys. William's bastard son, William Temple, lives with Franklin at Craven Street. Franklin and William later fight over Temple's allegiance. The largest controversy in Franklin's career is over the Stamp Act of 1765. It taxes books, almanacs, newspapers, decks of cards and legal documents. Franklin thinks Parliament can impose external taxes, like tariffs; internal taxes he finds unconstitutional. When the Act is announced Franklin takes his usual pragmatic attitude. It is a mistake—the people in the colonies are livid, and accuse Franklin of championing the Act. His reputation is so tarnished that a mob gathers to torch his new house, though they are dispersed. The Stamp Act causes the colonies to think as a unit instead of separate states. Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, John Hancock and Samuel Adams speak against the Act. To save his reputation Franklin begins a letter writing campaign using pseudonyms. He recommends the American colonies form their own federal legislature and presents his ideas to Parliament in a dramatic speech. This repairs his reputation in America and solidifies him as the foremost ambassador for all the colonies. Later, Franklin realizes the distinction between external and internal taxes is moot, and the issue is much simpler: "that Parliament has a power to make all laws for us, or that is has the power to make no laws for us" (p. 245). Franklin spends much of 1769 thinking about the problem, so uncharacteristically silent that people suspect his loyalties. On March 5,

1770, the Boston Massacre occurs, making it even more difficult for Franklin to be an America patriot and a loyal Briton.

At the end of 1766 Franklin's printing partnership with David Hall ends, cutting into his income. He writes to Deborah encouraging frugality, but says nothing about Sally's desire to marry Richard Bache. William discovers Richard's finances are a mess and the marriage is delayed. They marry in October 1767 without Franklin's explicit permission. Franklin is on vacation in France. He stays even as Deborah's health fails and his grandchild Benjamin Franklin Bache is born. Franklin does not look for deep personal commitments in his life. He enjoys intellectual stimulation and domestic comfort. When Polly Stevenson marries William Hewson, Franklin walks her down the aisle, though he makes no effort to attend his biological children's weddings.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Eleven Summary and Analysis

Chapter Eleven takes place in London from 1771-1775. In 1771 Franklin takes an extended vacation, touring England to observe the Industrial Revolution. Franklin is 65 and thinking more about family. On a stay with the Shipley family in Twyford he begins writing an autobiography containing his family history. Though disguised as a letter to his son, the autobiography is meant for the public. It is not the first autobiography in history, but it is the first written "for a middle class that had few historians." (p. 257). Franklin's letter is the story of a self-made man, which becomes part of the American Dream. He forms another flirtatious relationship with the Shipley girls, even composing a poem for them about the death of their pet squirrel: "Here Skugg/Lies snug/As a bug/In a rug" (p. 258). In August 1771 Franklin tours Ireland and Scotland, encountering his nemesis Hillsborough and dining with his friend David Hume. Upon his return to London his son-in-law Richard Bache visits, and though Sally worries, her husband and her father get along.

Franklin still pursues his scientific interests: the cause of colds, exercise, lead poisoning, canals, the saltiness of oceans and social philosophies. He believes that social mobility is in correlation with hard work and has a trickle-down theory of economics. His focus is always what action will benefit the common good. He still attempts to remain the peacemaker, but Franklin forwards the Hutchinson Letters to his friend Thomas Cushing. The letters give advice on how to subdue the colonies and are meant to remain private. On December 16, 1773, Sam Adams and the Sons of Liberty toss tea shipments from the East India Company into the water—the Boston Tea Party. Franklin is forced to admit he has forwarded the Hutchinson letters, a possibly illegal act, and is summoned to the Cockpit for a trial. He remains silent during the proceedings, appearing above the rabble of the room, and flees up the Thames for a few days afterward. Though his mission is effectively over, Franklin opts to remain in England. Franklin and William's relationship is irrevocably altered by the political trouble. William is a royalist and Franklin a rebel, and Franklin's letters to his son become cold and almost entirely political. On Christmas Eve of 1774, Deborah Franklin dies. William begs Franklin to return to America and bring Temple with him. As his wife pines away, Franklin plays chess with Mrs. Howe, whose brothers are involved in the British navy. The Howes and the Chathams secretly meet with Franklin to try to circumvent war, but ultimately when Chatham presents the plan, Parliament suspects Franklin. Franklin finally returns to Philadelphia in 1775, worried about the possible war and having failed in his mission.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Twelve Summary and Analysis

Chapter Twelve takes place in Philadelphia from 1775-1776. On the voyage back to the colonies Franklin studies the Gulf Stream. The situation in America is more dire than Franklin knows: British troops attempt to arrest Samuel Adams and John Hancock on April 18, 1775 but Paul Revere spreads the alarm. Americans cannot agree on whether the war should be fought for complete independence or for American rights within the British empire. Franklin and William fight over Temple and politics. Franklin is the oldest member of Congress. Franklin's journey to becoming a rebel is not a straight path. He believes in the middling people and merit based on achievement rather than birth. Britain makes it clear to the colonies that they are second-class citizens, which leaves no choice but rebellion. Franklin writes an angry letter to his friend William Straham. He never sends it, but allows it to be printed and circulated. He wrwritesote thirteen articles detailing the new United Colonies of North America and chairs a committee to replace the British postal system. He donates his salary to the rebellion. Richard Bache is the comptroller of the system. Franklin meets with General Washington in Cambridge to discuss the troops, who are undisciplined. Franklin meets his sister Jane in Boston, who returns with him.

In March 1776 Franklin takes a trip to Quebec to elicit help from the Canadian settlements. The journey is brutal and they cannot ask for Canada's help because they have no money, but Franklin obtains the fur cap that becomes his trademark. Most colonial leaders do not take the leap to complete independence until Thomas Paine's pamphlet Common Sense. Franklin edits Thomas Jefferson's declaration of independence, changing "sacred and undeniable" to "self-evident" (p. 312). The parchment copy of the Declaration is officially signed on August 2nd. The Second Continental Congress creates a new type of government. Franklin helps design the new paper money. He and Adams meet with General Howe to discuss the Olive Branch Petition, but it is too late for diplomacy. After the meeting Franklin is selected for a mission to solicit aid from France. He takes Temple and Benny, along with Silas Deane and Arthur Lee. Some accuse him of leaving to France for personal safety, but this is false: an ailing man would not cross a treacherous sea controlled by enemies if he was concerned for his safety. He does not inform William or Elizabeth that he is taking Temple. William does not discover the boy is gone until his release from colonial prison, and Elizabeth dies before seeing either of them again.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Thirteen Summary and Analysis

Chapter thirteen takes place in Paris from 1776-1778. The winter crossing is rough for Franklin, so he and the boys get off the ship as soon as they see land and take a carriage to Paris. He tries to remain anonymous, but his fame in France makes it impossible. America needs France's aid to win the war and Franklin plays his role as diplomat perfectly. The French love him and try to trace his ancestry back to France, though many mistake him for a Quaker. In fact, his rustic look is part of a political costume: the fur cap is a sign of wisdom. Franklin lives in the village of Passy, which becomes America's first foreign embassy. Madame Chaumont hosts him and Temple is his aid. Silas Deane and Arthur Lee are Franklin's commissioners, the first a corrupt accountant and the second completely paranoid. Lee and Franklin do not get along. Lee is suspicious of Arthur Bancroft, a spy for Franklin and a member of the Royal Society. Later, historians learn Bancroft is actually a spy for Britain working deep under cover. He provides his intelligence by writing in invisible ink in the black spaces of false love letters. Franklin and Deane have no idea Bancroft is a spy. France's foreign minister is the Comte de Vergennes, who is a realist in regard to international relations and sympathetic to the Americans. Before Franklin arrives, Vergennes and King Louis XVI decide their terms: they will help America secretly, but wait to see what Franklin has to say. Franklin blends realism and idealism in his negotiations with France, realizing he needs to convey "America's exceptionalism, the sense that America stood apart from the rest of the world because of its virtuous nature" (p. 338). He requests for certain documents in America to be translated and sent abroad in an attempt to influence others' opinions. The philosophical ruminations put Vergennes off for a few weeks, and Franklin is stuck reading and responding to letters from Europeans who want commissions in America's army.

In September 1777, General Howe takes Philadelphia. John Andre confiscates Franklin's house and possessions on Market Street. This is dangerous: if General Burgoyne is able to march down the Hudson, New England will be completely isolated. Luckily, Burgoyne and his forces are defeated at the Battle of Saratoga, leaving Howe with no help but his own. The French finally agree to officially aid America, but needs permission from Spain because of the Bourbon family pact. Spain denies permission, and Franklin plays the French and the British off one another to apply pressure. France's only stipulation is that Americans need to consult France before making peace with Britain. To sign the treaty on Feb. 5, 1778 Franklin wears a blue Manchester velvet suit—the same suit he wore the day of his humiliation in the Cockpit. Louis XVI makes the treaty official by inviting the commissioners to Versailles on March 20, where Franklin forsakes his fur cap for a white one held under his arm. This becomes a fashion trend. Franklin turns the world's mind to the issue of republicanism versus monarchy and gives America a real chance for victory.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fourteen Summary and Analysis

Chapter Fourteen takes place in Paris from 1778-1785. In April 1778 John Adams arrives to replace Silas Deane. Adams and Franklindodid not get along: they have very different personalities and styles of working. Franklin always tries to give the appearance of being industrious, but in France it is not the fashion, so Adams thinks him idle. The French public want Voltaire and Franklin to meet, so they stage a couple of dramatic meetings between the two sages. The Academie Royale and the Masonic Lodge of the Nine Sisters are Franklin's intellectual bases in France. Franklin takes over as Grand Master for the lodge. Similar to Franklin's previous relationships, he forms the deepest bonds with women. The first is Madame Brillon, his neighbor, with whom he plays music and chess. They exchange suggestive letters and Franklin writes stories for her, though their relationship is never physically consummated. He also courts Madame Helvetius, a bohemian widow to whom he half-jokingly proposes marriage. He composes "The Elysian Fields" for her, imagining he has discussed the situation with their late spouses, who approve. She does not accept him, but out of these relationships come the bagatelles, little stories Franklin writes that give insight into his personality. He enjoys playing chess and views the game as a metaphor for life. He inadvertently invents Daylight Savings Time. He keeps his family in Philadelphia at a distance, though Sally dutifully restores his house. She sends American-made silk as a gift for the queen, but it is stained with seawater and prompts ridicule from Franklin. In December 1779 Sally and the women of Philadelphia raise donations to sew new shirts for the troops. Benny misses Franklin's affection at school, though his friend Samuel Johnnot brings him out of his rebellious streak. Temple is a wild youth, a ladies' man and undisciplined.

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Fifteen Summary and Analysis

Chapter Fifteen takes place in Paris from 1778-1785. Franklin becomes the sole minister plenipotentiary, though Adams is still antagonistic and Arthur Lee campaigns against him in America by attacking Temple. Franklin, usually shrewd, turns a blind eye to his grandson's faults. Temple and the French General Lafayette are anxious to stage a land invasion of England, though their plot is never realized. John Paul Jones, ex-privateer, wins a commission in America's navy and commands the Bonhomme Richard. In battle with the ship Serapis when asked to surrender, Jones says "I have not yet begun to fight!" (p. 390). John Adams and Franklin disagree over whether America should show fealty to France: Franklin thinks America should remain a virgin state, but wants to show gratitude for the aid they receive. Adams thinks France acts for her own interests and America owes them nothing. Upon the betrayal of Benedict Arnold, America's money situation is dire and they need France's help. After securing a loan, Franklin requests to retire. He is not allowed and instead made into one of five commissioners allowed to negotiate peace with Britain. In October 1781, Washington and Lafayette defeat the British at Yorktown, so Franklin goes into negotiations. Franklin wants Britain to cede Canada and for no British loyalists to be compensated for the war. Instead, Americans are to receive compensation from Britain for their losses. Oswald and Grenville hope to convince Franklin to abandon France's wishes in the negotiations with Britain, though Britain does not yet recognize America as an independent nation. Franklin, working with Shelburne, offers a peace plan divided into necessary provisions and advisable provisions. Necessary is America's complete independence, the removal of British troops, safe boundaries and fishing rights in Canada. Advisable is compensation for the destruction in America, an admission of Britain's fault, free trade and giving Canada to the United States. Franklin falls ill during the negotiations and lawyer John Jay takes over. He discovers that Vergennes wants Britain to recognize America's independence only through France and Spain. Adams returns for the negotiations and, while he and Franklin still did not like each other personally, they manage to get along professionally. Franklin is against any provisions being made for the British loyalists, including his son William. The provisional treaty is signed on November 30, 1782, and Franklin has to explain to Vergennes why France is not consulted: "Nothing had been agreed in the preliminaries contrary to the interests of France" (p. 416). Vergennes realizes to force the issue will be to push America toward Britain, so the treaty is accepted. Franklin does not return to Philadelphia immediately, instead choosing to spend time with his grandchildren. Benny begins working at Franklin's printing press at Passy and Temple tries to get a ministry position. He fathers an illegitimate child named Theodore who, ironically, dies of smallpox. Balloon mania hits France in 1783 and Benny and Franklin study them together. Franklin advertises America to possible immigrants, explaining it as a place of "happy mediocrity" (p. 423). Franklin is not pleased by the choice of the bald eagle as the national bird, instead favoring the turkey. Franklin's social theories are a mix of conservatism and populism. In August 1784 he invents bifocal glasses. Franklin is happy to include Thomas Jefferson

among the ministers in Paris in 1784, who shares his ideals and some personality traits. Though everyone is peacemaking, Franklin cannot forgive his son William. Temple is allowed to visit England and see his father, also convincing Polly Stevenson to join them in Paris. In May 1785 Congress finally accepts Franklin's resignation. He is worried that the sea journey might be too rough for him, but the travel invigorates him instead. There are dramatic and tearful goodbyes from his French circle. He sails across the English Channel first, and says goodbye to friends still in England. Though he sees William, they do not reconcile and only speak of business.

Chapter Sixteen, Chapter Seventeen, and Conclusion

Chapter Sixteen, Chapter Seventeen, and Conclusion Summary and Analysis

Chapter Sixteen takes place in Philadelphia from 1785-1790. On the voyage from England Franklin indulges in his scientific inquiries. He finally has his family gathered around him at the house on Market Street. Benny becomes a printer and Temple, after a failed attempt at farming, becomes a party staple in Philadelphia. Franklin decides to build new houses and add on to Market Street, expanding the house by a third and adding an extensive library. He is elected the state president of Pennsylvania. The federal constitution needs to be rediscussed and the convention takes place in Philadelphia. Franklin's function at the convention is threefold: 1) he is very comfortable with democracy, unlike some of the other statesmen; 2) he is the most well traveled and worldly of the delegates; and 3) he embodies the spirit of the Enlightenment and preaches compromise. The major issue is if America will be thirteen separate states, one nation, or some combination of the two. Also, whether each state will have the same number of representatives or a number proportional to their populations. It is decided the Representatives of the House will be popularly elected and the numbers will reflect the state's population. The house will control taxes and spending. The Senate will have an equal number from each state and control executive offices and state sovereignty. He argues that Congress should have power to impeach the President and public officials should not be paid (though he does not realize that will limit the pool of people who can serve—only the wealthy can afford to go unpaid). The Constitution is written in the spirit of compromise and upon conclusion of the meetings Franklin gives an eloquent speech. He is the only person to sign all four founding papers of the republic: the Declaration, the French treaty, the peace treaty with Britain and the Constitution. He is reelected to the Pennsylvania Assembly, but is suffering from gout and kidney stones. In his last year of life he takes a stance against slavery and forms a society for abolition. The last letter Franklin writes is to Thomas Jefferson. Franklin dies on April 17, 1790 at age 84.

The Epilogue follows up with Franklin's family. William is bequeathed only useless land in Canada and never forgiven by his father. Temple, still roguish, fathers an illegitimate girl, Ellen, who is raised by William. He publishes some of Franklin's works in 1817, but after his death many of the original copies are scattered. Sally and Richard live at Market Street, take a trip to England, then move to Delaware. Benny becomes a printer and splits from his parents after marrying Margaret Markoe. Polly Stevenson inherisd nothing from Franklin and dies before she can return to England. In his will Franklin leaves a trust for early-career businessmen in Philadelphia and Boston.

In the Conclusion, the author examines other opinions written about Franklin, prefacing that people either love Franklin or hate him. Throughout the years Franklin's ideas have gone in and out of vogue, ridiculed in the Romantic period by the likes of Keats, Thoreau and Emerson and revered in the Gilded Age by Mark Twain and Thomas Mellon. His most scathing critic is D.H. Lawrence, who dislikes Franklin's low thinking (though bases much of his argument on one of Franklin's characters, not the man himself). The author argues that Franklin's focus on practicality, sincerity, public works, pragmatism, and his ability to separate the Puritan spirit of industriousness from its dogma are all profound contributions to the fabric of America. Like his straightforward philosophies, Franklin should not be taken at any more or any less than his deeds.

Characters

Benjamin Franklin

Destined to be a founding father and important part of American history, Benjamin Franklin starts out as a lowly son of a tallow-chandler. As a youth he is clever and impetuous, excelling as an apprentice and later as a printer. His style of writing is wry and folksy and he creates many characters and anecdotes throughout the years to express his opinions. He is a practical man not given to romanticism. He focuses his actions on usefulness and the public good. Even as a scientist and inventor, Franklin seeks for his discoveries to be useful, not just interesting blurbs or tidbits. He creates Poor Richard's Almanack, an archetype for the wry American voice. Though many of his ideas are excluded from the cannons of philosophy because of their simplicity, Franklin's version of America goes down in history. Many of his traits evolve into American identity—the backwoods sage and the wise middling man among them. Franklin always champions the middle class and prefers it to the pretensions of aristocracy. He excels at gaining others' favor and learns early on that flattery can get him where he wants to be, whether in his personal or professional life. Though he makes friends easily, Franklin is rarely able to keep up lasting relationships, especially with males. He enjoys flirtatious relationships with females and has many lifelong correspondences. Franklin's marriage to Deborah is not a great love affair but a partnership based on mutual respect and regard, and she is aware of the correspondences he has with other women. Franklin enjoys intellectual stimulation and a comfortable domesticity. There is no evidence that Franklin is unfaithful to her, though he does spend much of their marriage away in England and France. Franklin's illegitimate son William does not champion the middle class, but instead is prone to upper class pretensions. He and Franklin irrevocably split over the Revolution and William's illegitimate son Temple is caught in the middle. Temple is perhaps the family member who is closest to Franklin.

Franklin always believes he can best serve God by serving man, though his shaky ideas about God morph over the years. He focuses his life on doing good works on earth rather than preparing for heaven, like many of his contemporaries. His belief in democracy and the ability of man to do good works helps shape America, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the general attitudes of the newly formed country. His pragmatism, tolerance, willingness to compromise and focus on common sense shape the nation, allowing differences of opinion and respect for the individual.

William Franklin

The illegitimate son of Benjamin Franklin, William's mother's identity is never revealed to history. Instead he is raised by Deborah and Benjamin. William is a bright boy and assists Franklin in his infamous kite experiments. William accompanies Franklin to

England where, like his father so many years before, he indulges in the glamor of the big city. Unlike his father, William has no desire to champion the middle class. Instead he aspires to become part of the upper class and begins to associate with London's elite. Perhaps William feels he needs to prove to his father and the world that he is more than a bastard, that he is just as good as anyone else. Ironically, William fathers an illegitimate child in England named William Temple. Temple is raised by a foster family and kept secret the first years of his life, but moved into Franklin's house on Craven Street on his second trip to England. William is a Tory sympathizer, and is given a position as the royal governor of New Jersey. He marries Elizabeth Downes, who is high in Tory society. As a result of his loyalist sympathies and Franklin's rebellious sympathies, William irrevocably splits with his father. They fight over Temple's allegiance, whom William longs to grow closer to after abandoning him in England. William and Franklin never reconcile, even after the war, and their final meeting before Franklin's last crossing back to Philadelphia is strictly business. William is left some of Franklin's useless land holdings in Canada after Franklin dies. William has great regard and respect for his father, rarely speaking out negatively against him, and asks Temple about his health. Elizabeth dies while WIlliam is imprisoned and he marries again years later. After his second wife Mary D'Evelyn dies, William lives only three more years. His life ends lonely and broken, estranged from his son Temple.

Deborah Read Franklin

Deborah may have been born in Birmingham but lives most of her childhood and adult life on Market Street in Philadelphia. She meets Franklin when he first arrives in Philadelphia from Boston. They become engaged before Franklin leaves for London, but Deborah's mother insists the marriage wait until Franklin's return. While in London, Franklin basically neglects Deborah so she marries John Rogers, a potter. He turns out to be an unreliable person and flees to the West Indies. She never hears from him again. When Franklin returns he is anxious to find a wife and wants to make amends to Deborah, though they cannot officially marry because she is still married to John Rogers and they might be brought up on bigamy charges. Instead they begin living together and enter into a common-law marriage, which is to last until the end of Deborah's life. Though theirs is not a passionate love, it is a mutually useful relationship and they have respect for one another. Deborah gives birth to Franky, who dies at age four, and Sally, as well as raising Franklin's bastard son William. She defends the family home while Franklin is in England during the Stamp Act Riots. She is not an adventurous woman and prefers the comfort and familiarity of the city where she grew up. She does not accompany Franklin on any of his trips, though he asks her to and encourages her to bring Sally as well. Deborah is a sensible and practical woman who is more or less happy to fulfill her function in Franklin's life. She dies surrounded by her children while Franklin is still in London.

[William] Temple Franklin

Temple is the illegitimate son of Franklin's illegitimate son William. Ironically, Temple will have his own illegitimate son later in life. Temple spends the beginnings of his childhood growing up in secret with a foster family in London. When Franklin returns to London, Temple lives with him on Craven Street and returns with him to America in 1775. He is able to meet the rest of the family before going to Paris in 1776 with Franklin, where he attempts to gain a post in political administration. Temple is used as a pawn between Franklin and William during the Revolution, though ultimately he chooses Franklin. Temple is roguish and marries against his family's wishes. Years after Franklin's death he publishes a loose collection of Franklin's works. When Temple dies, the works scatter but are eventually collected again and many now reside in Philadelphia.

[Sarah] Sally Franklin

Sally Franklin is Benjamin Franklin's only legitimate living child. She is bright but no genius, and learns skills Franklin deems useful for household accounting and organizing. Sally is extremely loyal to Franklin, keeping up house and playing hostess for him while he is home and abroad. She travels to Boston with him once but, like Deborah, ultimately prefers the comforts of home. Sally marries Richard Bache, a struggling merchant, in 1767 without Franklin's specific permission, though later he approves the match and dotes on his grandson Benny.

[Benjamin] Benny Franklin Bache

Son of Sally and Richard Bache. Accompanies Franklin and Temple to Paris in 1776 for school and later becomes a printer.

Josiah Franklin and Abiah Folger Franklin

Franklin's mother and father. He is a silk maker turned candle maker when he emigrates to America. She bears ten children.

John Franklin

Franklin's brother who is a soap and candle maker in Boston. Franklin makes a catheter for him.

James Franklin

Franklin's brother to whom he is apprenticed. He is a harsh master to Franklin but starts the first independent paper in America, the New England Courant.

Benjamin Franklin the Elder

Josiah Franklin's brother who encourages Franklin's poetry writing. He may have been the inspiration for the saying "Guests and fish stink after three days."

Jane Franklin

Franklin's younger sister. She is his favorite sibling and they correspond throughout their lives.

Margaret Stevenson

Franklin's landlady and companion on Craven Street.

Polly Stevenson

Mrs. Stevenson's daughter and lifelong flirtatious companion of Franklin.

John and Thomas Penn

Members of the Penn family who control the Proprietorship of Pennsylvania. Enemies of Franklin.

John Adams

An American patriot who works with Franklin editing the Declaration of Independence and on negotiations with France and Britain. He and Franklin maintain a professional relationship but do not get along personally.

Edward Bancroft

A stock speculator who is Franklin's secretary in Paris. Unbeknownst to Franklin, he is a British spy.

Andrew Bradford

This man runs the rival paper in Philadelphia when Franklin first gets into the printing business. His father William meets Franklin as a runaway and introduces them.

Madame Brillon

Franklin's neighbor in Passy with whom he has a serious flirtation.

Madame Helvetius

A close friend of Franklin's in Passy. She wasisthe widow of a philosopher, and Franklin half-jokingly proposes to her.

Lord Richard Howe

An admiral in the Royal Navy, he secretly negotiates with Franklin over chess games at his sister's house.

David Hume

A Scottish philosopher and historian. He and Franklin are friends and exchange correspondence.

Thomas Hutchinson

Franklin publishes some of his letters which leads to the infamous trial in the Cockpit.

Samuel Keimer

He is a printer and employs Franklin when he first arrives in Pennsylvania. Their relationship sours when Franklin becomes his competition.

Arthur Lee

He is in Paris with Franklin for negotiations. Notoriously paranoid, he thinks everyone is a spy.

Hugh Meredith

Franklin's first partner in the printing business.

Thomas Paine

He writes Common Sense, which leads to the Declaration of Independence.

[Catherine] Caty Ray Greene

She meets Franklin in 1754 and becomes his first in a long line of young female flirtations.

Earl of Shelbourne

British ambassador during Franklin's Paris peace negotiations.

William Strahan

A close friend of Franklin's, also a printer, to whom Franklin writes a letter proclaiming they are enemies during the Revolution.

George Whitefield

A Great Awakening preacher who Franklin publishes many times.

Comte de Vergennes

The French Ambassador who negotiates with Franklin when he is asking France for aid in the Revolution.

Objects/Places

Philadelphia

Philadelphia is Franklin's home and the center of the American Revolution. Franklin's house on Market Street is where his family live their lives, as well as where many great political leaders will come during the Continental Congress to sit in his garden.

Boston

Boston is the city of Franklin's childhood and his sister Jane stays there through adulthood.

Kites

Franklin's childhood fascination with kites segues into his adulthood fascination with lightening and electricity. His famous electricity experiment is performed with a kite, string, and a key.

Fur Hat

Franklin obtains his fur hat on a brutal trip to Canada looking for aid for the Revolution. It represents Franklin as a backwoods sage or a wise, yet simple, man.

Letters

Letters are the medium Franklin uses to correspond with friends throughout his life. Letters are often published in pamphlets.

Passy

Passy, France, is where Franklin lives during the years he negotiates first for aid from France and then for peace with Britain.

London

London is where Franklin lives while on a mission to be an agent for the Assembly. He lives on Craven Street with his landlady Mrs. Stevenson.

Bifocals

Bifocals, a way to focus on one's reading, both with magnification and normally, are one of Franklin's most lasting inventions.

Oil and Water

Franklin studies the affects of combining oil and water throughout his lifetime but ultimately discovers that, while oil smooths the surface of water, the waves still roil underneath.

Madeira

This is Franklin's wine of choice and he sips it over many intellectual conversations.

Lightening Rod

This is the fruit of Franklin's studies on lightening: it means that villages no longer have to be afraid of lightening strikes.

The Cockpit

A room in the King's court in London that is once Henry VIII's cockpit for fighting birds, but in Franklin's time a trial or meeting room. Franklin suffers a humiliating trial there.

Market Street

The street in Philadelphia where Franklin and his family live.

Craven Street

The street in London when Franklin lives with Mrs. Stevenson, Polly and eventually Temple.

Themes

Usefulness

Throughout his life, Franklin's biggest goal was to be useful. His scientific experiments, political prowess, and his writings are all meant to be ultimately useful somehow to his fellow man. The lightening rod is a prime example: what starts as a fascination of Franklin's with electricity turns out to be a worldwide phenomenon, with villages in France erecting lightening rods and performing experiments of their own. The lightening rod demystifies lightening, previously thought to be the divine hand of God, so in a subtle way the lightening rod is also a nod to Franklin's ambiguous form of deism. His writings are usually didactic. In other words, they seek to teach the reader some sort of lesson. Franklin likes to write anecdotes involving his favorite virtues, in hopes that it would help his readers become moral and virtuous people. He is more progressive than most of his contemporaries in regards to women's education and encourages both Deborah and Sally to learn accounting and organizational skills to assist in running the printing shop and the household. Though he does not bother to become bogged down in dogma, Franklin approves of religion because of its usefulness in extolling virtuous behavior to the people. In politics Franklin usually seeks the middle ground that will contribute to the common good. He tries not to stray too far to the left or right, but is forced to choose during the Revolution. Although he famously states "There is no such thing as a good war or a bad peace," Franklin knows that the colonies have come to a crossroads and he is in a unique position to serve his newly forming country. He again opts to be useful by going to France to enlist their help, though he is gaining in years and the ocean crossing is painful for him. Though he is incredibly industrious throughout his lifetime, Franklin also perfects the art of appearing industrious. He firmly believes that usefulness to society is of the utmost importance.

Social Mobility

Franklin, and many other new Americans, come from places where social structure is strictly in accordance with a preexisting aristocracy. In these cases, there is almost no chance for one to break free of the class or caste in which one is born. Hence, peerages are hereditary, as are many merchant and labor force positions. Part of the attraction of America is its freedom: in this place, a boy born the youngest of ten children can one day own a business, become a politician, inventor, writer, world famous and stand before kings. Franklin fiercely believes that social and financial mobility should be the result of a person's hard work and virtuous behavior, not birth or a preexisting class system. Franklin typifies this version of the American Dream. Though he has his natural charm and way with people to help him along the journey, he essentially comes from nothing—the mercantile middle class—to later in life find himself dining with royalty and involved in intellectual discussions with renowned philosophers. Throughout all the fame and fortune Franklin strives to maintain his middle class values and personal morality system which he lays out stringently for himself years before. Franklin's example proves

that in America a man can be whatever or whoever he wants to be as long as he is willing to put in the work.

Pragmatism

Franklin is ever practical. He looks for practical solutions to the problems he encounters, including finding practical applications for his scientific diversions. His diatribes are excluded from the canon of philosophy because of their simplicity, but they perfectly suit Franklin's personality and his beliefs. Even while holding political office he never jumps to conclusions, instead preferring to find solutions that are thought out and moderate instead of brash and extreme. He is the peacekeeper of the Continental Congress, as well as the peacemaker for the new America. His ability to adapt to different places, people, and situations makes him the quintessential person to represent America. He learns early on how to curry people's favor by playing to their vanities. This is not, as some critics claim, underhanded or devious. It is simply Franklin pragmatically approaching a situation and behaving in a way he knows will be useful for his cause. Pragmatism will become a distinctly American philosophy centering again around usefulness: how scientific, social, and political endeavors can be practically applied for the good of the people. Franklin's traits have been instilled into the American psyche, since so many of them contribute to the country's beginnings.

Virtue

Franklin strives to be virtuous and moral throughout his life. Virtue, like pragmatism, is a trait he picks up from Puritanism (though he conveniently leaves its dogmatic ties behind). Franklin starts the Moral Perfection Project while still a young businessman in Philadelphia. He wants to focus on traits that will help him succeed in the world rather than traits that will guarantee his everlasting soul a spot in heaven. The virtues Franklin seeks are not heroic or spiritual, but practical and democratic. Though he does not mean his Moral Perfection Project to apply to everyone, he wants to become the best version of himself he can. He thinks that by being virtuous and treating others well he can get ahead in the world and perhaps others will treat him the same. Many of his writings are anecdotes about his favorite virtues. It is all a part of Franklin's image: he wants to be revered but not an object of envy, he wants to befriend people who can help him but not become obligated to such people, and he wants to embody the middle-class values of his beloved middling people. Though he surely does not epitomize many of the virtues he seeks even by the end of his life, his public relations plan works: he becomes the noble backwoods sage, put on a pedestal and appreciated by all.

Style

Perspective

This work is a biography, so the author's perspective is omniscient. He is able to look at Franklin's life as a whole and present the information that he thinks is the most relevant to understanding the man, printer, writer, politician, and philosopher. The author has a background with corporations such as CNN and Time Magazine and has written other works on American historical figures. Right off the bat the author mentions the two camps of thought regarding Franklin: people either love him or they hate him. It is clear that the author has a high regard for Franklin, not only from the fact that he writes an entire biography about the man, but also because he is up front about the many opinions of Franklin. He seems to prefer the backwoods sage, though others find Franklin less than profound and even clownish at times. The author makes a point that Franklin is a complex man with many layers, like an onion. As the country's first public relations guru, when looking back it is sometimes difficult to tease apart the public image from the private man. The author respects both, explaining and defending Franklin's political and private life, though he is the first to admit when events do not add up. The author does not think it is fair that Franklin's works have been excluded from the canon of philosophy because of their simplicity. He makes the point that while Franklin's ideas may not be the most profound, they are exactly what Franklin always meant them to be: useful. Franklin's life is a testament to his beliefs that being useful and serving one's fellow man is the highest calling one can take.

Tone

The tone of the novel is not combative though the author does seek to prove a point in certain sections. It is a clear presentation of the life of Benjamin Franklin; the author undertakes very little conjecture and generally sticks to the citable facts. His specific opinions about the man are subtly placed so the reader does not feel as if they are reading a sermon. His strategic use of quotations belies a respect for his subject, as he prefers to make his points with Franklin's own words. The author also examines Franklin through the words of others, using the vitriolic John Adams and the flirtatious Caty Ray to give insight to the character of Franklin. Overall the work is sweeping, spanning the entirety of Franklin's life including some before and after explanation. Above all, the author's clarity stands out in the work. He does not delve into the inner workings of Franklin himself, preferring to allow other historical figures or historical situations to do it for him. His presentation is factual, but still shows a new side of the man shrouded in anonymity, despite his worldwide fame.

Structure

The biography is very long and takes the reader chronologically through Benjamin Franklin's life, from his beginnings as a printer's apprentice to his final days as political and philosophical sage. The work is divided into eighteen chapters that are in turn divided into titled sections. Each chapter begins stating the length of chronological time frame contained within the chapter and an overall summary of what the chapter is about. For example, "Politician: Philadelphia, 1749-1756 (p. 146). Within each chapter there are subsections that are not numbered, but titled based on the information they contain. The author makes frequent use of quotations, both historical and contemporary. There is an extensive index, historical character reference, chronology, currency conversion, source list, and note section in the back of the book. The notes section is numbered and divided by chapter, with the corresponding number found in the actual chapters of the book. After the main focus of the work ends with Benjamin Franklin's death, the author provides an Epilogue explaining the events of the main characters' lives after he dies. There is also a section entitled Conclusions where the author debunks modern criticisms of Franklin, which the reader gets the feeling he has been waiting to do. This section provides some modern perspective on the subject of the work by providing the opinions of intellectuals since his time.

Quotes

"For as people say when they are angry: "If he strikes me, I'll strike him again'; I sometimes think it might be right to say: "If he flatters me, I'll flatter him again," (p. 271). Franklin describing how to handle his nemesis, Lord Hillsborough, in 1772.

"Stoop, young man, stoop—as you go through this world—and you'll miss many hard thumps," (p. 41). Cotton Mather to Franklin, reminding him about humility.

"[Franklin] cared more about public behavior than inner piety, and he was more interested in building the City of Man than the City of God," (p. 102). The author explaining Franklin's early interests.

"Social mobility was not very common in the eighteenth century. But Franklin proudly made it his mission—indeed, helped it become part of America's mission—that a tradesman could rise in the world and stand before kings," (p. 106). The author on Franklin's contributions to the American character.

"Tyranny is so generally established in the rest of the world that the prospect of an asylum in America for those who love liberty gives general joy, and our cause is esteemed the cause of all mankind," (p. 339). Franklin from France, explaining the international feeling toward America in a letter to the Committee of Secret Correspondence.

"In colonial America it was sinful to look idle, and in France it was vulgar to look busy," (p. 353). A note from Claude-Anne Lopez, used to explain Franklin's behavior during his time in Paris.

"You combine the kindest heart with the soundest moral teaching, a lively imagination, and that droll roguishness which show that the wisest of men allows his wisdom to be perpetually broken against the rocks of femininity," (p. 362). Madame Brillon describing Franklin's charm and appeal to women.

"No one can replace him, Sir, I am only his successor," (p. 429) Thomas Jefferson responding to rumors that he was to take Franklin's place.

"I have not yet begun to fight!" John Paul Jones aboard the ship Bonhomme Richard, when asked to surrender to the British ship Serapis.

"He means well for his country, is always an honest man, often a wise one, but sometimes and in some things, absolutely out of his senses," (p. 411). Franklin, about Adams, while working on the peace negotiations in France.

"People who live long, who will drink the cup of life to the very bottom, must expect to meet with some of the usual dregs," (p. 440). Franklin describing his health to a friend in a letter.

"The longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probably that an empire can rise without his aid?" (p. 451). Franklin, attempting to cool tempers at the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

"Eripuit coelo fulmen sceptrumque tyrannis, he snatched the lightening from the sky and the scepter from tyrants," (p. 492). Turgot on Franklin.

"If I die, I have a child to close my eyes," (p. 324). Franklin on why he took both Benny and Temple with him to Paris.

"My eyes were dimmed with the suffusion of two small drops of joy," (p. 51). Franklin's first view of the American shore upon his return from the first trip to London.

"One reason the Silence Dogood essays are so historically notable is that they were among the first example of what would become a quintessential American genre of humor: the wry, homespun mix of folksy tales and pointed observations that was perfected by such Franklin descendants as Mark Twain and Will Rogers," (p. 29). The author on the importance of Franklin's first character, Silence Dogood.

"The simplicity of Franklin's creed meant that it was sneered at by sophisticates and disqualified from inclusion in the canon of profound philosophy," (p. 94). The author on why Franklin is considered a great inventor but not a great philosopher.

"If then your father had no right to grant the privileges he pretended to grant, and published all over Europe as granted, those who came to settle in the province...were deceived, cheated, and betrayed," (p. 185). Franklin to Thomas Penn on the Penn's royal Proprietorship.

"There were only two alternatives: 'that Parliament has a power to make all laws for us, or that is has the power to make no laws for us," (p. 245). Franklin's realization in London while trying to make the distinction between internal and external taxation.

"From the age of 21, when he first gathered his Junto, he held true to a fundamental ideal with unwavering and at times heroic fortitude: a faith in the wisdom of the common citizen that was manifest in an appreciate for democracy and an opposition to all forms of tyranny," (p. 493). The author on Franklin's character.

Topics for Discussion

According to the author, why do Franklin's theories go out of vogue? What is the difference between realism and romanticism? Which do you espouse?

Deborah is the first girl Franklin sees when he gets off the boat in Philadelphia. Why do you think he forsakes her in London? Is their situation similar to a situation you have encountered before? Why or why not? How does Franklin's eventual "marriage" to Deborah play into his plan for a personal moral code?

Franklin sustains many long lasting flirtations in his life. Do you think any of these flirtatious relationships are ever consummated? Why or why not? Would Franklin's moral code have permitted him to make good on his flirtations? How does Deborah factor into the arrangement?

Discuss the irony of the death of Franky, Franklin's first son. Be sure to also discuss the tradition of illegitimate children in the Franklin family.

Why is Franklin such an adept politician? What personal traits does he possess that make him good at negotiations? Discuss his time both in England and in France.

What kinds of personal relationships does Franklin form throughout his lifetime? Is there a pattern that emerges? Who is Franklin most able to befriend easily?

What are Franklin's contributions to the American character? To the American dream? Is there anything attributed to Franklin that surprises you? Discuss.

Discuss Franklin's invention of the lightening rod. What does it mean for villages? How is lightening regarded prior to his discoveries?

Franklin is a card-carrying member of the Age of Enlightenment. Why? What details about his discoveries and way of thinking qualify him?