

The Amazing
Mr. Franklin

or The Boy Who Read Everything



Ruth Ashby

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To Ernie

—R.A.



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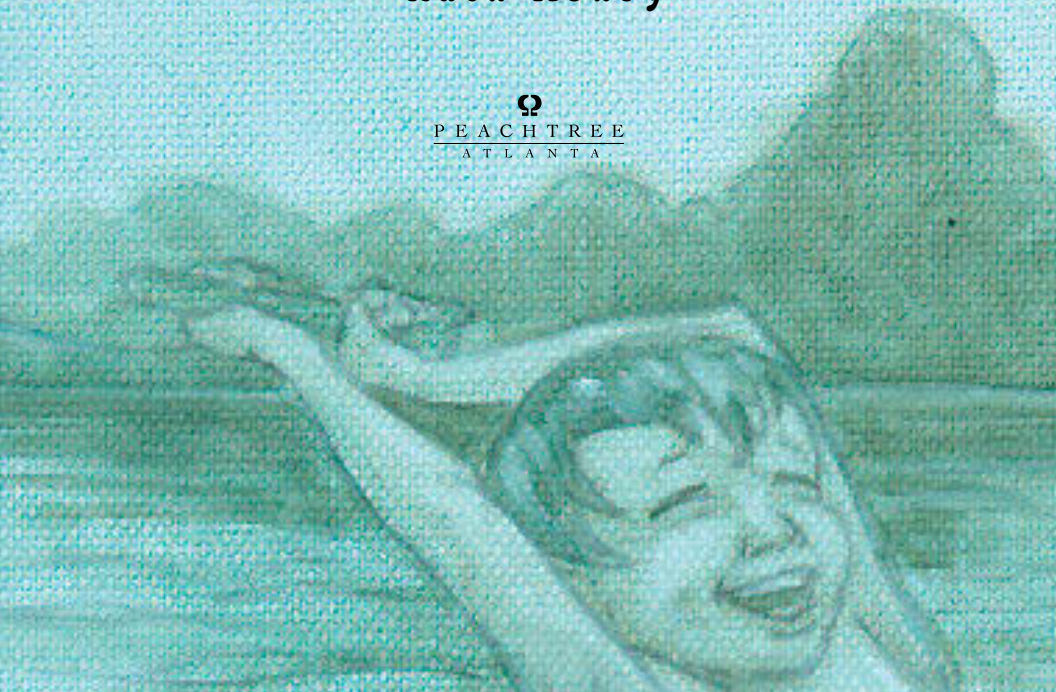
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Benjamin Franklin

1749
Proposes future
University of Pennsylvania

1737
Becomes postmaster of Philadelphia

1732
Prints first edition of POOR RICHARD'S ALMANACK

1731
Forms the Library Company of Philadelphia with friends

1730
Marries Deborah Read

1729
Publishes first edition of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*

1728
Sets up his own printing shop

1723
Runs away to Philadelphia

1718
Becomes printer's apprentice
to his older brother James

1716
Goes to work in his father's
soap and candlemaking shop

1706
Born in Boston

1700

1710

1720

1730

1740

If you would not be forgotten, as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write things

1752

Performs famous kite and
key experiment

1757

Sent to London to discuss colonial
disputes with Parliament

1775

The Revolutionary War begins

1776

Advises Thomas Jefferson on writing the
Declaration of Independence
Sets sail for France

1778

Persuades France to recognize the United States
as a new nation and sign a Treaty of Alliance

1781

Helps negotiate peace as
Revolutionary War ends

1785-87

Returns home from France
Serves three terms as
president of Pennsylvania

1790

Dies on
April 17

1750

1760

1770

1780

1790

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LIBRARY COMPANY OF PHILADELPHIA

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Chapter One

BOSTON BOY

Seventeen-year-old Ben Franklin was going to run away. He was tired of being an apprentice.

He didn't want to work for his older brother, James, anymore. It was time for him to strike out on his own and show the world what he could do.

It was a big decision. He would have to leave his family and friends—everybody and everything he knew—behind.

Ben had grown up in Boston, the son of a candle maker. His father Josiah had seventeen children, and Ben was the youngest boy. From the beginning, Josiah knew this son was special. Ben was bright and eager to learn. And he couldn't stay away from books. "I do not remember when I could not read," Ben wrote later.

Boston was just the right place for a curious boy. The bustling town on the sea had most of the books in

the North American British colonies. It had the most people, too—12,000 in 1706, the year Ben was born. Boston had been founded in the 1630s by a group of strict Protestants, called Puritans. Puritans wanted everyone to be able to read the Bible. Every village in the new Massachusetts Bay Colony had its own schoolhouse. As a result, nearly all the people in Boston could read, unlike most people in European cities at the time.

There were no public libraries, though. Anyone who wanted a book had to own it himself—or borrow it from someone else. Wealthy individuals had their own private libraries in religion, science, and history. Even Ben's father had a small home library.

There were no books written just for children, either. The first book Ben read was the Bible, when he was five. His next favorite was *The Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan. It was a symbolic story about a man named Christian who had lots of adventures as he struggled to become a good person. Ben liked the story because it was exciting. It also showed that people could improve themselves through their own efforts. That's what he wanted to do!

Even when he was young, Ben showed a flair for independent thinking. Once he was flying a kite near a local pond when he decided to take a swim. Grasping

BOSTON BOY

the string with both hands, he splashed into the water and lay on his back. The kite puffed out with the wind and pulled Ben across the pond. He was sailing!

Clearly, this inventive boy had special gifts. How should he put them to use?

Perhaps he could become a minister. In the early 1700s, clergymen were well-respected leaders of the community. When Ben was eight, his father sent him to Boston Latin School to study Greek and Latin. Ben was an excellent student. He shot straight up to the top of the class. But then Josiah pulled him out of school. Becoming a minister took many years and the training was very expensive. Ben would have to learn a trade, like most young boys his age.

At first Ben worked in the candle shop with his father. Candle making was hard work. Ben learned to boil beef and mutton fat to make tallow. He poured the tallow into molds and cut wicks for the candles. He ran errands, wrapped packages, and attended the shop. He was bored to death.

I'll run away to sea, Ben threatened. Josiah shuddered. That's exactly what Ben's eldest brother had done—and he had found a watery grave.

Josiah would do anything to keep Ben safe and on dry land. He took him around Boston to see all the

craftsmen at their jobs: joiners, bricklayers, carpenters, shipwrights. Ben loved watching the men work with their hands. But none of these crafts seemed right for him. He would much rather read.

Ben had already run through his father's small collection of books. He had to buy his own. "All the little money that came into my hands, was ever laid out in books," Ben once said. He read history and biography and religion, books about famous battles and great men. But there were never enough books. How could there be, when there was so much to learn?

By the time he was a teenager, Ben discovered a smart way to save money for books. He could become a vegetarian! Beef and pork cost a lot more than potatoes and bread. So Ben stopped eating meat—and spent all the money he saved on books.

Finally Josiah hit upon a solution. Ben could become a printer! Printers had to be able to write and edit as well as set type and run off the printed sheets. It might be just the right job for a boy who loved words.

Luckily, Ben had a half-brother, James, who was opening a print shop in Boston. Josiah asked James if he would like an apprentice. James said he would. Then Josiah asked Ben if he would like to become that apprentice.

Yes!

Ben was so thankful to find a trade he might enjoy that he signed legal papers of indenture. The document said that James would teach Ben to become a printer. In return, Ben promised to work for James until he was twenty-one. That seemed a lifetime away to Ben. He was only twelve.

Ben knew right away that he'd made the right decision. Like candle making, printing was difficult and time-consuming work. But it was also fascinating. Not only did he get to set the type for books, newspapers, and pamphlets, he got to read all the articles, too!

As apprentice to a printer, Ben also met lots of other apprentices. Occasionally a bookseller's apprentice would smuggle him a book. Ben would read all night by candlelight and sneak the book back the next morning, before anyone discovered it was missing.

I bet *I* could be a writer, Ben told himself. He decided to practice.

First he tried his hand at poetry. But his father disapproved. Poets are generally beggars, Josiah said sharply.

Ben gave up on poetry. He found famous essays to imitate instead. He wrote them over again, using different words. He turned the ideas into rhyme, then

back again to prose. Then he compared his version to the original essay.

It took a lot of effort. Ben was a perfectionist—he wanted to be a really *great* writer. “I was extremely ambitious,” he admitted later.

Soon he had a chance to show off his new skills. Brother James decided to start a newspaper, one of the first in the colonies. He wanted it to be lively, full of Boston politics and gossip. James and his friends used pretend names like “Harry Meanwell” and “Homespun Jack” to write articles and editorials.

One morning James was delighted to discover a letter slipped under the print shop door. It was from a Mrs. Silence Dogood. Mrs. Dogood was a talkative widow with lots of strong opinions. She made fun of hoop skirts, bad poetry, and local politicians. Readers loved her, so Mrs. Dogood kept writing. All of Boston tried to guess her true identity.

Was Mrs. Dogood really a forty-year-old widow? No, she was a sixteen-year-old boy—Ben Franklin!

Excited and proud, Ben told his brother his secret. He expected praise. But James was annoyed. As far as he was concerned, Ben was getting a swelled head. The boy was only an apprentice, after all. How dare he trick his master?

BOSTON BOY

The two brothers began to quarrel. James would order Ben to do something, and Ben would refuse. Often he was rude and saucy. Then, when James got really furious, he would beat him. That made Ben resent his brother even more.

Matters went from bad to worse. Then, one day, a crisis erupted. James was thrown into prison! His newspaper had printed an unfavorable story about the Massachusetts governor, who decided James deserved a lesson. While his brother was in jail, Ben took over the newspaper. He edited, printed, and published a whole issue by himself. At seventeen, he was the youngest editor in the colonies.

James was released, but soon he angered the governor again. This time, he was forbidden to publish the paper at all. He made a secret deal with Ben. Ben could run the paper—in public. In private, Ben would still be James's apprentice.

This wasn't going to work out. Ben didn't want to be under his brother's thumb for another five years. He wanted his freedom immediately. But he couldn't stay in Boston, where everyone knew him.

He would have to run away!

Where could he go? Ben wondered. Maybe New York. It was a growing city, with plenty of opportunities

for a hardworking, ambitious boy. But Ben was penniless. Where would he find the money to pay for the journey?

There was only one answer. He would have to sell his most treasured possessions—his books!