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General

Poor Richard's Lament: A Most Timely Tale
Tom Fitzgerald
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Benjamin Franklin, accomplished scientist, printer, inventor, statesman, and philosopher, and one of the most formidable (and fascinating) of the founding fathers, arguably set the course for American capitalism. In the wake of the current financial meltdown, the full effects of which we've yet to see, one can't help but wonder when our society became so driven by greed or how the burden of wealth divorced itself from social responsibility. In *Poor Richard's Lament: A Most Timely Tale,* Tom Fitzgerald offers a picaresque adventure that calls on the reader to decide if Franklinian civic responsibility is quixotic fantasy or imperiled wisdom.

Stuck in purgatory for refusing to adequately atone for his "errata," Benjamin Franklin is finally brought to celestial trial. His accusers—namely President John Adams, Reverend William Smith (the first provost at the University of Pennsylvania), and Solicitor-General Alexander Wedderburn—demonstrate that Benjamin Franklin, although doing much to advance American society, was cruel to those closest to him. After a lengthy trial that is fascinating not in the least for its erudition and wit, Franklin awakes to find himself in contemporary Boston, armed with only a nail, a whistle, and an ATM card.

The modern world offers Franklin situations both hilarious (the absurdity of urban transit) and heartbreaking (gang violence), and while the trial sections serve to remind the reader of the accomplishments of the historical Franklin (while accenting his more personal inadequacies), his meanderings between Boston, Philadelphia, and New York flesh out the virtues of Benjamin Franklin the man (while highlighting the contemporary consequences of his historical failures). Throughout his travels, Franklin centers a wheel connecting people as diverse as the president, a drug addict, a homeless man, a teen brave enough to testify against gangbangers, an artist, and intake counselor.

Fitzgerald writes in an eighteenth-century diction that is somehow amiable to the twenty-first-century ear—no small feat, indeed. But while the celestial trial is hilarious (and cleverly

argued), it’s disproportionately long: Franklin doesn’t fully come alive until he’s more than a passive defendant, until Fitzgerald—who does such a wonderful job of it—sets him loose in contemporary America. Nevertheless, this is a necessary read, not just for Franklinophiles or history buffs, but for anyone concerned that American capitalism might have veered off course somewhere along
the way.

Devon Shepherd