MONEY & INVESTING

Poor Richard's Almanack

by Benjamin Franklin

Twenty-five years of calendars, weather, jokes - and the sharpest one-line life advice in American English.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.**

Poor Richard, 1735. A secret told is a secret spent - the only version you fully control is the one you never say out loud.

02 **Fish and visitors smell in three days.**

From the 1736 Almanack. Hospitality has a shelf life: visit briefly, leave warmly, and never let your welcome wear out.

03 **Well done is better than well said.**

Poor Richard, 1737. Talk is cheap evidence; finished work is proof. Let results do the introducing.

04 **He that lies down with dogs shall rise up with fleas.**

From the very first Almanack, 1733. Company is contagious - you catch the habits, standards, and troubles of whoever you spend your time around.

05 **Eat to live, and not live to eat.**

Poor Richard, 1733. Food is fuel, not the main event - when appetite runs the schedule, the bill arrives as health, money, and energy.

06 **Hide not your talents, they for use were made: what's a sun-dial in the shade?**

A couplet from the 1750 Almanack. An unused ability helps nobody, including you - skill only pays when it is put where the light hits it.

07 **Haste makes waste.**

Poor Richard, 1753. Rushing skips the checking and doubles the fixing - the slow, right way is usually the fastest way home.

08 **Sell not virtue to purchase wealth, nor liberty to purchase power.**

From the 1738 Almanack. Some trades lose at any price: what you gain can be spent, but what you traded away was you.

09 **Better to slip with the foot than with the tongue.**

Poor Richard, 1734. A fall bruises for a week; a careless sentence can follow you, and its target, for years. Pause before you speak.

10 **A true friend is the best possession.**

Poor Richard, 1744. After decades of money maxims, the Almanack still ranks one asset above cash: a person who actually shows up.

11 **Genius without education is like silver in the mine.**

From the 1749 Almanack. Raw talent is only ore - it turns valuable when dug up, refined, and worked. Learning is the mining.

12 **Love your enemies, for they tell you your faults.**

Poor Richard, 1756. Friends flatter; critics audit you for free. The person pointing at your blind spot is handing you information money cannot buy.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

This is not one book but a twenty-five-year run: the yearly almanack Franklin issued from late 1732, for the year 1733, through 1758. He wrote it as 'Richard Saunders' - Poor Richard, a penniless astrologer and philomath whose wife Bridget had nagged him into publishing to pay the bills. Each issue packed in the calendar, weather predictions, moon phases and tides, astronomy, poems, jokes, and recipes - and, tucked into the blank spaces between calendar days, one-line proverbs about how to live. Print runs reached about 10,000 copies a year, an enormous figure for the colonies, and in many homes it was the only secular book besides the Bible.

The character was a performance with a purpose. Franklin borrowed the name from an earlier English almanac-maker and modeled Poor Richard partly on Jonathan Swift's hoax astrologer Isaac Bickerstaff. The early issues ran a famous running gag: Poor Richard solemnly predicted the death of rival almanac-maker Titan Leeds on October 17, 1733, then insisted for years afterward that Leeds had indeed died and the man protesting was an impostor. It sold almanacks. But Franklin was candid about the real aim: in his Autobiography he says he treated the Almanack as a vehicle for conveying instruction among common people who bought few other books - entertainment as the delivery system for improvement.

He was also candid about authorship. By his own estimate he invented perhaps one proverb in ten; the rest he gathered from older collections - especially Thomas Fuller's Gnomologia (1732) - and sharpened until they sounded inevitable. A man in a passion 'rides a horse that runs away with him' in Fuller; in Poor Richard he 'rides a mad horse.' And unlike The Way to Wealth, which is one speech about money, the Almanack ranges over the whole of a life across its 25 years: secrets, guests, loose tongues, bad company, food, hidden talent, patience, integrity, friendship, learning, and even your enemies.

For the final issue, dated 1758, Franklin gathered a quarter-century of maxims into the preface - Father Abraham's speech, later famous on its own as The Way to Wealth. The Almanack made Franklin's fortune and his name, and it never really ended: 'well done is better than well said,' 'haste makes waste,' and 'fish and visitors smell in three days' are still quoted daily by people who have never heard of Richard Saunders. Max Weber even used its maxims as the purest expression of the spirit of capitalism. Not bad for a five-penny pamphlet.

DO THIS WEEK

This week, run three of Poor Richard's rules at once: keep every secret you are told, word for word; finish one thing you have only been talking about; and leave one visit, call, or gathering while it is still good. Notice which rule is hardest to keep - that is the one that has been costing you the most.

By Benjamin Franklin, writing as Richard Saunders; published annually in Philadelphia, 1732/33-1758. Read a year's sayings at a sitting - three centuries old, and still the sharpest small book in America.