

Ben and Me
by
Robert Lawson**Book Information**

Robert Lawson, Ben and Me
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Amos the mouse observes and records the life of his great friend, Benjamin Franklin.

Award: ABA Children's Book Council

Topics: Animals, Mice; Countries/Regions, United States; Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 3-5

Main Characters

Amos the principal character of the story; the mouse that aids Ben Franklin in his inventions and decision making

Ben Franklin an American statesman and inventor

Madame Brillon a French lady who invites Ben to dinner several times a week while he is in France; she is the patroness of Sophia

Madame Helvetius a French aristocrat who has many cats

Red Thomas Jefferson's mouse, that preaches revolution to the mouse population and helps Amos free Sophia's children

Sophia a beautiful white mouse that Amos befriends; her children are held captive by the white mice of the King of France's Court

Thomas Jefferson an American statesman and co-author of the Declaration of Independence

Vocabulary

contrive to invent or design

disported amused oneself in a playful manner

grampus a member of the dolphin or whale family

maxim a general truth or rule of conduct

mongrel a cross of various breeds

patron a sponsor who supports or gives protection

succor assistance or relief in times of distress

Synopsis

The eldest of twenty-six children from a poor mouse family, Amos leaves home one day to make his way in the world. He finds himself in the spartan home of the famous Benjamin Franklin, where he finds warmth in a fur cap perched on Ben's head. When Amos awakens the next morning in a cold room, he suggests to Ben to place the source of heat for the room out in the open. Ben rushes off to gather metal scraps and other spare materials. He soon has assembled a crude looking stove, which, when lit, warms the room immediately -- the Franklin Stove. Ben and Amos soon sign an Agreement -- Ben promises to supply Amos's poor family with food, and Amos agrees to give Ben advice and aid until death.

Amos accompanies Ben everywhere, living inside the fur cap that Ben has fixed up to become Amos's home. Amos learns of Ben's affection and dependence on him when Ben chases a dog that ran off with the fur cap while Ben was swimming. Ben does not know that Amos had earlier climbed out of the cap and was watching the amusing chase from a tree near the shore.

Many of Amos and Ben's afternoons are spent together in Ben's print shop. Bored one day, Amos makes some changes in *Poor Richard's Almanack* that arouse the anger of local shipmasters. Ben calms them by claiming it is a hoax perpetrated by his rivals, and Amos makes himself scarce for a few days.

Ben becomes obsessed with electricity, beginning with simple experiments and advancing to complicated apparatuses. When he leaves Amos up on a platform on a kite during a severe thunderstorm, Amos has had enough. He leaves Ben's service and returns to his family. Only through pleading and a promise to stop experimenting does Ben persuade Amos to return. The return is short-lived, however, because Ben has lightning rods placed on the ship he plans to sail to England when the country requests he act as a negotiator.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

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Amos notices the rods and lets Ben sail alone.

When Ben returns from England, Ben and Amos resume their former relationship. Ben is involved in many committees involving the War of the Revolution. Amos meets Red, Thomas Jefferson's mouse aide, at one such meeting. Red is a radical and gifted with words. Red preaches revolution to the mice and draws up a document, which Amos shows to Ben one night. The words are so inspiring to Ben that he uses them as the basis of the Declaration of Independence.

When the war becomes desperate for the American soldiers, General Washington sends Ben to France to appeal for foreign aid. Amos accompanies him. The aristocratic women fawn over Ben and invite him to many dinners. At one of the dinners Ben and Amos attend, Amos meets Sophia, an aristocratic mouse whose husband is in exile in America and whose children are held captive under the Queen's throne at the Court at Versailles. Amos promises Sophia freedom for her children. The opportunity to fulfill his promise comes when Ben is invited to a party at the palace of the King and Queen. As Ben fusses with the details of preparations for his appearance, Amos devises a plan of attack along with Red, who has just arrived from America with Thomas Jefferson. They organize all of the mice and the rats. On the day of the ball when Ben bows before the King, Amos gives the attack signal, and mice swarm from every direction. The people of the court are aghast and frightened. The white mice of the court wage a fierce defense, but Sophia's children are eventually freed. Even though Ben is now shunned by French society, he soon returns home to America to a hero's welcome.

Both Amos and Ben are getting old. Amos throws an eighty-first birthday party for Ben, with many mice in attendance. He presents Ben a new hat, and the old fur cap is retired. Ben knows he can always do it again if he needs Amos.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What characteristics of real mice does Amos reflect in the events of the story?

The search for food and warmth is what initially brings Amos to Ben's home, just as real mice search for food and warmth in homes especially when winter is approaching. Because mice are often hard to find, since they are quick and agile, Amos is able to get information about others while avoiding detection. The problems with the printing press and electricity that Amos causes parallels the destructiveness that mice can cause in a home, whether it is through opening packages of food, destroying clothing, or gnawing an opening through a wall. Amos's intelligence reflects the trainability of mice: they are often used in science and psychology experiments because of their intelligence and ability to learn.

Literary Analysis

What insights into Benjamin Franklin's character does the reader gain in this book that may not be touched upon in other standard biographies of Benjamin Franklin's life?

The author places a humorous twist on some of Benjamin Franklin's foibles. He shows him as somewhat eccentric: walking the streets of town bumping into things because he is lost in thought; being obsessed with his science as in the case of electricity; and being somewhat vain and flighty as he becomes self-absorbed with all the attention he receives from the ladies in France. Another humorous aspect of Franklin's character is his faithfulness in providing for Amos's family. He is also pictured as loyal when he chases the dog that grabbed the hat at the swimming hole.

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Inferential Comprehension

How is Amos's freeing of Sophia's children from captivity similar to the American Revolution?

Amos and Red act as counterparts to Franklin and Jefferson. Red has an uncanny ability with words and can rally mice to a cause, just as Jefferson did with people. Amos knows that he cannot free the children alone, just as Americans needed assistance from other countries to help them in their battle against England. Americans sought help from those who may have held bad feelings against England, just as Amos sought the help of Russian, Swedish, and Italian mice. Both fights were about freedom and were not easily won.

Constructing Meaning

In a larger sense, this witty story illustrates the idea that behind everyone who is successful, there are those who contribute to their success but go unrecognized. If you were to become famous someday, who would you have to thank for your success? Why?

Answers will vary. Many students will mention one or both of their parents. Other possibilities would include a sibling, favorite teacher or coach, or a hero or heroine that served as an inspiration. The students should state how that individual or individuals contributed to who they are.

Teachable Skills

Responding to Literature Obtain a copy of *Poor Richard's Almanack* and read the maxims it contains. Have a classroom discussion about their relevance today. Students could choose their favorite maxim and, using cross-stitch, embroidery, or calligraphy, make it suitable for framing and hanging. Hang these wise sayings around the classroom to inspire the students.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Students should research the things Ben Franklin was credited with inventing. Have them choose one of these inventions and describe or illustrate it. They could then show how the invention has changed and evolved over the years and what it looks like

at the present time.

Comparing and Contrasting Research Ben Franklin's life to determine what parallels exist between the incidents in the book and the incidents in Franklin's life. For instance, was there a time when the French court suddenly snubbed Ben, or that a major error was found in his almanac? Review *Ben and Me* and find incidents that have their basis in fact. Present your findings on a chart using the headings fact and fiction.

Recognizing Details Benjamin Franklin, according to Amos, wore his fur cap everywhere so that Amos could always be with him. Have the students draw or construct what they envision as the cross-sectional view of the inside of the hat, showing the various peepholes and rooms for food storage and sleeping. The illustrations and models could be displayed in the classroom.