**Name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**RDG 096 Midterm**

**Midterm on Colonial Almanacs**

Books were scarce and expensive in colonial America, and many families owned only one, the Bible. But starting very early in the life of the English colonies, men and women had another important source of information: almanacs, the most popular nonreligious literature in early America.

Almanacs first appeared in America in 1638 or 1639 when printers in Cambridge, Massachusetts, began publishing the *Philomath Almanac*, which combined an elaborate calendar of religious holidays with information about astronomy, astrology, and, as time went on, other popular interests. In the 1680s, the *Farmer’s Almanac* began to rival the *Philomath*. It was a heavily illustrated publication that set a pattern for the future by adding medical advice, practical wisdom, navigational information, and humor. It also indulged in the European custom of prognostication; through a combination of superstition, popular folklore, and astronomical (and astrological) devices, it predicted weather patterns throughout the year, crop yields, and many other things. Almanac predictions were notoriously unreliable; but in the absence of any better alternatives, many people relied on them nevertheless.

By 1700, there were dozens, perhaps hundreds, of almanacs circulating throughout the colonies and even in the sparsely settled lands to the west and north. The most popular almanacs sold tens of thousands of copies every year. Most families had at least one, and many had several. America was a multilingual society, and although most almanacs were in English, some appeared in French, Dutch, Hebrew, Norwegian, Spanish, German, and various Indian languages. For five years just after the Revolution, Benjamin Banneker of Maryland was the only African-American almanac writer, publishing a book that occasionally included harsh commentary on slavery and the slave trade.

The best known almanac in the colonies in the years before the American Revolution was published by Benjamin Franklin, a printer’s son who ran away from an apprenticeship in his older brother’s print shop in Rhode Island and eventually settled in Philadelphia. There from 1732 to 1758, he published *Poor Richard’s Almanack* under the pseudonym Richard Saunders. “I endeavor’d to make it both entertaining and useful,” Franklin later wrote in his autobiography. “And observing that it was generally read, . . . I consider’d it as a proper vehicle for conveying instruction among the common people, who bought scarcely any other books.” In issue after issue, Franklin accompanied his calendars, astronomical information, and other standard almanac fare with “proverbial sentences, chiefly such as inculcated industry and frugality.” One of his favorite proverbs, which he said illustrated how difficult it was for a poor man always to act honestly, stated: “It is hard for an empty sack to stand upright.” Poor Richard’s many sayings became among the most familiar passages in America. Franklin was among many writers who used the almanac to promote the new scientific discoveries of his time and to try to discredit what he considered the backward superstitions that stood in the way of knowledge. He was particularly contemptuous of astrology.

Almanacs were virtually the only widely read publications in America that contained popular humor, and they are one of the best sources today for understanding what early Americans considered funny. Not unlike later generations, they delighted in humor that ridiculed the high and mighty (aristocrats, lawyers, clergymen, politicians), that made fun of relationships between men and women, and that expressed stereotypes about racial and ethnic groups. In the 1760s and 1770s, almanac humor was often used to disguise political ideas, in the way it ridiculed British officials and American Tories. During the war itself, humorous anecdotes about military officers and political leaders reflected the uneasy views of Americans about the long and difficult struggle.

During and after the Revolution, much almanac humor consisted of admiring anecdotes about the man who was by then perhaps the most famous and beloved man in America—Poor Richard himself, Benjamin Franklin. Much less reverential, and probably funnier to readers, was the often ribald ethnic and racial humor in many almanacs. In *Beer’s Almanac* of 1801, an Irishman boasted that he had owned a large estate in Ireland before leaving for America. Why, he was asked, had he left it to come to the United States? “Ah,” he replied, “It was indeed under a small encumbrance; for another man’s land lay right a top of it.”

Almanacs remained enormously popular throughout the nineteenth century, and some are still published today. But they had their greatest influence in the early years of European settlement when, for thousands of Americans, they were virtually the only source of printed information people had. “A good Almanac,” the printer Isaac Briggs wrote in 1798, in a preface to one of his own, “is like iron, far more valuable (although much less valued) than gold, if we estimate its value by its absolute usefulness to the common purposes of life.”

(*American History*, twelfth edition, Alan Brinkley, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007, p. 94-95)

**Multiple Choice**

Write the letter of the correct answer in the blank provided.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. The topic of this selection is

a. Benjamin Franklin

b. apprenticeships

c. colonial almanacs

d. the Revolutionary War

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. The author’s purpose in writing this selection is to

a. explain the history of almanacs in colonial America

b. entertain us with examples of Ben Franklin’s intelligence and wit

c. persuade us to read weather forecasts on a regular basis

d. inform us of the value of paying attention to astrology

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. The tone of the selection could best be described as

a. humorous

b. objective

c. ironic

d. sentimental

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. The statement “ A good almanac . . . is like iron . . . .” is an example of

a. metaphor

b. simile

c. personification

d. inference

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. Which of the following statements best expresses the main idea of the

selection?

a. Almanacs largely dispensed useless information.

b. Popular almanacs were an integral part of early colonial life.

c. Almanacs fueled the anti-slavery movement.

d. *Poor Richard’s Almanac* helped make Ben Franklin a rich and

influential man.

\_\_\_\_\_ 6. The author suggests all of the following about almanacs *except*

a. Almanacs often contained humorous stories.

b. Almanac predictions were generally considered to be very reliable.

c. Almanacs were very popular throughout the nineteenth century.

d. Most almanacs were in the English language.

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. *Prognostication* in paragraph 2 refers to

a. making a forecast

b. making a prediction

c. both a and b

d. none of the above

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. The information presented in paragraph 4 of the selection supports

which of the following statements

a. Almanacs presented information that was both useful and entertaining.

b. Proverbs were not well-received in *Poor Richard’s Almanac*.

c. Ben Franklin was not particularly interested in new scientific

discoveries.

d. Ben Franklin was a follower of astrology.

\_\_\_\_\_ 9. As used in paragraph 4, the word *vehicle* means

a. a conveyance moving on wheels

b. a medium of communication or expression

c. a play, screenplay or other work

d. a chemically inert substance

\_\_\_\_\_ 10. As described in paragraph 6, an *encumbrance* is likely to be all of the

following *except*

a. hindrance

b. blessing

c. burden

d. obstruction

**True or False**

Indicate whether each statement is true or false by writing T or F in the blank provided.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. A *pseudonym* is likely to be a fictitious name.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. If you are *multilingual*, you speak only one language.

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. Your *autobiography* is the history of your life written by you.

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. During the Revolutionary War, Benjamin Franklin was well-known.

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. Almanacs were unlikely to poke fun at the British.

\_\_\_\_\_ 6. Almanacs were careful to contain humor that was unlikely to be

offensive to any ethnic group.

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. In the United States, almanacs originated in New York.

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. Benjamin Franklin successfully completed an apprenticeship under his

older brother.

\_\_\_\_\_ 9. Two rival almanacs were the *Farmer’s* and the *Philomath*.

\_\_\_\_10. During colonial times, books were readily available.

**Vocabulary in Context**

Using the context clues below and in the reading selection, choose the best definition for the italicized word and write the appropriate answer letter in the blank.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. *sparsely* settled lands to the west (paragraph 3)

a. densely

b. thickly

c. lightly

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. *Contemptuous* of astrology

a. scornful

b. supportive

c. admiring

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. *ridiculed* British officials (paragraph 5)

a. derided

b. mocked

c. both a and b

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. *uneasy* views of Americans (paragraph 5)

a. comforting

b. uncertain

c. strong

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. *ribald* ethnic and racial humor (paragraph 6)

a. polite

b. vulgar

c. refined

**Synonyms and Antonyms**

*Directions*: If a synonym is given for the underlined word, write S on the line. If an antonym is given, write A on the line.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. scarce/plentiful

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. elaborate/simple

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. harsh/severe

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. promote/foster

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. discredit/disparage

\_\_\_\_\_ 6. reverential/adoring

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. frugality/wastefulness

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. backward/forward

\_\_\_\_\_ 9. entertaining/amusing

**Rhetorical Modes**

*Directions:* Identify which rhetorical mode is being used in the examples below. Write N for narrative, P for persuasive, D for descriptive and E for expository.

1.\_\_\_\_

What a day! I must write to you about it, because there is no one

else who didn't hate her mother, and even who doesn't hate her

children. Whether you are an Italian peasant or a Superwoman I cannot yet find out; but anyhow your mother was not the Enemy.

2.\_\_\_\_

Francis Scott Key was a Washington lawyer who witnessed the

bombardment of Fort McHenry by the British in September 1814. The fort withstood the attack, and the sight of the American flag still waving"in dawn's early light" inspired Key to write the four verses of "The Star-Spangled Banner." He set the words to the tune of an 18th-century English drinking song. Over a century later, on March 3, 1931, an act of Congress designated "The Star-Spangled Banner" as our national anthem. Ever since then, people have been complaining about both the words and the music of the anthem. Some are bothered that the first stanza ends in a question. Others are troubled by all the depressing references to war, such as "Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution." A lot of people don't even know what the lyrics are about. On top of that, the song is very difficult to sing. The low notes are too low, and the high notes are too high. For all these reasons, people have recently been talking about replacing "The Star-Spangled Banner" with a new national anthem. Many songs have been considered, but the best choice is "America the Beautiful.

3.\_\_\_\_

The embalmer, having allowed the appropriate interval to elapse,

returns to the attack, but now he brings into play the skills and

equipment of sculptor and cosmetician. Is a hand missing? Casting one in plaster of Paris is a simple matter. "For replacement purposes, only a cast of the back of the hand is necessary; this is within the ability of the average operator and is quite adequate." If a lip or two, a nose, or an ear should be missing, the embalmer has at hand a variety of restorative waxes with which to model replacements. Pores and skins texture are simulated by stippling with a little brush, and over this cosmetics are laid on. Head off? Decapitation cases are rather routinely handled Ragged edges are trimmed, and head joined to torso with a series of splints, wires, and sutures. It is a good idea to have a little something at the neck--a scarf or a high collar—when time for viewing comes. Swollen mouth? Cut out tissue as needed from inside the lips. If too much is removed, the surface contour can easily be restored by padding with cotton. Swollen necks and cheeks are reduced by removing tissue through vertical incisions made down each side of the cheek. "When the deceased is casketed. the pillow will hide the suture incisions . . . as an extra precaution against leakage, the suture may be painted with liquid sealer.

4.\_\_\_\_

The afternoon grew so glowering that in the sixth inning the arc

lights were turned on--always a wan sight in the daytime, like the

burning headlights of a funeral procession. Aided by the gloom, Fisher was slicing through the Sox rookies, and Williams did not come to bat in the seventh. He was second up in the eighth. This was almost certainly his last time to come to the plate in Fenway Park, and instead of merely cheering, as we had at his three previous appearances, we stood, all of us, and applauded. I had never before heard pure applause in a ballpark. No calling, no whistling, just an ocean of handclaps, minute after minute, burst after burst, crowding and running together in continuous succession like the pushes of surf at the edge of the sand. It was a somber and considered tumult. There was not a boo in it.

5.\_\_\_\_\_

"The barber was cutting our hair, and our eyes were closed--as

they are so likely to be. . . . Deep in a world of our own, he heard, from far away, a voice saying goodbye. It was a customer of the shop leaving. 'Goodbye,' he said to the barbers. 'Goodbye,' echoed the barbers. And without ever returning to consciousness, or opening our eyes, or thinking, we joined in. 'Goodbye,' we said

before we could catch ourselves. Then, all at once, the sadness of the occasion struck us, the awful dolor of bidding farewell to someone we had never seen. We have since wondered what he looked like, and whether it was really goodbye."

6.\_\_\_\_\_

When we pay our four or five bucks and seat ourselves at

tenth- row center in a theater showing a horror movie, we are daring the nightmare.

Why? Some of the reasons are simple and obvious. To show that we can, that we are not afraid, that we can ride this roller coaster. Which is not to say that a really good horror movie may not surprise a scream out of us at some point, the way we may scream when the roller coaster twists through a complete 360 or plows through a lake at the bottom of the drop. And horror movies, like roller coasters, have always been the special province of the young; by the time one turns 40 or 50, one’s appetite for double twists or 360-degree loops may be considerably depleted.

We also go to reestablish our feelings of essential normality; the

horror movie is innately conservative, even reactionary. Freda Jackson as the horrible melting woman in Die, Monster, Die! confirms for us that no matter how far we may be removed from the beauty of a Robert Redford or a Diana Ross, we are still light-years from true ugliness.

And we go to have fun.