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# *Alas, Babylon*

by

**Pat Frank**  
**1959**



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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The novel is set in the 1950s in Fort Repose, a small town on the Timucuan River in central Florida. As the novel opens, relations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union are extremely tense, and the two powers are on the brink of nuclear war. After the nuclear attack on the U.S., the people of Fort Repose simply.....

### CHARACTER LIST

#### Major Characters

**Randy Bragg** - Randy Bragg is the younger son of a prominent local family. His ancestor founded the town of Fort Repose in the early 1800s. Randy is a lawyer but does not practice law. Randy is responsible for pulling together his family and neighbors after "The Day" in order to survive the disasters that follow the nuclear attack. As the novel progresses, Randy grows from a playboy bachelor into a hardened leader.

**Helen Bragg** - Helen Bragg is Randy's sister-in-law, the wife of his brother Col. Mark Bragg. Before "The Day", Col. Bragg sends her and their children from their home in Omaha (home of the Strategic Air Command (SAC) base, Offutt Field) to the relative safety of Fort Repose. Helen is a strong-willed, practical, and independent woman accustomed to handling herself and her family during her husband's absences.

**Lib McGovern** - Elizabeth "Lib" McGovern is Randy's latest love interest. She is the daughter of a successful Cleveland businessman and has moved to Florida with her parents when they retired. Later, after.....

Additional major and minor characters are identified in the complete study guide.

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - The protagonist of a story is the main character who traditionally undergoes some sort of change. He or she must usually overcome some opposing force. The protagonist of this novel is Randy Bragg. His actions in the difficult days following the nuclear attack are responsible for the survival of the little community of neighbors linked by the artesian well system and, to a great extent, the survival of.....

**Antagonist** - The antagonist of a story is the character that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. Plots may have multiple antagonists that work together to oppose the main character. It would be easy to label the Soviets as the antagonists of the novel. It is, after all, the Soviets who launched the.....

**Climax** - The climax of a plot is the major turning point that allows the protagonist to resolve the conflict. One climax of this novel occurs early in the book, in chapter 5, with the nuclear attack on the U.S. by the Soviet Union. This, and the to-be-expected loss of water, electricity, gasoline, communications, and a .....

A **second climax** occurs near the end of the novel in chapter 11 when Randy and his newly formed protection force confront a gang of murderous highwaymen. Since "The Day", Randy has gradually built a functioning community despite the lack of the most basic goods and services. With the.....

**Outcome** - The outcome of both climaxes is essentially the same – the community survives. Rather worse for the wear, perhaps, but they survive. After the nuclear attack on the U.S., Florida is designated a Contaminated Zone. It is forbidden for people to enter a Contaminated Zone, and those leaving one must.....

### SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The novel *Alas, Babylon* mainly revolves around Randy Bragg and his neighborhood and, to a lesser extent, the people of nearby Fort Repose and its lower-class suburb, Pistolvile. Initially the novel revolves around Randy but, as the novel proceeds, other characters are added to create a tight-knit community struggling, first, to

survive, and, later, to rebuild after the devastation of a nuclear attack. Unlike so many other post-apocalyptic novels, *Alas, Babylon* is not the story of the survival of an individual, but of the group.

The novel is set in the 1950s in Fort Repose, Florida. Fort Repose is a typical quiet southern town, but the serenity is superficial. There are actually three communities: the prosperous whites of Fort Repose, the black community living on the outskirts of town, and the Minorcans and poor whites living in nearby Pistolville. This distinction sets the attitudes of each community toward the others – the whites and blacks look down on the “white trash” and untrustworthy minorities of Pistolville; the residents of Pistolville consider the whites of Fort Repose to be snobbish; and everyone looks down on the blacks. Their attitudes are typical of the segregated South of the 1950s. This segregation of each community helps to underline the high price society pays for discrimination and segregation, especially during a time when everyone’s help is needed simply to survive.

The novel opens with a general sense of unease over world events. The Soviets have been building their stockpiles of nuclear weapons and the U.S. is trying to catch up. This “weapons gap” puts the U.S. in a dangerously weak position and the Americans are afraid the Soviets will exploit this weakness before they can catch up.

Col. Mark Bragg, Randy’s brother, warns Mark in a telegram that war is imminent. His warning comes in the phrase, “Alas, Babylon” – a phrase from the Bible warning of the destruction of cities in .....

## THEMES

### Major Themes

**Survival and Isolation** - One of the major themes is survival when you are absolutely and permanently cut off from the outside world. "The Day"s when a small town can survive on its own are long past. Pat Frank causes his readers to consider what their life would be like if all “essential” services (electricity, clean water, communication, medical care, food, law enforcement, etc.) were suddenly and permanently eliminated. How does a society dependent on technology (and we are more dependent today on technology than.....

Additional themes are discussed in the complete study guide.

## MOOD

The mood of the novel starts off depressing but gradually rises to end on a hopeful note. The news of world events creates a feeling of nervousness and edginess in the people of Fort Repose, although there is nothing they can do about it. After Ensign Cobb launches his missiles and inadvertently destroys a .....

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Although *Alas, Babylon* (published in 1959) is frequently on high school and college reading lists, there is actually very little biographical information available on Pat Frank. “Pat Frank” was the pseudonym used by Harry Hart (1907-1964), an American writer, journalist, and government consultant, although he is primarily known for his novel *Alas, Babylon*. He began as a journalist, writing for several newspapers and government agencies. When he began his career as a novelist, he used his journalistic experience covering government and military bureaucracies in his writing. After the success of *Alas, Babylon*, he put his beliefs to.....

## LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

This is a novel of the Cold War. Readers born since the mid-1980s will see Russia as a relatively friendly nation, sometimes unpredictable, but an ally nonetheless.

Today’s younger readers do not remember the Cold War and the fear it often provoked. Americans no longer worry about nuclear war with an equally matched superpower supposedly intent on destroying the United

States. We no longer teach schoolchildren what to do in the event of a nuclear attack or show the then-famous "Duck and Cover" films. But, the world of Pat Frank, with a well-armed and belligerent Soviet Union, once existed, and the world came close to a scenario similar to *Alas, Babylon* on more than one occasion.

With the United States and western Europe focused on the Cold War and preparing for a real war with the Soviets and their allies, post-apocalyptic novels such as *Alas, Babylon* were common and..... popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Many were made into movies or inspired films ("The Day After", etc.). The .....

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

### CHAPTER 1

#### Summary

In this chapter, we are introduced to several of the major characters and the setting of Randy Bragg's neighborhood. Randy's ancestor, a U. S. Navy lieutenant, was assigned in the 1830s to establish control over this part of Florida to protect U.S. troop movements along the coast. From his log blockhouse, the town of Fort Repose would eventually develop.

Randy lives on his share of the proceeds of a trust his father established, and on his share of the proceeds from his family's orange groves. Their orchard and its income is not large, but it provides him with a comfortable income. The Bragg house is much larger than a bachelor needed, so most of it went unused. Not having need of a job, Randy is able to spend many of his mornings searching for the supposedly extinct Carolina parakeet – he thinks he has seen one, but it is actually Florence Wechek's escaped pet lovebird.

Randy receives a telegram from his brother, Mark, a colonel in the U.S. Air Force. Mark says he will be at a nearby military base and wants to talk to Randy. He indicates in his telegram that he is sending his wife and children to stay with Randy, and ends the telegram with "Alas, Babylon." This phrase comes from the Bible and was thundered from Preacher Henry's pulpit when the Bragg brothers were boys. They adopted the phrase as their private code meaning disaster or catastrophe, or just bad luck. Randy recalls meeting Mark the previous year, with Mark telling him about the rapidly deteriorating world situation and what it could mean for the U.S. In the event of imminent war, Mark would not be able to tell Randy directly, but would signal him with the phrase "Alas, Babylon."

Mark, being an intelligence officer in the military and attached to the Strategic Air Command (SAC), was in a position to know what was really occurring in U.S.-Soviet relations and developments in the Soviet military. Upon receiving the telegram, Randy understands its meaning – war is imminent – and he knows he must prepare for the arrival of Mark's family, as well as be ready to meet Mark on his stop-over

#### Notes

Fort Repose is no different from any other small southern town of the 1950s. It has its town gossips and busybodies, its well-to-do and its working poor, its playboy bachelors and its fussy spinsters. The people are basically uninterested in world events – they are more interested in the entertainment offered by the television and radio rather than in the news that will soon change their lives forever. Being a rural town with small farms and citrus groves nearby, it will be ideally situated to survive the coming war, but the people of Fort Repose do not yet know this.

Randy, a playboy bachelor with a trust fund, once had Rita Hernandez, a Minorcan resident of nearby Pistolville, as a love interest. The Minorcans are a people from the Balearic Islands, a group of islands in the Mediterranean Sea belonging to Spain. The Minorcans originally came to Florida as fishermen or crewmembers on board Spanish naval ships. The prejudiced attitudes of the 1950s are beginning to be seen in the novel, but Randy does not seem to be bound by them. He is indifferent to those who looked down their

noses at Rita, a woman whose reputation is questioned by the town busybodies. He once ran for local political office, running on a platform of equality. He was soundly beaten in the race and was labeled a “traitor to his race.” People’s attitudes toward his love interests, and the drubbing he took at the polls, caused him to thumb his nose at the shortsighted, mindless people who would mind his business.

Pat Frank gives the reader a look at US-Soviet relations in the 1950s. The “weapons gap” actually existed and was a source of great concern among many in the U.S. at the time. At the time in which the novel is set, the U.S. had not yet closed the weapons gap with the Soviets. Pat Frank is knowledgeable of these matters and vividly paints a world that very nearly came to be.

## CHAPTER 2

### Summary

This chapter sets the scene for the impending war. Randy Bragg leaves to meet his brother, Mark, at the nearby McCoy Air Force Base in Orlando. As he drives there, he listens to the news reports on the radio. The Middle East is abuzz with activities and Russia is rattling its sabers at the United States. Randy has heard it before but had not paid much attention to it. In the light of Mark’s “*Alas, Babylon*” warning, though, the news reports are ominous.

Florence Wechek and Alice Cooksey meet for their weekly lunch. Alice tells Florence about an incident she had with Kitty Offenhaus, the wife of a prominent local businessman. Kitty, a Daughter of the Confederacy, wanted some books removed from the library, books she considered subversive and anti-South. Alice refuses to remove the books. When Kitty threatens to bring up the issue with the county government (who controlled Alice’s budget), Alice retaliates by threatening to call the media to report on Kitty’s actions. Kitty, realizing she has lost the battle, leaves “in an eight-cylinder huff.” Kitty understands that the negative publicity would hurt her husband’s business interests.

Florence then tells Alice about Mark’s telegram. She thinks it is odd that the children would be coming to Fort Repose before school was out. And, what was that final comment, “*Alas, Babylon*,” about? Florence, who does not think much of the Bragg brothers, thinks both the brothers are a little odd. Alice, however, knows them both much better than Florence and realizes that something important is being communicated in that cryptic phrase. After lunch, she returns to the library and looks up the phrase in the Bible. The phrase, from the Revelation to St. John, refers to the destruction of the cities in the end-times. Her job as a librarian, and her inquisitive nature, has made her much more aware of world events; she suddenly realizes that nuclear war, and its inevitable consequences, is at hand.

Randy arrives at the base and is sent through to meet his brother. On his way to Base Operations, he notices the changes at the base: there are fewer planes on the runways; there are fewer men on base; civilians and dependents are gone; and there is a general feeling of tension in the air. Randy’s escort, Paul Hart, a squadron commander, tells him about the “interim dispersal” of the aircraft and the quiet evacuation of civilians and non-essential personnel from the base.

Mark arrives. The plane is on its way to SAC headquarters outside Omaha and is stopping at McCoy to refuel. In the short time Randy has with him, Mark tells Randy about the travel arrangements for his family. He tells Randy about events in the Mediterranean and that a defecting Soviet general revealed the Soviet war plan to the Americans. He gives Randy a check for \$5,000 (a huge sum of money in the 1950s) with instructions to cash it immediately and buy supplies.

### Notes

Pat Frank paints a very realistic image of Soviet responses during the Cold War to the fictional events in the Middle East. In the era before either the U.S. or the Soviet Union had the technology to launch intercontinental

missiles, regional events such as those depicted in the novel were critical. Russia's centuries-old dream of a warm-water port was a key component of Soviet military plans during the Cold War and it colored much of our military preparedness, including the selection of allies such as Turkey and Iran (before the fall of the Shah and the rise of the ayatollahs).

Alice's jousting with Kitty shows that the racist, segregationist, anti-Washington dreams of the Old South were still alive in the 1950s. However, attitudes were beginning to change. Alice, being well read and current on events of the time, was in the vanguard of this change. Kitty, as she is depicted in the novel, probably would not have accepted such a change, but she realizes that it is happening nonetheless. The consequences of a media scandal – the negative impact on her husband's businesses – shows us that the tide toward integration and social equality was beginning to turn.

The two authors to whom Kitty Offenhaus objected were well-known black writers of the times. Carl Rowan (1925-2000) is primarily remembered as a journalist and a civil rights activist in the 1960s. In the 1950s, he traveled to the South to report on the Supreme Court's decision requiring desegregation. Walter White (1893-1955) was one of the major writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

As in chapter 1, Pat Frank's knowledge of geopolitical events and the U.S. military's reaction to the events comes out. The events he describes were realistic and entirely plausible. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Soviet Union tried to influence elections in Greece and Italy to secure Communist victories at the polls. Had those efforts been successful, NATO would have been outflanked on its southern front, dealing the western alliance a crippling, if not fatal, blow.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Randy Bragg** - Randy Bragg is the protagonist and central character of the novel. As the novel progresses, he gradually changes from a playboy bachelor with a trust fund into a hardened leader. By the end of the novel, he has changed completely.

Randy has complete trust in his brother's analysis of the geopolitical situation. Mark is, after all, a full colonel in the military with access to top-secret military intelligence. Mark had warned Randy some time before that the world was racing toward war. Should events warrant it, Mark would warn Randy with their old phrase, "Alas, Babylon." When the message arrives, Randy instantly springs into action and prepares for war.

Before "The Day", Florence Wechek thinks Randy is a pervert, a Peeping Tom. She has seen him on many occasions looking through his binoculars toward her house. Actually, he was looking for the supposedly extinct Carolina parakeet. The bird he thinks is the parakeet is actually Florence's escaped lovebird. Randy is not, however, a pervert or a Peeping Tom. Defying popular opinion, he had previously dated a local Hispanic woman. When the novel opens, he has ended his relationship with Rita Hernandez and turned his sights toward Lib McGovern.

Randy starts moving some of his friends and neighbors into the unused rooms of his house. By this time, Mark's wife and children are living in the house as well. Gradually he begins taking on the job of leadership, beginning with his household, then extending to his neighbors, and, finally, assuming command of .....

Additional major characters are detailed in the complete study guide.

## PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

*Alas, Babylon* can be divided into three parts: (1) events before "The Day", (2) "The Day" itself, and (3) events after "The Day". It is important to note that Pat Frank did not divide the novel into sections, but the plot can be divided into these sections. The bulk of the novel concerns events after "The Day".

### Part I: Before "The Day"

This part of the novel is rather short. The primary focus of this part is to introduce us to most of the key characters and to inform us of the events that culminate in the nuclear attack on the U.S. We already know, or at least suspect, that the attack will come but we do not know how or why. In this section, we learn first of Mark's "Alas, Babylon" message, then we learn of Soviet actions that are raising political and military tensions with the U.S. Pewee Cobb tries to prove he is a big man, and defies orders and launches .....

## THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Throughout the novel, the twin themes of survival and personal redemption are shown in multiple ways. Pat Frank so skillfully intertwines them that it is sometimes difficult to separate the two.

Randy, his household, and his neighbors know that civilization must be rebuilt – there is much in American civilization is worth saving – but, to do that, they must first survive. The survival instinct can be found in the gopher soup, salads of local greenery and "weeds," and in the improvisation of needed tools. Even the highwaymen show their need for survival, even if in an inappropriate way (murder and pillage).

The second theme, personal rediscovery and redemption, is seen in the characters as they .....

## OTHER INFORMATION

There are three real (non-fictional) nearby air force bases mentioned in the novel:

**McCoy Air Force Base** - McCoy AFB was located outside of Orlando. In the 1950s it was a training location for pilots of B-47 and B-52 bombers. The base was closed in 1974 and most of the land was given to the city of Orlando to be used as the Orlando International Airport. In the novel, Randy meets Mark.....

## IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS - QUOTES

All quotations are from *Alas, Babylon*, © 1959, by Pat Frank, published by Bantam Books, 5<sup>th</sup> printing (1979).

**1) "Far to the east [Ensign Cobb] picked out Mount Carmel, and a river, and beyond were the hills of Megiddo, also called Armageddon."** (Chapter 4, p. 70).

The title of the book, *Alas, Babylon*, comes from The Revelation to St. John in the Bible. In The Revelation, the final battle is said to begin at Armageddon. Armageddon is Hebrew for "hills of Megiddo."

**2) "You see, all their lives, ever since they've known anything, they've lived under the shadow of war – atomic war. For them the abnormal has become normal. All their lives they have heard nothing else, and they expect it."** (Helen Bragg to Randy Bragg, Chapter 4, p. 84).

This is one of the most frightening quotes of the novel. It is, unfortunately, true for those who grew up during the Cold War. We were taught that a nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was all but inevitable, and we were taught how to respond (Civil Defense fallout shelters in the basements of large buildings and.....

Additional quotations and analysis is included in the complete study guide.

## SYMBOLISM / IMAGERY / MOTIFS

Pat Frank's novels, including *Alas, Babylon*, are very straightforward and largely lacking in symbolism. By and large, he lets his scene and dialog carry the themes of his works.

In one sense, the Carolina Parakeet can be said to be symbolic of the loss of "civilization as we know it." The Carolina Parakeet was widespread throughout the American South but was driven to extinction by man. Randy spends his free time searching for the bird, hoping to find some trace of it and, hopefully, recover the species. In the same way, after "The Day", Randy spends his time searching for the remnants of.....

## IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

**Title:** *Alas, Babylon*, by Pat Frank. First published in 1959, continuously in print to the present day.

**Meaning of the Title:** See Quotation #1 listed above.

**Type of novel/genre:** apocalyptic (post-disaster) novel. The novel is often described as ....

## VOCABULARY LIST / HISTORICAL REFERENCE

**BX** – base exchange; a store selling groceries, clothing, etc., usually at reduced prices, located on a military base to make shopping more convenient for military personnel stationed on the base. Only military personnel and their families are allowed shop at the BX.

**B-47, B-58** – long-range U.S. strategic jet bombers of the period, now replaced by the B-52, B-1, and B-2.

**C-in-C** – commander-in-chief

**DDT** – a pesticide commonly used in the 1950s and 1960s, but now banned in the U.S.....

## STUDY QUESTIONS / MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. Where does the story take place?
  - A. Fort Repose, Florida
  - B. Pistolville, Florida
  - C. Omaha, Nebraska
  - D. McCoy Air Force Base, Florida
2. In which war does the story take place
  - A. World War I
  - B. World War II
  - C. World War III
  - D. The Cold War.....

**Answers - DON'T LOOK HERE UNLESS YOU WANT THE ANSWERS:**

1; A; 2. D; 3. C; 4. C; 5. D; 6. A; 7. B; 8. C; 9. B; 10. D

## ESSAY TOPIC IDEAS / BOOK REPORT TOPICS

1. The minorities and "white trash" live in nearby Pistolville. Explain the symbolism of the town's name.
2. The novel was written and set in the 1950s when equality between the sexes and races did not yet exist to any large degree. How would the novel be different if it were written today and set in more recent times when men and women and the different races are more nearly seen as equals?.....

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