

# Alas, Babylon

by Pat Frank

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## About the Book

"In Fort Repose, a river town in Central Florida," an early December Friday dawns warm and peaceful. There are rumblings of potential crisis from the outside world--"The Russians had sent up another Sputnik, No. 23, and something sinister was going on in the Middle East"--but the citizens of Fort Repose bask in their small-town peacefulness. Then Randy Bragg, the younger son of a prominent local family--lawyer, Korean War vet, and unsuccessful candidate for the state legislature--receives a Western Union cable from his older brother, Mark, a colonel in the Strategic Air Command. Mark's cable includes a code phrase used by the brothers since childhood to indicate imminent disaster: "Alas, Babylon." Randy correctly concludes that nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union is in fact imminent. On Saturday morning, *The Day*, Randy wakes to "a long, deep, powerful rumble" and a second sunrise glow to the south. So begins the struggle of Fort Repose to survive the unimaginable. Against all the odds, the citizens of this small town are spared the immediate and worst effects of nuclear attack. But they escape neither the secondary consequences nor their own human limitations. As staples and services disappear--first the phone lines, then money, then gas, then electricity, then food and medications, then running water--they cope with a world in which, in a single day, a thousand years of civilization have been stripped away. In his large home just outside town, Bragg gathers together family members and friends, black and white, in a mutually supportive battle against disaster. Eventually Randy, as a lieutenant in the Army Reserve, will have to assume command of the entire town. In the meantime, through the year that follows *The Day*, all the human strengths and frailties come into play, with the fates of ordinary people hanging in the balance. Pat Frank's classic post-apocalyptic novel remains "an extraordinarily real picture of human beings numbed by catastrophe, but still driven by the unconquerable determination of living creations to keep on being alive." --*The New Yorker*

## Discussion Guide

1. Why do you think Frank selected a phrase from *The Revelation of John* as the title of his book? To what extent do you think he intended the references to Babylon in Chapters 17 and 18 of *The Revelation* to apply to the United States of the

1950s? To what extent might they apply to the United States today?

2. What instances are there of people being in positions of power or public authority who should not be, before and after The Day? How does Randy's exercise of authority contrast with that of others, from the pilot Peewee to Bubba Offenhause, Edgar Quisenberry, and Porky Logan?

3. What details reveal the specifics--and the inanity--of race relations in the American South during the late 1950s? Does the novel suggest any way of resolving the race issue? How does Randy's relationship with the Henrys go against his community?

4. In Chapter 4, Helen points out that her children, and all children in the late 1950s, "have lived under the shadow of war--atomic war. For them the abnormal has become normal." Do children today live under a comparable shadow or shadows? If so, what are the possible consequences for them?

5. What are the consequences--for Randy himself, for his family and friends, and for all of Fort Repose--of Randy's decision, in Chapter 5, that "he would have to play by the old rules"? In what ways do Randy and others subsequently act in accordance with or in opposition to "the old rules"?

6. What is the sequence of the escalating breakdown of "normal" order, institutions, and public services? How do people react to the sudden absence of services and procedures that they--we--take for granted? Would reactions today be different or similar? What do you think is the most serious loss?

7. In Chapter 5, Frank writes of bank president Edgar Quisenberry that "He had forgotten the implacable law of scarcity." How would you define/describe that law? How does it come into play for the people of Fort Repose, and what effects does it have?

8. Is Helen's "inventory of necessities," in Chapter 6, realistic and appropriate? What would be included in your inventory of necessities in the case of a similar catastrophe? Why?

9. What factors of character and circumstance justify Randy's assuming responsibility for and authority over Fort Repose? Is his thought in Chapter 7--"When you had the responsibility you also had the right to command"--explanation enough?

10. To what extent does "survival of the fittest" apply in Fort Repose after The Day? What do Randy and the others understand that phrase to mean? What do you understand it to mean?

## Author Bio

"Pat Frank" was the pseudonym adopted by the American writer, newspaperman, and government consultant, Harry Hart (1907-1964), who is remembered today almost exclusively for his post-apocalyptic novel . Before the publication of his first novel **Mr. Adam** launched his second career as novelist and independent writer, Frank spent many years as a journalist and information handler for several newspapers, agencies, and government bureaus. His fiction and nonfiction books, stories, and articles made good use of his years of experience observing government and military bureaucracy and

its malfunctions, and the threat of nuclear proliferation and annihilation. After the success of **Alas, Babylon**, Frank concentrated on writing for magazines and journals, putting his beliefs and concerns to political use, and advising various government bodies. In 1960 he served as a member of the Democratic National Committee. In 1961, the year in which he received an American Heritage Foundation Award, he was consultant to the National Aeronautics and Space Council. From 1963 through 1964 the Department of Defense made use of Frank's expertise and advice, and this consultancy turned out to be his last response to his country's call. His other books include **Mr. Adam** and **Forbidden Area**.

## Critical Praise

"Frank is successful enough in making us believe it could indeed happen here to send a small, fearful chill along our backbone."

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