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36

# *Alas, Babylon*

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PERENNIAL



MODERN CLASSICS

pat frank

ALAS,  
BABYLON

Foreword  
by David Brin

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BOOKS BY PAT FRANK

*Mr. Adam*

*An Affair of the State*

*Hold Back the Night*

*The Long Way Round*

*Forbidden Area*

*Seven Days to Never*

*Alas, Babylon*

*How to Survive the H-Bomb and Why*

## Foreword



*The world always seemed a dangerous place. Huddling in caves and isolated huts, our ancestors feared whatever lurked beyond the fire's light. Taking shelter behind village stockades and town walls, we dreaded the next flood, drought, plague, or invading horde. Nature appeared so mysterious, and our place in the world so tenuous, that legends of doom and ultimate loss were commonplace in nearly every culture.*

*Time* became an arch-villain, plotting to make things worse. Any golden age lay in the past. The future—except for some vague promise of final redemption—was portrayed as a realm of peril or woe. If doomsday would not come by fore-ordained fate or heavenly decree, then it must surely be wrought by human hands.

One may imagine that *Alas, Babylon*—a classic novel about catastrophic nuclear war—fits into this grand human tradition of dire prophecy.

But it does not.

Yes, you will find here a tale about Doomsday. At the time this book was written, we all felt its hot breath. While pundits and politicians fretted over fallout shelters, “thinking about the unthinkable,” we school kids pictured a burning flash whenever our teacher sprang another surprise duck-and-cover drill, sending us diving under our desks with the chilling command: *Drop!* On television, Armageddon's death angel took form as a

broad-shouldered cloud whose radioactive glow stalked our dreams, prickling the hairs on the back of our neck, and killing our sleep.

Our unease expressed in many ways, some of them contradictory: in a crisis of confidence . . . *and* in the arrogant hubris to take on a land war in Asia. In both materialistic obsessions *and* a new willingness to question old prejudices. In smugness *and* self-criticism. Enthusiasm for the adventure of technology combined with brooding suspicion of its cost.

Pat Frank's novel came along at a particular moment when our nerves were especially on edge—just after the shock of Sputnik, when it seemed likely that the very skies above might fall, in a rain of nuclear bombs. While the Soviet Union heaped triumph after triumph in space, American rockets seemed capable only of fizzling on the launch pad. A national defense that was based on fighter planes and bombers suddenly seemed old-fashioned, as some had been warning for years.

At one level, then, *Alas, Babylon* is highly specific to an era of just a few years. One character—an air force officer—even says so when he foretells that the enemy will take advantage of a narrow window of opportunity—one due to close fairly soon, as soon as the United States redressed the imbalance by catching up in missiles and submarines.

Today we know this “Missile Gap” was more figment than reality, based partly on an inflated notion of Soviet competence and eagerness for war—a mistake that was easy enough to make at a time when secrecy exacerbated every nightmare. In any event, this “Gap” featured prominently in the 1960 presidential election, as well as in the minds of millions who made this book a topical bestseller.

Certainly Pat Frank was accurate in predicting that some deterrence would be restored to the teetering world situation when the “Gap” closed, especially with the arrival of Polaris submarines that protected national deterrence against vulnerability to a sudden First Strike. What he could not foresee was that surveillance

satellites would prove such a boon to humanity and peace, helping to stabilize the world and calm down the Cold War, rather than aggravating it.

This firm placement in a particular era does not detract from the book, but rather adds to its charm. We see in the main character, Randy Bragg, a person about as admirable as you might hope to find at a time and place where Americans still took segregation of the races for granted. Randy's personal struggle to foster honorable change in his small corner of 1959 Florida is a touching portrayal of someone more honorable than his time, though still mired in habits that would take years and anguish to break.

Anguish that we would all go through during the decades that followed. Clear-eyed, Pat Frank foretold what our task would be in the years to come after 1959 . . . assuming that we survived to take it on. Throughout the following era, while we struggled with our institutions, with one another, and with our own moral flaws, one of the things that kept many of us going was a sense of privilege. Only the very fortunate *get* to struggle. Only the living may improve. Whenever events had us feeling especially low, we might look to dark imaginings like this one and tell ourselves—*it could be a whole lot worse*.

Human beings can't be all that bad, we would think. Or else that spasm-war would already have killed our nation, mortally wounded the planet, and destroyed all hope. That hasn't happened. Not yet. So our present difficulties are small potatoes by comparison.

In parallel worlds, like *Alas, Babylon*, people have *real* problems.

Which brings up survival, the theme most strongly associated with *Alas, Babylon*. Whatever historical and philosophical and political colorations and insights one might find here, it is the adventure tale that keeps readers coming back, captivating generations, from when I read this book at eleven years old until my son did, only last month, at the same impressionable age, devouring chapters in a state of total immersion as the brave citizens of Fort Re-

pose battle to protect something decent. Something more than just their own lives.

Is *Alas, Babylon* a grandfather of *survivalist* fiction?

Earlier tales followed intrepid characters through scenarios of “after the fall.” But before the 1950s, most of these apocalypse stories portrayed latter-day Noahs struggling against natural or supernatural disasters. Wrath pouring out of heaven, or the sea, or the bowels of the Earth. Few ever focused on the range of possible catastrophes that Technological Man might wreak upon the world with tools of his own making. But that was about to change.

Books and films that followed the detonations at Bikini and Eniwetok became, of course, a genre unto themselves. Starting with cheap monster movies about mutant giant insects, cinema seemed especially eager to exploit the dramatic impact of man-made apocalypse. Some of the best, like Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* (filmed in 1957) and the later TV miniseries *Testament*, took on the role of dire warnings, provoking shivers of fatalistic gloom, and perhaps girding some viewers to fight harder against the sort of political or technological errors that might end it all.

Two books that emerged at roughly the same time as *Alas, Babylon* were Eugene Burdick’s *Fail Safe* and Peter George’s *Red Alert*, which later inspired Stanley Kubrick to make the magnificently humorous and thoughtful *Dr. Strangelove*. As archetypes of the useful dire warning, each dissected a specific possible failure mode, bringing it to the awareness of so many that, ironically, their particular type of debacle became much less likely.

Indeed, the “self-preventing prophecy” may be the highest and most useful species in all of the vast, imaginative genus of speculative fiction. In much the same way that Orwell’s *1984* girded millions against “Big Brother,” these tales may have helped to keep their own nightmares from coming true. In other words, our most vivid nightmares may have been utterly practical, helping to save our lives.

At the same time, the core genre of literary science fiction was

busy. For example, Ward Moore, Alfred Bester, Philp Wylie, Andre Norton, Ray Bradbury, and Judith Merrill, all published novels about nuclear holocaust during the early and mid-1950s. Walter Miller's famed *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, appearing the same year as Pat Frank's novel, projected a thousand-year-epic of catastrophic war, followed by a new dark age, then a gradual climb back to technological civilization.

At a very different extreme were the apocalypses that creators and producers fashioned to look somehow, well, *attractive*. Especially in countless exploitive movies in which the fall of civilization was portrayed as a chance for tough, taciturn fellows to wear cool black leather; drive motorcycles real fast; and shoot a lot of bad guys wearing Mohawk haircuts—without any further thought about prim laws or consequences. This kind of tale, with its theme of ultimate liberation, is sometimes unfairly called a “Mad Max Story . . .” unfairly because I privately feel that the main character of *Mad Max* and its sequels broke with the tedious pattern that somehow got named after him. (In those films, Max was never portrayed as having fun, but rather in torment over civilization's fall—despite all the shooting and driving and cool leather togs.)

What I find interesting is that a few works in the postapocalypse genre do not fit into either of these categories—as dire warnings *or* escapist fantasies. *Alas, Babylon*, for example, seems to strike out in a different direction.

While it preaches a frightful admonition, this novel is not solely a tale of foolish error followed by pain and lamentation. Pat Frank certainly criticized some contemporary attributes that he saw in his fellow citizens—shortsightedness, political myopia, and slowness to correct racism, for example. But he also perceived a majority of them as basically good, capable of cooperation and deserving—if possible—a second chance.

In his novel, the characters are not *only* knocked down by cruel fate. They get to stand up. He lets them try and rebuild. It's no fun. But there is perseverance. There is hope.

Without any doubt, *Alas, Babylon* played a role in shaping my

own attitudes, leading ultimately to *The Postman*, my contribution to postapocalypse fiction. There, too, the price of error is terrible—even more terrible than Pat Frank depicted. For in my opinion, he downplayed some of the horrors that would have attended any nuclear spasm. Frank's description of the overall death toll feels a bit dry and detached, never going into details. He downplays the inevitable flood of wounded and starving refugees who would have flooded into poor, unprepared Fort Repose. But these small faults are forgivable, in the context of that time.

What both books share at their core is an assumption that devastating calamities do not have to mean the end of human aspiration. There are as many good things about civilization as bad. Perhaps more. And we would miss them. From toothbrushes to electric lights. From clean water to democracy. From bookstores to the kind of gentle, tolerant argumentation that never resorts to violence and allows for the slow changing of opinions, . . . and the gradual and diverse evolving of everybody's minds.

The core of what we now know that it means to be civilized.

We would miss these things, if they were ever taken from us. We would miss them terribly. We would never, ever be satisfied again, until we got them back.

The flaw in your classic *doom scenario* is the blithe assumption—conveyed by so many misanthropic writers and film directors—that humanity in general is dreadful, and therefore only individual heroes matter. A solitary bold protagonist, plus maybe a love interest, and a few sidekicks.

But if that's so, why even bother to warn us?

Likewise, those escapist romps that portray leather-clad heroes neglect to show them, later, weeping over children and wives who languish and die as typhus and polio and starvation return to vex us, as they did nearly all of our ancestors, distracting even the survivors from any thought beyond survival.

What *Alas, Babylon* says—that a few others say, as well—goes beyond “look at what we all might lose through carelessness.” It goes on to say “think about how much we'll miss, once it is gone.”

The reader is invited—along with Randy Bragg and the novel's other characters—to join in fighting to save what can be saved. To help bring something back from the brink.

So no, this is *not* part of that ancient tradition. The age-old pattern of storytelling that dwelled on punishing hubris and forecasting inevitable decline. On poignant decay and viewing the future as an enemy. For even as *Alas, Babylon* participates in the helpful process of criticism, finding failure modes to warn against, it mixes warning with that *other* message.

One calling for optimism, pragmatism, and a belief that all problems might be solved, with enough courage, determination, good will, grit, patience . . .

. . . and hope.

—David Brin, June 2005

## Preface



*I have an acquaintance, a retired manufacturer, a practical man, who has recently become worried about international tensions, international missiles, H-bombs, and such.*

One day, knowing that I had done some writing on military subjects, he asked: "What do you think would happen if the Russkies hit us when we weren't looking—you know, like Pearl Harbor?"

The subject was on my mind. I had recently returned from a magazine assignment at Offutt Field, Headquarters of the Strategic Air Command, several SAC operational bases, and the Missile Test Center on Cape Canaveral. More to the point, I had been discussing just such a possibility with several astute British staff officers. The British have lived under the shadow of nuclear-armed rockets longer than we. Also, they have a vivid memory of cities devastated from the skies, as have the Germans and Japanese.

A man who has been shaken by a two-ton blockbuster has a frame of reference. He can equate the impact of an H-bomb with his own experience, even though the H-bomb blast is a million times more powerful than the shock he endured. To someone who has never felt a bomb, bomb is only a word. An H-bomb's fireball is something you see on television. It is not something that incinerates you to a cinder in the thousandth part of a second. So the H-bomb is beyond the imagination of all but a few Americans, while the British, Germans, and Japanese can compre-

hend it, if vaguely. And only the Japanese have personal understanding of atomic heat and radiation.

It was a big question. I gave him a horseback opinion, which proved conservative compared with some of the official forecasts published later. I said, "Oh, I think they'd kill fifty or sixty million Americans—but I think we'd win the war."

He thought this over and said, "Wow! Fifty or sixty million dead! What a depression that would make!"

I doubt if he realized the exact nature and extent of the depression—which is why I am writing this book.

—1959

ALAS,  
BABYLON



*In Fort Repose, a river town in Central Florida, it was said that sending a message by Western Union was the same as broadcasting it over the combined networks. This was not entirely true. It was true that Florence Wechek, the manager, gossiped. Yet she judiciously classified the personal intelligence that flowed under her plump fingers, and maintained a prudent censorship over her tongue. The scandalous and the embarrassing she excised from her conversation. Sprightly, trivial, and harmless items she passed on to friends, thus enhancing her status and relieving the tedium of spinsterhood. If your sister was in trouble, and wired for money, the secret was safe with Florence Wechek. But if your sister bore a legitimate baby, its sex and weight would soon be known all over town.*

Florence awoke at six-thirty, as always, on a Friday in early December. Heavy, stiff and graceless, she pushed herself out of bed and padded through the living room into the kitchen. She stumbled onto the back porch, opened the screen door a crack, and fumbled for the milk carton on the stoop. Not until she straightened did her china-blue eyes begin to discern movement in the hushed gray world around her. A jerky-tailed squirrel darted out on the longest limb of her grapefruit tree. Sir Percy, her enormous yellow cat, rose from his burlap couch behind the hot water heater, arched his back, stretched, and rubbed his shoulders on her flannel robe. The African lovebirds rhythmically

swayed, heads pressed together, on the swing in their cage. She addressed the lovebirds: "Good morning, Anthony. Good morning, Cleo."

Their eyes, spectacularly ringed in white, as if embedded in mint Life Savers, blinked at her. Anthony shook his green and yellow plumage and rasped a greeting. Cleo said nothing. Anthony was adventurous, Cleo timid. On occasion Anthony grew raucous and irascible and Florence released him into limitless freedom outside. But always, at dusk, Anthony waited in the Turk's-cap, or atop the frangipani, eager to fly home. So long as Cleo preferred comfortable and sheltered imprisonment, Anthony would remain a domesticated parrot. That's what they'd told her when she bought the birds in Miami a month before, and apparently it was true.

Florence carried their cage into the kitchen and shook fresh sunflower seed into their feeder. She filled Sir Percy's bowl with milk, and crumpled a bit of wafer for the goldfish in the bowl on the counter. She returned to the living room and fed the angel-fish, mollies, guppies, and vivid neons in the aquarium. She noted that the two miniature catfish, useful scavengers, were active. She was checking the tank's temperature, and its electric filter and heater, when the percolator chuckled its call to breakfast. At seven, exactly, Florence switched on the television, turned the knob to Channel 8, Tampa, and sat down to her orange juice and eggs. Her morning routine was unvaried and efficient. The only bad parts of it were cooking for one and eating alone. Yet breakfast was not her loneliest meal, not with Anthony ogling and gabbling, the six fat goldfish dancing a dreamy oriental ballet on diaphanous fins, Sir Percy rubbing against her legs under the table, and her cheery friends on the morning show, hired, at great expense, to inform and entertain her.

As soon as she saw Dave's face, Florence could sense whether the news was going to be good or bad. On this morning Dave looked troubled, and sure enough, when he began to give the news, it was bad. The Russians had sent up another Sputnik,