

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Alas, Babylon

by

Pat Frank

Book Information

Pat Frank, Alas, Babylon
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Pat Frank reveals how quickly the thin veneer of civilization disappears after a bomb is dropped.

Topics: Adventure, Survival; History, Nuclear Weapons; Science Fiction, Future; Wars, Misc./Other

Main Characters

Alice Cooksey an older single woman who has dedicated her life to the maintenance and improvement of the town library

Ben Franklin Bragg the thirteen-year-old son of Helen and Mark, who strives to take on some of the duties of the adults

Caleb Henry the thirteen-year-old son of Missouri, who labors on the family farm and assists Ben in his ventures

Cappy Foracre the Fort Repose Chief of Police, who is murdered during a raid on the clinic

Colonel Mark Bragg the devoted husband of Helen and brother of Randy; he works in a high-risk military job

Dr. Dan Gunn a bitter physician who is dedicated to his profession; he is a good friend of Randy's

Edgar Quisenberry the local banker, who likes to show off his power over others; he commits suicide when money becomes worthless

Elizabeth "Lib" McGovern the girlfriend of Randy, who proves the strength and quality of her character after the bombing

Florence Wechek a middle-aged single woman who loves animals and longs to feel wanted and useful

Helen Bragg the wife of Mark, who has a special talent for keeping a household running smoothly and dealing with the pressure of emergency situations

Jim Hickey the generous beekeeper, who is murdered by the highwaymen

Lavinia McGovern Lib's diabetic mother, who is very proud of her modern home; she is very afraid of snakes

Lieutenant Colonel Paul Hart a friend of Mark's who reports to the "contaminated" areas of Florida in hopes of finding his wife and children

Luther "Bubba" Offenhaus the local undertaker, who retreats from his duties to the community after the bombing

Malachai Henry the self-educated and hard-working brother of Two-Tone; he bravely helps capture the highwaymen

Missouri Henry the hard-working wife of Two-Tone Henry; she is employed by Randy, the McGoverns, and Admiral Hazzard

Pete Hernandez Rita's brother, who uses his position at the grocery store to procure large masses of supplies after the bombing

Peyton Bragg Mark and Helen's lively daughter, who sometimes disobeys rules in order to prove herself useful

Porky Logan a greedy, small-time politician who brings radioactive material into the community

Randolph "Randy" Rowzee Bragg the son of a once-prominent family in the Fort Repose community; he regains his leadership skills and strength when he is presented with emergencies

Rear Admiral Samuel P. Hazzard an elderly neighbor of Randy's who uses his radio to provide valuable news to the community; he is a former top-ranking, military official who warned the military about their inadequate defense systems

Reverend Clarence "Preacher" Henry the dignified patriarch of the Henry family, who is very knowledgeable about fishing as well as religion

Rita Hernandez the sister of Pete and a former girlfriend of Randy; she is flirtatious with men and uses her looks to acquire wealth

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the highwaymen a group of robbers and murderers who ambush travelers along the road

Two-Tone Henry the husband of Missouri, who comes up with a plan to make whiskey for use in trade and medicine

W. Foxworth "Bill" McGovern the father of Lib McGovern; a retired businessman who needs to feel useful and powerful

Vocabulary

appalled shocked and disgusted

disintegrated separated into very small pieces

policy rule used to decide how to act

routine part of normal activities

transformation a complete change from one state or condition to another

typhoid a deadly disease caused by drinking germs in unclean water

Synopsis

When Randy Bragg of the small Florida town of Fort Repose receives a message ending with the words "Alas, Babylon" from his brother, Mark, he knows that nuclear war is probably imminent. At his brother's request, Randy flies to a military base to receive directions from Mark before Mark travels to Omaha, where he will be part of the U.S. defense team when the Russians attack the United States. In their meeting, Mark gives Randy a check for five thousand dollars and instructions to bring Mark's wife, Helen, and their two children to Randy's home in Florida.

Upon returning to Fort Repose, Randy cashes the check despite a nasty encounter with the bank president, Edgar Quisenberry. He then goes to the grocery store and buys a large number of supplies. When he arrives home, he warns Malachai Henry about the imminent war. As a member of a nearby family who does yardwork and domestic work for the wealthier families, Malachai will help prepare his large family for the disaster. Randy also warns his best friend, Dr. Dan Gunn, and Randy's girlfriend, Lib McGovern. When he goes to speak to Lib's

parents, her father, Bill, is openly skeptical, and the family shows little inclination to follow Dan's advice to stockpile medication for Lavinia, Lib's diabetic mother.

In the middle of the night, Randy picks up Helen and the two children, Peyton and Ben, from the airport. At dawn, the bombing begins. Peyton is blinded when she witnesses the bombing of Tampa, and Randy goes to find Dan. At Dan's hotel, chaos has already broken out. Dan gives Randy medicine and promises to return later with medical supplies that Randy has neglected to buy. Dan also reassures Randy that Peyton's blindness is probably temporary.

In the meantime, the community responds to the disaster. Edgar closes the bank when he becomes concerned about the large amounts people are withdrawing. He goes to Western Union to send a telegram, only to learn that the lines are down. A man at the gas station tells him his money is worthless. The people of the town have already rushed to the stores and bought all the goods available. Demoralized by the situation, Edgar goes home and shoots himself. Over the radio the community is informed that most of the large cities have been destroyed, the president and most of the major officials of the government are dead, and the country is trying to combat the enemy.

That evening, Randy and Helen pay a visit to Admiral Hazzard, a neighbor who is a retired member of the military. He confirms the severity of the attack and lets Helen know that there is little hope that Mark is still alive. While the three are speaking, a bomb hits Orlando, and electricity is permanently terminated for Fort Repose and the surrounding areas.

A few days later, Helen discovers the meat in Randy's well-stocked freezer is thawed. Randy hurries to town to get preserving supplies, only to find that the grocery store has been sold out. Randy is able to persuade Pete Hernandez, the store owner, to sell him salt out of his personal stock,

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which he does but at an exorbitant price. Randy then goes to the clinic to check on Dan. There Randy finds the building ransacked and the chief of police dead. Dan is unharmed, but Randy talks him into moving in with his family instead of returning to the hotel. That night Randy and his neighbors feast on the thawed steaks. Further news reveals that Florida has been decreed contaminated, which means no one will be coming to help them.

In the days following the bombing, Randy and his neighbors become a tight community. They extend the irrigation system to provide water to three of the homes; Lib and her father come to reside with Randy after Mrs. McGovern dies; and they all pool their resources and knowledge to ensure their own survival.

Several months pass and food and other supplies are running out. Further bad news comes from Dan, who has diagnosed three cases of radiation poisoning. When Randy and Dan investigate, they learn from Pete's sister Rita that the source is probably a batch of radioactive jewelry brought by a politician named Porky. Porky (and eventually Pete and another man) die from the poisoning. Dan and Randy have to use force to persuade the community to help them properly dispose of the radioactive material.

Just before Easter, Dan is ambushed and severely beaten by a band of highwaymen. Randy's small community loses its only working car, and Dan loses his medical supplies and eyeglasses. Randy is incensed. An announcement over the radio gives Reserve Army members authority to assume leadership, so Randy organizes a vigilante group to hunt down the highwaymen. The morning of the planned attack, Randy marries Lib, and then Bill, the Admiral, Randy, and Malachai set out to lure the highwaymen into a trap. Malachai is badly wounded in the confrontation, and Dan is unable to save him. The only surviving highwayman is later hanged.

While Dan is recovering from his beating, he is nursed by Helen. An affectionate relationship

develops between them, but Helen is reluctant to marry Dan until she is certain Mark is dead. One day in November, a government helicopter lands in the yard. Officials come out to test for radiation and clear the area, and one of the men tells Helen that Mark did not survive the attack. He also informs Randy and his friends that the country has suffered severe damage. Large areas will be uninhabitable for thousands of years, electricity is unlikely to be restored in the near future, and gasoline will not be sold to private citizens for a long time to come. He offers to take Randy and his people out of Florida, but they decide their lives are more useful in Fort Repose. The official also tells them that the United States has won the war, but the country has been reduced to being a second-class power.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

How does Helen feel about Lib coming to live in the Bragg household?

Helen feels threatened by Lib. For some reason, both she and her husband have the expectation that Randy will become Helen's new life partner. She feels jealous and competitive when Randy argues that Lib should live in the home. However, she also feels obligated to help those who are vulnerable, and she feels she should honor Randy's wishes because it is his home.

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Literary Analysis

What traits in others does Dan seem to value? How do his actions and decisions as a doctor reveal what he values?

Dan values certain character traits in others: generosity, loyalty, honesty, and intelligence. Several times in the story, he makes choices about who will receive his ultimate efforts as a doctor and who will not. Despite these attitudes about who is worth saving and who is not, the high value that Dan places on honesty and devotion compels him to continue his duties as a doctor as long as he is able. Dan also feels that it is important to protect others. When typhoid and radiation poisoning threaten the community, he wants immediate action taken.

Inferential Comprehension

In this story, most forms of public communication disappear or become very limited. There is no postal service, no telephone, no telegraph, no television, and only scattered radio messages. How does this breakdown of communication affect the people in this story?

In the first place, people have difficulty finding out what is going on outside their community. They do not know what is happening with the war or whether their government still exists. Finding out what happened to relatives in distant places is virtually impossible. Secondly, the lack of communication makes it difficult to receive direction on how to handle the emergency. The community lives in a state of chaos because most people are unsure how to cope. Finally, even communication within the community is greatly limited and occasionally dangerous. A bulletin board in the park and word of mouth replace the former means of communication, but these methods are slow. As a result, people who are ill or wish to trade something must wait until the right person reads the bulletin board or receives their message. In the case of the bulletin board, the public nature of it makes some people vulnerable to highwaymen, who are alerted to who has goods and where those people are.

Constructing Meaning

How can the reader tell that the former leaders of the community did not have the community's best interests in mind?

After The Day, virtually all the important leaders of the community disappear or cease to be active in the community. Edgar cuts off hundreds of people from money that might have enabled them to buy supplies. He kills himself when he recognizes that money is worthless and his power is gone. Porky loots a radioactive town and brings the threat of radiation into the otherwise clean community. There is no indication that he attempts to help anyone but himself. Bubba, who was one of the most powerful men in the town before The Day, holes up in his house. He has to be coerced into dealing with the problem of Porky's body and the radioactive jewelry, and he has made little effort to fulfill his duties as representative of the Civil Defense.

Teachable Skills

Comparing and Contrasting: The characters in this book make several allusions to other civilizations that have fallen. Have the students choose a civilization, either mythological or real, that met a cataclysmic end. The students can then compare and contrast the stories of their chosen civilization with the story in this book.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors: At the time this book was written, atomic war was a relatively new danger. Many examples of popular culture from this time period express ideas or fears about atomic power. Provide the students with a wide variety of 1950s material on this topic. Suggest that the students write a report explaining what is happening because of atomic power and what, if anything, the piece advises people to do to protect themselves.

Recognizing Details: After the bombing, Randy and the other survivors become aware of what is truly useful when modern conveniences such as electricity, grocery stores, and an established monetary system disappear. Have the students

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create a list of essentials that should be purchased if one is anticipating a national emergency. Students should be prepared to support their choices.

Understanding the Author's Craft: Randy's ancestor writes a diary that tells of the difficulties he encountered when he first came to Fort Repose. The students could choose one of the characters in this book and make a diary that tells events from that character's point of view.