

Black Hole

Plot/Storyline:

Set in mid-70's Seattle, *Black Hole* is a serialized graphic novel by Charles Burns that tells of adolescents plagued by an unexplained, sexually transmitted disease that mutates them in different ways. Mutations are not apparent in some teens and grossly obvious in others. This novel appeared in serial form for over a decade. Events in the story are told in a non-linear fashion. Author uses dreams and flashback series.



We see the story from the viewpoint of three of the main characters: Keith, Chris and Rob. With them, we experience the nature of high school students: the cruelties, the insecurities, the cliques, the experimenting and the desire for acceptance.

Once infected, they do not look for an answer to why they have been infected nor do they look for a cure. They simply drift in and out of drug and alcohol induced stupor.

What the heck is a black hole anyway?

A black hole is a theoretical region of space in which the [gravitational field](#) is so powerful that nothing, not even visible light, can escape its pull after having fallen past its [event horizon](#). The term derives from the fact that the absorption of visible light renders the hole's interior invisible, and indistinguishable from the black [space](#) around it.

Characters:

Major

- Keith Pearson (tail-like growths on his chest)
- Chris Rhodes (sheds skin)
- Rob Facincani (second mouth at the base of his neck)
- Eliza (tail, "Lizard Queen")
- Dave Burns (lion face)

Minor

- Dee (friend of Keith)
- Bruce (friend of Keith)
- Jill (Dee's girlfriend)
- Marci (Chris' best friend)
- Rick (Random kid appears twice)
- Burt (Drug dealer)

*Note: It is not mentioned whether these three are infected. They do drink heavily and use drugs however.



Illustrations:

Burns' illustrations could be considered creepy, disturbing or grave. Done in black and white, the images are meant to evoke the atmosphere of classic 70's teen horror flicks (*Carrie*, *Halloween*).



As evidenced in this panel with split faces, Burns is extremely precise with his images.

SPATIOTOPIA INDEED!

- Panel movement is very evident. "moment to moment"
- The characters are not static. The layout of the panels clearly indicate movement. For instance, the panels with Eliza's tail are unmistakably showing movement.
- Flashbacks are indicated by the use of wavy lines.
- Very symmetrical.

Discussion Questions

- Would you consider this a coming of age story?
- After reading the book, what do you think of the title?
- Is it possible that the blackout Keith had in the beginning is the answer to this mystery? Was there no real plague?
- What do you make of the lack of parental involvement in this novel?
- The book had a major emphasis on sex and drugs, what did you think of the subtle images associated with the female anatomy as a motif?
- Do you see any parallels with our current epidemic of AIDS?
- People that had been infected by the sickness are alienated from society; does our society react similarly to people with STD's?
- How does this book's graphics compare to *Blankets*, the other completely black and white book? Is there a certain mood associated with black and white?

- What was the purpose in giving the infected individuals such obvious physical, non-human like features?
- How do issues of drug use, and sexuality compare with some of the other books we have discussed?

About the Author:

Born in 1955, Charles Burns portrays a disturbed world of dark horror and kinky science in his comic strips, the product, he admits, of over-exposure to American pop culture in his youth. "My father's a scientist who once wanted to be a cartoonist. So I was able to read comics without being told they were going to rot my mind. As a result my brain rotted..."



Charles Burns

Burns' high-profile illustrations include work for the Iggy Pop album *Brick by Brick*. His art was also licensed by The Coca-Cola Company to illustrate product and advertising material for their failed OK Soda product. More recently, he has worked on advertising campaigns for Altoids and portrait illustrations for *The Believer*. In the early 1990s, his

Dogboy stories were adapted by MTV as a live-action serial for *Liquid Television*.

Author Interview:

Excerpts from March 2008 interview with *Anthem Magazine's* Bryan Hood...

How did you come up with the idea for *Black Hole*?

It was an idea that was floating around. I think it started more as something in a sketchbook, a visual idea, where I was taking these kinds of teenage characters and messing around with them—putting some diseases, skin ailments, playing with them. Then I started thinking about this whole idea, wanting to do a story about adolescence, thinking of adolescence as this disease that some people get over, some people don't get over.

You spent a decade working on *Black Hole*. Why did you spend so long on one particular story?

There were a number of reasons for that. I work slowly. My straight job is doing illustration and advertising. Starting and stopping when I had time to work on it, with the intention of getting at least an issue out each year. It was a slow process. That being said, it was always looked at as being this whole piece, this collection. It was designed that way, almost like a jigsaw puzzle or a mosaic, where all the pieces are eventually going to come together. All the fragments, all the plot threads are going to come together. Up until then almost all of your work had been a lot shorter, right?

Oh yeah, my work had been much shorter and when I started *Black Hole* I had this idea that I really wanted to do a story about the characters, a much more character-driven story. Not so much about the intricacies of the plot, but more about really getting into the characters. Finding my way into the characters and having a much more personal story in that I was putting more of myself into the characters and delving into that.

Unlike many independent comics creators, you have not worked on anything that could be considered a memoir. Any particular reason for this?

I've never really wanted to do a memoir per se. *Black Hole* is definitely based on elements of friends of mine, situations I was in, things I was going through and things I was thinking about. So in that regard it has those certain moments that are pulled straight out of my life or at least the feelings I was going through at that time. I don't think I've got the kind of temperament to write that; it's not something that intrigues me, to delve into that memoir sort of thing. There are people who do it really well, but it's not something that I'm interested in or drawn towards.

You started working on comics in the early 80s. Where did you get started?

I originally appeared in *Raw Magazine*, a comic anthology that Art Spiegelman and Francoise Mouly started in New York. I was living up in Philadelphia, met them, and started working.

Burn's Other Works:

El Borbah

Fantagraphics, 1999

El Borbah is a 400 pound private eye who wears Mexican wrestler's tights and mask. Subsisting entirely on junk food and beer, El Borbah conducts his investigations with tough talk and a short temper. He stalks a perfectly realized film-noir city filled with punks, geeks, business-suited creeps, mad scientists, and other would-be heroes.

Facetasm

with Gary Panter

Gates Of Heck Inc, 1998

"Far creepier and cooler than any episode of *Twin Peaks*, this volume takes a classic childrens book format and transforms it into a perverse portrait gallery for twisted adults."

The Comics Journal

Skin Deep

Fantagraphics, 2001

Classic tales of doomed romance filtered through the twisted vision of Charles Burns, including *Dog Boy*, a red-blooded all American boy, who has the transplanted heart of a dog and is unable to control the urge to lick his girlfriend's face or sniff her bottom.

Online Resources for Charles Burns:

<http://lambiek.net/artists/b/burns.htm>

<http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v2/1/reviews/raney.shtml>

Hooray for Hollywood!!!

Black Hole is the latest in a line of graphic novels being made into a motion picture.

"I made the decision when I signed the option that I didn't try to negotiate and gain any control ... I just want to kind of move onto something else." *Charles Burns, on the making of the Black Hole movie.*