Review of:


by Vanessa Raney

1. Charles Burns’ twelve-volume comics serial *Black Hole* is difficult to summarize, if only because it visually challenges the reader in ways that are uncomfortable. From all outward appearances, *Black Hole* shares many characteristics in common with the 1960s underground comics movement with its emphasis on drugs and sex. That was a time of rebellion following from the 1954 Comics Code, which created an environment for self-censure and pro-Werthamian contents. A closer examination of Burns’ work, however, reveals a disturbing subtext that forces the reader to grapple with events unfolding from a hostile environment in response to a teen epidemic, similarly to the one created from the real epidemic of AIDS in the 1980s when it was positioned as a homosexual disease.

2. Despite the increase of AIDS in the heterosexual community since then, it continues to be stigmatized as a homosexual disease. As such, AIDS became a metonym for deviance, for otherness, and it remains human nature to strike out in fear of the unknown. In *Black Hole*, Burns presents a story about a teen plague that, like AIDS during its first years of discovery, has no known cause. The disease, like AIDS, is primarily a sexual-social disease. Unlike AIDS, however, the STD in Burns’ story, if we go by the mini-text sequences, is cured; without any understanding of how the teen-specific disease happened or ended, the reader is asked to consider the ways in which deviants in society get stigmatized. More important, Burns asks the reader to imagine what it would feel like to be the outsider.

3. As for *Black Hole*, some interesting aspects include the mini-text sequences that precede each volume, the point-of-view shifts and the time movements. The first serves to provide a larger framework for the continuing story, while the other two work to engage the reader with the emotional turmoil of the mysterious “teen plague” or “the bug” (no. 1). While Burns never reveals the cause of the STD, he also presents scenes as if looking through a navy binocular, suggesting distance from and between the reader and characters.

4. Keith Pearson, Chris Rhodes and Eliza (aka “The Lizard Queen” (no. 8)), the focal characters in the series, almost echo those of Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist play, *Huis Clos* (*No Exit*). In *Black Hole*, the triangle of love/lust angles Keith toward Chris, Chris with Rob Facincani, and Eliza for Keith. Into the mix flies Dave Barnes, whose obsession with Chris and his inability to cope with the “new disease that only affected teenagers” (no. 1) leads to deathly consequences. Only one of the pairs comes together on point at the end.

5. What dispels the temptation to suggest that Burns is taking a moral stance on the issue of teen sex is his inclusion of Dee and his girlfriend Jill, who entertain a sexual relationship while being disease-free (no. 6). This suggests two possibilities: the events that take place in *Black Hole* stem from Keith’s fainting
episode (no. 1), in which case they are imaginary; the disease stands in as a metonym for the AIDS virus.

6. While AIDS may be variously transmitted, the only known cause in *Black Hole* is sexual contact with an infected teen. At the same time, Burns troubles this assumption; for example, when Dave spits on a verbally abusive customer at Kentucky Fried Chicken, he says, “See how easy that was? That’s all it takes…a little spit. Some saliva…and now you’re one of us” (no. 11).

7. It is the mini-text sequences, however, that anchors the view that the teen plague stands in for the AIDS virus. The following quotes illustrate this most clearly, though the speaker(s) is(are) never revealed:

“Sometimes we made jokes about it…but it was no joke - we were scared shitless” (no. 5).
“‘I don’t know what it was…but suddenly we were the target of every asshole joke in town. They’d drive around searching for us at night, ganging up on us when we were out trying to find food. They did everything they could to make our lives as miserable as possible’” (no. 9).
“Half my fuckin’ friends died out there, man” (no. 12).

8. In this light, Dave’s actions as a reaction to the prevailing hostility and Chris’ rejection lend the psychological insight to grasp his motivations. That his face resembles the face of drug dealer Bruce suggests both the unpredictability of the disease and the similarity between their lifestyles: sex and drugs. Burns, however, only hints at the possibility that transmission of the teen plague results from unprotected sex. Nos. 2 and 4 of the series provide good examples to support this position.

9. “Racing Towards Something” is the section title in no. 2, in which Chris assumes the point-of-view throughout the sequences. Divided into three main parts, the first and last place Chris in present time somewhere around the forest area of “Planet Xeno,” the popular teen hangout. Chris’ flashbacks (suggested by wavy-lined panels) to her sexual encounter with Rob and her fears over her late menstrual flow dominate the middle part.

10. Her own thoughts as she reflects back on these moments in no. 2 appear in boxes, while the real-time conversations appear in balloons. Because there are no page numbers, I will refer to specific panels in the order presented in the first flashback sequence, which begins with Chris thinking in panel 1, “I was so happy…” In panel 6, Chris thinks, “…That night was different…there was something pulling me towards him [Rob]…something dark and sexy.”

11. In panels 10 and 11, which appear side by side in vertical parallel, Burns creatively switches the forward-facing images of Rob and Chris in the individual panels by taking their backside images and positioning them in the center of both panels, though they appear on the far right and far left respectively in the individual panels. [see Fig. 1] Here, the top of their heads are aligned while differences in their hair lengths reveal differences in their heights.
12. This effect is tripled in panels 12-14, but here Burns switches Rob and Chris by means of facial position and movement, in which Rob leads the dance as his head (on the right of each panel) changes to Chris’ head. Unlike panels 10 and 11, their upper bodies are shown more closely parallel than their necks and faces (as evidenced by how the lines of their different clothes meet), with Chris’ face seeming about an inch or two higher than Rob’s face. [see Fig. 2]
In both cases, however, their literal movement as they make their way to the cemetery is suggested by the subtle shifts in the tree and cloud backdrops. As before, Burns does not abandon his technique, but in panels 15-18, the tombstones define the movement. Likewise, the position of the panels are different, as panels 15-17 line up vertically and take up just over half of the page, while panel 18 takes up the space horizontally beneath them. [see Fig. 3] I would argue that in this sequence of panels (comprising panels 10-18), the pacing of Chris’ and Rob’s movement actually quickens. However, while Burns uses this technique throughout the series, it is not always movement-specific as here.
14. “We’d both been drinking a lot,” Chris reminisces in panel 17, “…but it was more than that…” In panel 18, she emphasizes, “…much much more.” The second sequence (panels 19-52) reveals the animal sexual magnetism between them, but panel 31 shows the actual penetration. Because Burns has been exacting in details prior to this, Rob’s hand covering his penis from view only suggests that neither Rob nor Chris have protection. However, in panel 49, when, Chris remembers, “[Rob] pulled out,” and where Chris’ vagina is hidden from the reader while Rob’s condomless penis is visible, the evidence is clear.

15. Unlike AIDS, however, the teen plague in *Black Hole* results in physical mutations, though these are not always easily observable by other people; Eliza, for example, grows a tail. Rob’s mutation is an extra mouth on his neck, as first revealed in panels 40-43. The fear that arises from this in panels 46-47 – Rob for thinking Chris knew about it, Chris for not knowing about it – invites the reader to associate their fear. For these panels, Burns splits the faces of Rob and Chris and sets them side by side, so that the reader must depend on the boxed text and Rob’s dialogue to grasp that the face which merges from the two panels is actually the split faces of Rob and Chris; even then, the reader must orient him- or herself
Again to the text to recognize the tears are Rob’s because the face as a whole appears more feminine than masculine. [see Fig. 4]

**Figure 4.** *Black Hole* no. 2, panels 46 - 47, © 2005 Charles Burns.

16. Turning now to no. 4, with the section title “Bag Action,” Keith takes up the point-of-view throughout these sequences. Similarly to no. 2, no. 4 is likewise divided into three main sections, though, unlike no. 2, there is only present time in no. 4. More important, Keith weaves between the real and fantasy. Where wavy-lined panels in no. 2 pointed to the use of flashbacks, in no. 4 – where some of the panels are half-wavy-lined and half-straight-lined – the wavy-lined areas represent Keith’s fantasies.

17. The first part of no. 4 shows Keith and his friend Todd driving (though this is not clear until panel 8) to the drug dealers’ house where Eliza lives; here Keith’s fantasies of Chris dominate. These fantasies come into play again toward the end of the middle part, where the guys exchange money for drugs. It is in the last part that Eliza begins her seduction of Keith, but the sexual act will not be consummated until no. 8. As previously (no. 2), the boxed texts reveal Keith’s thoughts; unlike no. 2, these should be read in present time, not as reflections on what has already happened.
18. Also from this point onward, I will refer to specific panels in the order they appear in the third section, which begins with Keith thinking in panel 1, “I couldn’t find the light switch....” In the first sequence (panels 1-36), most of the action takes place in the kitchen, and Keith is shocked twice when he sees Eliza’s tail and her vagina. “The weird part,” he thinks in panel 34, “was I was playing along...like it was all perfectly natural.”

19. Though the seduction centers around bologna sandwiches, Eliza’s tail inspires Keith’s excitation, as panels 36-38 in the second sequence (panels 36-71) make clear. The movement in these three panels, which appear vertical and parallel while taking up just over half of the page, with panel 39 supporting them horizontally, reveals Keith’s perspective as he narrows in on her tail; thus, Eliza’s size (and the lightening effects) continues to increase from panel to panel. [see Fig. 5] Because of the way the text flows and connects the panels, it is necessary to quote Keith’s thoughts in their entirety:

Panel 36: “It was dark but that didn’t stop me from getting a good look at her from behind. I could see it [the tail], pressed up against the back of her towel....”
Panel 37: “…a long slender shape tucked over to the side. It looked like it was moving just a little bit...twitching.”

Figure 5. Black Hole no. 4, panels 46 - 47, © 2005 Charles Burns.
Panel 38: “I could feel myself getting hard…”

20. The third sequence (panels 41-72) brings the reader to Eliza’s bedroom, where Keith discovers her penchant and talent for art. In the fourth sequence (panels 73-77), the fantasy-real dominate, but the phallic presence of the tail renders Keith female in his fantasy (panels 73-75). More relevant in the fantasy, the animal sexual aggression is closely tied into the natural landscape of Xeno Park.

21. These three panels, which mix the fantasy and the real, occupy the page in vertical position, where Burns’ earlier technique is again at play. In the fantasy portion of panel 73, the grass flows up and inward to Chris, whose upper torso from the sag of her breasts is shown; the grass then becomes bushes, which become the lightning-shaped trees.

22. In panel 74, where the position of Eliza’s hands on Keith’s back are reversed, the fantasy portion now shows the metamorphosis of the grass into vagina and legs while Chris faces upward, further back and framed by the legs at the point of her waist; thus the perspective has shifted somewhat and the grass in-between the vagina/legs and Chris is denser. Here, one also begins to make out Eliza’s tail as part of the fantasy; a closer look at the previous panel shows the tip of her tail.

23. Her tail is not static, but, from panel 73, moves right to left. In panel 75, she lies against Keith’s back, while Chris’ image departs from the fantasy; it is here that Keith realizes his sexual difference. While his left hand covers his vagina hair, his thighs are spread apart to accept Eliza’s tail; the grass has become the trees, but fan-shaped.
24. Adding to the already strong erotic sequence are the actual pillows on which Keith’s head rests – as if mountains were bodies in the act of sex. [see Figs. 6a and 6b] By panel 76 Keith’s fantasy includes Eliza nude from the waist down, with the grass now appearing like upward-moving fire that Eliza controls. Then, in the last panel of the sequence (panel 77), Keith’s fantasy reveals Eliza from the waist up as her head veers right and her long hair fans as if there were five connected tails. This time, the sparse outline of trees frames her head; her transformation to human is indicated by the downward movement of the branches. Eliza is no longer alien, and the dialogue between her and Keith suggests this:

   Eliza: “Come on, you can tell me, it’s ok…you **liked** it, didn’t you?
   Just **tell** me.”
   Keith: “I…uh…y-yeah.”

25. It is interesting that the only sex visible in *Black Hole* is between Eliza and Keith, the full consummation of which begins in no. 8, and between Chris and Rob, the latter of whom dies in no. 8. Yet the animal quality of their sexual attractions is earthy, as if driven more by instinct than desire. Of these four, however, Eliza remains the only one without a last name, yet she is a central character.

26. More important, Eliza never leads with a point-of-view of her own. Instead, the point-of-view shifts are primarily between Keith and Chris, but also from the
perspectives of Rob, and, in the first section of no. 11 (titled “Rick the Dick”), Dave. What follows is the breakdown of points-of-view shifts in the series: Keith and Chris in nos. 1 and 12; Chris in nos. 2, 7 and 9; Chris, Rob and Keith in no. 3; Keith in nos. 4, 6 and 10; Rob and Chris in no. 5; Keith and Rob in no. 8; Dave and Keith in no. 11.

27. In all except no. 12, the point-of-view shifts are readily discernible by the presence of two or more sections, which are set off with full-page panels and individual titles. In no. 12 (“The End”), however, Burns offers no signals that the point-of-view has changed from Keith to Chris. The first twenty-nine panels make-up Keith’s dream sequence, as indicated by wavy-lined panels. Panel 29 crosses with panel 30 in that space between sleeping and waking so that the next ten panels show Keith and Eliza talking in the real, as indicated by straight-lined panels.

28. However, while the wavy-lined panels occupy the next seven panels, suggesting another dream sequence, it is clear in panel 47 that these wavy-lined panels represent fantasy or wish fulfillment; the interesting aspect is that Eliza refers to Monument Valley in panel 40, the physical features of which matches the land mass that Keith saw in his dream – the same land mass displayed on the parchment that Chris extracts from her foot and gives to him. The panels leading up to panel 56 are shown in straight-lined panels, but panel 56 has a right angle on the left side that is straight and a right angle on the right side that is wavy-lined; here the space between waking and sleeping is revealed.

29. Keith is clearly dreaming by panel 57 and this dream state continues in panel 58 such that the two-page spread panel that follows this appears to be part of Keith’s dream. Two pages later, this assumption becomes very much in doubt, as the reader comes across Chris waking up from a dream in a stranger’s car. Unlike Keith’s dream, however, hers ends as a waking nightmare, as she dreams the face of Dave while the reader sees an anonymous hand reaching out to Chris in the next panel, but it also appears to be connected to Dave. Thus, by panel 70, the reader might be feeling the same terror Chris awakens with when the man touches her; in panel 71 the reader achieves the same awareness as Chris does in panel 72 when the face of the driver becomes visible.

30. Time movements in Black Hole also add to the disorienting effects of the story. Burns succeeds in this aspect of the series by telling the events in nonlinear fashion. For example, in no. 1, which includes three sections, Rob, in the second section (“Planet Xeno”), identifies the ghost-seeming human skin someone hung across some branches; in the third section (“Sssssssss”), that someone turns out to be Chris. This blurring of past and present throughout the story adds an important dimension: the emotional implications of disease, which actively involves the reader.

31. If we accept the teen plague as a metonym for AIDS, however, the particular image that leads the first section in no. 8, titled “Wizard Queen,” and which reappears in smaller-sized and rougher versions in nos. 4 and 5, is very telling. It shows a man with no outward defects in a position of bondage; what might otherwise pass as a picture of masculinity becomes instead a judgment. The reader is forced to make a decision: Is this man guilty of a crime or the victim of a crime? By the end of the Black Hole series, the reader has a definite answer.