

Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy

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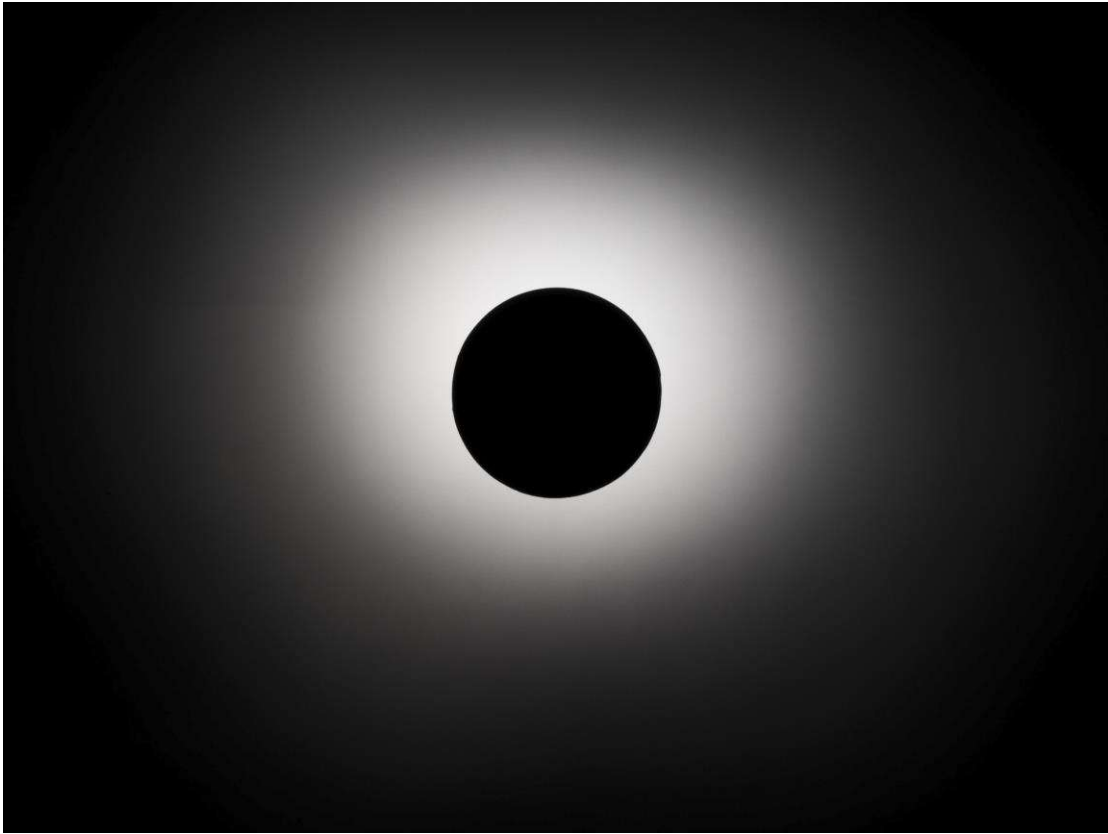


Photo: João Paulo Serafim

REVIEW | *Pandemic* (2020)

BY | Ambika Raja

When the Coronavirus pandemic spread across the world in 2020 it not only brought all facets of global health systems, trade, economy, and education to a standstill but also created a severe and long-lasting impact on the daily lives of people across the planet. How did the unprecedented pandemic deter humans from carrying on with their routine activities? How were individuals and communities transformed during the peak of the health crisis? What aspects of human lives were massively affected by the situation? These are a couple of questions the web graphic novel *Pandemic* tries to address through its short stories rich in visuals and texts.

Developed by the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative, a collective of seven major media houses and local institutions focusing on issues in the Charlotte region in the US, and BOOM Charlotte, an art-led initiative, the graphic novel has been created under a project titled *The Pandemic: Stories of COVID-19*. In an attempt to cater to the immediate needs of Charlotte residents during the Coronavirus pandemic by providing

reliable information and news that can keep communities safe and healthy, the graphic novel tells stories of how the COVID-19 has affected the health, work, and finances of people, through a collection of seven short tales written by several writers and artists (Boraks n.pg). Unlike news reports that strictly focus on facts and figures related to the pandemic, or human-interest articles that narrate individual experiences solely using texts, *Pandemic* offers a blend of relatable tales alongside factual information on the COVID crisis through simple, short sentences and vibrant images, making it interesting and intelligible for readers across all age groups. While the focus of the graphic novel is limited to one particular region, Charlotte in North Carolina, the narrative captures the experiences of numerous individuals hailing from diverse backgrounds and belonging to different races, ethnicity, nationality, and gender thus rendering insights into varied human experiences. Additionally, the novel also views the impact of the pandemic from multiple lenses including death, separation, isolation, homelessness, and employment crisis, and this ensures that a holistic approach is taken towards the subject under discussion.

Prior to delving into the stories of individuals, the novel, in its introductory section, offers a glimpse of the timeline of the Coronavirus pandemic and the immediate response of the North Carolina authorities to the burgeoning issue. The words “Today, we have confirmed our first presumptive positive results for the new Coronavirus in North Carolina,” (Introduction) spoken by the state Governor Roy Cooper and represented in the first panel of the graphic novel, establish the theme and purpose of *Pandemic*. It is worth noting here that the predominant colours in the introductory chapter are blue and black as opposed to the colour red which is usually used in narratives that involve danger, disease, or a sense of urgency. Perhaps, it is a conscious decision on the part of the content creators as the colour blue stands for a sense of trust, credibility, and knowledge, and is usually used in a majority of healthcare logos. The closing down of schools, shutting down of bars, safety instructions and death report mentioned in the chapter foreshadows the tales of tragedies and hope described in the subsequent sections of the novel.

The seven succeeding chapters discuss the tales of affected individuals and families through first or second-person narrative. The story of Charlotte music teacher Cedric Meekins, who is one among the first in the region to be affected by the pandemic, traces how he contracted the virus, the immediate effects it had on his health,

and his slow recovery. The faceless images of people illustrated as long black figures suggest COVID-led death looming large over every individual. In the penultimate panel of the story, the visuals zoom in on the different parts of Meekins' body that have been affected by the virus. His inability to hold an ink pen properly and his difficulty in walking provide readers insights into the minutest troubles the virus can create. Meekins' transformation from a patient to a fully recovered person represented through an image of him wearing a bandanna, sunglasses, and sporting a goatee resonates with the underlying message of the story that "healing is a daily process" (Morabito et al. n.pg.).

Each tale of the graphic novel differs from one another in terms of content, visuals, narrative style, and usage of colours and panels. For instance, the opening sequence of Juan Chagoyan's story has been illustrated in the form of a social media interaction featuring the live streaming of his funeral and a subsequent voice call with the members of his family. At a stage when the globe is moving towards a hybrid model involving virtual and in-person interactions, the representations of Chagoyan's story using virtual motifs are in line with the current and future trends. In an effort to highlight the plight of immigrant families, who have been some of the most vulnerable during the pandemic, the story encapsulates diverse aspects of the lives of immigrants. Chagoyan's quote "I can't be sick. I won't be able to work for a few weeks. I don't have papers," (Chapter 2) suggests the risks beyond health-related ones that the pandemic has posed on immigrant families. Staying true to their journalistic instincts, the writers have not only covered Chagoyan's untimely death but have also probed into the callousness on the part of hospital authorities in giving proper updates regarding the patient's condition to his family. "They never really let us know what was going on," says Ana, the victim's sister, indicating the helpless situation of several immigrant families who not only face financial hardships but find it difficult to communicate with the authorities in a language they are not well-versed in, which in this case is English. It is worth mentioning here that all the chapters of the graphic novel *Pandemic* have been published in both English as well as in Spanish (which is also the most commonly spoken foreign language in Charlotte) on the web pages of the Charlotte Journalism Collaborative and BOOM Charlotte. The availability of the graphic novel in more than one language ensures that crucial information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic is made accessible to a larger population and not just to the English-speaking community.

The tales of suffering, isolation, and hope in *Pandemic* have been characterized in the backdrop of the political situation in the US, specifically, the emergence of the anti-mask protests in various parts of the country. Jordan Grunawalt in his article “The Villain Unmasked: COVID-19 and the Necropolitics of the Anti-Mask Movement” points out that when nationwide stay-at-home orders were first instituted, an exemption was demanded by several anti-mask protestors as they believed that it tampered with their personal, national, and economic freedoms. In the final tale of the graphic narratives, the protagonist strongly sets across the message that wearing a mask is not about freedom, but rather “it’s about whether or not you care about other people” (Chapter 7).

Beginning on a tone of fear and panic, *Pandemic* culminates on a note of hope and possibilities. Since the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous articles and reports have been published on the subject, some of which have been found to be misleading and fake thus providing wrong information to readers. In contrast, the graphic novel *Pandemic* provides a comprehensive insight into the global issue from a human-interest perspective meanwhile ensuring that accurate facts, figures and other medical nuances related to COVID-19 are not left out. The non-fictional and grave subject is dealt with sensibly and the presence of visuals ensure that the readers’ attention is retained throughout the length of the work. For those who are keen on knowing the multiple impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic, the web graphic novel is a definite go-to.



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