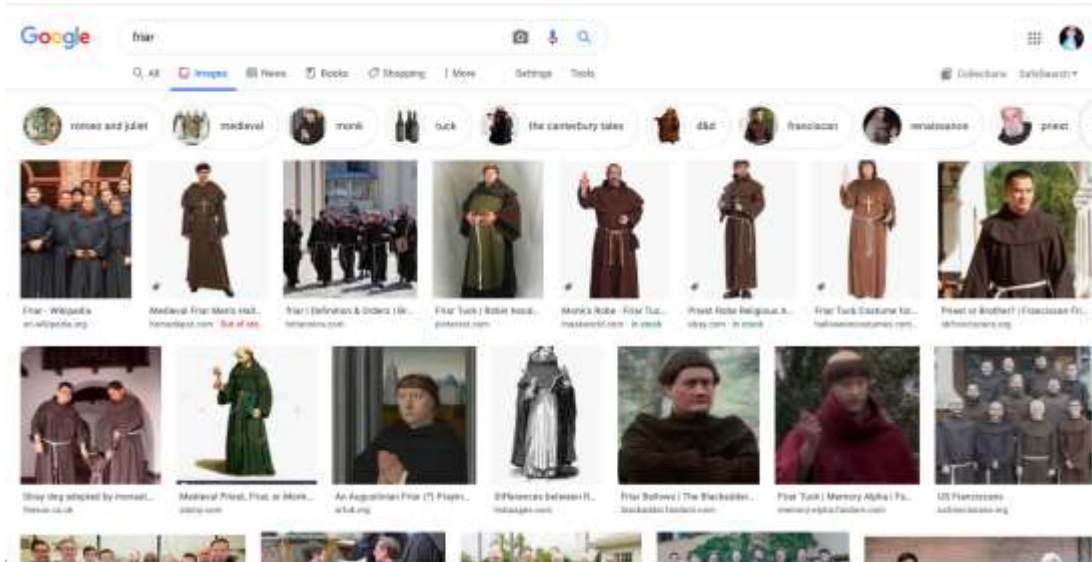# FrameWork 7/20

Zach Seely on Gareth Long and Derek Sullivan's *Decameron*

On April 28, 2020, Sundar Pichai, CEO of Alphabet and Google, stated during a Q1 2020 Earning Call, that he had "seen a significant rise in search activity." He further contextualized that "coronavirus-related search activity at its peak was four times greater than during the peak of the Super Bowl" (Retrieved 06/14/20 from the transcript of the Q1 2020 Earnings Call). The increased traffic should be of no surprise. By this date, people had been stuck at home, many without work, and plenty anxiety-ridden for at least a month. Like a modern-day Delphic oracle, people brought to Google their most pressing questions: what are the symptoms, can I travel, or what should I read? In each case, the platform rewarded the searcher with a plethora of answers. Unlike the Greek riddles that the Pythia returned in verse, the algorithm provided those inquirers with a cypher of listed decontextualized answers and images. Search was just a bit less poetic than its Greek counterpart.

On that same day, Gareth Long and Derek Sullivan entered the word "friar" into their preferred oracle's search bar, returning a glut of images of men in costume, actual friars, and artistic depictions of holy men (See Image 1). From one of these digital models, Long and Sullivan drew together to produce a set of images (See Image 2), turning search into the poetic, perhaps.



(Image 1: Google Search, 7/5/20, "Friar".)

(Image 2, Gareth Long and Derek Sullivan, *Third Day, Third Story, April 28,* 2020, pencil and colored pencil on paper 2 @5.8 x 8.3".)

The illustrations are part of a larger project that Long and Sullivan are collaborating on, which takes its inspiration from the pandemically-relevant *Decameron*, that Italian Renaissance Black Death classic. Each day of the lockdown, or until social distancing restrictions are lifted, they will repeat this process, in isolation, until they have illustrated every story from Boccaccio's text, of which there are 100.

Their choice of text is apt. The conceit of the *Decameron* centers on seven women and three men who have escaped the plague-ravaged city of Florence. Over the course of a ten-day self-quarantine, these protagonists comfort each other by telling stories.

The *Decameron* has appeared in a number of lists of books that one should read during a pandemic. When the crisis hit, a rash of articles appeared for those asking the oracle "What should I read during a pandemic?" (See Chart 1). I, too, admittedly, approached the platform for advice about what to read. A number of articles were returned to me like "Pandemics: An Essential Reading List", published by *Vulture*, and from the *New York Times,* "Your Quarantine Reader." Those lists and countless others list books like Albert Camus' *The Plague*, Stephen King's *The Stand*, and the *Decameron,* which garnered special attention by receiving a significant and sustained portion of that increased Google search activity (See Chart 2).
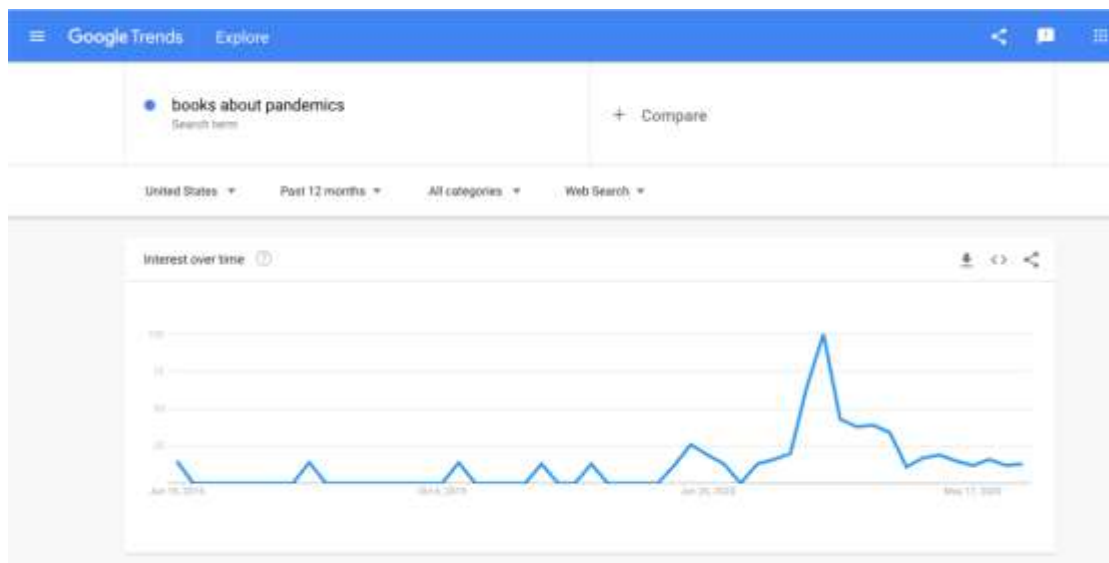
(Chart 1, Google Trends, "books about pandemics" past 12 months, retrieved 6/14/20).
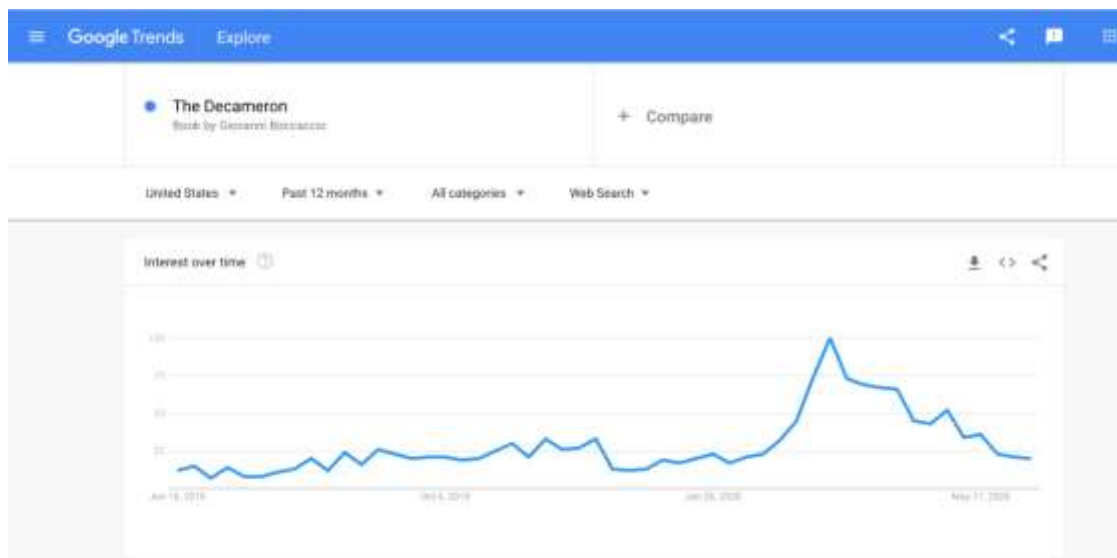
(Chart 2, Google Trends, "The Decameron," past 12 months, retrieved 6/14/20).

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It's tempting to retreat to this text as a form of consolation along with its ten protagonists finding comfort in each other's stories. In *The New Statesmen,* Andre Spicer believes that this consolation is the lesson of the text. "The *Decameron* reminds us that we need the support of others to make it through a public health crisis. Rather than letting ourselves be seized by an epidemic of fear, we should try to occupy ourselves with common pleasures such as playing games, enjoying music and sharing stories. These activities not only improve our sense of wellbeing but also connect us with others" (Retrieved 06/14/20, "The Decameron – the 14th-century Italian book that shows us how to survive coronavirus" *The New Statesmen*, 03/09/20). Laura Benedetti deciphers this lesson, too. The telling of stories acts as a prophylactic by keeping "death at bay" (Retrieved 06/14/20 "Hoyasaxon, a modern-day Decameron: an experiment in narrative healing," *The Irish Times* 06/02/20).

This lesson is the grand gesture of art, that of telling a story. The mimetic act is essential for being human. Art is not the froth of society, but its foundation. When we strip away all the trappings of culture, its buildings, institutions, and religions, we are left with the power of the bard. In the midst of a plague, the act of creation reigns supreme. It's a seductive narrative. Some have been seduced into thinking that this is what we should take from Boccaccio's 14th century romp.

One might be forgiven if one, too, is seduced into thinking Long and Sullivan are engaging with the consolation of art in times of crisis. Looking closer at their work, though, the devil is in the details. Rather than earnest and faithful depictions of each story in their illustrations, one is confronted, on the ninth day, with odd depictions of the film *Junior* (1994) starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as the first pregnant man (see Image 3). This day's work was inspired by a *Decameron* story about a man who thought he was pregnant. It appears that there are less than six degrees separating the body-building actor-turned-governor and Boccaccio. Instead of directly engaging with the story itself, Long and Sullivan use the Internet, and in most cases Google Images, as a mediator between the text and their eventual illustration. This decision is key. What led them to the film *Junior*, one might imagine, is the search term "pregnant man". And thus spake the algorithm.


(Image 3, Gareth Long and Derek Sullivan, *Ninth Day, Third Story, June 27,* 2020, pencil and colored pencil on paper, 2 @5.8 x 8.3").

In many ways, the queries Long and Sullivan feed the giant platform don't return precise representations of their words. Their intentions often break down within the algorithm to hilarious effect, as the inputs don't always bring back the best outputs. It's in this fissure that their project is most interesting. When the oracle is imprecise, they interpret it as they see fit. Maybe, we are being prodded to ask better questions about this text in this time. What sorts of stories are comforting and to whom? With what technologies do we tell stories? Who has the privilege to tell stories? Those ten protagonists were a literate, privileged class.

On April 28th, Sundar Pichai had his own story to tell, which was one of positivity and comfort for his shareholders. Despite the horrors of both a health crisis and an economic crisis (and our oracle was of too poor of vision to predict the racial crisis that would come), Pichai reveled in the boons his company would receive due to increased traffic.

And if one had looked closely into the oracle's eyes, one would have discovered that interest in the *Decameron* peaked in 2004 during the end of the SARS outbreak (See Chart 3). So while search for the Renaissance text has been on the decline, the story since 2004 has been Google's to write.
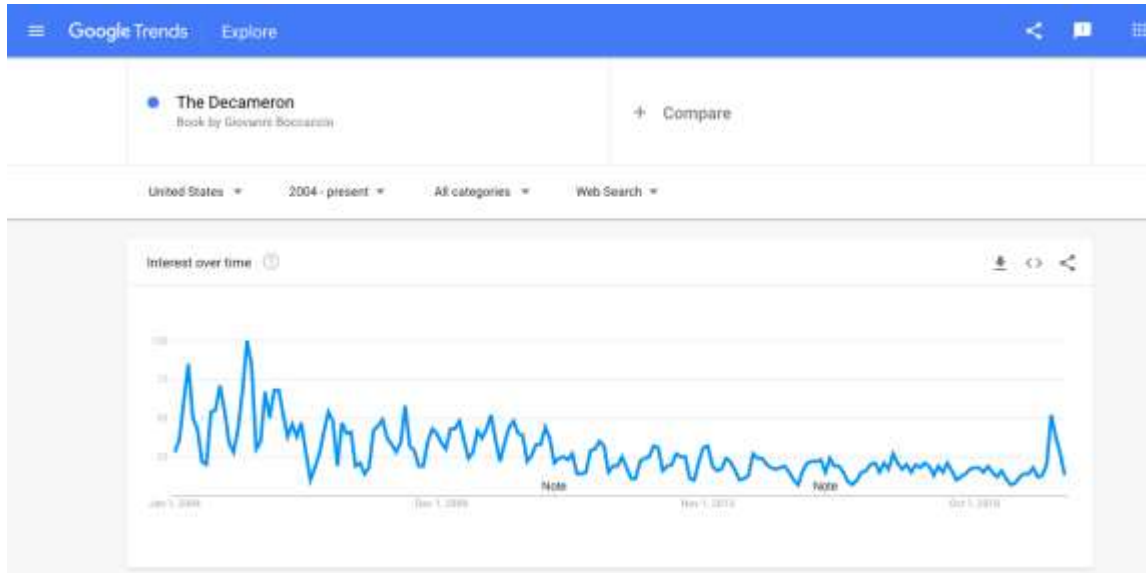
(Chart 3, Google Trends, "The Decameron," 2004 - present, retrieved 6/14/20).