

'The Mysterious Benedict Society': Kids out to crush panic-causing fake news



CHENNAI: "The Mysterious Benedict Society," created by Matt Manfredi and Phil Hay, sees a group of gifted children battling the spread of misinformation that creates fake fears and leads to panic and strife.



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Adapted from Trenton Lee Stewart's 2007 novel, and directed by James Bobin, the Disney+ production sees two boys and two girls in the lead roles in a series that is set to debut in the region on OSN.

As Nicholas Benedict (Tony Hale) — who heads the institution where the four kids are enrolled — says at the start of the show: “Most people care about the truth. But most people, given proper persuasion, can be diverted from it ... every day, our minds are plagued by fear and anxiety.”

There could not be a more fitting premise for the show, as fake news continues to dominate social media, with the lines between what is real and what is fabricated increasingly blurred every day.

The four children, all orphans, include the terrifically brainy Reynie (Mystic Inscho), Sticky (Seth Carr) — who never forgets what they see or hear — the daredevil Kate (Emmy DeOliveira) and the stubborn-but-loveable Constance (Marta Timofeeva).

They are inducted into Benedict’s school for an extraordinary mission. They have to get into the Learning Institute for the Very Learned, which is on an island and is presumably responsible for disseminating fake news.

And since kids’ voices are used to relay this fabricated news, it is imperative, Benedict feels, that his army of boys and girls must infiltrate the institute to break the chain of transmissions.



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The first two episodes, the only ones available for critics at the moment, detail the journey each child has undergone in their road to being picked out for the mission.

Kate's background as a trapeze artist in a circus helps her to overcome one of the difficult tests, while Reynie uses his analytical skills to pass it. Constance's sharp mind enables her to solve every riddle, while Stick's phenomenal memory leads him out of a maze. Each child must pass the trials to be accepted into Benedict's hallowed institute.

But despite these tough tests, the two episodes did not engage me. The adult actors shine, but the child cast let it down. Hale, who is both the main protagonist and the antagonist as Benedict's twin, is amazing with his whimsicality. He displays Jeeves-style humour, his fainting fits brought on by excitement and distress are novel.

The child actors can't match this. Carr is cute as Sticky, but Inscho and DeOliveira struggle to emote. And Timofeeva tries hard to be sarcastic, but gets a trifle too exasperating. It is possible, though, that as the plot progresses, the youngsters may evolve into satisfying performers.
