

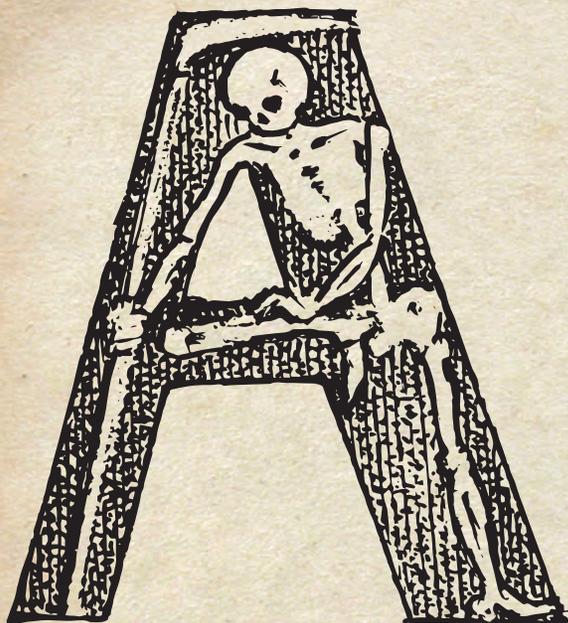
“DARK ACADEMIA” IS THIS YEAR’S BIGGEST SOCIAL MEDIA TREND AND IT’S MAKING TWEED BLAZERS AND FUSTY OLD COLLEGES SEEM COOL. PRIZE PUPIL **JESSICA PRUPAS** EXPLAINS – IN SUITABLY BOOKISH FASHION – WHY SCHOOL’S IN FOR THE SUMMER

DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION: HIT&RUN



DARK ACADEMIA





DEFINITION OF "DARK ACADEMIA"

1. According to pop culture theorist and Instagram academic Kristen Cochrane – whose popular monthly newsletter casts a critical eye on internet culture – dark academia is an aesthetic and lifestyle that “emphasises the scholarly and its encounters with moody themes”; in other words, the emo side of erudition. Its proponents like to engage in knowledge-seeking activities like reading, writing and admiring art – only they’ll probably be wearing dark colours and brooding while doing it. Typical pursuits include, but are not limited to: taking a stroll around Edinburgh (fig. 2) to admire its Gothic buildings on a rainy day; studying for the sake of studying until you become ill and bedridden; being fascinated by mysterious fictional deaths.



TS EMERGENCE

2.1. The subculture took first root on TikTok, Instagram and Tumblr in 2020, when creators like 18-year-old theatre student Sydney Decker – who runs themed IG

account @myfairesttreasure – began posting mood boards that instructed adherents on how to dress, do their make-up and spend their free time.

Suggestions include: writing in a journal, reciting poetry and skulking around moody libraries (fig.3).

2.2. The trend really caught fire last year, when more and more creators began pivoting towards the dark academic realm. Now, #darkacademia has over 1.8 billion views on Tiktok and 1.4 million posts on Instagram. Its most prolific creators include the mysterious Celesté – aka @deadacademic on Instagram and @artindetails on Twitter – who posts classic paintings of sorrowful subjects coupled with torturous, existential quotes from everyone from Homer to Bukowski, and Talya, who posts shadowy, contemplative videos of her life in Edinburgh under the handle @cosyacademia on TikTok. (Her bio reads: “Eternally romanticising my life.”)



HEMES

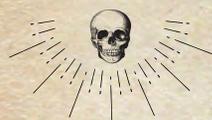
3.1. A torrent of tweed

Aesthetically, the trend has an established uniform: crisp linen shirts, chunky argyle or cable knit jumpers, trousers or wool skirts, and blazers. It’s preferable that at least one item of clothing is made from tweed, and everything must be in earthy tones.

See: *The floaty professor look espoused by dark academic fashion icon Clive, played by Hugh Grant, in 1987 film Maurice (fig.1).*



FIG.1



The University of Edinburgh
SCOTLAND

This storied uni has seen its fair share of pasty bookish students shuffling to lectures under gloomy autumnal skies. The 440-year-old institute rocks a hodgepodge of architectural vibes, from gleaming steel-and-glass

boxes to sprawling Renaissance palazzi. For the true dark academia experience, however, make a beeline for imperious New College, designed by Victorian architect William Henry Playfair.



FIG.2

FIG.3



*John Rylands
Library*

MANCHESTER

Positively Hogwarts-ian with its soaring vaulted ceilings, whisper-quiet alcoves and venerable stone columns, John Rylands Library in the centre of Manchester is a bibliophile's dream. Fully 200,000 volumes – among them first editions of the Gutenberg Bible and dark academia staple *Ulysses* – perfume the air with a heady intellectual musk. There's even a romantic backstory – Enriqueta Rylands tearfully erected this beautiful book repository in tribute to her late husband, a textile tycoon and philanthropist, throwing the doors open on their wedding anniversary in 1899.

3.2. So emotional

According to Cochrane, dark academia's preferred mood – both meteorologically and metaphorically – is “rain and overcast skies”. Its adherents tend toward emotional volatility and a general surplus of “feels”, cultivating a rich interior life of poetic anguish and sublime pain.

See: *Elle Fanning as the lovelorn author of Frankenstein in 2017's Mary Shelley (fig.4).*



FIG.4

3.3. Big brain stuff

It's called “dark academia”, after all. Proponents of the trend emphasise intellectualism, usually in the context of a classical, liberal education. The humanities get preferential treatment over STEM subjects: literature, philosophy, history, art and ancient and modern languages are all frequent preoccupations of the dark academic.

See: *Robin Williams as unorthodox English teacher* ▶



FIG.5

Mr Keating in the canonical dark academic film, *Dead Poets Society* (fig.5).

3.4. Learning the hard way

Dark academic purists don't look for earthly rewards like fame or money – rather, they pursue knowledge for knowledge's sake. "If you become an academic under the spirit of dark academia, it is because you are obsessed with the pursuit of knowledge," says Cochrane. "It engulfs you and you can become sick from it." The illness or general hardship caused by the relentless, single-minded pursuit of your craft is romanticised – what's more romantic than dedicating your life to art?

See: *Daniel Day-Lewis's turn as obsessive designer Reynolds Woodcock in Phantom Thread* (fig.6).



FIG.6



WHY NOW?

4.1. The question of why dark academia has reached a fever pitch in 2022 perplexes followers of the trend. While there's no unified theory, some believe the timing of its rise is significant – its ascension coincided with the pandemic. "People have been reflecting, reading, and watching a lot of film and television with more time spent at home," says Cochrane. "Maybe Instagram browsing and comparing oneself to others has begun to expire."

4.2. This dovetails with another theory – that dark academia is a reaction against the primacy of pop culture online, a counterpoint to the information superhighway of Paris Hilton memes and cat videos. According to Cochrane, dark academia is still a way for people to have fun online, but "it's oppositional to the idea of not reading or thinking".

FIG.8

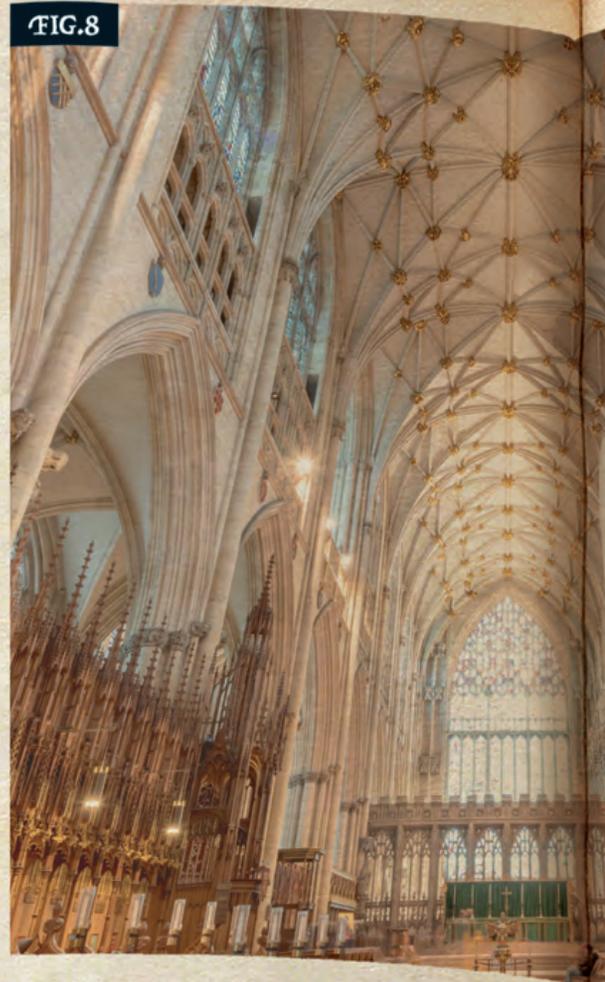
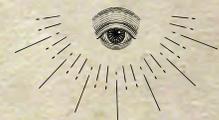


FIG.7



St Xavier's College

MUMBAI

Originally founded, and still controlled, by Jesuits – the elite order of Roman Catholic priests who love a bit of education and practical preaching – Mumbai's foremost Neo-Gothic pile conceals thrilling hidden passages

and a noteworthy collection of early Mesopotamian seals. Students have to adhere to a strict dress code and the college once hosted a speech by everyone's favourite highbrow pin-up, Barack Obama.

PHOTOS: ALAMY, ADOBE STOCK, TOUCHSTONE, SKW ATLANTIC, CORWIN WICKERSHAM



York Minster

ENGLAND

Utterly dominating the skyline of this peaceful city, York Minster – aka the Cathedral and Metropolitan Church of Saint Peter in York – is a gigantic Gothic beast. Started in about 1230, but not finished until 1472, the vast stone hulk incorporates – among innumerable leering gargoyles and flying buttresses – the largest surviving medieval window in Great Britain. No fewer than 300 panels of divine stained glass tell the epic story of Creation and the end of the world itself.



CONCLUSION

5.1. After years as a social media subculture, it looks like dark academia is finally breaking into the mainstream.

Now that travel is on the books again, cerebral tourists are venturing out to explore the world's dark academic hotspots (figs.7-9). Late last year, author and journalist Lili Anolik released a swishly produced podcast called *Once Upon a Time... at Bennington College*, which chronicles all the gossip of the Vermont university's most salacious decade, the 1980s – when dark academic icon and author Donna Tartt was a student.

TV has hit peak dark academia: *A Discovery of Witches* – based on Deborah Harkness' *All Souls Trilogy* (fig.10), which follows a Yale professor's discovery of a bewitched manuscript – and *Dickinson* (fig.11), a biographical series about the 19th-century poet, are both in their third season.



FIG.10

So, will we all be donning tweed blazers and carrying around dog-eared novels this year? Maybe not. Cochrane stresses that dark academia still has, well, a dark side. "It has great potential for being toxic," she says. Sacrificing your health for the sake of art is never a good look.

5.2. Still, the mainstreaming of the trend has some upsides – specifically, its normalising effect on

intellectualism. "One of the critiques of my work is that it's too 'academic,'" says Cochrane. "I think this is because our culture doesn't value subtext." But dark academia's rise could change that a little by making more space for the cerebral online. Once we've had our fill of mindless scrolling, it won't kill us to use our brains a little – or will it?



Boch Center ~ Wang Theatre

BOSTON

The Wang is a pretty faux-Baroque performing arts venue where, since the roaring 1920s, the learned denizens of New England have congregated for high-minded nights at the ballet and such. These days, the classical canon

jostles for position on the Wang playbill with brainy contemporary acts like Sigur Rós (8 June). If you're a sucker for a frieze, Corinthian capitals and ornamented ceilings, you're guaranteed to feel at home here.



FIG.9



FIG.11

📺 Watch *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*