



## Waves of YA, Episode 10: Enter Dark Academia with Kit Frick

### ***Transcript:***

00;00;06;24 - 00;00;22;03

Lindsay

Hello and welcome to Waves of Y.A., a podcast focused on young adult literacy. Brought to you by The Ocean County Library's Teen Literacy Workgroup. Hello. My name is Lindsay. I'm the teen librarian at the Brick Branch, and joining me today, we have

00;00;22;15 - 00;00;24;15

Kristen

Kristen from the Little Egg Harbor branch,

00;00;24;21 - 00;00;31;23

Colleen

Colleen from the Lacey Branch and Kit Frick, your author guest for the day.

00;00;31;25 - 00;00;57;07

Lindsay

Today's episode features special guest Kit Frick, author of Y.A. thriller, *I Killed Zoe Spanos*, and her forthcoming novel, *Very Bad People*. We'll be discussing Kit's new novel and the insides of the genre that has grown in popularity in the last few years. Dark academia. So, Kit, can you start us off and maybe tell us a little bit about your writing journey?

00;00;57;17 - 00;01;30;24

Kit Frick

Sure. It's really nice to be with all of you today. I am joining you from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It is, Yeah. Sorry, I have cousins out there, so I like it. Oh, wonderful. Yeah. So, great to be a guest. Thank you for having me. Okay, so, yeah, writing journey. So I've been an avid writer since childhood. I started off with, I had this amazing first grade teacher that had us write and, quote unquote publish our first books and stories in the classroom in first grade.

00;01;30;24 - 00;01;58;03

Kit Frick

So we, we wrote and illustrated little books and stapled them together with construction paper covers, and there was even a little copyright on the interior page. And so I got really into the idea of not just writing, but also the idea that writing could appear in book form, and real people, not just those magical elves called authors, could write a book from a pretty early age.

00;01;58;21 - 00;02;26;01

Kit Frick

I wrote a lot of poetry as a child and teen. I did not get involved in writing in a community sense until college. I didn't really share, like I had a lot of notebooks where I kept all of my teen poems, which were a lot like song lyrics without the music. There was a lot of rhyme structure that you would find in pop songs because I didn't really read a lot of poetry.

00;02;26;06 - 00;02;38;16

Kit Frick

I didn't know what was going on in contemporary poetry, but I loved listening to music. And so yeah, my poems were, going back and reading them, I'm like, Oh, this is kind of like an Alanis Morissette song.

00;02;40;24 - 00;03;05;11

Kit Frick

So in college, I took my first actual classes in writing. I was lucky to go to a school, which we'll talk about more when we get into dark academia, but a school that had a really good writing program. And so I was lucky to be able to take writing workshops. Again, I took mostly poetry classes. I actually started reading a lot of poetry and understanding what contemporary poetry was.

00;03;05;25 - 00;03;34;01

Kit Frick

I still wrote fiction. I wrote short stories. I went on and got my MFA a few years after college graduation, I went to Syracuse. I got an MFA in poetry, and it wasn't until after I graduated from that MFA program when I was in my early thirties that I really started reading a lot of Y.A. which had not been an established category yet in publishing when I was a teen.

00;03;34;15 - 00;03;57;15

Kit Frick

So I came to that late as an adult and loved it and was like, Oh my God, I'm so sad that this was not a thing when I was a teen but I'm so happy to find it now. And I still felt super connected to my teen self and still do. And so my first foray into writing full length fiction was in Y.A., and I really found my voice in that.

00;03;57;29 - 00;04;19;22

Kit Frick

So that's how I came to Young Adult , super, super summarized version. There's a more boring detail I could get into, but yes, that's poetry writing classes, MFA, and then sort of self-taught in

fiction. I didn't really study fiction or Young Adult, came to all of that on my own and super happy to be here.

00;04;20;13 - 00;04;25;09

Colleen

So what made you interested in writing thrillers in dark academia in general?

00;04;25;11 - 00;04;50;03

Kit Frick

Yeah, I have a lifelong love of mysteries and games, and so I really think that that is what drew me to suspense when I was writing that first Y.A. novel, which was published in 2018 called See all the Stars. My publisher is rereleasing it actually this fall under a new title. It'll be called Before We Were Sorry, same book.

00;04;50;28 - 00;05;16;22

Kit Frick

It has a new, really awesome illustrated cover. New title hopefully gets new readers, people that find I Killed Zoe Spanos, and Very Bad People hoping they might go back to the beginning and find that book. The reason I bring that book up is because it is my most sort of classic contemporary Y.A. book. There is a suspense plot that is in the DNA of the story.

00;05;16;23 - 00;05;45;07

Kit Frick

Suspense really drives the narrative, but it's not a murder mystery. It's not a classic thriller in the way that my writing has progressed since then. But I think even writing that first book, even though I didn't set out to write a thriller or a mystery novel per say, I was still drawn to the suspense and how that could formulate the narrative.

00;05;45;07 - 00;06;15;21

Kit Frick

And I think that really does come from just always being fascinated with mysteries and and crime in a in a, that sounds creepy to say that that's something I'm fascinated with, but I think a lot of us are. Yeah. I mean, from a psychological perspective, what drives people to commit crime, especially violent crime and all of that I think was sort of swirling when I set out to write that first book.

00;06;15;21 - 00;06;41;01

Kit Frick

And it's just grown with each book. I settled really solidly at this point into a mystery thriller space in terms of dark academia, that was also part of the question, right? Thriller. Yeah, dark academia, right. So I think like many people that did not attend a private school or boarding school, I've always been a little bit obsessed with them.

00;06;41;20 - 00;07;11;01

Kit Frick

There's, I think maybe a little bit less of a luster of one actually went to a boarding school. My spouse went to boarding school. I have good friends that went to boarding school. They were all really invaluable resources. When I was researching this book, I spoke with folks that had that experience. I myself went to a small, private liberal arts college when I was just a little bit older than high school age obviously.

00;07;12;08 - 00;07;46;29

Kit Frick

And while it was not a boarding school, it was college. There is, I think, a lot of parallels between a specific type of college experience that one might have on a traditional private residential liberal arts campus and a boarding school. And so a lot of my inspiration for this book for *Very Bad People* was drawn not only from, you know, interest in boarding school and research that I've done into it, but also from my own experience in college.

00;07;46;29 - 00;08;12;12

Kit Frick

I always wanted to find a way to channel that into a Y.A. book. So a boarding school setting just seemed like a natural fit. And that's a little different from dark academia. We're going to get a lot into those sort of tropes, I'm sure. And like what dark, how we define that, what that means. But I'll just start with an interest in boarding school to begin with.

00;08;12;12 - 00;08;19;06

Kit Frick

And that's, that's how I sort of came to my interests for the setting for *Very Bad People*.

00;08;19;08 - 00;08;24;24

Kristen

Can you tell us a little bit about your newest book, *Very Bad People*?

00;08;25;14 - 00;08;49;18

Kit Frick

Yeah, absolutely. I'll start with the official pitch and then I can say a little bit more about like if you like this, you might like this book. So the official pitch for *Very Bad People*, it is about a teen girl search for answers about her mother's mysterious death, which leads to a powerful secret society at her new boarding school and a dangerous game of revenge that will leave her forever changed.

00;08;50;06 - 00;09;07;03

Kit Frick

And if that doesn't reel you in, I can also say that if you like secret societies and sister drama, dark family secrets, first love, mysterious letters and moral quandaries, this might be a book for you.

00;09;07;14 - 00;09;09;17

Colleen

Oh, yes. Mysterious letters.

00;09;09;25 - 00;09;19;22

Kit Frick

Yes. Love, Mysterious letters. Lots, lots of secrets and mystery in this one. That was really, really fun to dig in to.

00;09;20;08 - 00;09;28;06

Kristen

I enjoyed very bad people. Do you remember, I think 19, in the nineties there was a movie Skulls, I guess.

00;09;28;08 - 00;09;28;21

Colleen

Oh, yeah.

00;09;28;21 - 00;09;41;17

Kristen

So many vibes of like, it was like a mixture of my college experience plus skulls. But it took place like for people in high school and I was like, Oh man, that's a lot to do. There's like a whole lot to deal with. It was really good.

00;09;41;19 - 00;09;43;02

Kit Frick

00;09;43;04 - 00;09;54;28

Kit Frick

Thank you. Yeah, that's hilarious. I actually I had never seen Skulls. I watched it though, recently after I wrote this book because I was like, I have to see it. It's Joshua Jackson. Like how did I miss this movie when it came out.

00;10;01;08 - 00;10;08;19

Kit Frick

And it I mean, it's not great, is it? It is not a work of cinematic excellence. I mean, anything with the secret society, Like give that to me.

00;10;09;05 - 00;10;19;28

Kristen

Yeah. I mean, I feel like we get to say that about most movies from the nineties. It was like, you know, cinematic excellence. But I will go back to it like, you're right, I'm still there for it.

00;10;21;08 - 00;10;36;18

Kristen

So before it came on, we were just talking about what makes a book dark Academia, like what fits it into the genre, and maybe this is like a personalized answer because I think we all had a little bit of a twist on our answers.

00;10;36;26 - 00;10;46;22

Kristen

But for the listeners who maybe haven't gotten into this genre other than like boarding schools, like what else makes it dark academia and is it only boarding schools?

00;10;47;01 - 00;11;10;13

Kit Frick

Yeah, I think we could easily have four different answers to this question because I think there is a Wikipedia page on dark academia, like it is something one could look up in a sense, but it's not something with a super strict definition, and I think it means something different to a lot of different authors and readers and content creators on social media.

00;11;10;23 - 00;11;43;00

Kit Frick

So I can talk a little bit about how I define dark academia, but I'd also be really interested to hear what your take on it is. My sense is that it started with this Tik Tok and Instagram aesthetic, which predated the pandemic but is fairly recent. And I don't mean that there have not been books set at boarding schools before this time, but rather just the term dark academia, I don't think had been coined until fairly recently.

00;11;43;00 - 00;12;18;16

Kit Frick

And so now there's so there's both the social media aesthetic and then there is the way that the term dark academia has been used to be applied to books often Y.A., not always Y.A. also adult market novels often set at boarding school. But no, I don't think strictly boarding school. Also a lot of college and university settings in terms of both novels and the aesthetic on social media.

00;12;18;16 - 00;13;04;04

Kit Frick

I think both start with all of the classic trappings of academia and then layer in a big dose of obsession. So all of the darkness of the aesthetics, the candles and the skulls and the gothic makeup, all of that comes back to an obsession with learning and knowledge and set that at a time of coming to age and forming an identity that really appeals to teen readers and young adults and both readers, and also to the young, the teen and young adult community of creators on social media that are creating content with this aesthetic.

00;13;04;04 - 00;13;57;29

Kit Frick

So, I think there's a little bit of a difference when you're talking about social media and talking about a subgenre of Y.A. thriller or a genre within books. But I think they're all connected in that way. So yeah, I think the crux of it is academia. Start with classic, like obsession with scholar, scholarship with knowledge. And both the sort of visual cues of like the tweed jackets and the steaming mug of tea and all those things, but also make it dark in terms of characters that are obsessed to the point of probably making some morally grey decisions and possibly getting into witchcraft.

00;13;58;02 - 00;14;22;06

Kit Frick

And there are lots of different applications depending on book. That's something I love about this subgenre is it doesn't just mean one thing. There are lots of ways that academia and this academic backdrop setting can go dark, but I think that's how I've been defining it anyway. I'm interested to hear what it means for you on the library side of things.

00;14;22;22 - 00;14;40;20

Colleen

I do like the idea you said about it being an obsession with education and like succeeding, and I think we see that and it's like, oh, yadda yadda, yadda. She's a high achieving senior at her, at her boarding school and, you know, like and then it's what will she do to keep that, to keep being number one in her class.

00;14;41;01 - 00;15;02;13

Colleen

We see that the one I read in the fall was Ace of Spades. They're, they're the two highest achieving people in their class, but they're being blackmailed by this mysterious stranger. In order to keep their place, they have to maybe do some things they shouldn't or keep secrets on others. And then it turns into this huge conspiracy in the whole school, which was pretty wild.

00;15;03;01 - 00;15;40;14

Kristen

I mean, I like the idea of the obsession. And Colleen, you're saying the importance of belonging. I belong as number one or I belong at the school. That is a theme that comes back a lot of times in the dark academia books. And I'm like, already merging into tropes like who, who belongs here and what does it mean to belong here, and what do you have to do to stay here, are all like pieces that I think are important in considering something to be in the genre. Though I think it is a nebulous genre, like when I was looking at different lists.

00;15;40;22 - 00;16;02;15

Kristen

I see One of Us is Lying by Karen McManus will make the dark academia list. But for me that was not as much dark academia as it was the setting is school, but I didn't get the same vibe that I do from books that for me, hit marks that are dark academia.

00;16;02;23 - 00;16;05;06

Colleen

Mm hmm. That's more like just a murder mystery.

00;16;05;12 - 00;16;18;09

Colleen

It's more like on par with, like, Holly Jackson, which I wouldn't consider hers dark academia, even though she's a high schooler. She has she's in school. But it's not all about that community of the school. It's more about her and what she's doing.

00;16;18;23 - 00;16;26;05

Kristen

Yes. But then you have Truly Devious and I would definitely put that in the genre because the school is more than the backdrop.

00;16;26;05 - 00;16;36;22

Kristen

The school is part of the story. I think that for me is the distinction where it's not just a setting, it influences the characters in ways more than just like I'm getting an education.

00;16;36;24 - 00;16;47;22

Colleen

Yeah, it's like it's, it's like it's one of the characters and I never thought of that before. That's a really good point. And that's why I do think that Harry Potter is the original dark academia, because Hogwarts is very essential to the story.

00;16;48;06 - 00;17;01;27

Kristen

Yes, Yes. And I hear that. But I don't know that I feel like there was something dark about Dead Poets Society. There's something dark about A Seperate Peace. And all of those happened at boarding schools and they actually pre-date Harry Potter.

00;17;02;03 - 00;17;02;20

Colleen

Yeah, that's true.

00;17;03;19 - 00;17;05;03

Colleen

I think Dead Poets Society is a great example.

00;17;05;03 - 00;17;11;25

Kit Frick



But that does raise an interesting question, thinking about, you know, One Of Us is Lying and Holly Jackson series.

00;17;12;00 - 00;17;24;18

Kit Frick

Those characters attend public schools. And I do wonder, I also don't think of them as being dark academia. I think of them as being amazing. Y.A.

00;17;24;21 - 00;17;25;27

Kristen

Fabulous

00;17;26;00 - 00;17;44;17

Kit Frick

but not necessarily dark academia. But I am curious, could a public school be a setting for a dark academia novel. I think it could. I don't know that, boarding school has become kind of synonymous, at least within Y.A. with dark academia, not in adult.

00;17;44;17 - 00;18;17;08

Kit Frick

I mean, then we get into the college and university setting more, but the idea of setting being a character in a lot of these dark academia books, which I think sort of naturally happens at a boarding school setting because part of the appeal for readers is really the access to a elite institution that has its own set of quirky rules, rules and traditions, etc..

00;18;17;29 - 00;18;50;06

Kit Frick

That's part of, I believe, what draws readers in to a boarding school book, whether it's dark academia or whether it's Curtis Sittenfeld Prep. These are things that draw readers in. So I wonder if in a public institution, if there is that same attention to detail when it comes to building the setting of that public high school, if perhaps a book could be dark academia, I think I think it's possible.

00;18;50;06 - 00;19;00;08

Kit Frick

I don't know that, I don't know that I've really seen that or at least those books may exist. And it's not front of mind for me, but I think it's possible for sure.

00;19;00;24 - 00;19;11;26

Colleen

Yeah, especially as the genre grows, we might see more people writing dark academia and then from a different perspective. But yeah, nothing jumps out to me as taking place in a public school at all that I've read.

00;19;12;23 - 00;19;17;10

Colleen

I was trying to think of some, but I think they're all private. At least private schools, if not boarding schools.

00;19;17;12 - 00;19;35;14

Kit Frick

Yeah, but certainly at public school, like there can be secretive things going on. You could have something equivalent to a secret society in a public school. I think we just haven't really seen that yet. Mhm. Or if we have, you know, someone needs to tell me because I want to read that book.

00;19;35;16 - 00;19;37;12

Kit Frick

Yeah, Bring it to my attention, please.

00;19;38;21 - 00;19;52;02

Lindsay

So do you have any favorite dark academia Y.A. books that you've read? I am the one who asked what dark academia was, which is what got our conversation started. So I'm curious to know what your favorites are.

00;19;52;06 - 00;20;07;15

Kit Frick

Oh, yeah. So this is not Y.A., although I will get into Y.A., I but I think I would be remiss without starting with Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, which definitely checks all of those dark academia boxes for me.

00;20;07;25 - 00;20;45;02

Kit Frick

And there's a reason it's probably the most talked about dark academia title on book talk. It is definitely ubiquitous. I doubt anyone listening to this podcast is like, Oh, that's what I haven't heard of. But there's a reason that everyone keeps coming back to that book. It is university set, It is written for an adult market. But as with I think many books that are set at colleges and universities that have 18, early 20 something characters, there's a wide appeal among teen readers, just as there is within adult readers.

00;20;45;02 - 00;21;37;21

Kit Frick

And it is definitely an obsessive academia privilege thriller with a ton of morally dark content. So that's a classic for a reason within the genre and then within Y.A. a few that I've really enjoyed recently are Victoria Lee's *A Lesson in Vengeance* came out last year and was great. A couple of years ago. *People Like US* by Dana Mele and both of those are set at boarding schools

and then also dark academia with a speculative twist Wilder Girls, by Rory Power is another favorite of mine and it's also pretty recent from a couple of years ago.

00;21;37;29 - 00;21;39;26

Kit Frick

I found those three to be really exciting.

00;21;40;08 - 00;21;43;22

Colleen

Now I just heard about actually just today that Donna Tartt one so I.

00;21;44;16 - 00;21;48;16

Kit Frick

... everyone knows this one was

00;21;49;27 - 00;21;56;25

Colleen

I was like, Oh, God, not, you know, But yeah, I kind of really want I really wanted to read that when I was reading about it.

00;21;56;25 - 00;22;00;11

Colleen

So since you're saying how good it is, I definitely will put it on my list to read.

00;22;01;09 - 00;22;02;19

Kit Frick

Oh, yeah, I highly recommend.

00;22;02;21 - 00;22;26;13

Colleen

Yeah. And it's interesting because some of my favorite dark academia is not Y.A. like you were saying, but I think that it could have some sort of crossover appeal. And one of my favorite favorites and I have the sequel on Hold was A Deadly Education, which is like super fantasy, but also dark academia because they're in a witchy boarding school, you know, learning different like magics and stuff, and there's like crazy stuff going on.

00;22;26;13 - 00;22;34;19

Colleen

Not so good, but it's definitely meant for adults. Do I always recommend that to my teens? No, but maybe in a couple of years.

00;22;35;07 - 00;22;53;26

Kit Frick

Well, something I love about this genre is that it does span not Y.A. and adult, but also you mentioned Harry Potter, middle grade on up. There's probably even chapter books that fall into this category to a certain degree, although I don't know how dark a lot of chapter books go.

00;22;53;26 - 00;23;33;20

Kit Frick

But in any case, it spans age categories and it also spans genres. Like you were saying, like there's fantasy, there's Leigh Bardugo. There's witchy stuff, there is very contemporary, straight up murder mystery thriller, which tends to be what I gravitate toward because it's what I write. But there's speculative, there's contemporary, there's historical, there's so much crossover in terms of age, category, and genre and dark academia occupies this kind of cool subject and niche that pulls from all of these.

00;23;34;06 - 00;24;07;22

Kristen

I recently read the Chandler Legacies and it it was really fabulous. And for me, it wasn't a murder mystery, but it was very dark anyway. The biggest thing was the things that happen and need to be kept secret to keep the school going. And then how do students who don't like certain parts of the school as Chandler, parts of the school, how do they show that they love their school?

00;24;07;22 - 00;24;33;27

Kristen

That they want to be there, but that the school can be better or the people there can be better. That's something that really resonated for me as I love the organization because of what I believe the organization can be, not necessarily what it's doing today. And so I think that that that's definitely a piece of dark academia. That's when I'm looking for a book.

00;24;34;10 - 00;24;36;11

Kristen

I want one that has a little bit of that.

00;24;36;20 - 00;24;38;17

Kit Frick

That sounds really good. I'll have to check that out.

00;24;39;13 - 00;24;44;15

Kristen

Okay. Can we talk about tropes? Because that's kind of where I was heading.

00;24;44;15 - 00;24;45;11

Colleen

Heading there?

00;24;45;11 - 00;24;59;20

Kristen

Yeah, where I'm heading. I'm like, There's always got to be like a teacher that's like, it's really hard to get them to take anything seriously and there's got to be like stuff that teens shouldn't have to deal with.

00;24;59;20 - 00;25;19;01

Kristen

But because an adult doesn't do it, you're like, Oh, this is all on me. This is what that now I've got to do this. I've got to tackle the entire institution. But I get really nostalgic because I worked in higher education and I was an RA when I went to college. I didn't go to boarding school for high school.

00;25;19;01 - 00;25;42;08

Kristen

But a lot of this resonates on like every level because I'm like, where are the adults? Like all the times that I'm reading, I'm like, Why are they not taking care of this? And part of coming of age is figuring out that you need to take care of the stuff too. And so that ends up as one of my favorite tropes is the bumbling adults.

00;25;42;10 - 00;25;42;28

Colleen

Clueless.

00;25;43;10 - 00;26;02;08

Colleen

Yeah, you know what that actually made me think of? And this is not a book, obviously, but I kind of thought of Buffy the Vampire Slayer is kind of a bit of dark academia. It just like came to me and I'm like, because that's a public school. Jinx. You go, because she's doing all this stuff. Her mother doesn't know what's going on.

00;26;02;08 - 00;26;06;06

Colleen

She's washing blood out of her clothes and she's just pretend it's not happening. Right?

00;26;06;06 - 00;26;16;29

Kristen

And she's like, Oh, this is on me. Like, I am the the person that must defeat all of the demons. Like, that's all on me. Like, I have algebra. Come on.

00;26;18;19 - 00;26;28;18

Colleen

Yeah, the mundane having to go to class, but still having all this pressure on you, whether it's just being blackmailed or whether it is saving the world, it's like, very interesting.

00;26;28;27 - 00;26;57;19

Kit Frick

Yeah. I mean, I think that's something that draws readers to Y.A. in general, right? It's the teen centered stories where teens are often taking on so much more than perhaps they should have to or, or in a way that is really empowering because the adults take a backseat and the teens get to play the leading role. Yeah, I mean, that's definitely something that has always drawn me as a reader.

00;26;58;06 - 00;27;20;00

Kristen

And because like you, there wasn't really a Y.A. section when I was growing up. I'm like, I need these lessons now. Please tell me how do I deal with this, Y.A. books? And that's like one of the reasons that I get so connected to Y.A. books? Because I'm like, I need to know what I'm supposed to do because I jumped from like R.L. Stine to Stephen King.

00;27;20;04 - 00;27;22;28

Kristen

And like, there was nothing in between with the steps.

00;27;24;26 - 00;27;28;29

Kit Frick

No, that's so true that the teen section, when I was growing up,

00;27;29;02 - 00;27;46;23

Kit Frick

It was all R.L. Stine and Christopher Pike. We had lots of that. If you wanted horror, you were set, but if you wanted anything else, you had to seek out books that were written for adults but that centered teen characters in the general fiction section, which I did a lot, and I loved those books.

00;27;47;16 - 00;28;21;26

Kit Frick

But yes, tropes. Secret societies, of course, we've talked about that a little bit, that obviously plays a prominent role in Very Bad People. Give me a secret society. I am always going to be fascinated. I want to know about all of the arcane ritual. I want to know about the hierarchy of power. I want to know about the interaction between the campus writ large and the functioning of the secret society.

00;28;21;26 - 00;29;07;28

Kit Frick

I'm all about all about those books. And let's see what else. This is something that we already talked about a little bit, but I think of it as a trope as well, which are college or boarding school campuses that are a character in their own right. I mean, that's something that feels like a

pretty essential element for me when reading Dark Academia, and I'll broaden that to, say, any school setting that feels like a character in its own right and campus maps along with that, I got super lucky in that Very Bad People has a really meticulously illustrated campus map for Tipton Academy and I love any book that has a campus map like,

00;29;07;28 - 00;29;16;21

Colleen

Any map in general, like I look like, where are they? Where are they going here? Okay. Oh, that's over there. Yeah. It's just so fun to go back to the beginning and check out the map.

00;29;16;23 - 00;29;27;02

Kit Frick

It's a love map and map, especially like I expect a map a little bit more in fantasy, but I find a map in a book that's not fantasy.

00;29;27;09 - 00;30;29;24

Kit Frick

I'm extra excited because it's like a surprise. And then one more trope teen or college age characters that are super smart, obsessed with learning and developing their own specific worldview, which is in these books, often highly educated but also skewed by privilege or by self-interest. So this specific type of character that is both smart and engaged, but also flawed in a way because of the way that either the setting or their background or the influences in the school has developed has contributed to developing their worldview and the way in which this combination often leads to dark or morally gray decisions that readers can then chew over.

00;30;30;09 - 00;31;05;23

Kit Frick

That's something that appears in most of my favorite dark academia books. The Secret History for sure, A Lesson in Vengeance, Wilder Girls, there's Get Even, that series by Gretchen McNeil. I love teen characters that are super smart and interesting, but also are in part a product of their setting and in part due to whatever personal baggage and personality that the author is throwing into the mix are making these really dark choices.

00;31;06;14 - 00;31;26;10

Colleen

Yeah, and that does remind me of truly devious, devious characters. Very like she's a little odd sometimes, but she's so smart and she goes, she's so far where her parents are. She goes so opposite of it that it's almost like too much. She has a very narrow view of things, but she slowly opens it up over the course of the series, which is also really interesting.

00;31;26;10 - 00;31;34;07

Colleen

We can see her actually doing a character arc where sometimes we don't get to see that if the character is too perfect, it's uninteresting as they're growing.

00;31;34;07 - 00;31;35;02

Kit Frick

Yeah, yeah.

00;31;35;25 - 00;31;55;23

Kristen

And that the relationship between home and the school or sometimes it's the town and the school, like you see that there's something very different about this place versus where one of the characters or sometimes multiple characters came from and then now where they are.

00;31;55;23 - 00;32;27;17

Kristen

And there's the conflict for those characters. Also the conflict between the school and the town that it's in. And I don't necessarily know that that's only, a lot of these tropes are actual things that are, that are true for boarding schools and for private institutions and sometimes for public colleges as well. There's a lot of finesse that goes into figuring out what it means to be a resident of a college town or a resident of a town where there's a boarding school but not be associated with that school.

00;32;27;24 - 00;32;40;10

Kristen

Mm hmm. Mm hmm. So are there things that we haven't seen in the genre that we would want to see? We talked about public schools, but are there other things that we're just like, waiting for?

00;32;42;07 - 00;32;55;24

Kit Frick

I couldn't think of anything off the top of my head that we haven't seen at all. However, elite boarding schools and institutions of higher education have, of course, historically been very white and male.

00;32;56;09 - 00;33;32;02

Kit Frick

And at this point women authors are very well represented in this subgenre, which is great. And we are seeing more stories by queer authors and authors of color that are centering nonwhite and non straight non-cis characters. But it is still a subgenre with predominantly white stories. So more diversity, more queer authors and authors of color telling these stories that center nonwhite, non straight characters is, is definitely something that we could use more of for sure.

00;33;32;13 - 00;34;03;00

Kit Frick

I've mentioned Wilder Girls, you know, Lesson in Vengeance, and Colleen brought up Ace of Spades and let's see, Tiny Pretty Things and We Fall Apart are also books to look out for. So this



is not to say that you will not find books in this subgenre that are centering these characters or written by authors of color and queer authors, but proportionally still quite white or quite straight.

00;34;03;10 - 00;34;13;16

Kit Frick

So more. More of those for sure. What else are you looking for in dark academia that you haven't seen yet or haven't seen enough of yet?

00;34;14;09 - 00;34;38;06

Kristen

I would definitely agree that centering queer and characters of color, non-cis characters. One of the reasons that *The Chandler Legacies* was as powerful as it was, was because it's told from one of the multiple perspectives, is a queer student who's from Iran.

00;34;38;23 - 00;35;09;03

Kristen

You have this added layer of belonging in boarding school, but also a sense of the boarding school is pushing back on your ability to belong because of your gender identity or your race. And so that is like multi-layered part of the dark academia, like or academia in general is like we're supposed to be fitting a mold. And then what happens when our characters don't fit that mold?

00;35;09;03 - 00;35;42;15

Kristen

Because we need to get rid of the mold? I think that makes for very powerful stories because it's got more layers. This book just it has secret societies and it has multiple characters with different reasons that they came together. So now we have a secret society of five people and two people used to be roommates, and there's some tension there and there are secrets that need to come out to make belonging in the school ever be possible.

00;35;42;15 - 00;36;14;13

Kristen

And then it also deals with bullying and sexual assault and all of many other issues that come up in life. But also, yeah, realistic issues. But they also are hyper when you're in an enclosed community that's kind of insular. So there's extra pressure to toe the line to be the way that quote everyone is supposed to be here. It's added because we're living together.

00;36;14;20 - 00;36;18;21

Kristen

I don't get to go home and decompress because I live on a campus.

00;36;19;07 - 00;36;38;04

Kit Frick

Yeah, the insularity and the sort of bubble effect of a campus, whether it's college or boarding school, is definitely, I think, one of the reasons that most of these books are set not at public institutions where you can go home at the end of the day.

00;36;38;04 - 00;36;57;05

Kit Frick

Oh, but actually that makes me think. I think the Get Even series, which I mentioned by Gretchen McNeil, that is a private school, but it's not residential, but is a school where the students do go home to their families.

00;36;57;05 - 00;36;59;14

Colleen

It's like Ace of Spades, too.

00;36;59;17 - 00;37;00;23

Kristen

Mary Shelley, also.

00;37;00;23 - 00;37;03;18

Colleen

And How We Fall Apart. They all go home after.

00;37;03;21 - 00;37;04;27

Kit Frick

Yeah. So we're

00;37;04;27 - 00;37;06;24

Colleen

Oh, how was Mary Shelley Club?

00;37;06;26 - 00;37;29;28

Kristen

Oh, I. Mary Shelley Club was good because it has an added horror. The secret society has to do with horror. And so it was a good read and it had all of those ties in to horror tropes. So that part of the society is knowing your horror and to get in, you need to scare each other enough.

00;37;31;01 - 00;37;32;00

Kristen

It was definitely good.

00;37;32;03 - 00;37;32;18

Colleen

Interesitng.

00;37;32;20 - 00;37;47;03

Kristen

And also it was like kind of scary because you're like, Oh, these things that you're doing to scare people, like, I don't know, they're they're morally, they're definitely like pushing the into the gray area, where they're moral.

00;37;48;02 - 00;37;49;02

Colleen

That sounds really good.

00;37;49;16 - 00;38;04;04

Kit Frick

Yeah. I mean, I think one of the reasons that this question is a little tricky is because there is so much room in the genre to explore horror and fantasy, contemporary and murder mystery.

00;38;04;04 - 00;38;35;29

Kit Frick

And so we are seeing already a lot of things within the subgenre. So it's great because there are so many different avenues that authors are already exploring. And I'm sure also from a librarian perspective, it's great because you have a kid that's interested in horror. Mary Shelley Club Is the recommendation someone that's interested in witches and witchcraft like a lesson in vengeance or, you know, etc. So that's really cool about it.

00;38;36;10 - 00;38;47;11

Colleen

I think we might need more science fiction, dark academia. You're stuck in a spaceship, and that's even more insular than a boarding school because you can't even go outside and take a walk. Right?

00;38;48;06 - 00;39;03;09

Kristen

Right. Or something with guys sort of like the Girls with Sharp Stick series where maybe we've got some A.I. happening, but it's in a residential community and that's where you're learning you're living.

00;39;03;15 - 00;39;07;18

Kristen

But also there's this fantastic element, yeah.

00;39;07;21 - 00;39;10;04

Colleen

Yeah, that would be very cool.

00;39;10;06 - 00;39;11;04

Colleen

And we might see more.

00;39;11;18 - 00;39;11;28

Kit Frick

Yeah.

00;39;11;28 - 00;39;14;02

Colleen

As it keeps getting popular.

00;39;14;02 - 00;39;19;10

Kit Frick

The Kazuo Ishiguro book from, Oh my gosh, I'm blanking.

00;39;19;11 - 00;39;20;07

Lindsay

Never Let Me Go.

00;39;20;08 - 00;39;21;28

Kristen

Yes.

00;39;22;01 - 00;39;33;09

Kit Frick

I see that on a bunch of dark academia lists and I think it's borderline in terms of dark academia but it's definitely, definitely speculative.

00;39;33;10 - 00;39;41;27

Kit Frick

Yeah. And I think it's been a bunch of years since I've read that book. What is it originally? It's at a school setting at the beginning

00;39;42;01 - 00;39;43;29

Colleen

when they're young. I think I saw the movie I never read the book.

00;39;43;29 - 00;39;44;17

Colleen

It's a boarding school.

00;39;44;17 - 00;39;55;13

Kit Frick

Right. It is. And then like the characters go out into the... I think that's why it, it makes some of their dark academia lists.

00;39;55;13 - 00;39;59;02

Kit Frick

But yeah, there's not a whole lot in the sci-fi.

00;39;59;04 - 00;40;09;16

Lindsay

Yeah, I feel like it's about it's at a school, but it's not necessarily about their education, moreso about what's happening to them, right.

00;40;11;18 - 00;40;18;10

Kit Frick

Without giving giving away the consensus yet not the larger societal issues that these characters are tackling,

00;40;19;03 - 00;40;20;06

Lindsay

I'm learning so much.

00;40;21;20 - 00;40;42;05

Lindsay

I honestly, because I on a bookstagram all the time and I see all everyone's posts and I just automatically assumed that dark academia was fantasy. More had to do with magic. And so I didn't put the pieces together that, you know, it could be anything really, which is cool.

00;40;42;23 - 00;40;50;21

Kristen

But like those magic schools, like Harry Potter and like some of the other magic schools they often do have.

00;40;50;24 - 00;40;53;11

Lindsay

Yeah, And that's probably why I assumed.

00;40;55;14 - 00;40;58;04

Kristen

But those are important books in the genre also.

00;40;58;19 - 00;41;09;06

Lindsay

So you're, Very Bad People. It's dark academia. Do you have ideas or plans or any more dark academia stories?

00;41;09;08 - 00;41;21;22

Kit Frick

Oh, I would love to write a sequel. I think this book really sets itself up for a sequel really nicely, but I don't know yet whether or not there will be one.

00;41;22;04 - 00;41;56;01

Kit Frick

I discussed it with my publisher. We will see what happens. My next book will be completely removed from school. I seem to alternate between setting in a school and setting somewhere completely different. I Killed Zoe Spanos is set, actually, the summer after high school graduation, summer job in the Hamptons. The book that will be my next, which I'm just starting to work on now, will be at a resort on a family vacation.

00;41;56;06 - 00;42;22;06

Kit Frick

So no school all for, it will be over, over a break. But then I will probably be interested in coming back to a school setting again and we'll see if it for a sequel for this book or for something else. Now, I'm kind of interested in that public school with a secret lair idea. So, you know, maybe there's something there I don't now.

00;42;22;20 - 00;42;24;01

Kit Frick

I don't know. We'll have to see.

00;42;24;08 - 00;42;35;14

Kristen

I think that like the hyper competitiveness of a boarding school, as long as your public school also has that competitive, which many of them do,

00;42;35;15 - 00;42;44;18

Colleen

Like football. More sports orientated too, in a public school, than education. Right. I'm thinking of all the crazy football towns like in Friday Night Lights and stuff like that.

00;42;45;12 - 00;42;48;05

Colleen

Some sort of weird different kind of angle of like competitiveness.

00;42;48;08 - 00;43;37;04

Kit Frick

And like what is the book I'm thinking of, Dare Me. Which is another book that is adult market but definitely has crossover appeal for teens, um that was recently adapted into a TV series. It's cheer focused and so it's not something I would call dark academia necessarily, but it is a public

school with a elite cliquish sports program that again offers the same sort of appeal I think that dark academia offers in that readers are offered access to a setting or institution or clique to which they wouldn't normally have access.

00;43;37;04 - 00;43;46;13

Kit Frick

I think something like cheer can offer the same type of inside look, and it's definitely dark. It's a thriller.

00;43;46;26 - 00;43;53;07

Kristen

MM Yeah, the competition and the traditions. I think those, those two pieces are definitely important.

00;43;53;26 - 00;44;15;10

Kit Frick

It'll be interesting to see if this term dark academia sticks. I think that definitely the books that are within this genre, both in fantasy and in murder mystery thriller, like there's a long tradition of books set in boarding schools before we had the term dark academia.

00;44;15;12 - 00;44;41;27

Kit Frick

I think appeal will say, and that will go on. I'm curious about the staying power of the label and whether its appeal on social media in terms of the book aesthetics and the popularity of a small handful of these titles, it seems to still be going strong. We'll see if that continues or if we'll just go back to saying like boarding school Y.A. in a few years.

00;44;42;08 - 00;44;51;05

Kristen

Yeah, yeah. Did anyone not get to talk about a book or thing that they wanted to make sure that they talked about in the podcast?

00;44;52;01 - 00;44;53;20

Colleen

I think I talked about all my favorites.

00;44;54;01 - 00;45;09;00

Kristen

Okay. The only book that is still in the back of my brain begging me to mention it is The Ivies, which is, is recent. It's thriller, murderly situation.

00;45;09;23 - 00;45;37;26

Kristen

And what I found extra interesting about this one, it's a boarding school, but it's centered around the competitiveness of getting into ultra competitive colleges. You've got this focus on Ivy League education, so the students are trying to fit in where they are in an insular boarding school setting, and now they're like focused on getting into somewhere even more exclusive and even more selective.

00;45;38;10 - 00;45;56;24

Kristen

And then there are many conflicts that happen because we know that only a certain number of people get into these Ivy League schools. And a friendship group is realizing, Hey, wait, we are all in direct competition with each other. And so some not so good things result from that.

00;45;57;08 - 00;46;07;25

Kit Frick

Yeah, that's interesting. Also in thinking about Tiny Pretty Things, that duology by Dhonielle Clayton and Sona Charaipotra.

00;46;07;27 - 00;46;44;02

Kit Frick

It has a similar set up in that it's at an elite boarding school, it's at a dance academy. And so it's both about the dynamics of fitting in and rising to the top, the hyper competitive dance school. But it's also the characters are focused on life beyond the academy, making it into elite ballet companies. And so there's a similar, it's not Ivy League, it's dance, but there's a similar way that the hyper competitiveness within the school comes into play.

00;46;44;21 - 00;47;30;00

Kit Frick

I'll also give a plug for, I don't think any of us have mentioned the Charlotte Holmes series by Brittany Cavallaro. This is also a boarding school. It is inspired by a series of classics by the Sherlock Holmes stories. But, you know, casting a female lead and it is in some ways it's less dark, I think, than some dark academia in that the series is more detective oriented, but still bad things happen, and I think it definitely still fits within the dark academia fear.

00;47;31;12 - 00;47;33;25

Kristen

And did you say you wanted to go to boarding school?

00;47;34;16 - 00;47;40;24

Kit Frick

I actually, so I went to a large public high school in the suburbs.

00;47;40;24 - 00;47;40;29

Kristen

Yes.



00;47;41;02 - 00;47;57;12

Kit Frick

So I went to probably the most boring type of suburban setting, large, you know, my graduating class was twice the size, three times the size of my graduating class in college.

00;47;58;04 - 00;48;39;04

Kit Frick

So, you know, it was big. It was a very good school. It was academically rigorous, but it definitely didn't have any of the glitz of a private school or a boarding school. But what I really wanted in high school was to attend the arts school that was in the city of Pittsburgh. I had, I was very involved in theater in high school, and I had all these friends through a community theater program that I was involved with that went to there was both a middle school and then high school that were magnet schools in the city system, the Rogers Middle School and CAPA, the High School for the Performing Arts.

00;48;39;04 - 00;49;02;25

Kit Frick

And in my head it was like fame. I just envisioned that, you know, all these students went there. I knew one of the teachers at the middle school was a was a director in our community theater program. So I learned second hand all about these schools through them. And I was so jealous and really wanted to go there.

00;49;02;25 - 00;49;30;05

Kit Frick

And my parents were just like, No, we are not driving you 45 minutes to get to this school that we then have to pay taxes for your suburb and then also pay for you to go to the school, like, heck no. And I was like, I don't do taxes, I don't care. So that's what I desperately wanted in high school and did not get.

00;49;30;09 - 00;49;58;10

Kit Frick

But I think that my decision to attend the liberal arts college that I did had a lot to do. It was a very arts, so I went to Sarah Lawrence And it's a small school, right outside of New York City. For those that are not familiar with it, it's a very kind of hippie school based on the Oxbridge tutorial system where you do not declare a major.

00;49;58;10 - 00;50;24;02

Kit Frick

Students are studying dance and French literature and pottery and, you know, you design your own curriculum. And that really, I think, scratched the itch for me in terms of both being able to have an arts focused education. It checked the box for my parents because it wasn't a conservatory program. I'm still going to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree.

00;50;24;19 - 00;50;56;28

Kit Frick

I was interested in boarding schools as a teen. I went to reading about them. I think once I had this college experience where the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge itself was really a focus of the school, it was not a professionally driven institution by any stretch of the imagination. I don't know what the current policies are, but at least when I attended in the early 2000 classes could not be professionally focused.

00;50;57;02 - 00;51;50;06

Kit Frick

There were many writing classes, but there was no journalism program. I remember one visiting professor kind of getting a slap on the wrist because he had a more music journalism focused class, and administration was mad about that it was too radical. So that sort of educational experience, I think was then what really drew me back to the idea of a boarding school as an author, because that just deep dive into scholarship and the intense encouragement of the individual at this particular school where I went with the Design your own curriculum program and the lack of majors and the system where you would, it was a seminar conference system.

00;51;50;06 - 00;52;12;16

Kit Frick

So you would meet with your professor in a small group for class, and then you would have these biweekly individual meetings where you'd be working on a separate independent study project called Conference Project. So I don't imagine that most boarding schools are set up in this way. But in my head there was a definite overlap between that type of college experience.

00;52;12;16 - 00;52;43;14

Kit Frick

It's so different from I mean, there's so many different college experiences out there in the US alone, but it seemed boarding school esc in a way that I felt would translate to life in a way. And of course, the school that I developed, Tipton Academy has a few things drawn from Sarah Lawrence. There are very few specific. You know, I didn't actually end up putting a lot of the school into it, but sort of in the back of my head, atmospherically, it was a driving force.

00;52;43;20 - 00;52;54;17

Kristen

Yeah. Yeah, it definitely resonated with me from experience at my college as well, because I didn't have a boarding school experience, but we had secrets societies and weird stuff like that.

00;52;54;17 - 00;53;09;22

Kristen

It was fascinating. It was fascinating to be in. I just went to a public university in New Jersey because societies. Yeah, and they had there I was not involved in it, but I was like adjacent.

00;53;09;22 - 00;53;38;05

Kristen

So I knew that there were people that were part of the secret society. And I'm just like, this is strange, especially because it was a large public institution. I don't know if it was sanctioned by the university or if it was just like a thing that people voted each other into. I'm really not clear because as I said, I was not a part of this, but reading anything or watching anything with a secret society, I'm like, How was that happening?

00;53;38;09 - 00;54;01;20

Kristen

And that's where fiction comes from, is that people see some of it in real life. So every time I read one, I'm having flashbacks to college and like weird things that like, why did we have that much time? It's like, how did we have that much time? So yeah, every time, every time I'm reading The Secret Society stuff, I'm like, This is weird, but it's also real.

00;54;02;10 - 00;54;12;17

Kristen

And I think that's the creepiest part for me. I'm like, Okay, yeah, there's a murder mystery. Yes, that's going on. But can we talk about the Secret Society? Because that is the thing that's, yeah.

00;54;12;17 - 00;54;20;26

Kit Frick

Yeah, for sure. I mean, something that was interesting about researching this book is there are not actually that many instances of secret societies in boarding schools.

00;54;20;26 - 00;54;42;11

Kit Frick

It's much more of a college and university phenomenon. But there are a few Andover and Exeter famous boarding schools in the U.S. claim to not have any currently, but there is definitely a history and I was able to find, I think actually it was in the report. I'm now failing to remember which of these two schools it was.

00;54;42;11 - 00;55;01;19

Kit Frick

But in the reporting from one of their collegiate newspapers from just a couple of years ago, I think right before the pandemic, there was a secret society that had risen to again come back into being at one of these schools. But of course, they're definitely not sanctioned,

00;55;01;21 - 00;55;02;03

Kristen

Right.

00;55;02;04 - 00;55;15;28

Kit Frick

At high school level sometimes are at the college level. I think it varies by institution, but there are definitely some official organizations in colleges, Yale and

00;55;16;04 - 00;55;16;20

Kristen

Yes.

00;55;16;20 - 00;55;44;19

Kit Frick

And eating clubs and those sorts of things. But I was interested to see that it was not the total fiction that secret societies might exist at a high school level boarding school. In fact, they have historically, although perhaps rarely. And also within the UK, there's more evidence of sort of a tradition of secret societies as well. Yeah, totally fascinating, because as you say, they're real.

00;55;45;02 - 00;55;57;16

Kit Frick

But of course, part of them being secret is that there is not a lot known about the inner workings. So it does leave a lot of room for imagination play on the author's part.

00;55;58;01 - 00;56;03;05

Kristen

Is there anything else you would like to plug and where can we find you on social media?

00;56;03;20 - 00;56;15;02

Kit Frick

Yes, Very Bad People releases on April 5th, 2022 and it will be available from anywhere you buy books, all the usual suspects.

00;56;15;06 - 00;56;38;19

Kit Frick

So where you can find me, I actually keep my website up to date. It is Kitfrick.com and I am most active on Twitter and Instagram both @KitFrick, very easy and I run a monthly author newsletter and the signup page is right on the home page of my website.

00;56;39;12 - 00;56;46;21

Kristen

It was really good talking to you. Really glad that we can have this conversation and kind of nerd out about dark academia.

00;56;46;27 - 00;56;49;28

Lindsay

Wonderful meeting all of you. This was really fun.

00;56;50;01 - 00;56;50;15

Kristen

Thank you.

00;56;50;18 - 00;57;06;18

Lindsay

Yeah have a great rest of your day! Yes, you too. Thanks for joining us today. Be sure to check out The Ocean County Library's website for more podcasts and events on our website's calendar events page. All titles mentioned in today's episode can be found through The Ocean County Library free with your library card.

00;57;06;28 - 00;57;08;16

Lindsay

Until next time. Happy reading.