

# **Divine Madness**

*Identifying, Analysing and Developing the Campus Clique Crime Novel*

**Creative Writing PhD Thesis**

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## Abstract

Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History* (1992) recounts the crimes of an elitist clique at an exclusive liberal arts college in rural Vermont, USA. Since 2005 there have been a number of predominantly American novels, including John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005), Martha O'Connor's *The Bitch Goddess Notebook* (2005), Lev Grossman's *The Magicians* (2009), Jennifer McMahon's *Dismantled* (2009) and Amber Dermont's *The Starboard Sea* (2013), that feature a campus, a clique and a crime. Their plots contain cycles of repression and return, and characters who falsely believe that their superior intelligence places them outside the moral codes of society. These novels, which I have termed campus clique crime novels, have not previously been defined as a distinct sub-genre. The purpose of this thesis is to identify, analyse and develop the campus clique crime novel.

The exegesis locates the campus clique crime novel within the wider body of campus fiction and conducts a comparative analysis of three primary texts, Tartt's *The Secret History*, Green's *Looking for Alaska* and Grossman's *The Magicians*, to determine the key narrative devices and themes of the sub-genre and to identify ways in which the campus clique crime novel may be further developed.

The creative project, a novel titled *In the Company of Saints*, incorporates all the key narrative devices identified and analysed in the exegesis; however, I used the drafting process to play with these devices and determine how they might be developed.

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Margot McGovern

1 August 2013

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## Introduction

According to Plato, the ancient Greeks believed that madness was occasionally not a failing of the mind, but a gift from the gods. In *Phaedrus* the character Socrates explains:

The divine madness was subdivided into four kinds, prophetic, initiatory, poetic, erotic, having four gods presiding over them; the first was the inspiration of Apollo, the second that of Dionysus, the third that of the muses, the fourth that of Aphrodite and Eros.<sup>1</sup>

The second, that of Dionysus, is achieved by performing a *bacchanal*, or as Benjamin Jowette explains: ‘with holy prayers and rites, and by inspired utterances’ and is ‘a way of deliverance for those who are in need’.<sup>2</sup> Jowette also notes that there are strong parallels

between the young Athenian in the fifth century before Christ who became unsettled by new ideas, and the student of a modern University who has been the subject of similar *aufklärung*. We too observe that when young men begin to criticise customary beliefs, or to analyse the construction of human nature, they are apt to lose hold of solid principle.<sup>3</sup>

In 1992 Donna Tartt married this ‘loss of solid principle’ and Dionysus’ divine madness in her international best seller, *The Secret History*. In her novel protagonist Richard Pape escapes an unhappy working class upbringing in California by winning a scholarship to Hampden College, an elite liberal arts college in rural Vermont. There he befriends a precocious clique of students from more affluent but equally unsatisfactory backgrounds. Under the tutelage of their ancient Greek professor, they come to believe themselves superior to the laws and moral codes governing the wider community, engage in decadent behaviour and practise ancient rites (including performing a *bacchanal*) as a

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* (Trans. Benjamin Jowette) (Project Gutenberg: 30 October 2008) EBook #1636. Kindle Edition. Available: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1636>. Accessed: 30 March 2012. Location 1 317.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Jowette, ‘Introduction’, *Phaedrus*, location 934.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Jowette, ‘Introduction and Analysis’, *The Republic*, location 1910.

means of distancing themselves from their pasts. In the course of the *bacchanal* they kill a farmer, and when Bunny, a fringe member of the group, threatens to expose their crime and secrets of their past, they murder him and frame the crime as a hiking accident. As the police investigation unfolds the group begins to fall apart. Its unofficial leader, Henry Winter, commits suicide and Richard returns to his native California disillusioned.

From 2005 a group of American novels bearing strong similarities to *The Secret History* have been published. These titles include: John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005), Martha O'Connor's *The Bitch Goddess Notebook* (2005), Lev Grossman's *The Magicians* (2009), Jennifer McMahon's *Dismantled* (2009) and Amber Dermont's *The Starboard Sea* (2013). These novels share *The Secret History*'s theoretical concerns and feature a clique of students who meet at a typically elite campus where they are misguided by destructive authority figures and are, at least in part, responsible for a major crime, but remain unclassified as a recognisable sub-genre. I have termed these novels 'campus clique crime novels' and the purpose of this exegesis is to firstly locate the campus clique crime novel within the broader genre of campus fiction before undertaking an analysis of the sub-genre itself using three primary texts: *The Secret History*, *Looking for Alaska* and *The Magicians*, which have been chosen to demonstrate both the sub-genre's diversity and uniformity. *The Secret History* provides the template for the campus clique crime novel and is the work against which all subsequent texts have been examined. *Looking for Alaska* is an example of novels, such as *The Bitch Goddess Notebook*, which are set on high school rather than university campuses and which more directly target a young adult readership. In *Looking for Alaska*, Miles Halter transfers from a public school to Culver Creek Preparatory School in Alabama, where he befriends



a group of student pranksters who later come to call themselves the Barn Night Crew. When the group's leader, Alaska Young, is killed in a car crash that may or may not be a suicide, the group members are left to consider their role in her death. *The Magicians* uses fantasy to satirise and extend the sub-genre's key themes and is an example of how the campus clique crime novel is becoming self-reflexive. Despondent with his life in Brooklyn, child prodigy Quentin Coldwater enrolls at Brakebills College for Magical Pedagogy where he becomes one of an elitist group that specialises in physical magic. Quentin inadvertently summons the Beast, a monstrous manifestation of his repressed inner desires, who murders both Quentin's classmate and his girlfriend.

Additionally, this exegesis uses this analysis to discuss where and why my novel *In the Company of Saints* adheres to and challenges the conventions of the campus clique crime novel to answer questions about the possibility of developing the sub-genre, particularly how might the inclusion of an active rather than a passive narrator alter the campus clique crime structure? How might a narrative use other key elements in the campus clique crime novel in new ways while remaining true to the sub-genre's principal themes? And most importantly, can such a narrative still be classified as campus clique crime fiction?