

The Alert Collector:  
The Gothic Aesthetic: From the Ancient Germanic Tribes to the  
Contemporary Goth Subculture

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# The Gothic Aesthetic

*From the Ancient  
Germanic Tribes to  
the Contemporary  
Goth Subculture*

Rachel K. Fischer

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Goths. How did we get from warlike Germanic tribes sacking Rome, to an aesthetic or subculture imbued with “the dark and melancholy, a hint of horror tinged with romance.”<sup>1</sup> This column will show you how widely this aesthetic is represented in art, architecture, film, literature and more, and along the way you will undoubtedly find some great resources to add to your collections, from music CD, to academic journals, reference works and the usual popular and academic books. Rachel Fischer has ably put together an excellent resource for anyone wanting to build a collection from the ground-up, or add some new and interesting resources.—*Editor*

**A**lthough the history of the ancient Germanic tribes called the Goths, Visigoths and Ostrogoths occupied a very small portion of world history texts, their culture has influenced Western civilization more than people may understand. Some historians believe that the modern world would not be the same without them. The Goths were not commonly known by what they called themselves, like Thervingi (forest people) and Greuthungi (steppe or rock people), but were called Goth because of their barbaric nature. This ancient culture originally worshipped Norse gods and was known for piracy. They were most famous for the invasions of Rome that began in 238 CE, and the Visigoth sacking of Rome in 410 CE. This attack greatly weakened the western Roman Empire and contributed to its eventual collapse, and the conquering of Italy by Odoacer, a Germanic king, in 476 CE. Although these tribes were frequently demonized for their barbaric nature, they were acting out of fear. The Holy Roman Empire and Christianity threatened their way of life. The Goths waged war because they refused to be submissive to Rome's control. Studying this period of time provides us with a glimpse into an important point in history as pagans fought and lost their right to religious and cultural freedom.

The term Gothic was first used to describe a “barbaric” aesthetic in the 1500s. Painter, architect, and historian Giorgio Vasari popularized the term Gothic as a pejorative term to describe a grotesque or barbaric aesthetic, reminiscent of the destruction of Roman buildings during the Gothic sacking of Rome. Ironically, Gothic architecture was ascribed to the popular style of the great cathedrals of Europe that were first built in France during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and continued to be built through the sixteenth century. This style can be described as ornate and flamboyant. Due to criticism, it fell out of favor during a classical revival period until a Gothic revival in the mid-eighteenth century.

Although William Shakespeare first portrayed the Gothic tribes in the tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, the term Gothic literature first emerged in England in the late eighteenth century. It was used to describe a genre of horror most closely associated with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and the works of Edgar Allan Poe. Gothic literature described an aesthetic of fear and terror. It also included romance, a Byronic hero, and villains. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Daphne du Maurier's *Jamaica Inn* were nineteenth century examples. Southern Gothic literature has emerged in the United States as a subgenre that portrays life in the American South. In addition to portraying the societal problems associated with poverty, slavery, and racial injustice, it is characterized by crime and supernatural elements, like ghosts, vampires, zombies, and magical realism associated with voodoo. Southern Gothic authors include Anne Rice, Charlaine Harris, Toni Morrison, Tennessee Williams, and Truman Capote.

A post-punk music scene emerged in the 1970s. This included labels for many different sub-genres, including Gothic rock, and the Goth subculture. The *Gothic rock* term was most closely associated with English rock bands such as Joy Division, the Cure, David Bowie, Sex Pistols, and Siouxsie and the Banshees. American Gothic rock musicians and bands included Alice Cooper, Marilyn Manson, and Nine Inch Nails. The term *Goth* has also been used to describe subgenres of electronic music, such as Industrial music, and a subgenre of folk music called Southern Gothic music. Although these genres of music are quite different, the lyrics have dark elements similar to those of Gothic literature.

The Goth subculture that emerged from the post-punk music scene was characterized by a love for the occult and a certain dark fashion aesthetic wearing black clothing, black nail polish and lipstick, dramatic makeup and dyed hair. However, not all Goths wear black all the time. Cybergoths wear neon colors. Despite having a name that means "barbaric," the Goth subculture is far from it. Their dark fashion aesthetic and love of the occult should not be feared. These individualists who reject the status quo tend to be lovers of the arts and culture and may be interested in searching for a spiritual experience.

The Gothic aesthetic has permeated so many aspects of history, politics and culture that a whole book could be written on all of the items that could be included in a library's collection. Although works of fiction and movies have not been included in this list, a librarian can refer to these books, journals, and websites for assistance with choosing works to include in a fiction or pop culture collection. Watching videos on YouTube or listening to music on internet music apps can be very helpful in choosing the right audiovisual material to add to a pop culture collection.

Whether they are writing about the ancient history, the Goth aesthetic, or the Gothic subculture, the authors on these topics do have varying opinions and personal experiences that should be represented in a nonfiction collection

to capture the depth of the scholarship on the topics. While the majority of the books in the list that follows are scholarly and more appropriate for academic libraries, the introductory and pop culture-related works would fit well in either a public or academic library. The scholarly research on these topics is still evolving, as the Goth music and art scene and the Goth subculture are contemporary. Books have not been written yet on Southern Gothic music. Librarians should expect and watch for new books to be published on Gothic topics.

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## BOOKS

### Ancient and Medieval Culture

Collins, Roger. *Visigothic Spain: 409–711*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006 (ISBN: 9781405149662).

Collin's work is for readers interested in a higher level academic study of the early medieval period of Spanish history. It covers the span of Visigothic rule, the Arab invasion, and the rise of Spanish culture through a historiographical approach that examines past and current historical and archeological research and offers new theories about the politics and culture of the Spain under the Visigoths.

Hasenfratz, Hans-Peter. *Barbarian Rites: The Spiritual World of the Vikings and the Germanic Tribes*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2011 (ISBN: 9781594774218).

Hasenfratz's in-depth and concise introduction to the paganism of Vikings and Germanic tribes describes the history, religion, magical and occult beliefs of the tribes that worshipped gods like Odin, the Norse god of war. It encompasses pre-Christian history, social classes and clan systems, rites of passages, and battles of the "barbarians" of Europe, as well as how it influenced the Nazis. The book's interesting take on these subjects would make it a perfect fit for a public or academic library collection.

Heather, Peter. *The Goths*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1998 (ISBN: 9780631209324).

*The Goths* is a comprehensive history of Goths, Gothic society and Gothic identity. It covers history from the early period through the Gothic revolution and fall of the Western Roman Empire. This volume is a part of the Peoples of Europe series. Its introductory nature would make it a good resource for both public and academic libraries.

Hilgarth, J. N. *The Visigoths in History and Legend*. Toronto: PIMS, 2009 (ISBN: 9780888441669).

Hilgarth examines the history of the Visigoths in the context of Spanish history and legends. It addresses the influence of Gothic history on the descendants of the Visigoths, and the origin of Spanish culture. Hilgarth examines how these legends were defined and utilized by both Spanish monarchies and authors of literature.

Kulikowski, Michael. *Rome's Gothic Wars: From the Third Century to Alaric*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008 (ISBN: 9780521608688).

*Rome's Gothic Wars: From the Third Century to Alaric* is an animated and stimulating history of the Gothic culture's relationship with Rome starting before the medieval period until Alaric's sacking of Rome in 410. Kulikowski describes how the Goths acted out of a state of desperation because they did not want to be suppressed by Rome. *Rome's Gothic Wars: From the Third Century to Alaric* also examines how history books have portrayed the Gothic culture.

Ward-Perkins, Bryan. *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005 (ISBN: 9780192807281).

Ward-Perkins criticizes contemporary theories of a peaceful transformation of Rome in favor of a traditional theory that blames attacking barbarians for the empire's economic collapse. *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* is a well-written and utilizes archeological evidence and eyewitness accounts to prove that the fall of Rome was a violent one. Although academic in nature, it can be found in both public and academic libraries.

## Architecture and Art

Becket-Griffith, Jasmine. *Gothic Art Now*. New York: Harper Design, 2008 (ISBN: 9780061626999).

*Gothic Art Now* is an introduction to the contemporary Gothic art of today's Goth subculture. It includes painting, illustration, sculpture, photography, and digital art. Becket-Griffith's book provides an introduction to the aesthetic of popular Goth through its depictions of the Gothic influence on fashion, literature, music, and graphic design so it would make an excellent edition to a public or academic library collection.

Brooks, Chris. *The Gothic Revival*. London: Phaidon, 2001 (ISBN: 9780714834801).

Brooks' comprehensive coverage of the history of the Gothic Revival spans through the entire movement from the Victorian era to the post-punk Goth subculture. Brooks analyzes the cultural meaning and influence of the movement in relation to the historical context and influence on modern culture. The all-inclusive and introductory nature of this book makes it a good addition to a public or academic library collection.

Carso, Kerry Dean. *American Gothic Art and Architecture in the Age of Romantic Literature*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015 (ISBN: 9781783161607).

Carso analyzes the influence of British and American Gothic literature on art and architecture in the United States. Authors covered include Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Charles, Victoria and Klaus H. Carl. *Medieval Art: Romanesque Art—Gothic Art (987–1489)*. New York: Parkstone International, 2012 (ISBN: 9781906981037).

*Medieval Art: Romanesque Art—Gothic Art (987–1489)* is a two-volume set on medieval architecture, painting and sculpture from the late tenth to the fifteenth centuries. Volume one covers the Romanesque style, and volume two covers Gothic style. It is filled with many colorful illustrations of cathedrals, paintings and sculpture, so this work would fit well in a public or academic library.

Frankl, Paul. *Gothic Architecture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001 (ISBN: 9780300087994).

In this highly detailed study of Gothic architecture Frankl analyzes the medieval architectural style as it evolved from the Romanesque style to the Gothic style in Europe from 1093 to 1530.

Kavaler, Ethan Matt. *Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe, 1470–1540*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012 (ISBN: 9780300167924).

*Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe, 1470–1540* is a well-illustrated history of the art and architecture of the late Gothic period of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It focuses on the ornate and flamboyant architectural and artistic details of the time period and what the rich designs signified.

Lewis, Michael J. *The Gothic Revival*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002 (ISBN: 9780500203590).

Michael Lewis's *The Gothic Revival* is an introduction to the Gothic Revival period of architecture. It covers the movement as a whole, while also including individual buildings in the United States and Europe. This volume is part of the Thames and Hudson World of Art series, so its introductory nature would fit well in a public or academic library collection.

Scott, Robert A. *The Gothic Enterprise: A Guide to Understanding the Medieval Cathedral*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011 (ISBN: 9780520269996).

Robert A. Scott's take on the history of Gothic cathedrals is an excellent edition to a public library collection. It provides an overview as a travel guide and is a comprehensive general introduction to the architectural style. It explains why the cathedrals were built, how they were built, and the religious significance of the style.

## Literature and Interdisciplinary Works

Abbruscato, Joseph, and Tanya Jones, eds. *The Gothic Fairy Tale in Young Adult Literature: Essays on Stories from Grimm to Gaiman*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014 (ISBN: 9780786479351).

Abbruscato and Jones' essays discuss Gothic themes in young adult literature as they relate to fairy tales and fantasy.

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Some of the themes examined include evil step-parents, incest, and cannibalism. Authors examined include Neil Gaiman, Lemony Snicket, Orson Scott Card, Terry Pratchett, and others. This work may be of interest to both high school and college students, so it would fit well in a public or academic library collection.

Anderson, Eric G., Taylor Hagood, and Daniel Cross Turner, eds. *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature and Culture*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015 (ISBN: 9780807161074).

As the title promises, *Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature and Culture* is focused on the themes of the undead, such as vampires and zombies, in Southern American literature. The essays address issues related to literature in a historical context, such as themes related to the Civil War, slavery, Native American struggles, and the Civil Rights Movement.

Armitt, Lucie. *History of the Gothic: Twentieth-Century Gothic*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011 (ISBN: 9780708320075).

*History of the Gothic: Twentieth-Century Gothic* is the third volume of the Gothic Literary Series. Lucie Armitt examines themes such as supernatural creatures, metaphors related to these creatures, and what they represent to contemporary society. Authors discussed include Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, Clive Barker, and others.

Crow, Charles L. *History of the Gothic: American Gothic*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009 (ISBN: 9780708320440).

*History of the Gothic: American Gothic* is an important volume in the Gothic Literary Studies series. Charles Crow discusses three hundred years of Gothic literature produced in America, including authors like Edgar Allan Poe and Toni Morrison. He discusses the importance of American cultural changes in relation to literature.

Davison, Carol Margaret. *History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature 1764–1824*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009 (ISBN: 9780708320457).

*History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature 1764–1824* is the first volume in the Gothic Literary Studies series. It takes a historical look at the earliest Gothic authors and works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Carol Margaret Davison examines British political and cultural developments, as well as Gothic literary themes of the time period.

Edwards, Justin, and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, eds. *The Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture: Pop Goth*. New York: Routledge, 2014 (ISBN: 9781138016507).

This collection of essays tries to touch on all aspects of popular culture that have been influenced by the Gothic aesthetic and subculture. Essays include works on literature, fashion, and music. Topics include monsters, Steampunk, superheroes, and Lady Gaga. Although academic in nature,

its focus on pop culture allows this work to fit into a public or academic library collection.

Ellis, Jay, ed. *Southern Gothic Literature*. Ipswich: Salem Press, 2013 (ISBN: 9781429838238).

*Southern Gothic Literature* is one of only a few volumes on Southern Gothic Literature. It is a definitive work of essays by international literary critics that examines novels, poetry, and plays. Essays discuss works by authors like Cormac McCarthy and Flannery O'Connor.

Ermida, Isabel. *Dracula and the Gothic in Literature, Pop Culture and the Arts*. Leiden: Brill, 2015 (ISBN: 9789004306172).

Isabel Ermida examines the development of the vampire character from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to its contemporary versions in literature, film, theater and pop culture in *Dracula and the Gothic in Literature, Pop Culture and the Arts*. It examines the symbolism in Gothic literature from the Victorian era and contemporary culture. Although academic in nature, its focus on pop culture allows this work to fit into a public or academic library collection.

Killeen, Jarlath. *History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature: 1825–1914*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009 (ISBN: 9780708320693).

*History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature: 1825–1914* is the second volume of the Gothic Literary Studies Series. It is an introduction to nineteenth-century Gothic literature. Ghost stories, detective stories and adventure stories were common genres of the time. Killeen uses this book to examine psychological and theological themes in addition to discussing the modernization of British society.

Morgan, Jack. *The Biology of Horror: Gothic Literature and Film*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002 (ISBN: 9780809324712).

Jack Morgan discusses the horror genre as a theoretical opposite of comedy. The essays examine themes and motifs important to the genre of horror. Works discussed include classics like *Frankenstein*, to modern authors, like H. P. Lovecraft and Clive Barker. Films discussed include *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Friday the 13th*, *Night of the Living Dead*, and others.

Mulvey-Roberts, Marie, ed. *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*. New York: New York University Press, 1998 (ISBN: 9780814756102).

*The Handbook to Gothic Literature* contains essays that provide an overview of key authors and terms related to Gothic literature from the Victorian era through the twentieth century. Due to its introductory nature this volume would fit in a public or academic library collection.

Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature*. New York: Facts on File, 2004 (ISBN: 9780816055289).

This A-to-Z reference book would make a good addition to a public, high school or college library. The entries cover the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. The encyclopedia includes articles on authors, terms, subgenres, and individual works of British and American literature.

Spooner, Catherine. *Contemporary Gothic*. London: Reaktion Books, 2006 (ISBN: 9781861893017).

*Contemporary Gothic* is an interdisciplinary work that examines the Gothic aesthetic within contemporary popular culture. The book includes the topics of film, literature, music, art, and the Goth subculture. Author Catherine Spooner analyzes issues of contradictory themes of the Gothic aesthetic.

## Music

Elferen, Isabella van, and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock. *Goth Music: from Sound to Subculture*. New York: Routledge, 2016 (ISBN: 9780415720045).

Elferen and Weinstock provide an introduction and analysis of the subgenres of music that are labeled “Goth” in the United States and Europe. The book compares the similarities and differences among the diverse Goth styles and discusses the relationship of the music scene to the Goth subculture.

Harriman, Andi, and Marloes Bontje. *Some Wear Leather, Some Wear Lace: The Worldwide Compendium of Postpunk and Goth in the 1980s*. Chicago: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2014 (ISBN: 9781783203529).

The photographs of bands and audience members in *Some Wear Leather, Some Wear Lace: The Worldwide Compendium of Postpunk and Goth in the 1980s* provide a glimpse into the postpunk music and fashion scene of the 1980s. Essays and interviews with musicians and audience members expound on how the Goth music scene emerged from the Postpunk era around the world. It emphasizes the creativity and individuality of a music scene instead of defining it as a subculture. The photographic and pop culture nature of this work would fit well in a public or academic library collection.

Reed, S. Alexander. *Assimilate: A Critical History of Industrial Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 (ISBN: 9780199832606)

Industrial music is a post-punk genre that is frequently associated with Goth music. Reed’s study discusses the development of the genre in a historical, political and social context. It emphasizes the philosophical ideals of industrial music, which sought to challenge the status quo.

## Subculture

Brill, Dunja. *Goth Culture: Gender, Sexuality, and Style*. Oxford: Berg, 2008 (ISBN: 9781845207670).

Dunja Brill’s ethnographic study was the result of fieldwork conducted in the UK, US, and Germany. Fashion, gender, and sexuality are explored as well as how it relates to the identities of the Goth subculture. In addition to exploring the significance of fashion, the work examines music, literature, social theory and popular media.

Goodlad, Lauren M. E., and Michael Bibby, eds. *Goth: Undead Subculture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007 (ISBN: 9780822339212).

These scholarly essays on the Goth subculture cover the topic of gender, spirituality, music, film, specific communities, and cultural practices. The essays explore the issues of consumerism, resistance of the status quo, interest in the occult as an “undead” subculture, and an impact on culture.

Hodkinson, Paul. *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*. Oxford: Berg, 2002 (ISBN: 9781859736005).

Paul Hodkinson’s *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture* was the first full scale ethnographic study of the Goth subculture from an insider. This work discusses fashion, music, social habits, and the Internet. Hodkinson discusses how media and commerce strengthened group identity.

Issitt, Micah. *Goths: A Guide to an American Subculture*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011 (ISBN: 9780313386046).

*Goths: A Guide to an American Subculture* is meant for students; it includes textbook elements such as a glossary, sidebars, and biographical sketches. Issitt compares Goth culture to a contemporary mainstream culture. The introductory nature of this book would fit well in a public or academic library collection.

Kilpatrick, Nancy. *The Goth Bible: A Compendium for the Darkly Inclined*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2004 (ISBN: 9780312306960).

*The Goth Bible: A Compendium for the Darkly Inclined* explains the entire history of the Gothic aesthetic, from the ancient Germanic tribes to the Goth subculture. It discusses how the subculture has been misrepresented by media and also includes interviews from musicians, artists, and individuals that identify with the Goth subculture. The introductory nature of this book would fit well in a public or academic library collection.

Siegel, Carol. *Goth’s Dark Empire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005 (ISBN: 9780253217769).

In *Goth’s Dark Empire*, Siegel examines elements of the Goth subculture that are often considered “dark” by the mainstream such as resisting sexual norms and sadomasochism. Siegel focuses on the issue of resisting sexual norms, such as an interest in sadomasochism. It discusses Goth

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subculture as portrayed in movies and the music scene, and explains how the subculture became an underground scene.

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### MUSIC

*The Dark Box: The Ultimate Goth, Wave and Industrial Collection: 1980–2011*. Los Angeles: Cleopatra Records, 2012.

*The Dark Box: The Ultimate Goth, Wave and Industrial Collection: 1980–2011* is a four-disc box set of music commonly associated with the Goth subculture, including Goth music, Electronic, and Industrial music. Many of these bands are European groups and are a good introduction to post-punk music for public library collections. Some of the bands include Joy Division, The 69 Eyes, and Christian Death.

*Goth Industrial Club Anthems*. Los Angeles: Cleopatra Records, 2015.

This three-disc set of Gothic rock music is a good introduction to the bands that defined the post-punk genre. It would fit well into a public library collection. Some of the bands include Bauhaus, Rosetta Stone, 45 Grave, and Fields of Nephilim.

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### JOURNALS

*Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies*. <https://www.aeternumjournal.com/> (ISSN: 2324-4895).

*Aeternum: The Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies* is a peer-reviewed, open access, interdisciplinary journal. The research featured in the journal focuses on literature, television, new media and film. The journal recognizes the impact that the Gothic aesthetic has had on culture, technology, politics, and even food.

*Gothic Studies*. Manchester: Manchester University Press (ISSN: 1362-7937).

*Gothic Studies* is the official journal of the International Gothic Association. It features peer-reviewed articles on Gothic studies from the eighteenth century to the present, including the disciplines of literature, film, television, theater, and the visual arts.

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### WEBSITES

Horvath, Ibolya, et. al., eds. "Ancient History Encyclopedia" (<https://www.ancient.eu>).

The Ancient History Encyclopedia provides comprehensive coverage of culture from prehistoric times to the Middle Ages. It includes multiple articles on the Goths among its highly detailed and scholarly entries.

Smith, Alicia Porter. "A Study of Gothic Subculture: An Inside Look for Outsiders" (<http://www.gothicsubculture.com>).

The goal of this website is to explain the Goth subculture in a realistic manner in order to eliminate misconceptions. It contains information on history, culture, religious views, drug use and other criminal activity, advice for parents, and a message board.

### Reference

1. Issitt, Micah L. *Goths: A Guide to an American Subculture* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011).