

The Moral of the Ghost Story

Author Antonio R. Garcez on ghostlore and the undeniable substance of the supernatural

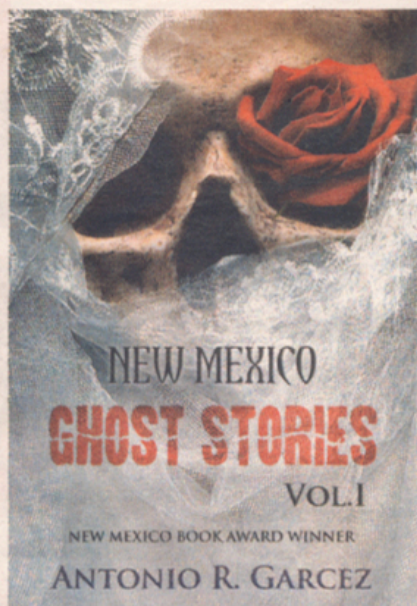


PHOTO CREDIT: ANTONIO R. GARCEZ

BY MAGGIE GRIMASON

Whether they're portending disaster or teaching an important lesson, the ghosts that inhabit New Mexico carry great meaning. From Old Town to the foothills, Rio Rancho to Corrales, ghost stories populate the adobe buildings and swathes of desert in and around Albuquerque. Whether you're a skeptic or not doesn't really matter because these stories are a part of your immediate world regardless of your attitude toward them. "Ghost stories are fundamental to the human matrix," says Antonio R. Garcez, the author of 11 books on the topic, including *New Mexico Ghost Stories*, volumes I and II. During my conversation with Garcez, it became evident that to him the tendency to trivialize ghost stories denies that these tales often present serious explorations of belief, societal norms, customs and cultural expression. Whether or not they make you quake under the duvet, there is value in the telling of ghost stories regardless of whether you perceive them as folklore or fact.

Garcez has more than 55 years of experience with the supernatural. His parents and grandparents were healers who were invited to the homes of those in their community that were "troubled by misguided spirits." Apprenticing to them throughout childhood, Garcez learned the complexities of the paranormal and has distilled many of his anecdotes, legends and real, first-hand accounts into his books—compelling tomes that describe immediate, intimate encounters with the spirit world. "I have had so many encounters throughout my life and they continue even to this present day. Each experience I have had has enriched my life," Garcez said.

According to Garcez, ghosts, the shades that haunt dreams and linger just on the edges of our field of vision, have a lot to teach us. Stories of the paranormal, regardless of their origins, touch on sensitive areas of our existence. The most popular and longstanding of them reflect the reigning cultural understandings of morality and human responsibility, ideas about grieving, home construction, land use and respect for the dead. In death, these shadows illuminate the values of the living. "Take for example La Llorona," Garcez suggested, the tale of the mother who drowned her children in the river and is doomed, as punishment, to wander its banks, crying for them. "The legend is used as a teaching tool for children to avoid dangerous situations," Garcez points out. Play by the river alone and you may just encounter the mad specter of La Llorona—it is a fear that provides instruction: The river can be dangerous, don't play there alone.

Yet, if we discuss ghost stories as folklore, do we deny the possibility of their reality? That these stories have their origins in an event interpreted rationally and relayed accurately? In his books, Garcez presents readers not with "folktales or legends, but actual experiences," as he puts it. These modern stories of encounters with the dead who still roam the Earth nonetheless contain echoes of the sentiments found in the legends and folktales that precede them. "It is a time honored practice to remain still and to be silent and observe," says Garcez. These stories help us understand that "care and reverence are important when encountering an entity from the afterlife," and indeed, when approaching all topics of deep feeling and philosophical concern. After all, what we are

really looking for in these stories of ancient woods, glowing eyes and lurking shadows is "evidence of the afterlife," says Garcez, "to find meaning and purpose in our mortal existence."

"It's important to take ghost stories seriously because literally millions of people throughout the world have had encounters," Garcez continues. Those who unfold ouija boards, wield dowsing rods and dim the lights for a seance are making attempts at answering some of the most enduring questions of human existence, just as religion and philosophy do. Take a look at the folklore that contributes to notions of culture or the movie posters on a theater's marquee. Better yet, sit in on a middle schooler's slumber party and you'll grasp that ghosts can and do haunt our daily lives. Ghost stories neatly contain fear in a narrative and use that powerful emotion to bolster important lessons and provide insights into life after death.

During my conversation with Garcez, it occurred to me that perhaps just as interesting as the question of whether or not ghosts exist are the stories that we tell about them and what they reveal about us. Despite great range and variety, the ghost that is very much like the living—with recognizable features and emotions—is the most common. Maybe that speaks to the truth of these tales or the way in which the living seek avenues to better understand the world we inhabit. Garcez has stronger convictions. "Writing my books has provided me with proof that life after death exists," he said pointedly, "I don't just believe in ghosts, I *know* they exist." ●