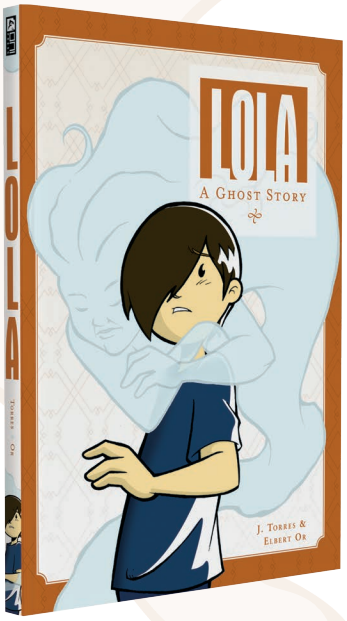
LOLA

A Ghost Story

Written by J. Torres and Illustrated by Elbert Or

DISCUSSION GUIDE



ISBN: 978-1-62010-691-4

About the book

Even though Jesse grew up in the United States, his parents tried to help him stay connected to his family in the Philippines, a land filled with strange legends of frightening creatures and inhabited by humans with supernatural visions, like his grandmother Lola. After returning to her village for her funeral, Jesse still feels like an outsider, especially when his emerging powers make him think that he may be going crazy. The more Jesse learns about who Lola was, the more he realizes that his abilities might be a gift after all. He just needs to say something. The novel explores themes of family relationships, grief, and fear. The limited color palette of the illustrations is deceptively vivid while still creating an overall sense of memory and dreams across cultures and generations.

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LEARNING STANDARDS

Lola: A Ghost Story can be used to address many of the Reading Literature Common Core Standards for readers ages 10-13, including: **RL**.4-6.1 **RL**.4-6.2, **RL**.4-6.3, **RL**.4-6.4, and **RL**.4-6.5.

The novel and activities in this teaching guide may also be used as a springboard for addressing numerous Common Core standards for Writing, Speaking, and additional related ELA-Literacy standards.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Pre-reading: What do you think of when someone says "ghost story"? Do you perk up because you like scary or suspenseful stories? Or are you skeptical about the existence of ghosts? Do you know any ghost stories? Where did you hear them?

1. In the foreword by Jennifer de Guzman, she explains how her interest in horror stories and related books and movies inspired her to explore folklore about ghosts and monsters of the Philippines. **What do you know about the Philippines?** Location? Culture? Languages? Food? What do you think about the poem that the author includes in her foreword?

2. Now that you have read the foreword, carefully examine the cover of the book and page 1. **Speculate what you think the story will be about.**

3. Page 3 contains a single illustration. In comics and graphic novels, this is called a "splash page". They can be used to introduce or focus special attention on particular places, characters, or events. **Why is a splash page used here?**

4. **Describe what you think Jesse is feeling on pages 2-9.** Explain your answer using examples from the text and illustrations.

5. **What is the significance of the story that Jesse's uncle tells about the pig?** What does it reveal about Lola and her influence on the family and community?

6. **Who is Jonjon and why is he so important to the story?** How did he influence Jesse's first night back in the Philippines?

7. Why does the illustrator choose to use more splash pages on page 30 and page 35? **Where else are splash pages used?** Analyze the other ways the book's illustrations help to convey actions, moods, and emotions.

8. Explain what happens to Jesse during Lola's funeral. **Do you think it is real or a dream?** Why?

9. On page 49, Jesse's cousin Maritess discovers his secret. What is her reaction? How do you think you would have reacted to learning a cousin can see ghosts? **Why do you think Jesse sees Jonjon, but not Lola?**

10. What additional family stories does Maritess tell Jesse on pages 50-51 and pages 63-66? **What insights do they provide about both Lola and Jesse?**

11. Why are the panels on page 82 important? **What do they reveal about the relationship between Jesse and his Lola?**

12. Why do you think that Jesse is so afraid of his powers? **Do you think things would have been different if he had grown up in the Philippines instead of the United States?** Why or why not?

13. On page 91, Jesse climbs the garden wall. Why is this so upsetting to everyone? **How does it ultimately bring some comfort to Jesse's family?** Could Jesse have done more? If so, why didn't he?

14. Explain what is happening on the last few pages of the book. **Do you like how the story ends?** Why or why not?

15. Speculate about what you think happens in the minutes after the book ends. **What do you think Jesse will do?** What do you think will happen later?



EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Discovering the Philippines

The Republic of the Philippines is a diverse nation consisting of more than 7600 islands that have been settled or conquered over the centuries by many groups, including Austronesian, Malay, Indian, Chinese, Spanish, American, and Japanese peoples. The Philippines was a strategic location during World War II and remains an important world trading partner. It boasts rich cultural traditions, more than 150 languages, and is one of the ten most biologically diverse countries in the world. There are also approximately 4 million Filipino-Americans in the United States and nearly 1 million Canadian Filipinos. Ask students to investigate one or more aspects of the Philippines, such as geography, history, climate, ethnicities, etc. Likewise, students might research the contributions of the Filipino-American community. Assign students to present their findings as written, oral, or multimedia reports so that the entire class can be better informed about the setting and characters of the novel. (**W**.4.7, **W**.5.7, **W**.6.7)

Family Stories

On pages 50-51, Maritess tells Jesse a family legend that explains the source of Lola's powers and her hump. Ask students to tell and/or write down a special family story that they know about their parents/guardians, grandparents, or even great-grandparents. If they do not know any stories and/or have no access to them, ask them to tell and/or write down a story about themselves that they imagine would be told by their children or grandchildren. The stories can be illustrated using available manual or digital resources. (**W**.4.10, **W**.5.10, **W**.6.10)

Monsters and Creatures

At the end of the book, the author provides a glossary of a dozen Filipino monsters and legendary creatures. Individually, in pairs, or teams, assign students to research one of those terms using available print and digital resources and report their findings to the class via a written or oral report accompanied by illustrations that depict their interpretation of what those creatures look like. (**W**.4.2D, **W**.5.2D, **W**.6.2D)

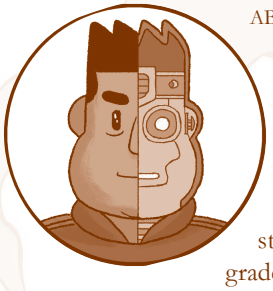
Grief Resources for Teachers

The novel focuses heavily on the theme of grief. Students who have lost a loved one, such as a family member or a pet, may experience renewed feelings of bereavement. If you notice that one of your students is struggling, or if you simply need helpful materials in order to facilitate a class discussion about the topic, you may wish to explore the following websites:

Dougy Center: the National Center for Grieving Children and Families
www.dougy.org

National Alliance for Grieving Children
childrengrieve.org

DISCUSSION GUIDE AUTHOR A former K-12 instructor, **Dr. Robyn A. Hill** is a teacher educator, reading advocate, and lifelong comics fan.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR **J. Torres** is a former ESL instructor and award-winning author, who was born in the Philippine capital of Manila, grew up in Montreal, and now resides in Toronto with his family. He learned to read from newspaper strips and comic books. By the third grade, he was writing and drawing comics for the school paper. He has been writing comics and graphic novels professionally for the last 20 years.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR **Elbert Or** is an award-winning writer and illustrator based in Manila, Philippines where he lives with his wife and family. He is also the co-founder of Pushpin Visual Solutions, a communications firm.

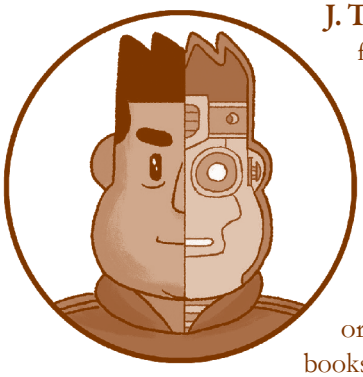


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A Ghost Story

Oni Press sits down with J. Torres, author of *Lola: A Ghost Story* to ask him 10 questions about the new 10th anniversary edition of Lola.

Oni Press: *Lola: A Ghost Story* has been out in the world for a decade now - has that time helped you to gain new perspective on the story? What influenced your choice to update the ending?



J. Torres: When Oni Press first published *Lola*, it was a smaller, definitely more "indy" type publisher. So, we didn't really have the same guidelines and parameters and ratings that we do now in terms of what ideally should or shouldn't be included in books for younger readers. Now, Oni is in more schools and libraries and that's what led to the updated pages, especially the ending which some people considered a little too gory for the children's book market. It's a kinder, gentler approach—something today's world needs more of if you ask me—an approach that I might have objected to ten years ago, like some indignant hipster who didn't want his work "censored." But now as a dad with more experience not only in terms of writing for kids but also curating media for my own kids, I get it. In the end, it's a cosmetic change and the story itself, its message, the characters, etc. remain intact, and I'm amazed and humbled that people are interested in this book after all these ye

Op: You dedicated *Lola* to your Lola Gloria, whose stories clearly made a big impact on you. Would you say she was responsible for your decision to become a creator? How much of Jesse's lola is based on your own?

Jt: All of the stories about Jesse's lola come from stories I was told about my Lola Gloria, and I didn't embellish them very much, nor did I have to. They were pretty fantastic and creepy and all that good stuff as they were told to me. But more than my lola, my Aunt Nida was probably more responsible than anyone in my family for my becoming a writer. She's very creative in her own way, she told great stories, and she was the one who first introduced me to most of the stories from the Philippines, including the myths and legends.



Op: Throughout the story, Jesse struggles to accept that he's different, not just because of his ability to see visions like his Lola, but readers also get the sense that Jesse doesn't feel entirely at ease amongst his extended family. What would you say to someone who has a hard time accepting all the different parts of who they are?

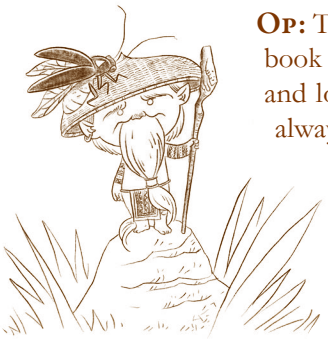
Jt: I struggled with similar identity "issues" growing up a visible minority and coming from an immigrant family. There were times I downplayed or even tried to hide my Filipino-ness. I was proud to be Canadian and wanted to fit in, but it took me a while to accept that I was allowed to be different as well. Don't people get embarrassed if they show up to a party in the same outfit as someone else? Nobody wants the same lunchbox or backpack that everyone else has, right? Everyone wants to be "original" and "unique," which means the same as being *different*. So embrace that! Yes, you get teased for standing out, for being different, but if you look closely, if you pay attention you'll realize we're all a little different and in that way we are mostly the same. So you have to learn to accept who you are, then you can accept others for who they are, and in turn you will be accepted too.

Op: What do you admire most about Jesse?

Jt: Like most kids he's very resilient despite everything that's going on around him. Sure, he gets scared and has his fears, which is perfectly normal, but ultimately he's quite brave and strong and finds a way to cope.

Op: Interestingly, the sadness that permeates the story is more linked to the past death of Jesse's younger cousin rather than the more recent death of his Lola. Stories of Lola seem to be on the tip of everyone's tongue, while not many speak of JonJon whose loss is a heavy and lonely thing. What do you hope younger readers come to understand about the different ways of dealing with death and grief?

Jt: That's a tough question because I'm not an expert on the subject. I also wonder if I've fully processed how I feel about people I've lost. But I hope kids who read this see how Jesse bottling up his feelings isn't the best thing to do, and Maritess reaching out to him, trying to advise him or at least give him someone to talk to is a good thing. It's important to find someone you can talk to about how you're feeling; and if you can be that person for somebody, that's incredibly valuable.



Op: The muted color palette of the book helps create a sense of unease and loss. Was this something you always intended for the story, or something that illustrator Elbert Or brought to it?

Jt: I remember suggesting it because that sepia tone makes me think of old photographs my relatives in the Philippines would break out and show us whenever we visited. I find "old pictures" can sometimes look scary because of bad lighting causing weird shadows and grainy film making people look spooky. I thought the art in sepia would make things look creepy and nostalgic as needed.

Op: What was the writing process for *Lola: A Ghost Story* like? Did you talk to family, revisit significant places, reference any photos, or did it just grow organically out of old memories?

Jt: Mostly the latter, I just sat down and started to work out the story over a number of years. I think it started out as an attempt to re-tell some Filipino monster myths, and then it morphed into a story about a kid who saw ghosts, and I eventually took those two things and merged them with "real life" stories from my family and various personal memories.

Op: What was the hardest part of writing *Lola*?

Jt: I think it was coming up with a story that could incorporate the Filipino myths and legends, as well as the stuff about my lola, in a cohesive, engaging, entertaining story that made sense and came together as a whole.

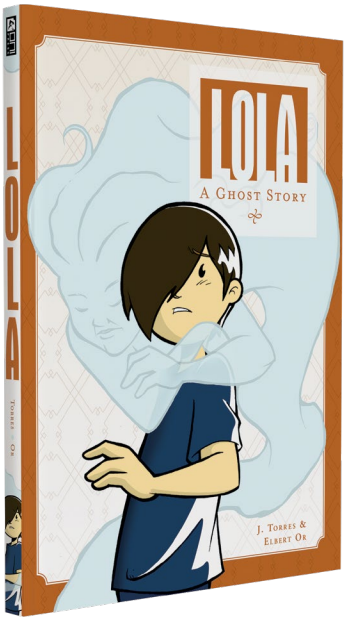


Op: Jesse finds some of the Filipino legends frightening. Was there a creature or a story that particularly frightened you as a child?

Jt: I grew up Catholic around a lot of adults who put the fear of the devil in me. It didn't help that I saw the movie *The Exorcist* when I was only 11 or 12. There was also a movie that I saw when I was a teenager called *Race with the Devil* which was about people in a Winnebago who encounter murderous Satanic worshippers in a small, remote town. Because of that movie, even into adulthood, I had this fear of small, remote towns for the longest time! But I'm over all of that now. I think.

Op: Do you believe in ghosts?

Jt: My son recently asked me this question and I told him that while I believed in ghosts when I was younger, these days I'm more of a "science guy." I like a good ghost story, though. I don't know what the science is behind that, actually enjoying a good scare, but like a lot of people I like spooky stuff.



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