

MEXICAN

BOOK CLUB KIT

GOTHIC

Silvia Moreno-Garcia

*Author of Gods of Jade and Shadow*

# A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

## DEAR READERS,

Mexico is peppered with mining ghost towns. The description has a double meaning. On the one hand it refers to an abandoned place. On the other hand, these towns carry with them the traces of colonial rule and all its excesses. They are filled with ghosts.

When the Spaniards arrived in Mexico, they found a trove of mineral riches: gold and especially silver that could be mined in huge quantities. By the 18th century, Mexico was the world's chief silver producer.

Bustling mines required workers, and cheap ones. The predominant laborers in these towns were Indigenous people who were forced to work the mines through several systems—slavery, *encomienda* and *repartimiento* were used at different points in time—and often abused, toiling in bad conditions. Those who did not labor in the mines might still feel the brunt of Spanish rule, by being driven from their traditional lands.

The War of Independence of 1810 did not really ease the grasp of foreign powers on Mexico and its riches, nor did it distribute those riches more evenly. After the Spaniards, there came other powers to pry the earth for silver.

British mining companies arrived in the early 1800s and established themselves throughout the country, including in the town of Real del Monte, high in the mountains of Hidalgo. Nicknamed 'Little Cornwall,' Real del Monte boasts a unique British-inspired architecture and an English Cemetery out of a Hammer film. It is this town, which I visited many years ago, that serves as the basis for the location of *Mexican Gothic*.

It might sound a bit odd for a book titled *Mexican Gothic* to actually take place in a town that was modeled and exploited by British forces. Yet that is part of the ironic legacy of Latin America. I suppose I could have called the book *Postcolonial Gothic*, but that seems so much longer and less zesty. *Mexican Gothic* expresses the haunting feeling I had when we drove through Mexico looking at the remains of towns from another era.

To know a place, you must look at the land. What the land told me in Hidalgo is that there are ghosts and then there are *ghosts*. The ones that wear bed sheets over their heads are much less terrifying than the ones left by the sins of our ancestors.

*Mexican Gothic* is a fun romp through a trove of Gothic tropes, including a dark and gloomy house, an alluring yet dangerous man, a family with secrets, and things that go bump in the night. But it's also a story about those other ghosts: the ones that were left like a scar on the land.

**SILVIA MORENO-GARCIA**



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did you feel about the historical period and setting the book takes place in?
2. What did you think of the main character, Noemi?
3. Who was your favorite character and why?
4. How did you feel about the relationship between Noemi and Francis?
5. What did you think about the ending? What do you wish had been different?
6. What do you think the author's purpose was in writing this book? How well do you think she got it across?
7. What did you enjoy most about this book? What did you enjoy the least? What changes to the story, if any, would you make?
8. Would you read a sequel to this story? Would you prefer it feature Noemi and Francis, or would you prefer a story in the same world with new characters?
9. If you were interviewing the author, what questions would you have for her?

# THE PLAYLIST

**This playlist, curated by the author, will transport you to the terrifying yet seductive world of High Place.**

**Listen on Spotify at  
<https://spoti.fi/2yHyltz>**



1. "Black Walls" by Chromatics
2. "Eyes Without a Face" by Marsheux
3. "Girls Just Wanna Have Some" by Chromatics
4. "The Killing Moon" by Echo & the Bunnymen
5. "Is Your Love Strong Enough?" by Bryan Ferry
6. "Digital Versicolor" by Glass Candy
7. "Shadow" by Chromatics
8. "Passion of Lovers" by Bauhaus
9. "Wicked Game" by Ursine Vulpine, Annaca
10. "Blue Wings" by Wild Nothing
11. "Shadowplay" by Joy Division
12. "Cat People (Putting Out Fire)" by Martyn Lenoble, Christian Eigner
13. "Goodbye Horses" by Psyche
14. "TOY" by Chromatics
15. "Journal of Ardency" by Class Actress
16. "Tainted Love" by Marilyn Manson
17. "She's Gone Away" by Nine Inch Nails
18. "Bonbon (Johnny Jewel Remix)" by Lou Rebecca, Johnny Jewel
19. "Tell Me Where It Hurts" by Garbage
20. "Tear You Apart" by She Wants Revenge
21. "She's Lost Control" by Joy Division
22. "Saturday" by Desire

# THE REAL DEL MONTE

BY SILVIA MORENO-GARCIA



One time I was asked during an interview whether it really rained in Mexico City as much as I said it did in one of my novels. It does rain and in fact parts of the city might flood periodically. When people think of Mexico, they tend to picture tumbleweeds and deserts. My interviewer, having little grasp of the varied features of the country, was one of those folks who pictured the whole nation as one hot desert, out of a Speedy Gonzales cartoon.

My upcoming novel, *Mexican Gothic*, takes place in a chilly, fog-shrouded town at the top of a mountain, a town with a deep British influence. For some people, such a locale would seem incompatible with their idea of Mexico. But *Mexican Gothic* is inspired by a real town, complete with an English cemetery: Real del Monte.

Real del Monte, also called Mineral del Monte, is located in the mountains of Hidalgo. Humboldt called this region the Mexican Andes due to its mountain chains that cross each other, forming a series of steep peaks. The territory is uneven, puckered by deep ravines, and the valleys at the feet of the mountains have fertile soils. The predominant rocks in the region include basalts, vestiges of huge lava currents. The Basaltic Prisms of Santa María Regla, a series of tall, polygonal columns of basalt rock with twin waterfalls streaming down the rocks, are some of the most amazing examples of such rock formations.

Obsidian is abundant in Hidalgo. The prehispanic people of the region mined the Sierra de las Navajas for this volcanic glass which was used in weapon making. It's also a region rich in silver.

After the Spanish conquered Mexico, they quickly began exploiting its silver deposits. When Humboldt visited Guanajuato, one single mine there, the Valenciana, was the source of one fifth of all the silver production in the world. One reason the Spanish were able to make such huge profits on silver was the fact they had access to cheap labor in the form of the Indigenous people of the area. Through outright slavery or various forms of forced labor, they mined the rich silver deposits of the country until the War of Independence broke out.

Towards the second half of the 19th century, mining companies from other parts of the world began to make themselves at home in Mexico. That's when the British arrived in Real del Monte, earning the area the nickname Little Cornwall. You can clearly see their influence in the architecture of the town: the sloping roofs are a dead giveaway. It's also obvious in its English Cemetery, which, thanks to its variety of trees and the cold of the mountainside, looks like something out of a Hammer horror film if you visit it at certain times of the day when the mist clings to the tombstones, which are all oriented towards England (minus one).

# THE DOYLE FAMILY SEAL



**“Noemí stood up, and as she did she noticed that there was a mosaic on the floor. Stepping back and looking around the room she realized it circled the table. It was another of the snake symbols. The ouroboros slowly devouring itself. The infinite, above us, and below, as Virgil had said.”**

Illustration: Sara Bardi

# THE GIRL IN THE MANSION

## HOW GOTHIC ROMANCES BECAME DOMESTIC NOIRS

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THAT GIRL? You know the one I mean: long hair, old-fashioned dress, with a dark, looming house in the distance and a look of anxiety on her face. She's most often running from said dark house.

The girl from the Gothic novels.

I'm talking about the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Gothic novels, not the original crop of Gothic books, like *The Castle of Otranto* or *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. No, it's that second wave of Gothics—termed Gothic romances—that were released in the 1960s in paperback form that I'm referring to. This was a category dominated by authors such as Victoria Holt and Phyllis A. Whitney, and their covers fixed in the minds of a couple of generations what 'Gothic' meant.

Most of these mid-century gothics tended to adhere to a simple formula which contained a young woman, a big house and a dangerous yet exciting man. Often the women were in subservient positions, working for the lord of the manor, orphaned, or the like. The women encountered some mystery that needed solving and eventually found love with the dangerous-exciting man, who turned out to be misunderstood (rarely was he a criminal). Although the mystery and threats surrounding the heroine seemed to be of supernatural origin, there was usually a rational explanation.

As Joanna Russ explains in her essay "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic," the 1960s Gothic romance ultimately resembled a crossbreed between *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*, and publishers such as Terry Carr believed the appeal of the books was that they featured "women who marry guys and then begin to discover their husbands are strangers . . . so there's a simultaneous attraction/repulsion, love/fear going on."

Whatever the plot variation, Gothic novels allowed for excitement, romance and sublimated sexual desire, as well as providing the heroine with a certain level of agency: after all, she had to survive and solve the mystery, even if the killer was inside the house with her.

This game of literary Scooby Doo was profitable. Such was the demand for Gothic books that in true pulp fashion sometimes one title would be re-issued with a different cover and a new name.

Yet, by the end of the 1970s the Gothic novel seemed to vanish from shelves. What happened? Tastes changed. Fans who had previously turned to these books now looked for the emergent, spicier romances such as *The Flame and the Flower*, and readers more inclined to chills were about to discover Stephen King and the joys of the 1980s horror boom.

And so the genre died. Or did it? Some writers continued to write Gothic novels, even if these were less common than before—V.C. Andrews was probably the only

# THE GIRL IN THE MANSION

heavy-hitter in the 1980s mining this niche with *Flowers in the Attic*. But I believe that rather than disappear completely, what happened was that the impulses behind the Gothic novel mutated and eventually gave birth to what we call the Domestic Noir.

In *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology*, Kate Ferguson Ellis argues that Gothic literature presents the middle-class home as a paradox, a site which should feel safe but instead turns horrific. Julia Crouch has defined Domestic Noir as a genre which “takes place primarily in homes and workplaces, concerns itself largely (but not exclusively) with the female experience, is based around relationships and takes as its base a broadly feminist view that the domestic sphere is a challenging and sometimes dangerous prospect for its inhabitants.”

Domestic noirs emphasize the female experience with their covers and titles. Peruse the shelves and you’ll find that it’s a world of girls (*Gone Girl*, *The Girl Before*), wives (*The Wife Between Us*, *The Silent Wife*, *My Husband’s Wife*, *The Perfect Wife*), and the like. The covers of Gothic romances, with their ever-present women and manor, also hit a similar beat. No, the titles were not *The Wife in the Tower*—though I supposed that might have been a good choice—but the illustrations, promotional copy and even the choice of author’s names worked together to give the impression of a female space.

In *The Gothic Romance Wave: A Critical History of the Mass Market Novels, 1960-1993*, Lori A. Paige states that although Gothic romances offered upright heroines, “below the surface of every story remained an undercurrent of self-conscious repression, vice and even depravity.” The same could be said of domestic noirs such as *The Girl on the Train* where a heroine attempts to conceal her alcoholism and the woman she is fascinated with—a seemingly perfect woman—is involved in a torrid affair. *The Couple Next Door* are obviously hiding a secret; the dotting husband of *Before I Go to Sleep* is not who he seems; and *The Woman in the Window* spies on her neighbours, the perfect family, which is not perfect after all.

Terry Carr said women liked reading Gothic romances because they featured “a magnetic suitor or husband who may or not be a lunatic and/or murderer,” a man who might frighten them and make them anxious. It sounds a bit like riding an emotional rollercoaster. In Domestic Noirs heroines might still fear their husbands, but they also seem to be frightened of a wider variety of people including neighbours, friends and even employees, the rollercoaster taking them through numerous peaks and valleys of anxiety.

Unlike the Gothic romances, though, domestic noirs tend to be firmly rooted in the present and the urban—or suburban—experience. In that sense, they are realistic while Gothic romance sought an air of unreality thanks to their great big castles, misty landscapes and old-fashioned settings.

I don’t think it’s a perfect straight line between the Gothic romances of old and the current boom of domestic noir, but they both reflect that eerie feeling that the call is coming from inside the house. And perhaps the phone has been ringing for a long time.

# DRESS UP NOEMÍ

***Bring Noemí Taboada's signature fashion to life with this paper doll!***

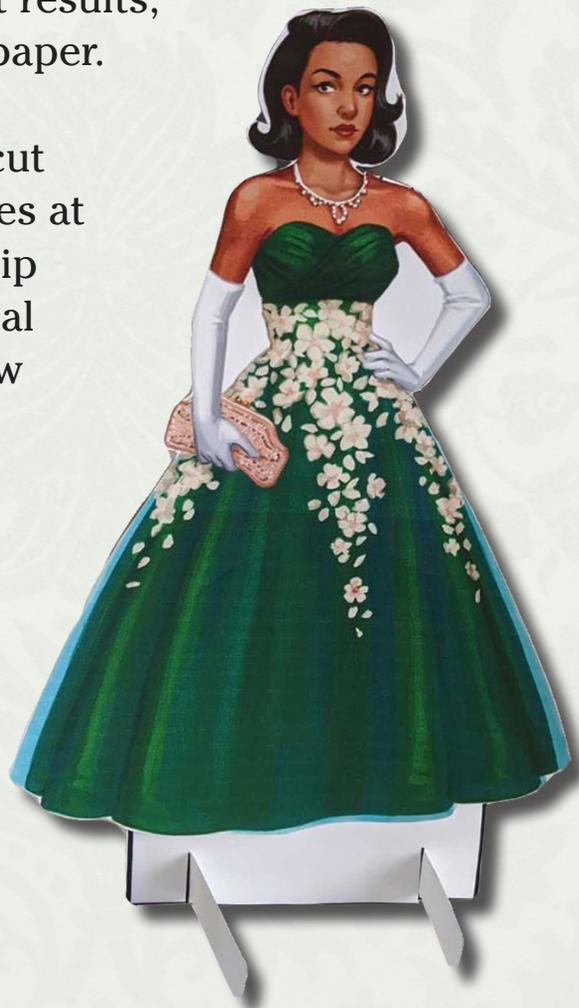
Print out the following pages to switch between her many styles, and learn more about the history behind each of these classic 1950s looks.

## ***INSTRUCTIONS:***

Print and cut out each outfit along its border. For best results, use cardstock or heavy paper.

To construct the stand, cut along the small black lines at the base of the model. Slip each end of the horizontal strip between the shallow cuts, letting the strip arch around the back of the doll to create a supported base.

Affix outfits to model by folding over white tabs, and unfolding to remove.



# NOEMÍ

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*“She was vain, yes. Though she didn’t think it was a sin. Noemí looked a bit like Katy Jurado when she struck the right pose, and of course she knew what exact pose and angle to strike.”*



Noemí says that she looks a bit like classic Mexican film actress Katy Jurado: she has that 1950s ideal hour-glass figure down pat.

She dresses to the nines. Think Liz Taylor in *A Place in the Sun*, or Audrey Hepburn. Her favorite designer is probably Christian Dior or Jacques Fath.



# BALLGOWN

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*“She wore a green gown with white appliqué flowers and didn’t bother to tell her date about the switch.”*



Noemí Taboada is a wealthy socialite in 1950s Mexico. This means she owns a variety of ball gowns with dramatic colors and fabrics.

This dress evokes the bustle of 19th century dresses, but has a streamlined silhouette and utilizes modern materials such as nylon.



# SUIT WITH CALOTTE HAT

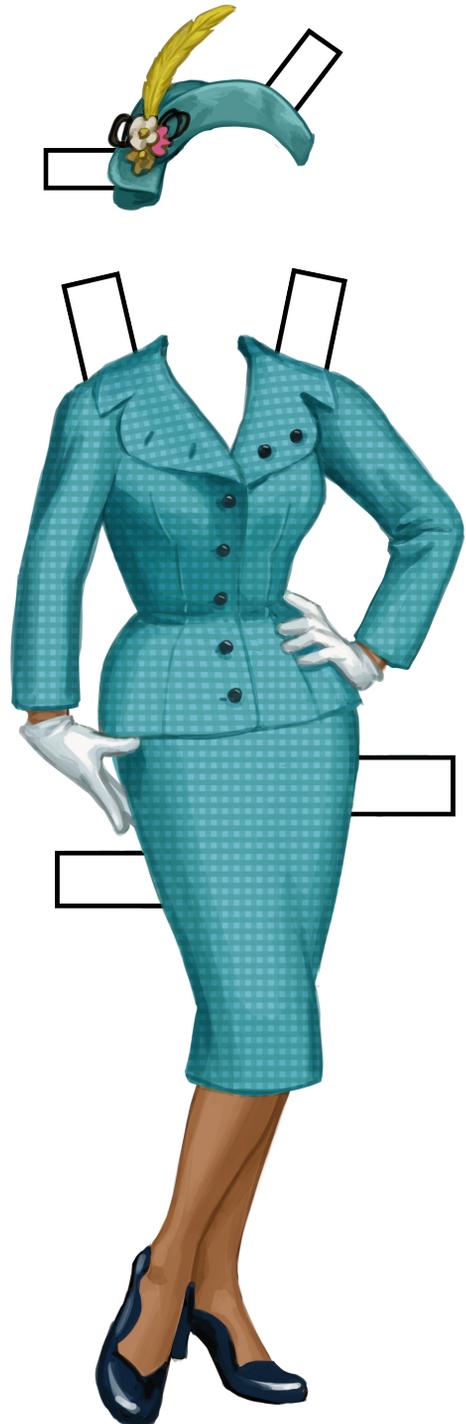
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*“She looked at it curiously as she adjusted her teal calotte hat with the long yellow feather and peered onto the street looking at her ride.”*



For daywear, a woman in the 1950s could opt for several options. A day dress was one of them. A form-fitting suit would have been another. Gloves and a hat would complete the ensemble.

At the beginning of the novel, Noemí is wearing a *calotte hat*, which is a small hat that closely hugs the scalp. It would have been decorated with feathers, pearls or other materials. Later in the 1950s, hats grew bigger and wider.



# KICKPLEAT SKIRT & FITTED SWEATER

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*“She dressed in a long-sleeved button-down blouse in pale cream and a navy skirt with a kickpleat, put on a pair of flats, and headed downstairs long before the predetermined hour.”*



We associate the 1950s with the poodle skirt, but at the beginning of the decade, skirts would have been less voluminous. Still, the skirt in this daywear ensemble flares out a little and the waist is accented with a large belt to make it look tinier and emphasize the hourglass figure. It’s a more “casual” look that also incorporates another big 1950s trend: the fitted sweater.



# NIGHTGOWN WITH PEIGNOIR

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*“She was in her nightgown. It was supposed to be part of a gown-peignoir set, but she was not wearing the cover-up with the wide aquamarine sash at her waist.”*



A wealthy woman in the 1950s would wear a nightgown trimmed with delicate materials. A peignoir would have looked quite glamorous and would have normally come in a set.

