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Don Crouse

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BOOK REVIEW. Oscar Casares's *Amigoland*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009. 357 Pages. (Hardback, \$23.99). ISBN: 978-0-316-15969-2.

By Don Crouse

Writers frequently draw on their own experiences to inform their stories, and often set them in the same region in which they grew up; but it is always something of a risky proposition to write too extensively about one's own hometown, state or region. While writers such as Faulkner, Welty, and Jewett, have been able to successfully set the vast majority—if not the entirety—of their oeuvre in the same locale, many more have been summarily dismissed as “local colorists” by critics.

Casares, a native son of Brownsville, Texas—an historic border town directly across the Rio Grande river from Matamoros, Mexico—established himself as an engaging storyteller with his first volume of short stories, *Brownsville*. He continues his faithful depictions of the colorful and sometimes poignant goings-on in these sister cities, *ciudades hermanas*, in his first novel, *Amigoland*.

The novel is principally structured as a quest; but the hero of this quest is not a bold and innocent youth, setting out to make his mark on the world and achieve glory, but rather an old man who has his entire life behind him, setting out on a last-ditch effort to reaffirm his dignity and to recover a key part of his heritage, of his identity. After having been committed to the Amigoland nursing home by his daughter and son-in-law after an embarrassing accident, Don Fidencio Rosales, 91 years old, finds himself increasingly oppressed by the daily indignities of life in an institution. His opportunity to escape and revalidate himself comes when his estranged younger brother, Celestino, a 71-year-old widower, decides to take him into Mexico to find the place where their grandfather told Fidencio he had been kidnapped by Indians as a boy and taken North.

The catalyst for the decision to undertake this journey is Socorro, a 40-something Mexican woman who was abandoned and then widowed by her husband, and who has subsequently developed a romantic relationship with Don Celestino, for whom she cleans house once a week. Socorro wants to be more than Celestino's *amante*; she wants a real relationship. Celestino, for his part, likes the arrangement, but fears that he will not be able to offer Socorro what a younger man would be able to offer. As Casares allows us to glimpse Socorro's relationship with Celestino from the viewpoints of the principals, as well as those of Socorro's mother and aunt, he provides us with thought-provoking insights into the nature of gender roles in Latino society.

Several reviewers have chosen to read this novel as a comedy, and it is, indeed, entertaining; but the comedy in this work overlays some disturbing and increasingly relevant social issues, such as the exasperating incongruities of American immigration policy, Mexican machismo, marital infidelity, the subordination and dependency of Latinas, and the isolation and loss of dignity suffered by the elderly in our society.

In *Amigoland*, Casares lays the Mexican-American experience of life on the border out there with all its inherent charm and ugliness, and it is for his readers to decide how they want to see it. One thing seems clear, however: although this novel is set in a south-Texas border town, Casares' ability to tap into universal themes of human identity, dignity, and love, establishes him as a legitimate new voice with an appeal that will reach far beyond the Rio Grande.

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