

Review of *Amigoland* by Oscar Casares

Well-Drawn, Vivid Characters Dominate

BY JOSEPH PESCHEL, Correspondent

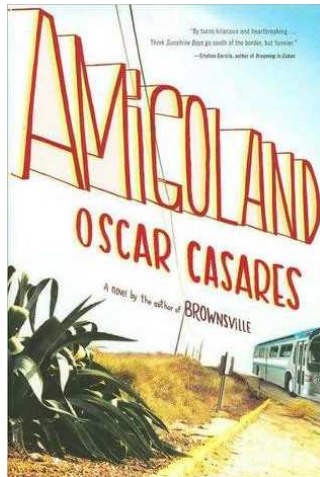
“I’m not even supposed to be here. Against my will they have brought me to this place.”

So says Don Fidencio Rosales, 91, who lives in Amigoland, a nursing home in south Texas that he calls a prison. Fidencio is also stubborn, forgetful and abhors taking his medicine.

Told that his accustomed canes were confiscated for his own good, he must use a walker to get around. His daughter and her husband, whom Fidencio detests, have committed him to Amigoland. He believes “this is where they have sent me to die, with strangers.” He wants to find some way to escape, even if it might cost him his life.

Don Celestino, Fidencio’s seventy-year-old brother, is as stubborn as his older brother, but is in much

better health, even though he has diabetes. He takes vitamins to keep up with his lover and housekeeper, Socorro, who is 30 years his junior.



The two brothers haven’t spoken in 10 years, when Fidencio had his last haircut. For years, they argued over a bit of family history: Fidencio believes his grandfather’s story about *Papá Grande* being kidnapped by Indians when he was 7 years old and taken to the other side. Celestino thinks the tale about grandfather’s

kidnapping is mythology.

That’s the setup of Oscar Casares’s first novel. Set in southern Texas and on the other side of the Mexican border, “Amigoland” is the story of two brothers on a quest, one for peace, the other, although he doesn’t know it, for love. Hope, humor, and adventure permeate this novel.

Socorro persuades Celestino to visit his brother in Amigoland, and, later Celestino springs his brother from the nursing home. The three travel to Linares, Mexico, to find La Rancho Capote, the home of their grandfather, to which Fidencio has promised to return.

The writing is superbly wise and often funny, the central characters are well developed. Even though the two old guys are cantankerous,

Casares portrays them as humorous and endearing.

Minor characters, too, are vividly drawn, including the nursing home's staff and its inmates. The old man has given them names like "The One With The Big Ones," "The One With The Flat Face," "The One With The Hole In His Back." Even the taxi driver is

quite memorable as a divinely comedic guide through Mexico.



Casares, who is in his mid-40s, has one other book to his credit, "Brownsville," a collection of stunning stories set in

Brownsville, Texas. With a heart reminiscent of John Steinbeck, Casares's narrative style is similar to the novelist and short story writer T. C. Boyle. In "Amigoland," Casares is able to transcend the ethnicity of his characters to depict some universal truths about old age, death, and longing.

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Amigoland
Oscar Casares
Little, Brown and Company, 368 pages

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