

Oscar Cásares:

An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Cásares, Oscar, 1964-
Title:	Oscar Cásares Papers
Dates:	1996-2020, undated
Extent:	13 document boxes (5.46 linear feet), 1 oversize box (osb)
Abstract:	The papers of Mexican American author Oscar Cásares consist primarily of short story and book drafts, editorial correspondence, notebooks, proofs, and published articles and stories. Some additional correspondence, photographs, and articles document the writing career of this award-winning author.
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Sketch

Oscar Homero Cásares was born in Brownsville, Texas, on May 7, 1964, to Everardo Issasi Cásares when his dad (a livestock inspector for the USDA) was 50 and his mother, Severa (a grocery cashier), was 42. His two brothers were already adults, and his sister was ten when he was born. Cásares has said that he didn't read books growing up; instead, he learned how to tell stories from his two uncles, Nico Cásares and Hector Cásares, who spent hours holding court in the family's living room.

After high school, Cásares earned an associate's degree from Texas Southmost College in 1984 and transferred to the University of Texas at Austin where in 1987 he earned a BS in Advertising. While living in Minneapolis after college, a homesick Cásares began telling anecdotes about his family and life in South Texas to friends in bars and realized he had an ability to tell entertaining stories. He returned to Austin in 1989 and worked in advertising at GSD&M and began writing stories in 1996. Eight months later, Cásares left his advertising career to pursue writing full time.

Cásares took any opportunity to learn about and practice writing and took courses at the University of Texas Extension and at Austin Community College where his first published story, "Mingo," was printed in their literary journal *The Rio Review* in 1998. Although not registered as a student, Cásares reached out to writer Dagoberto Gilb, who was teaching an MFA seminar at Southwest Texas University (SWT; now called Texas State University), to ask permission to attend his writing seminar. Cásares was not allowed to do this, but recognizing his talent, Gilb held an informal workshop for him in his own home. Following this, Cásares officially audited two of Gilb's workshops at SWT which led to publication of his story "Yolanda" in *The Threepenny Review*. In 1999, Cásares was accepted to the MFA program at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. After graduating in 2001, Cásares returned to Texas and taught freshman composition at the University of Texas at San Antonio while also writing short stories and book reviews. In 2002, The University of Texas at Austin and the Texas Institute of Letters awarded Cásares the Dobie Paisano Fellowship which allowed him to revise and polish the stories that became *Brownsville* (2003). This collection received critical praise and was selected by the American Library Association as a Notable Book of the Year in 2003 and is included in the curriculum at universities throughout the country.

Following the success of *Brownsville*, Cásares moved to Austin in 2004 and joined the faculty at the University of Texas at Austin to teach creative writing. In 2009, Cásares published his first novel, *Amigoland*, and ten years later published *Where We Come From* (2019). Although his stories and novels are set along the US-Mexico border, particularly Brownsville, they speak to universal themes of loss, grief, change, struggle, and bonds among family, friends, and neighbors. One critic described his work stating, "Cásares writes about the lives of characters who are mostly middle-class and ethnic in a way that makes them neither victims nor heroes nor martyrs, that acknowledges their social difference only as background material and recreates their world from the inside out--so that the margins become mainstream" (Cecilia Balli, *Texas Monthly*, March 2003).

In 2006, Cásares married attorney Becky Pestana and they have a son, Adrian, and daughter, Elena Isabel.

As of 2022, Cásares continues to write and teach at the University of Texas at Austin. He is Writer-at-large at *Texas Monthly* and has published essays in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and on National Public Radio.

Sources:

In addition to material in the collection, the following sources were used:

"Oscar Cásares" [personal website]. <https://www.oscarcasares.com/highway-77>. Accessed 9 November 2022.

"Oscar Cásares." Texas Monthly [contributors webpage]. <https://www.texasmonthly.com/contributors/oscar-casares/>. Accessed 9 November 2022.

"Oscar Cásares." University of Texas, College of Liberal Arts, Department of English [faculty webpage]. <https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/english/faculty/ohc56>. Accessed 9 November 2022.

Scope and Contents

The papers of Mexican American author Oscar Cásares consist primarily of short story and book drafts, editorial correspondence, notebooks, proofs, and published articles and stories. Some additional correspondence, photographs, and articles document the writing career of this award-winning author. The papers are arranged into two series: I. Works, 1996-2019, undated; and II. Professional Material, 1998-2020, undated.

The arrangement of the material closely reflects Cásares's own organization of his papers, as received at the Ransom Center. He labeled the documents and folders extensively with sticky notes, and where Cásares provided a meaningful label for a grouping of material, that wording is used in the container list and is indicated in single quotation marks. Original sticky notes were retained and placed in mylar sleeves.

Series I. Works forms the bulk of the material and consists of twelve document boxes of notes, research material, drafts, proofs, correspondence, and marketing material. The works are arranged into two subseries: A. Books, 1996-2019, undated; and B. Short Works, 1996-2019, undated.

Subseries A. Books includes drafts and related material for all of Cásares's published books and are listed in alphabetical order. Within each title, the material generally follows the chronological order of literary production, from research and notes to publication proofs. When present, related material such as editorial correspondence and marketing material follow the original proofs. For all books, there is more than one manuscript draft (often heavily revised), some of which contain edits by fellow authors

and/or friends such as Laura Furman, Antonio Ruiz-Camacho, José Skinner, as well as by editors.

Amigoland was Cásares's first novel and second book published by Little, Brown and Company. As Cásares began sketching out the plot and characters, he drew from family histories and stories, and there is a small volume of related research material. With each subsequent draft, the story, characters, and critical scenes evolved, and the first and final drafts are very different. An outline in box 5.2 compares the original and newer versions. The original working title was *Américo* and there are numerous incomplete early drafts with that title which were each clipped together by Cásares and are foldered to reflect those segments. Additionally, these are often not in continuous chapter order as pages and chapters are reordered and/or moved. Although it seems like this was intentional as Cásares revised and moved scenes around, this could not be completely determined. Consequently, pages remain in their original order.

Brownsville, a collection of short stories, was his first book published by Little, Brown and Company. Cásares wrote and revised many of these stories between 1996 and the time of his Dobie Paisano Fellowship in 2002. This section of material includes the final versions that were submitted for publication. For original story drafts, see the Short Works Subseries. Of interest is the letter from editor Reagan Arthur recommending the removal of the story "Ruben and Norma" from the final collection and a jacket proof rejected by Cásares that included a monkey wearing a sombrero (the sombrero was removed in the final version). Because of the limited number of bookstores in South Texas, Cásares pitched that the book be sold at the Texas-based grocery chain H-E-B, which ordered enough books to send it into a second printing before it was released. H-E-B's owner, Charles Butt, issued a company-wide mandate that the book would be displayed at the checkout counter. Profiles and reviews documenting the release of this book are filed in Series II. Professional Material.

Where We Come From was Cásares's third book, and as with *Amigoland*, there are several incomplete early drafts which were each clipped together by Cásares. They are foldered to reflect those segments, as these are often not in continuous chapter order as pages and chapters are reordered and/or moved. Although it seems like this was intentional, this could not be completely determined. Consequently, pages remain in their original order. Of particular interest are the email printouts with border patrol agent Hipólito Acosta, and notebooks documenting Cásares's research about the conditions and human smuggling system in place along the U.S.-Mexico border. Five notebooks primarily used for sketching out and editing this novel are also of interest. In addition to plot-focused notes, chronologies, questions about plot points, research notes, and text fragments, some notes take the form of a conversation, where Cásares "talks through" his idea in writing in order to come to a solution. An example of such a note is, "Am I spending too much time in Houston before the book takes off in Brownsville?". Other notes are more journal-like reflections and provide a glimpse of Cásares's thoughts as the novel takes shape. Although only about 20 pages have notes, the notebook in box 9.6 references Cásares's anticipation over his first readers', Laura Furman, Laura Tillman, and Antonio Ruiz-Camacho, responses to the novel. Notes for "A Child Doesn't Cry in Spanish or English. A Child Simply Cries, and We Respond" (*Washington Post* op-ed) and "A Bridge Now Crossed Less Freely" (*New York Times* travel article) are also present in notebooks in boxes 9.7 and 10.1, respectively.

Additionally, email correspondence with Knopf editors provides detailed discussion that shapes the narrative of the final novel. The Index of Correspondents at the end of this finding aid contains box and folder locations for the correspondence in the collection.

Subseries B. Short Works is organized by genre and in the following order: short stories, essays, book reviews, and a speech. The short story groupings were arranged by Cásares and for the most part reflect the context in which stories were written or polished (for example, 'Austin Community College and University of Texas at Austin Extension course' or 'Iowa Writers' Workshop'). Individual stories that weren't grouped are listed within the container list alphabetically. Some stories appear in more than one folder (e.g., "Mingo") as it was revisited at different times. Most drafts contain edits from Cásares or from readers, especially those that were worked on during writing workshops. If possible, the readers were identified and listed in the container list.

Essays and Articles includes Cásares's contributions to the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Texas Monthly*, and other publications. In many cases, the piece is represented by the published version with tear sheets or complete publications, with few original drafts. For example, as Writer-at-Large for *Texas Monthly*, these folders contain mostly tear sheets with some drafts and email with editors. An exception is a notebook used in writing the 2019 *Texas Monthly* article "Postcards from the Border" which includes diary-like entries to his daughter Elena.

There are three book reviews present, again represented by the published review and/or editorial email. There are no drafts for any of these reviews. There is one speech draft, a keynote address given at the annual *Celebración de Excelencia* hosted by ¡Excelencia in Education!

Series II. Professional Material is small in volume (approximately one document box) and includes documents related to Cásares's writing career. It is ordered alphabetically by theme or topic and contains material related to awards and honors, correspondence, events, photographs, and clippings and periodicals containing reviews and profiles of Cásares.

There are three small groups of correspondence: 'Fan mail,' 'MFA letters,' and 'Publishers.' The letters from fans include readers from across the country and present are notable writers such as Sandra Cisneros and Junot Diaz. Many of the letters are from teachers, doctors, and professors who grew up in the Rio Grande Valley. Cásares was accepted to several MFA programs in the U.S. and the 'MFA letters' are these acceptance letters, including the letter from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. The 'Publisher' letters are responses from academic, literary journals and popular monthly magazines, as well as letters to agents requesting representation, dating from 2000 to 2002. These notes were not in any original order, so were arranged alphabetically by title of periodical/agent during processing. Correspondence ranges from pro forma printed "decline" slips to significant notes commenting on the submission in some detail; only the latter are included in the Index of Correspondents.

There is one folder of flyers, programs, postcards, posters, photographs, clippings, and letters for readings and literary events. Of interest are materials related to Cásares's support of Austin's literary community including the Clarksville Book Worms, the Austin Community College Latino Literary and Arts Festival, and the Harry Ransom Center's "The Big Read" campaign with a small poster of Cásares reading Edgar Allan

Poe (2009). Some recordings of readings and events are cataloged with the Center's Moving Image and Sound Recording materials.

There are a small number of photographs, mainly casual snapshots of Cásares at readings and events, as well as some publicity and head shots. Included photos are: Texas Book Festival (The Short of It: Story Collections panel with Oscar Cásares, Andrew Geyer, Robert Phillips, and moderator Katherine Oldmixon, November 2003); Cásares at the Paisano Ranch (also pictured in snapshots: parents and siblings, dog Flaco, 2002-2003) and color slides by photographer Joel Salcido (published in *Texas Highways*, May 2003); reading at Joe's Bar (San Benito, Texas, 2002); Bread Loaf Writers' Conference (also pictured: poet Agha Shahid Ali, 1998); Cásares with Judge Reynaldo G. Garza and wife Bertha (2004), and the Houston Chronicle Book and Author Dinner (2003).

Profiles, Reviews, and Clippings are arranged by year and span from 1999 to 2020. These are clippings or sections of newspapers, as well as complete publications. The years 2003 and 2009 reflect the release years for Cásares's first two books and contain the most reviews and profiles. Articles from 2011 to 2012 discuss Cásares's involvement with establishing the University of Texas at Austin's MFA program, The Writers Project.

'Unsolicited Materials' includes Spanish translations of Cásares's stories "Domingo" and "El Charro" by a fan in Houston, Texas, and an adaptation of the short story "Chango" into a short film. A DVD with test clips is cataloged with the Center's Moving Image holdings.

Separated Material

A non-commercial sound recording was transferred to the Center's Sound Recordings and is cataloged in a separate database.

Two VHS tapes and three DVDs of readings and events, as well as one DVD with a short film, were transferred to the Center's Moving Image holdings and are cataloged in a separate database.

A political t-shirt depicting a monkey and the word "Chango" and a matchbook from the KGB bar are housed at the end of the collection.

Index Terms

Subjects

American literature -- Mexican American authors.

American literature -- Mexican-American Border Region.

Authors, American -- 20th century.

Authors, Mexican.

Mexican American authors.

Mexican American Border Region.

Mexican Americans.

Mexican Americans in literature.

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Brownsville (Tex.).

Rio Grande Valley (Colo.-Mexico and Tex.).

Southwestern States.

Document Types

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Correspondence.

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Notebooks.

Novels.

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Series I. Works, 1996-2019, undated

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Amigoland (novel, Little, Brown and Company, 2009)

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- The Atlantic Monthly (C. Michael Curtis)--13.2
- Baskin, Joan Ragsdale--12.19
- Bergholz, Susan (Susan Bergholz Literary Services)--13.2
- Bernstein, Stuart--13.2
- Brandt and Hochman (Marianne Merola)--13.2
- Bromley, Larry (University of Texas at Arlington)--12.19
- Bush, Laura Welch, 1946- --12.19
- Butt, Charles C. (H.E. Butt Grocery Company)--12.19
- Cadena, Teresa (University of Texas at Brownsville)--12.19
- Cásares, Loida--1.2
- Cásares, Nicolas--12.19
- Center for Literary Publishing (Stephanie G'Schwind)--13.2
- Cisneros, Sandra--12.19
- Clarksville Bookworms (Emma Strub; Patrick Parks; Barbara Harlow, 1948-2017)--13.3
- Columbia University (Dan Kleinman, Richard Locke)--13.1
- Cornell University (Dorothy Mermin, 1936-)--13.1
- Corning, Josephine H.--12.19
- Darhansoff, Verrill, Feldman (Alexis Kanfer)--13.2
- Delgado, Julia--12.19
- Diaz, Junot, 1968- --12.19
- Domino, C. X.--12.19
- DoubleTake (Albert LaFarge)--13.2
- Ellen Levine Agency (Diana Finch)--13.2
- Escalante, Cynthia--12.19
- Esquire (A. A.)--13.2
- Farrar, Straus, and Giroux (Ayesha Pande)--13.2
- Fiction (M. W. Pollock[?])--13.2
- Furman, Laura--10.5
- Harper's Magazine--13.2
- Iowa Review (David Hamilton)--13.2
- Iowa Writers' Workshop
 - Brothers, Connie--12.19
- Conroy, Frank, 1936-2005--12.16, 13.1

- James A. Michener Center for Writers (James Magnuson)--13.1

- Little, Brown and Company (Reagan Arthur)--5.3, 6.2
- Matonte, Ana Lerman--10.8
- The Missouri Review (S. M.)--13.2
- Moya Ford, Lauren, 1986- --12.19
- National Endowment for the Arts (Dana Gioia)--12.16
- Neeley, John--12.19
- The New York Times (Steve Reddicliffe)--12.3-4
- The New Yorker (Filed Maloney)--13.2
- Northwest Review (Jan MacRae)--11.10
- Osandu, Epaphras C.--10.5
- Perales, Gina--12.19
- Pestana, Carlos--1.6
- Ruiz-Camacho, Antonio, 1973- --10.8
- Salcido, Joel, 1957- --12.11
- Santos, John Phillip--10.5
- Skinner, José, 1956- --2.1
- Soledade, Patricia--12.19
- Southwest Texas State University (Debra Monroe)--13.1
- Texas Monthly
 - Broders, John--12.19
- Hogan, Claire--12.11
- Nickell, J. K.--12.11
- _____, Francesca--12.10

- Tharpe, Coleman--12.19
- The Threepenny Review (Wendy Lesser)--12.2, 13.2
- University of Houston (Faith Venverloh)--13.1
- University of Texas at Austin, Dobie-Paisano Fellowship Project (Carolyn Osborn, 1934- / Teresa A. Sullivan, Audrey N. (Audrey Nelson) Slate, 1926-)--12.16
- The Washington Post
 - Murphy, Mary Jo--12.4, 12.7, 12.14
- Stockwell, Jamie V.--12.19