

Where we come from by Oscar Casares

The author of the collection *Brownsville* returns to that Texas border town for this thoughtful and quietly suspenseful novel. Retired single schoolteacher Nina lives with and cares for her crabby, bedbound mother. She is looking forward to spending a few summer weeks with her 12-year-old godson, Orly, whose advertising executive father, Nina's nephew, lives in Houston, and whose mother recently died of an aneurysm. Meanwhile, a few months before Orly's visit, Nina has gotten in over her head by providing secret housing for undocumented immigrants in the rental house behind her mother's. When Orly arrives, one boy, 12-year-old Daniel, is hiding there. Despite Nina's efforts, Orly discovers Daniel's existence, and the two form a tentative bond, in the process putting Nina's extended family in danger. While keeping the focus on family dynamics and the characters' internal struggles, Casares frequently, and often heartbreakingly, sets this domestic story in a wider context by stepping back to investigate the stories of people with whom the main characters interact only tangentially (a waiter who provides room service for Orly's father in San Francisco; the gardener who cleans the gutters at Orly's house in Houston). With understated grace and without sermonizing, Casares brilliantly depicts the psychological complexity of living halfway in one place and halfway in another.