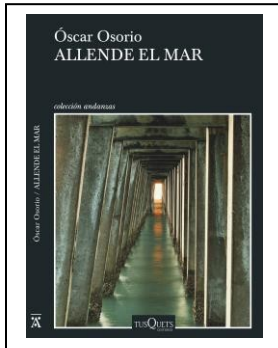


Allende el mar by Óscar Osorio¹

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Óscar Osorio's book *Allende el mar* is a collection of ten chronicles of real-life experiences of Colombians who have immigrated to the United States. Even those who may consider themselves experts on the subject of Colombian immigration to this country - its causes, conditions, and repercussions – would do well to take the time to read these striking accounts, which the author refers to as "non-fiction stories."

Osorio captures the personal tone of each of his protagonists in their telling of events that occurred before and after they came to the United States. Every story in *Allende el mar* envelops and engages the reader in situations that would almost seem to be the work of a creative storyteller in the magic realism tradition of Latin American literature, with each protagonist having a very different story to tell and their own personal way of telling it in these highly individualized accounts. Nevertheless, there are certain things that they do have in common: Their recollections of things that happened in Colombia will evoke similar memories among many of their compatriots due to a shared collective memory, and almost all of them are imbued with a longing for their native country and a wish to improve the situation of the land where they were born.

The protagonists of *Allende el mar* are Beto Coral, Álvaro López, Rodín, Ruby Tovar, Freddy Castiblanco, John Estrada, Camilo Peñaloza, and three women who were given fictitious names upon request. The chronicles are organized on the basis of the protagonists' current place of residence: the first four live in Florida, the next three in New Jersey, the following two in New York, and the last one in Indiana.

The collection begins with the wish "Que ningún otro niño viva lo que yo viví" (May no other child ever go through what I went through) as the title of the first chronicle, which tells the

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story of a son's initial search for truth regarding the circumstances of his father's death and his subsequent efforts to see that his father's murderers be brought to justice in Colombia, all of which is now part of the nation's history.

The longest chronicle in the collection, "Una inmensa tristeza" (An immense sadness), is 30 pages long, while the shortest, "Elizabeth es un barrio popular de Cali" (Elizabeth is a lower-class neighborhood in Cali) is only 11 pages long. Both stories are told by women who have asked to be given fictitious names in the collection. Some of the incidents that Mariana relates in the former involve people engaged in criminal acts like drug trafficking or counterfeiting money, but she also tells of the violence she suffered at the hands of two of her partners, and of events she confesses she does not know how to deal with and therefore keeps to herself in a shockingly precarious personal situation.

In the chronicle titled "El niño que deseaba intensamente que su padre se muriera" (The little boy who wished intensely for his father to die), Osorio masterfully chooses the order in which to intersperse the events of Estrada's childhood in Colombia and his later life as a student and then as a university professor in New York. These emotionally and economically challenging periods mark his life and rarely fail to move those who read about them. Like other protagonists of the *Allende el mar* chronicles, Estrada constantly thinks about returning to the land left behind years ago and is currently planning to settle in Medellín where he looks forward to working as an expert on medieval literature.

Osorio's expertise as a chronicler is evident in the way he manages to disappear from or to become almost invisible in these chronicles. We can hear each one of the protagonists voices with their own distinctive tone. Some converse fluidly with the reader, while others use short, staccato sentences. The transition between the two vital spaces, Colombia and the United States, and the time in which the narrated events take place bind the reader to follow the story to the very end.

The ten chronicles contained in *Allende el Mar* all express the feelings of anxiety, nostalgia, and emotional suffering upon leaving one's homeland to strive for a supposedly "better" life in another country, one that fails to materialize in most of these narratives. The loneliness of being

personally and culturally uprooted, the discomfort of taking shelter with one's children in the living room of a relative's rented apartment, the absurdity of having to work in a supermarket while holding a doctorate in literature from a prestigious American university, the terror of death threats aimed at a doctor who is forced to flee because he attended patients on both sides of the conflict in a remote region of Colombia, the desperate search for identity in a new world, and the twin horrors of domestic violence and child abuse are some of the topics that become engraved in the reader's mind through reading these chronicles. And yet, at the end of each of these "non-fiction stories" there still remains the sense of an undeniable desire to overcome all odds and the audacity to hope for a better future for the actors of these stories, their children, and Colombia itself.