

In 'Lost City Radio,' faint signals from a country's lost heart

Daniel Alarcón's debut novel tells of a nameless country dealing with the aftermath of war.

By [Marjorie Kehe](#)

At first glance, **Lost City Radio** by Daniel Alarcón has the look of a political fable. It tells the story of an anonymous Latin American nation, first ravaged by a pointless war and now governed by a faceless totalitarian regime. The book's tone is chillingly Orwellian.

But politicians – either of the left or the right – are neither the real heroes or the villains in this haunting debut novel. "Lost City Radio" is indeed a wrenching commentary on the devastation war can inflict. But the mystery at the heart of this story is not political – it's a riddle of the human heart.

Alarcón gained considerable attention with the 2005 publication of his short-story collection "War by Candlelight." The 20-something author was born in Peru but raised mostly in the United States. He writes in English – carefully, precisely, and beautifully.

The protagonist of "Lost City Radio" is Norma. She lives in the capital city of her unnamed country and is one of its celebrities even though almost none of her countrymen recognize her face.

Norma's fame is in her voice, a voice that makes "unemployment figures read like bittersweet laments, declarations of war like love letters." She is the star of the Lost City Radio show, a program intended to reunite listeners with lost loved ones. After a brutal decade of civil war, the number of vanished loved ones is legion.

Norma is not allowed to mention the war on air (and she needs to pay attention to any and all such prohibitions – her previous program director, who did not, has disappeared without a trace) but she is encouraged to massage the hope and longing of her listeners.

"Are you alone, or more alone, than you expected to be?" she coos. "Have you lost touch with those whom you expected to find...? This show, my friends, is for you."

Listeners call in from across the war-torn land, to talk "about their uncles, their cousins, their neighbors from that long-ago abandoned village; the way the earth smelled back home, the sound of the rain as it fell in bursts over the treetops, the lurid colors of the countryside in bloom."

Meanwhile, Norma's own life should be counted as one of the missing. She lives alone in an apartment with two dusty, dying houseplants. Her husband Rey, a botanist fascinated by plants with psychoactive properties, was also (unknown to her) a collaborator with the insurgency. He is one of the vanished.

One Tuesday morning Norma's solitude is broken by the arrival of Victor, a young boy who is "slender and fragile" with "eyes too small for his face." He has traveled to the capital from a remote village called 1797. (Since the war, the government has replaced all city names with numbers: odd numbers indicate a river or mountain nearby, and the higher the final digit the smaller the hamlet.)

The purpose of Victor's journey is to bring Norma a list of the names of those missing from his town. But as it happens, his town is the one Rey used to visit as he hunted for plants.

The novel's action glides from city to village, from present to past, and from one narrator to another. Norma relives her story with Rey; Rey recollects both his travels in the jungle and the torture he underwent as punishment by the government; and other voices fill in events in Victor's village.

Meanwhile, all around these characters swirls the subdued, truncated life of this country, marked most strikingly by what it has lost. In the city, "There were soldiers on every other corner.... Pedestrians moved chaotically between the featureless, modern buildings, beneath a clouded sky that threatened to clear. Taxis honked, vendors shouted, police whistles squealed."

There are those who recall, however, that once, "There were parks of olive trees and lemon trees planted in rows, flower beds bursting with flowers of alarming colors, shady places for napping on a spread blanket, places where couples might stroll, hand in hand, and discuss in whispers all manner of personal things. This, too, the war would bring to an end."

Distant from the city is "the undulating countryside, the sharp teeth of the gray mountains, the scandalously blue sky." There, a handful of people still speak the

local dialect, a language with two words for *we* – one that includes *you* and another that does not. "Barely anyone spoke that language anymore – a few of the ancient women of the village, and no one else." The *we* that includes *you* is close to extinction, thanks to the war. Yet one of the striking things about "Lost City Radio" is its apolitical nature. Rey was an informer for the IL (Illegitimate Legion) and he also worked for the government. He and his uncle (also a servant of both sides) agree that it's strange "to be tortured by the state, and then employed by it, all in a matter of months." However, they conclude, "The government after all, was a blind machine...." Norma too is a political enigma – a woman who accepts her job without seeming to question the implications of cooperating with those who have destroyed her happiness.

No one, in fact, seems even to understand what the war was about. How did it start, some villagers ask Rey. "He forgot now. Someone was angry about something. This someone convinced many hundreds and then many thousands more that their collective anger meant something. That had to be acted on." There is no response from Rey when a villager queries, "Tell us sir, who was right in all of this?"

There are no right or wrong sides in this tale. There is only the folly of human beings, a willingness on the part of too many to replace real feeling with meaningless action, not unlike the impostors who call in to Norma's show, desperate to be falsely accepted as either the missed or the missing. In other words, the terrain under examination here is that of the human heart – the realm of literature and not that of politics.

• *Marjorie Kehe is the Monitor's book editor. Send comments to [Marjorie Kehe](#)*