

ON THE AIR

by Victor Cruz Lugo

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Peruvian-born, American-bred writer Daniel Alarcón has fulfilled his early promise with his debut novel *Lost City Radio*.

Set in an unnamed Latin American country, the book opens when an 11-year-old boy, Victor, turns up at a radio station in search of popular talk show host Norma, who broadcasts a nightly program that helps callers locate missing loved ones. In this imaginary nation, which is itself a brilliantly rendered character, war is never far, and lives, bodies, identities, and even names are crushed under the arbitrary weight of warring factions. With its inhabitants radically displaced by civil war and the forces of modernity, listeners have turned to Norma, and her soothing voice, for solace. But we learn that Norma, whose husband Rey is an ethno-botanist who has also disappeared, is as much a victim of her place and time as her adoring fans.

Alarcón first caught the national spotlight when his short story *City of Clowns* made the cut in the 2003 *New Yorker* magazine's all-fiction issue. That was followed by the critically well-received publication of short works titled *War by Candlelight* (HarperCollins). But it is with the publication of *Lost City Radio* that Alarcón is confirming his place as one of the strongest voices of his generation, as capable writing a novel as working the short form, perhaps more so.

Alarcón is known to have researched the disappearance of his own radicalized uncle who disappeared in Peru in 1989. And the acknowledgements section of *Lost City Radio* mentions further research. This careful study is wedded to Alarcón's already formidable gift for storytelling, his ear for the lyrical turn of phrase, his eye for the right detail. And here, in the long form of the novel, we are treated to the latest features of Alarcón's tools of his trade: a firm grasp of the discipline of pacing, and a masterful display of sustained tone and mood. Which is to say, the book has the same gritty, earthy texture of the real and is therefore as disturbing as it is lovely.

As one follows the narrative of Norma's search for her husband, and the secret life he kept from her, we are introduced intimately to several other characters in a story that cannot escape politics and that meanders from city to jungle and back, where hope is always on the verge of being extinguished. But the gifted Alarcón, of uncommon maturity and with the necessarily cold eye of an emerging master, weaves this tale of the personal and political without being polemical.

There will be more favorable reviews of *Lost City Radio*. Of this you can be sure, but more than likely, Alarcón's greatest triumph will come later. He writes in English and lives in Oakland, California, but when *Lost City Radio* is finally published in Spanish, many of the folks who lived similar experiences will read it. And more than likely, they'll agree that he got so much of what went painfully wrong in the country they've loved, and in many cases fled, exactly right.