

# Boyd Tonkin: A Week in Books

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Across the Atlantic, literary selectors have been busy drawing up teams to represent the future of fiction in the not-so-new world. First came Granta magazine's second list of the 20 best young American novelists. For all their diversity, "American" here mostly means what people south of the Rio Grande would call *estadounidense* - "unitedstatesish". Now that other continent has answered back with a list of 39 Latin American writers aged 39 or under, chosen by a trio of leading Colombian authors and issued this month to inaugurate Bogotá's year as "capital of the book". And it turns out that the name of one truly outstanding young writer appears on both teams. Perhaps his ambidextrous success in both the Anglo- and Ibero-American spheres can tell us a story about the literature of the coming decades - not just over the ocean, but across the planet.

Daniel Alarcón was born in Lima, Peru, in 1977. He grew up a migrant child in Birmingham, Alabama, and graduated from that West Point of American literature's new officer class, the Iowa University writers' workshop. Later he spent time back in Peru on a scholarship and still co-edits a Lima magazine, *Etiqueta Negra*. Alarcón has said that he finds it "increasingly difficult to tell where Latin America begins and where North America ends". Of course, like millions of others across the continents, he's completely bilingual.

As a writer of fiction, however, Alarcón has only ever worked in the English language. After a volume of stories, *War by Candlelight*, he has just published a debut novel: *Lost City Radio* (Fourth Estate, £12.99). Set in an intensely realised but unnamed Latin American state in the aftermath of a horrific cycle of repression and insurgency, it condenses that conflict into the story of a lonely radio presenter and the husband who vanished into the jungle. Norma hosts a programme that tries to re-unite relatives with the lost legions of the "missing" that years of strife have torn from their families. An 11-year-old, Victor, arrives from a mountain village to beg her help - "mother to an imaginary nation of missing people" - in the search for his people's "disappeared". Soon she grasps that Victor may hold the key to the fate of her Rey, the ethno-botanist and alleged guerrilla.

This is a formidably accomplished first novel. Alarcón's nameless country feels as intensely real as the riotous flora of its rainforests or the reeking slums of its cities. Yet its location beyond any map allows him to synthesise the ordeals of many places into a fable of loss and longing that decodes the "indecipherable text" of every murky civil war. As I found out in Colombia this year, the unfinished business of Latin America's armed conflicts - in states with a semblance of political peace, but no proper social resolution - has been preying on creative minds across the continent.

Alarcón surveys this "postconflict" landscape in a style that weds gravity to grace - but he does so as an Anglophone author rooted in Hispanic realities. We know that fiction in English has flourished for over half a century in the Indian subcontinent. Much more recent is the wave of Anglophone writing from regions that lack the same history of colonisation or settlement. The Bogotá "39 under 39" list has another rising star who only writes in English: Juno Diaz from the Dominican Republic, but now settled in the US.

In the past, a literary shift of tongues signalled a permanent state of exile or emigration: think of Nabokov, or Conrad. Now we enjoy more flexible times, in which a writer such as Alarcón can be claimed, and acclaimed, by two continents at once. Yet it's still the English language that tends to reap the benefits of this hybridity. Secure in its hegemony, English can say to the world, "Make yourself at home". Even if, in this case, the Spanish sounds far sweeter: *Mi casa es tu casa*.