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★ **Alarcón, Daniel**

LOST CITY RADIO

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The host of a radio show finds herself increasingly tangled in the legacy of her country's wearying history of war.

Like the dystopian settings of *Brave New World* and *1984*, the nation that Alarcón describes in his jarring and deeply imagined first novel feels at once anonymous and very familiar. Norma lives in the capital city of a South American nation that has spent ten years recovering from a long civil war that pitted the army against a failed cadre of rebels called the Illegitimate Legion. The reasons for the fighting are obscure, but Norma has become a national folk hero by helping to pick up the pieces; as the host of "Lost City Radio," she reunites listeners with family members who were among the "disappeared" during the war. She's not wholly dispassionate about her work: Among the missing is her husband, Rey, a plant scholar who paid dearly, perhaps even fatally, for his freethinking attitude. A young boy named Victor visits the station from the jungle village of 1797 (all towns were renamed with numbers under the new regime), bearing a list of people its residents are searching for; through Victor, Norma is forced to intimately contemplate the war, and how she and Rey were connected to it. There's little plot in the present-day sections—the story mainly sparks remembrances of the past, which allows Alarcón to render this unnamed country in remarkable detail. In reportorial prose, he describes the folkways of the jungle village where Victor was born, and the lives of its residents; the horrors of the Moon, the concentration camp where Rey suffered various indignities; and the shape of the secretive underground movement in the city. Alarcón (stories: *War by Candlelight*, 2005) makes increasingly strong connections between city and jungle, the army and the rebels, and Norma and Victor, sending a powerful message about how war has a way of implicating everybody.

Alarcón has mapped a whole nation and given its war-torn history real depth—an impressive feat. (*Agent: Eric Simonoff/Janklow & Nesbit Associates*)