

## Giving voice to the IL effects of war

FICTION A woman channels her country's grief into a radio program that seeks to reunite missing and displaced persons in the aftermath of guerrilla warfare.

By Cherie Parker, Special to the Star Tribune

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### LOST CITY RADIO

By: Daniel Alarcón.

Publisher: HarperCollins, 262 pages, \$24.95.

Review: Stunningly beautiful prose and a nuanced portrayal of the human costs of conflict mark this debut novel, marred only by some defects in plot and character development.

Daniel Alarcón muscled onto the literary scene in 2005 with "War by Candlelight," a collection of short stories that showed off the young University of Iowa grad's keen intellect, classically elegant style and grounding in both North and South American cultures -- all suggesting the unveiling of a major talent. His first full-length novel has been hotly anticipated by fans of literary fiction.

That novel, "Lost City Radio," is here. While it doesn't quite fulfill what were probably unrealistic expectations, it does contain all the qualities -- big ideas broached from unexpected angles, an apprehension of the human condition and every sentence constructed like a Stradivarius -- that make reading Alarcón feel like witnessing the arrival of a John Steinbeck or Gabriel García Márquez.

Alarcón's Big Idea in "Lost City Radio" is war. The setting is a nameless South American country. The government has turned totalitarian after defeating an insurrection called the IL (Illegitimate Legion) mounted by the usual ragtag union of poor urbanites, Indians from the jungle, intellectuals and free-thinkers. Norma is host of the titular radio program, a hugely popular national show that gives voice to the displaced and tries to reconnect war refugees with those who have lost them. Norma is beloved for her soothing, empathetic voice, but she herself has lost her husband, Rey. Rey visited the jungles during the war, ostensibly for botany research, until the trip from which he never returned. One day an orphan boy from a jungle village comes to Norma with a list of lost people's names for her to read. Their histories and destinies intertwine, and Norma is forced to face the realities of Rey's ultimate fate.

Alarcón never shows sympathy for the IL, and this is a welcome intellectual exercise. "Lost City Radio" embodies a moralism devoid of politics, where a war machinery has rendered left and right meaningless, and where pointless terrorism is answered with pointless repression. As in "War by Candlelight," Alarcón posits small actions that

initiate chain reactions: A prank becomes a fire, a fire ignites a mob, a mob demands satisfaction.

The weakness of "Lost City Radio" is its plot. Most of the action happens in flashbacks that eventually answer the questions of what happened to Rey, Norma and Victor, the boy from the jungle. But there are too many scenes in which people talk for pages in unrevealing banter that dissipates the suspense. And while the characters are all lovingly rendered, the central figure of Norma is essentially a cipher. She misses her husband, yes, but there are so many other things we would like to know about her.

Still, there is so much to love in the details of Alarcón's work. He describes this scene in a village canteen: "Inside, everything had come unmoored. Drunkenness had exploded inside, and no one had been saved. The soldiers had spread about the room like ivy, a couple of them leaned over the open window, chatting with the children, blowing smoke above their heads. ... " Or this gorgeous and gentle memory of a lovers' encounter: "It had been a moonless night. Around them, above them, in the near distance of the forest, birds had made their bright and inscrutable music. A pang of desire shot through him at the memory: he and Adela had scratched one another and pushed, they had rolled clumsily off the mat and onto the ground. The moist earth had stuck to their bodies. Later, the rains came to clean them: a sky split by lightning, curtains of purple water crashing loudly over the trees."

In the end, if "Lost City Radio" doesn't come together as the full realization of Alarcón's genius, it's simply because he himself is guilty of setting the bar so high.

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