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In a Latin nation, men fight, die or disappear

Lost City Radio_By Daniel Alarcón
HarperCollins. 257 pp. \$24.95
Reviewed by John Freeman

'One man's freedom fighter," it has been said, "is another's man's terrorist." In his debut novel, *Lost City Radio*, Daniel Alarcón reminds that one man's freedom fighter is probably another woman's husband, another boy's father, certainly another man's son.

Set in a fictional Latin American republic, *Lost City Radio* depicts the trauma inflicted upon a society when these freedom fighters - be they vigilantes or soldiers on the side of the government - simply disappear.

The book takes its title from a popular radio show in what Alarcón calls "the provincial capital." Each Sunday, the station broadcasts the names of the disappeared.

"The idea was simple. How many refugees had come to the city? How many of them had lost touch with their families? Hundreds of thousands? Millions?"

The voice connecting the lost with the found belongs to Norma, a brave, beautiful and damaged journalist whom Alarcón brings vividly to life. Her husband, Rey, has been missing for more than a decade.

Alarcón's portrait of the emotional toll this loss takes on Norma is heartrending. A decade later, she still sleeps alone, facing the door to her bedroom, as if Rey might still walk through the door.

Lost City Radio then cycles backward to tell the story of the country's war, the way it fractured the committed from the fearful, the urban from the rural, and the collaborative from the resistant.

Based on Alarcón's descriptions, the country might be Argentina or Chile or the author's native Peru - all countries wracked by civil wars and state-sponsored disappearances. But the observations this book makes aren't limited to Latin America, especially when it comes to the siren call of violence.

"Before the war began, those of Norma's generation still spoke of violence with awe and reverence," Alarcón writes: "cleansing violence, purifying violence, violence that would spawn virtue."

It doesn't take long for the society to realize that the fire next time can become the fire all the time - fires that burn indiscriminately. Indeed, these blazes become one of the most compelling metaphors of *Lost City Radio*.

A petty act of pyrotechnic vandalism flies out of control and starts Rey on his career of civil disobedience. House fires announce the start of the war. Norma is dispatched to cover one, where she discovers from a firefighter that a man is inside, tied to a chair.

At the heart of the book is a secluded piece of scorched earth called the Moon, where political prisoners are taken and buried in pits and baked in the sun, tortured, and burned to death. Rey survives, but is scarred by nightmares.

Like many of his compatriots, Rey remains quiet about his experience at first, lest he be sent back. Finally, he asks a family member, who works at a jail, why he never asked Rey what happened to him while he was away. "I work in a prison," the man responds. "I know exactly what they did to you."

This novel would feel like a political tract were it not so skillful at portraying the moral insanity of war. *Lost City Radio* reveals how hard it is to separate villains from victims, killers from the killed.

The novel's key plot revolves around a boy who is sent from a village to the city to have a list of names read on Norma's show. His appearance sets off a chain of events that show how all the characters are more connected than at first appears.

Alarcón is still in his late 20s, but he manages the complicated plot mechanisms this storyline requires like a veteran. Even more impressively, time and again he resists the urge to bring the hammer of judgment down upon any of his characters.

We emerge from this impressive political fable with a profound sense of loss and rage, and a clarifying glimpse into the futility of violence. "What does the end of a war mean," Alarcón writes, early in the book, "if not that one side ran out of men willing to die?" In some cases, indeed they stop fighting. Other times, they are missing.

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