

Woman comforts South American nation  
in 'Radio'  
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The Tennessean  
Published: Sunday, 02/11/07

A portrait of a nameless, war-ravaged South American country, *Lost City Radio* is poetic without being pretentious, serious and affecting without being ponderous, carefully constructed without being precious. Though the Peruvian-American author, Daniel Alarcón, is still in his 20s, he exerts extraordinary command over his craft. With an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa and a collection of short stories already to his credit, this young author is not simply lucky: He is in enviable possession of the right stuff.

Alarcón never reveals where his debut novel takes place, yet the Orwellian atrocities his characters suffer are hardly unique to the region. The unnamed country, abstracted and universalized, is ever in the throes of an interminable civil war in which both government and insurgents justify their brutalities with equally hollow rationales. Really, their common cause seems to be violence itself — not as a means to a defensible end, but violence as an energetic, independent force operating through the country.

Too often, first novels have an aura of egotistical sublimation, of personal testimony rather than invention and imagination. Not so with Alarcón, who introduces a varied, and believable, cast of characters in *Lost City Radio*. The protagonist, Norma, is a beloved radio personality who reads the names of missing persons and encourages listeners to call in with their own stories of displacement and dispossession. Her voice charms and soothes the nation, as she seeks to reunite a desperate, war-weary and traumatized population.

The original impetus for Norma's *Lost City* radio show is her own "disappeared" and likely deceased husband, Rey. In one of the book's darker ironies, she is able to provide solace to the masses through her work, yet rarely finds any comfort for her own traumata. Because Rey's name is still politically dangerous, she is unable to use her own show to help discover what fate befell him.

Rey had been an ethno-botany professor involved in dissident intrigues, and perhaps even a member of IL, the most notorious of the jungle-based guerrilla factions. But Alarcón leaves open the question whether IL even exists. As the dimensions of the war are nebulous, so too are its motivations. The author never shies from moral ambiguity, casting neither IL nor the government as the good guys. Rey is portrayed as reckless and callous, where a more sentimental writer might have cast him in a heroic light.

Alarcón carves every aspect of his novel into an aesthetically pleasing form. Among the myriad pleasures is his treatment of time lapse, as he interweaves flashbacks and past experiences into the central narrative with a laudably light, elegant touch.

Alarcón's sense of pacing is equally deft: He begins and ends each chapter, each episode at just the right moment, whether he's offering a lyrical recounting of the country's cycles of violence or diving into a character's private memory.

Lost City Radio feels like the product of a mature talent, and Alarcón likely will draw comparisons to such luminaries as Nadine Gordimer or Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who write with similar authority and scope of the borderless zones where personal and political realms meet and intertwine. Like them, this young writer maps for us the dimensions where ocean tides of history and eddies of personal narrative flow together, moving outward, then inward, then out again.

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