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Review

Lost City Radio

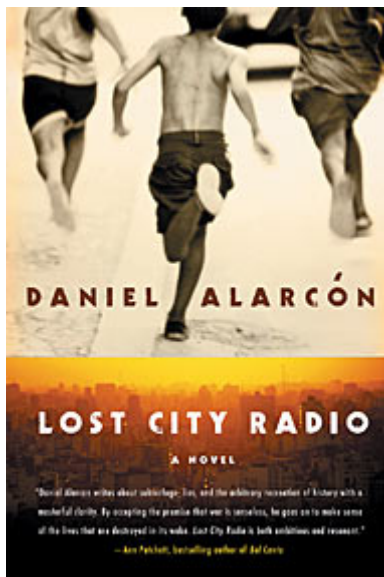
By Daniel Alarcón. HarperCollins, \$24.95.



Following up the much-lauded *War by Candlelight*, Alarcón begins *Lost City Radio* with the simple introduction of two characters: Victor and Norma. Eleven-year-old Victor has come out of the jungle of a fictional South American country with a list of names for Miss Norma, the radio personality who reads names on the air in the hopes of reuniting families torn apart by the country's civil war.

This a novel about war, but the battles are mentioned only in passing, and anyway, they were all done with ten years before the novel begins. But the violence, offstage as it is, lingers. Norma, despite what she does for a living, has no idea if her own husband is alive. All she knows for sure is that trying to find out could be very dangerous. Above all else, the war denies the characters any sense of certainty.

This is a drama of consequence more than action; the characters exist in circumstances that go back years and leave them little room to maneuver. As the story goes on, the plot doesn't so much progress as deepen. It isn't long before the bulk of each chapter is concerned with backstory, scenes looping in and out of one another and back again. It's not as hard to follow as it could be, but there's no doubt that Alarcón's narrative play may frustrate some. But there's so much intention and control in this writing that it's hard not to get on board.



Alarcón has earned some weighty comparisons since his debut in *The New Yorker* a few years ago, but the one that resonates most for us, at least, is the one made to Graham Greene. Both writers share an honest but unflinching sympathy for their characters, but more to the point, modulate effortlessly between the cultural and the individual scales in a way that is, in a word, cosmic.—*Pete Coco*