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Review

Lost City Radio

By Daniel Alarcón. HarperCollins, \$24.95.

Daniel Alarcón's story collection *War by Candlelight* explored, from different perspectives, the results of a civil conflict in his native Peru. His sumptuous debut novel, *Lost City Radio*, unfolds in a similar but unnamed South American country. The story, which is set ten years after a devastating war between the government and a leftist rebel faction, is loosely based on Peruvian history, but the author's refusal to identify the setting gives this novel a timeless, elegiac feel.

The novel's protagonist, Norma, hosts a popular radio program called *Lost City Radio*, which attempts to reunite the war's "disappeared" with their families. Norma hopes the show will lead her to her husband, Rey, an ethnobotanist who vanished during the coup's waning days. The novel opens with the arrival of 11-year-old orphan Victor, whose jungle village has sent him to Norma with a list of its missing. Among the names is one of Rey's aliases from his dissident days, which sends Norma in search of his true role in the insurgency.

Norma's investigation alone makes *Lost City Radio* a thrilling political fable. But Alarcón also lends the book a complex structure that artfully shows how rampant violence changes the way people think. Perspectives shift rapidly, and the action cuts between past and present. Reading the book, you can feel the characters' jitteriness, and the bemusement brought about by a conflict whose goals have become indecipherable over time. Alarcón evokes not just the immediate horrors of war but the daily mysteries and confusion that battles inspire. —*Barbara Spindel*