

## BOOKS

# Locating *Lost City Radio*

By Meredith Perry

## Lost City Radio

By Daniel Alarcón

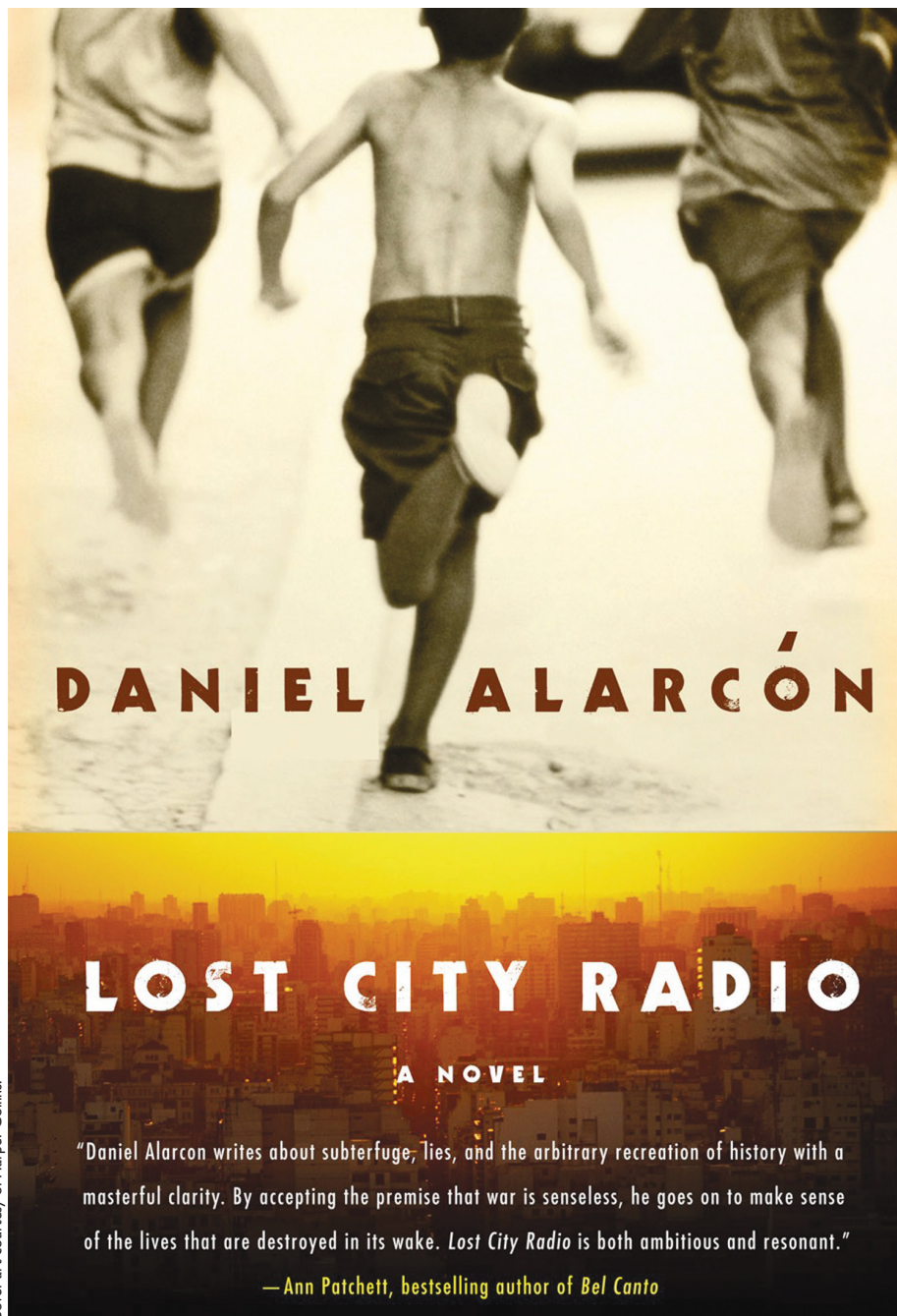
272 pages, HarperCollins.

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**B**efore beginning his reading of *Lost City Radio*, author Daniel Alarcón offers a disclaimer, “I didn’t set this novel in Peru. I set this novel in an unnamed Latin American country, in an unnamed Latin American city.” Seconds later, as Alarcón is framing the excerpt he is about to read, he says, “This is about the night the war finally became real in Lima.” Then he pauses and corrects himself, “Not in Lima, in this made-up, fictional city.” Standing before the Peruvian Consul General, Alarcón, winks, “Nothing like this ever happened in Peru.”

*Lost City Radio*, Alarcón’s first novel, chronicles two days in the life of Norma, a news announcer for a national radio program. With thousands missing due to civil war and economic dislocation, Norma’s radio program provides a forum for callers hoping to reconnect with their lost family members, lovers and friends. Ten years prior, Norma’s own husband Rey disappeared during the waning days of the war in a village on the outskirts of the jungle.

The narrative begins when Victor, an 11-year-old boy from the jungle village where Norma’s husband disappeared, arrives at the station with a list of the village’s missing. When Norma recognizes her husband’s nom-de-guerre, she is forced to come to terms with her life, her husband’s secrets and Victor’s mysterious origins — in short, “how that name ended up on that list.” These recollections are told in a series of flashbacks that recreate, in unflinching and



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unflattering detail, the lives of Norma, Rey and Victor.

Despite his disclaimer, Alarcón readily admits that Peru is the template from which derives his lost city and unnamed country. Like the fictional country, Peru is culturally and geographically divided among poor sierra towns, frontier jungle villages and a sprawling coastal metropolis which

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absorbs internal migrants from those poorer regions. Like the fictional country, Peru was devastated by a violent guerilla insurgency which sought to remake a corrupt state through a bloody civil war. And, in both cases, when the corrupt state proved victorious, it was ruled by an authoritarian dictator who sought to recast history through an iron-fisted control of the media and political process. The novel evocatively describes the crowded buses, dusty shantytowns and politicized universities that would be familiar to any resident of Lima.

The premise for the novel's call-in radio show even came from a Peruvian program, "Busca Personas" ("In Search of People"), which functioned as a radio bulletin board for the country's internally displaced and the people who missed them. Listening to the program, Alarcón heard a Lima characterized by displacement and dislocation, a place "of disintegrating cultural traditions, of people kind of being swallowed up by the city and unable to maintain their ties to the places they used to call home and the people that were their loved ones." In the novel, Norma attempts a delicate balancing act as she publicly assists citizens unwilling to forget their past in a nation defined by a state-led policy of erasing history.

However much Alarcón draws upon Lima as a prototype for his lost city, he adamantly defends fiction as his preferred medium. Although he first drafted the story as a work of nonfiction, he felt constrained by sticking with the particulars. Alarcón refers to Mario Vargas Llosa's concept of "*la verdad de las mentiras*" ("the truth of lies"), to explain how fiction can be a more persuasive, richer means of expressing a true sentiment or situation than mere facts.

Alarcón also seems to have chosen fiction and an anonymous setting to deliberately collectivize the experience of displacement, memory and anger. He began the reading with the mention of a February 2007 New York Times article recounting how a woman from rural Thailand got on the wrong bus, became lost in a city over 750 miles from her hometown and wasn't reunited with her family until a homeless shelter volunteer thought to attempt speaking with her in Yawi, her indigenous language — 25 years later. In *Lost City Radio*, languages, places and rural customs are unnamed, numbered or given foreign-sounding but deliberately ambiguous titles.

But perhaps most alarming is Alarcón's universalizing description of prison and detention policies in a counter-insurgency war. As a university student, Rey is imprisoned for months for traveling on a city bus without his identity papers. While at a detention facility known as "the Moon," he is forced to bury himself alive. His guards urinate on him. He is abandoned in unsanitary, overcrowded cells. He also meets the contacts who will one day draw him into the guerilla insurgency.

It is several years, however, before Rey is driven to join the rebels. His breaking point comes when his uncle Trini is killed while being detained on trumped-up charges. A few months later, Rey undertakes his first operation as a member of the Illegitimate Legion. From then on, he creates a dual life: as a botany professor and devoted husband in the city and an Illegitimate Legion guerilla in the provinces.

Against this background of fear and uncertainty, "everyone comes off poorly." Norma, Rey and the supporting characters choose paths that reveal their greatest weaknesses: selfishness, denial, egotism, lust and ambition. Although many willingly pay a penance, often their efforts are too little, too late.

Alarcón's *Lost City Radio* is not merely about Peru. It is not just a Latin American novel. Rather, it is a chronicle of moral failure and the struggle for redemption in a society traumatized by dislocation, violence and fear.

2007 Guggenheim Fellow Daniel Alarcón is the author of *Lost City Radio* and *War by Candlelight* and the editor of *Etiqueta Negra*, a Peruvian culture magazine. He read selections from *Lost City Radio* in an event sponsored by the Center for Latin American Studies on April 16, 2007.

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Daniel Alarcón.



Photo by David R. León Lara.