

## A finely tuned 'Radio'

### Loss, love and chance figure into Alarcon's debut novel

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IN ONE PASSAGE from "Lost City Radio," the first novel from acclaimed short-story writer Daniel Alarcon, the protagonist Norma is annoyed at her boyfriend's insistence on showing her a shabby neighborhood where he used to live.

She asks to go home, but instead, the boyfriend, Rey, takes her to an apartment where she is surprised to meet her future father-in-law, a man Norma assumed was dead.

Rey has not seen his father in years, for reasons unexplained, but shows up unexpectedly and decides to propose to Norma mid-visit.

The scene is one of many in "Lost City Radio" where Alarcon drops a surprise that may seem joyful but is laced with tragedy. That device is repeated throughout the novel, as the plot and characters are filled with contradictions and unforeseen revelations that leave the reader guessing until the end.

It is a remarkable first attempt from Alarcon, the Oakland resident who released the short story collection "War by Candlelight" two years ago.

As in his earlier work, Alarcon's writing is masterful, and as enriching as it is stark at times. Alarcon's style of using precise details to create poignant images delivers a story that is both driven by plot and emotion.

In his first novel, he takes on lofty topics: love, war, politics. "Lost City Radio" tells the story of Norma, a radio show host whose husband, Rey, vanishes at the end of a violent civil war in an unnamed South American country.

The story encompasses the beginning, end and aftermath of the war between the country's government and a guerrilla group known as the Illegitimate Legion.

The specific reasons for the war are not clearly stated, but Alarcon gives the reader hints that it has to do with the usual civil war ingredients -- class frustrations, governmental abuses and political idealism on either side of the conflict.

Nonetheless, the novel's nebulous explanation for the war mirrors a similar conflict within each of the characters as they try to make sense of their lives. Just as the war is rife with contradictions and questionable logic, so are the character's lives filled with irony and opposing actions.

Norma is a radio personality who reads government-approved news during the week and on Sundays hosts a show called "Lost City Radio," during which people call in, hoping to reunite with a loved one. It seems as

if everyone in the country has at least one name they could announce, since the war lasted 10 years and disrupted most of the country, from city slums to isolated villages in the jungle. The radio program serves as a metaphor for the desire to seek that loss instills in people, thus raising the question: Do we search for the sake of the other person or for our own?

Norma's irony lies in the fact that her husband has been missing for 10 years, and while she has helped reunite thousands, she has no leads on what could have happened to Rey. She assumes the disappearance may have had to do with Rey's reputation as an IL sympathizer.

The possible motives for and extent of Rey's involvement with the IL is unclear. He takes on the label of political rebel as a teenager and college student, but later seemingly settles into a yuppie-esque married life with his radio journalist wife.

But Rey has secrets, or perhaps they are complexes. He is a man of dichotomies: He is handsome despite his crooked nose; he loves his wife but chooses to spend every six months without her in the jungle; he undergoes torture at a government camp and then takes state jobs collecting census information and teaching at a university.

The novel opens with Norma's lonely and routine life quickly turned upside down when an orphan arrives at her radio studio with a list of the missing from a jungle village where Rey was last seen.

The real-time action of the story happens over the course of a few days, but the course of the novel reveals more than two decades' worth of background. Alarcon's storytelling technique is impressive, shifting between past and future and including flashbacks within flashbacks.

In some instances, the story traverses different periods and narratives several times on one page. Demands on the reader are high, but the payoff is recognizing the connection between two moments years apart.

The novel leaves the reader wondering how much of life and history happens based on chance. A mere accident can have tremendous implications when people decide to attach meaning to it. One case in point is that the battle that ends the war erupts after a young girl is killed by a stray bullet; a second is that Rey's opposing the government develops after a teenage prank turns him into a political criminal.

Alarcon creates a view of Latin America that doesn't harp on the stereotypical motifs of passionate love affairs, spicy food and loud parties. His novel's perspective captures the tragedy and complexity of the region and its subjects of love, war and politics without resorting to graphic violence and cliches. And, at around 250 pages, it's a story that doesn't overstay its welcome.

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## **FICTION**

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- AUTHOR: Daniel Alarcon

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