

Novelist finds hope in the aftermath of war

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With the publication two years ago of his short-story collection "War by Candlelight" (HarperCollins), Daniel Alarcón received critical acclaim that included comparisons to Mario Vargas Llosa, Flannery O'Connor and Ernest Hemingway.

Born in Peru and living in northern California, Alarcón unflinchingly portrays people battered by civil strife, natural disasters and governmental abuses. He now brings us his first novel, "Lost City Radio" (HarperCollins, hardcover \$24.95), a potent, disturbing, but, in the end, hopeful portrait of a nation torn by years of war and betrayal.

Set in an unnamed South American country, Alarcón's novel centers on Norma, the host of a popular program, "Lost City Radio," in which she reads the names of missing persons and lends an understanding ear to callers who hope she can help them reunite with lost loved ones. Norma has become a celebrity, a voice everyone knows, the apolitical salve for a nation that has lost too much.

Why Norma? "She was a natural: She knew when to let her voice waver, when to linger on a word, what texts to tear through and read as if the words themselves were on fire."

Norma's unctuous boss, Elmer, wants high ratings without angering those in power. Government authorities are more than willing to make radio employees disappear if they seem to sympathize with the Illegitimate Legion, a guerrilla faction based in the nation's mountains and jungles. Though the war with the IL is technically over, suspicion and distrust are ingrained in the nation's psyche.

Norma is no stranger to loss. She nurses the hope of finding her husband, Rey, who disappeared 10 years earlier. Rey, an ethnobotanist, would leave Norma for long stretches to venture into the jungle, ostensibly to study indigenous remedies. With cities and villages stripped of their original names, Rey often visited "Village 1797." He failed to return home after one such foray. Rey's covert jungle activities as an IL sympathizer has convinced Norma that the government is responsible for her husband's disappearance.

One day, a village boy, Victor, is brought to the radio station to meet Norma. "He was slender and fragile, and his eyes were too small for his face. His head had been shaved -- to kill lice, Norma supposed." The boy carries a letter from the residents of Village 1797, who pooled their money to send Victor to the city for a "better life." The letter includes a list of lost people, some of whom may have fled to the city. "Perhaps one of these individuals will be able to care for the boy," says the letter.

The list of names includes one Norma recognizes: an IL pseudonym once used by Rey. Could Victor be Norma's last and best chance of finding her husband?

Norma and Rey share the stage with unforgettable characters whose histories connect in compelling and poignant ways. Manau, the village schoolteacher who takes Victor to see Norma, is a man whose body is covered with sores from his life in the humid jungle, a man who enjoyed a too-brief romance with Victor's late mother, Adela. And there's Zahir, another resident of Village 1797, whose hands were hacked off by zealous members of the IL. Though falsely accused of stealing food, Zahir accepts his punishment because of other evil things he has done.

Alarcón's narrative has the ebb and flow of a dark dream. With a fluid chronology that curves upon itself and doubles back effortlessly, he allows the past to mingle and compete with the present. There are no false steps or strained sentences. "Lost City Radio" is, quite simply, a triumph. Alarcón has created a sublimely terrifying, war-ravaged world populated by unforgettable and fully realized characters. But at the novel's core is a story of hope, one that renders the resiliency of human nature in all its imperfect glory.