

Book Review

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Jon Krause

Missing

A novel about the disappeared in a South American war.

LOST CITY RADIO

By Daniel Alarcón.

257 pp. HarperCollins Publishers. \$24.95.

By SARAH FAY

ALTHOUGH Granta has just named him one of the best young American novelists under the age of 35, Daniel Alarcón makes me think not of a novelist but of the late Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski. Alarcón shares Kapuscinski's candor and eye for detail, and his ambitious book, "Lost City Radio" — about the vacuum war creates in the lives of those who survive it — almost feels like a response to an argument Kapuscinski once made: "There can be a thousand topics. But in the end there will only be one: reminiscences from the war."

Alarcón's first novel is set in an unnamed South American country 10 years after the end of a dirty civil war. Though the rebel faction has been disgraced and the debris cleared away, many people are still trying to locate the missing and confirm the identities of the dead. It's no surprise, then, that the nation's most popular radio show, "Lost City Radio," tries to reunite families separated by the conflict. Everyone is looking for someone — even Norma, the program's host, whose husband disappeared the year hostilities ended. Refugees in the barrio and villagers in the mountains tune in as she reads the names of the missing, but the show is a farce: if the "disappeared" can't be found, the station hires actors and stages reunions. Nevertheless, when a boy from the town where her husband was last seen appears at the station, Norma decides to renew her search.

As she does, the novel also looks back at the lives of its four central characters: Norma; her husband, Rey; the young boy, Victor; and Victor's teacher, Manau. Writing in tight, rhythmic prose, Alarcón describes the night Norma and Rey first met at a dance: "Rey was gliding through the crowd, in time with

the song. Bam! A snare, a cymbal, a pulse within the music: the tight skin of the drum singing war! She was drunk, she realized, and her feet were moving without her."

Alarcón's writing is strengthened by reportorial detachment. Even the cruelty Rey endures when he's arrested and tortured is depicted in matter-of-fact style: "They buried him in a pit and he stood there for seven days, unable even to bend his knees properly, unable to squat. The hole was covered with wooden boards, with tiny slats wide enough to see a sliver of the sky: just a sliver, but enough to pray on."

This book has the same vigor that made Alarcón's debut short-story collection, "War by Candlelight," such a delight. But at the same time it lacks the dramatic punch of those stories — perhaps less a reflection on Alarcón's abilities as a novelist than an indication of his willingness to take risks. Rather than play it safe and replicate work that has already earned applause, Alarcón (a Peruvian who was educated in the United States and now teaches in California) chose to try a complex novel with an omniscient narrator.

Yet he never establishes a solid relationship between the story and this narrator, who becomes increasingly intrusive. The first third of the book is evenhanded, allowing various characters to come forward. But the final parts capriciously switch point of view within chapters, sections, even paragraphs — jolts that sequester the rising action in flashback and permit the characters to confront their memories rather than one another. This tactic also diffuses the impact of the war, that "single, implacably violent entity" on which the plot hinges.

The final half of the book is marred by dull descriptions ("Victor had gained weight and grown in all directions) that lapse into sentimentality ("Norma smiled at him, and she looked like sunshine"), as well as stylistic tics in which fragments echo sentences. Still, there's enough here to confirm that Alarcón is talented — and wise — beyond his years, that he remains intent on challenging himself and his readers. □

Sarah Fay's interview with the Spanish novelist Javier Marias appears in the current issue of *The Paris Review*.