

How to disappear

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Lost City Radio

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The meaning of the word "disappear" has undergone an unhappy evolution in the past few de-cades. There was a time, not too long ago, when people and things would simply disappear. Now, however, individuals can also be disappeared, usually by a malevolent government that wants to cover its culpability. Once this happens, the word takes on an even more horrifying noun form, as those who vanish become The Disappeared.

These ominous new uses for a trusty old verb inform Daniel Alarcón's powerful first novel, *Lost City Radio*. It is set in an unnamed Latin American country that physically resembles Brazil but also brings to mind Argentina and Chile under junta rule. The novel opens with the nation in "a stage of militarised calm" after a long and bloody civil war. In its teeming capital, a melancholy, maternal broadcaster named Norma hosts a programme called *Lost City Radio*, in which she reads out the names of the disappeared in order to facilitate reunions with loved ones. Aided by a voice her boss once called "gold that stank of empathy", she has become famous, though her

fame does little to alleviate the sad fact that her husband, a biology professor named Rey, is among the nation's countless missing.

Norma's gloomy calm is shattered by the arrival of Victor, an 11-year-old boy from a jungle village that has been known only as "1797" ever since the mass erasure of place names carried out by the nation's postwar dictators. Recently orphaned, Victor carries with him a list of his town's vanished citizens in the hope that Norma will dedicate an entire broadcast to contacting them. The lonely Norma immediately takes Victor under her wing. As the two gradually become closer, their stories unfold, most notably that of Norma's marriage to Rey, an ethnobotanist with a special interest in medicinal and psychotropic plants, or "jungle juju". Before he vanished, Rey was allied with the insurgency, the Illegitimate Legion, an involvement that was stoked by his internment at the country's notorious political prison, aptly nicknamed The Moon. We also learn the tragic story of Victor's dead mother, Adela, and her lover, Manau, a teacher whose education ill-prepares him for life in a jungle village, as well as of Zahir, a peasant whose mutilation by the insurgents might not be as undeserved as it seems.

The Peruvian-born, Alabama-raised Alarcón interweaves these stories in a back-and-forth manner that does not always advance his ambitious narrative with the clarity it requires. That said, *Lost City Radio* is more than saved by its powerful characterisation and its spooky ambiance. Norma is a particularly strong creation, a woman whose "private life was antiseptic and empty, a place for memory, music, and solitude", until she meets the boy who carries within him the seed of her fate. Rey is equally well conceived: half poet and half scientist, part urbanite and part jungle-dweller; a man whose involvement with the insurgency, "the great brain of subversion", is more like a tropical disease he catches from his troubled land than the result of political indoctrination.

Alarcón is at his best in evoking the unforgettable setting. The author has a good reason not to identify his novel's country - it could be too many places in the modern world. Mixing elements of Márquez and Orwell, he creates a nightmare landscape of roadblocks, abductions and unexplained imprisonment; a place where entire neighbourhoods are razed for political expediency, and where firemen are forced to watch helplessly at gunpoint as a bound man is roasted in his burning house by justice-dealing rebels.

"The war had bred a general exhaustion," Alarcón explains. "It was a city of sleepwalkers now, a place where another bomb hardly registered, where the Great Blackouts were now monthly occurrences, announced by vitriolic pamphlets slipped beneath windshield wipers like shopping circulars. The government retaliated every fortnight with its army of poorly trained boy-soldiers,

one or two died in the crossfire, and partisans took to the streets, filling the long avenues and clashing with riot police, before racing home to listen to descriptions of themselves on the radio news the same evening."

In case a North American or British reader is tempted to derive comfort from the belief that the story is set long ago and far away, Alarcón provides a few hints that it could just as well take place in our world, particularly when he describes the innocent who "would be tortured, and some would die, but many would be released and swell the ranks of those too angry or too bitter to remain mere spectators of the conflict. In this manner, the war grew." Anyone who thinks this describes Buenos Aires in 1973 better than it does Baghdad in 2007 simply isn't paying attention.