

Radio host a voice of hope amid war

Reviewed by Alan Cheuse

Sunday, February 11, 2007



Lost City Radio

By Daniel Alarcón

HARPERCOLLINS; 257 PAGES; \$24.95

"[A] nation at the edge of the world, a make-believe country outside history": That's how Norma, one of the main characters of Daniel Alarcón's shadowy and brilliant first novel, thinks of her home country. She is the host of a late-night radio show -- "Lost City Radio" -- in the capital of a nameless country in the midst of a seemingly unending civil war in which many victims have disappeared. Norma devotes her show to reading lists of the names of the missing, and thus has won the devotion of the listening public. Names, names, names! In a country where all of the villages and towns have lost their names and been assigned numbers, her empathy for individual suffering has made her popular, so that when, at one point late in the book, she and some companions are stopped at a military checkpoint, her recognizable voice gets them through unharmed.

Her empathy is well earned, as her husband, the enigmatic Rey, has himself disappeared into the fog of war, only to surface again and again in sequences out of Norma's past. In one of these brief scenes we see him being pulled from a car at a government checkpoint and taken to an interrogation center known to all in the military and the guerrilla struggle as "the Moon." In another scene out of the past, we discover the paternity of a young boy from the country whom a schoolteacher named Manau, his mother's lover, has brought on a journey out of the jungle into the city for the purpose of uniting him with radio host Norma.

Alarcón keeps the reason for that meeting hidden for a large part of "Lost City Radio." But this seems in keeping with his Faulknerian sense of the mystery of time -- "the past is never past, it is always present," was, is, the Mississippi writer's maxim.

We can leave it to the critics to discern the reasons why some major South American writers -- and the Peruvian American Alarcón -- feel this affinity with Faulkner. For whatever reason, time remains fluid in this novel. As already mentioned, Rey appears again and again, as do a number of other characters out of the past. However, the prose is forceful enough to carry the story "forward" in a resolution of sorts, at least by accretion.

As Alarcón develops his story -- and he works quite subtly, sometimes dangerously close to obscurity -- his own empathy for the existential suffering of Third World political misery, and the ordinary dangers of middle-class life under a system in which values float without notice from democracy to autocracy and back again, makes for quite powerful reading.

There were moments while I was lost in the wonderfully imagined world of "Lost City Radio" that I felt as though I were reading a novel by the obscure (to most of us here in the United States) but marvelous Uruguayan novelist Juan Carlos Onetti. I mean that as a compliment and as a writer's, as well as a critic's, doff of the hat.

Novelist Alan Cheuse is a book commentator for National Public Radio.