

Lost City Radio

Daniel Alarcón channels South America, but won't pinpoint it on a map.

[February 21st, 2007]

With *Lost City Radio* (HarperCollins, 257 pages, \$24.95), Daniel Alarcón has written an ambitious, well-crafted first novel that resonates with many situations throughout South America today. The Peruvian-born author's previous book, *War by Candlelight*, was a finalist for the 2006 PEN/Hemingway Award. It was a collection of short stories that shifted between Peru and New York City—much like how Junot Diaz's stories alternated between his native Dominican Republic and New Jersey in *Drown*. Both U.S.-based authors share an ability to write their characters with guileless cultural fluency, telling their stories with gritty authenticity.

Lost City Radio is set in a nameless South American country at the end of a decade-long civil war between the government and the Illegitimate Legion, a guerrilla insurgency group. Norma is the announcer of a popular radio show called *Lost City Radio*, a program for "the hundreds of thousands of displaced people" who have been forced to take refuge in the city due to the violence erupting elsewhere in the country. The show, which has made Norma a kind of folk hero, helps callers to relocate the missing or to simply remember those who have disappeared.

The story of Norma's own missing person surfaces when a boy named Victor appears at the radio station. He's from a jungle village called 1797—renamed so by the postwar government—and carries a list of the town's missing persons to be read over the radio. On that list, Norma finds Rey, one of the names her husband used before he disappeared. Through Victor, Norma is given a clue as to what happened to Rey, who has been missing for so many years.

Through compassionately rendered characters and gorgeous, flowing prose, Alarcón tells an important story in *Lost City Radio* about the devastating and fragmenting effects of civil war on a society, on individuals, and on families.

It is disappointing though, that in the literary world, South America seems a continent in which individual countries have been blurred into one homogeneous place—albeit an exciting one to write about, full of guerrilla insurgents and right-wing dictatorships. Ann Patchett's 2001 *Bel Canto* was also set "somewhere" in South America, and Lily Tuck boldly confessed in her 2004 National Book Award acceptance speech for *The News From Paraguay*, "Actually I have never been to Paraguay, nor do I intend to go."

Today, it is estimated that Colombia's ongoing civil conflict has created between 1.8 and 3.8 million internally displaced people. After Sudan, it is one of the most urgent humanitarian crises in the world. With *Lost City Radio*, Alarcón gives us an emotional landscape in which to place a real-world fact like that, but he has missed the opportunity to actually put it on a map.

LISA HOASHI.