

LOST CITY

"REMARKABLE. . . *LOST CITY RADIO* IS A
BRAVURA PERFORMANCE." —*LOS ANGELES TIMES*

A NOVEL

RADIO

"TRAGIC AND WONDERFUL. . . A BOOK OF EXTRAORDINARY POWER." —*THE GUARDIAN (LONDON)*

DANIEL ALARCÓN

AUTHOR OF *WAR BY CANDLELIGHT*

"READING ALARCÓN IS LIKE WITNESSING THE ARRIVAL OF A JOHN STEINBECK
OR GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ." —*MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE*



P.S.
INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE...

WELCOME!

Welcome to *California Reads*, a statewide program that brings Californians together to explore important topics through reading and discussion. This year, our theme is *Searching For Democracy*. What does democracy mean to us? What challenges has American democracy faced in the past? How can we strengthen our democracy in the future? How can we talk and work together despite our differences? What can we learn from the experiences of others who have struggled with these questions?

California Reads offers a choice of five superb books to act as a springboard for community discussion. These works include fiction as well as non-fiction, and were written by men and women of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints. There are many ways to experience and explore what democracy means, strives for in its promise, and requires for its success. No singular book can capture all of these complexities, and each selection offers the reader an opportunity to discover new perspectives by inviting us to think about individual responsibility, the importance of a free press, the collective good, and what it is needed from each of us to sustain a healthy democracy.

Cal Humanities and the California Center for the Book are partnering on this project because we feel books—and the conversations they spark—can make a difference in the world. We hope this will be just the first of many statewide conversations under our *California Reads* banner, providing Californians with opportunities to read and discuss stories and ideas that matter. Whether you are joining the discussion through a program at your local library, bookstore, school or elsewhere, we hope you will be inspired by these books and enjoy a new connection with your community and your state.

With gratitude,



Ralph Lewin
President and CEO
Cal Humanities



Mary Menzel
Director
California Center for the Book

california READS OVERVIEW

California Reads is a new program of Cal Humanities developed in partnership with the California Center for the Book and the California State Library. It invites Californians from all walks of life throughout our state to participate in reading and discussion programs and related activities hosted by libraries, schools, colleges, bookstores and other community institutions.

We have selected a slate of books this year to stimulate a thoughtful reflection of, and lively discussion among, friends and neighbors, family and strangers about the past, present, and future of democracy. Five thought-provoking books were chosen from a pool of over 300 titles nominated by members of the public, and based upon the final recommendations of an advisory group of librarians, authors, scholars, publishers and critics.

These five books were selected:

- *The Penguin Guide to the United States Constitution: A Fully Annotated Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution and Amendments, and Selections from The Federalist Papers*, by Richard Beeman. Annotated by one of the nation's foremost Constitutional scholars, this compact edition of our nation's founding documents provides text and context for readers seeking to understand the framework of our democracy as well as its meaning, past and present.
- *Farewell to Manzanar*, by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston. A heartbreaking and compelling memoir about the Japanese American internment experience as seen through the eyes of young girl, this personal story bears witness to a failure of American democracy.
- *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, by Rebecca Solnit. A masterwork of narrative nonfiction by a contemporary California writer reaches some surprising conclusions about our need for community and common purpose, which she argues are fundamental to democratic forms of social and political life.
- *It Can't Happen Here*, by Sinclair Lewis. This underappreciated classic by one of America's greatest novelists, first published in 1935, imagines a chillingly undemocratic America. It details the rise of a populist politician as he creates a fascist regime, and reminds us of the fragility of our democratic institutions.
- *Lost City Radio*, by Daniel Alarcon. A haunting novel by a young California writer explores the aftermath of a traumatic civil war in a fictitious South American country, and raises questions about the importance of historical knowledge, collective memory, and public access to information in a democratic society.

The discussion guides for each book—like this one—provide an overview of the book and author, a series of discussion questions to begin conversations, a brief author interview, bibliographies and other supplemental resources for interested readers. A K-12 curriculum guide for each book is also available to further support classroom activities. All of these materials, along with additional resources and information about *Searching for Democracy* and *California Reads* public programs and activities at libraries and other community venues, can be found at our web site at www.calhum.org/searchingfordemocracy.

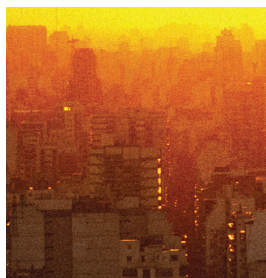
SEARCHING *for* DEMOCRACY OVERVIEW

Leading into the national 2012 elections, *Searching for Democracy* is the culmination of a two year-long initiative that provides Californians with various ways to explore how the humanities can provide insight and opportunities to converse about the nature, state and needs of our vibrant American democracy. Cal Humanities and its partners will explore these complexities—through a series of local, regional, and statewide humanities-inspired activities—to accomplish a greater understanding of what is needed to sustain a healthy democracy in an increasingly interdependent world.

Students, families and people from all walks of life will explore—online and in person—what discoveries and lessons lie in works of fiction and nonfiction, provocative cultural exhibits and public conversations. The Cal Humanities website (www.calhum.org) will be an online hub for all activities, where participants in events, readers of the initiative's books, and people new to our effort can learn more and share what they have discovered.

Our *Searching For Democracy* program partners include: California libraries, California Center for the Book, California History-Social Science Project, Exhibit Envoy, and Zócalo Public Square, in collaboration with California State Library, California Community Colleges, California State University, and University of California Television.

about the book *Lost City Radio*



Like many nations, the United States has endured civil war. Daniel Alarcón takes us to a fictional Latin American country much like his native Peru: ten years after a brutal “dirty” war, its insurgents dead or in hiding, the government, firmly solidified in power, is rewriting history by the enforcement of silence

and systematized forgetting, erasing names and histories, and even replacing village names with numbers. Through the stories of three characters whose lives have been turned upside down by civil strife, the novel explores what happens to people – and societies – in the face of violence. The book documents the consequences of political extremism and bears witness to the moral and psychological destruction that can ensue when democracy fails.

Every week, Norma, the host of a popular radio show in the capital city, reads aloud a list of names of people who have gone missing. Although the government has forbidden mention of the war, it has given grudging approval to this program which holds out hope that people who have lost loved ones, for whatever reason, may hear news of them or yet be reunited. One day, Norma receives a surprise visitor, a small boy from a distant jungle village who carries a list of the town's disappeared. As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that the boy also carries the key to the disappearance of Norma's husband, Rey, during the conflict. Through flashbacks and shifting viewpoints, the truth about the characters and their situation unfolds as the web of relationships and responsibilities that connect them slowly emerges.

Lost City Radio has been translated into several languages and is the winner of the 2008 PEN USA Novel Award and the 2009 International Literature Prize given by The House of World Culture in Berlin. The *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Financial Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Chicago Tribune* named it a 2007 Best Book of the Year.

about the author Daniel Alarcón



Daniel Alarcón was born in Lima, Peru in 1977. At the age of three, he and his family moved to a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama, where he grew up and attended high school. He currently resides in Oakland, California.

Alarcón is a Visiting Scholar at the UC Berkeley Center for Latin American Studies. He recently co-founded *Radio Ambulante*, a Spanish language podcast that tells Latin American stories. He is Associate Editor of *Etiqueta Negra*, an award-winning Peruvian quarterly, and a Contributing Editor to *Granta*. He is author of the story collection *War by Candlelight* that was a finalist for the 2005 PEN-Hemingway Award. His debut novel, *Lost City Radio*, was named a 2007 Best Novel of the Year by the *Chicago Tribune*, *Financial Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Washington Post*. In 2009, Alarcón published a collection of short stories, *El rey está siempre por encima del pueblo* (*The king is always above the people*), and most recently, *Ciudad de payasos*, a graphic novel adapted from his 2003 story “City of Clowns.” His pieces have appeared in publications such as *A Public Space*, *El País*, *McSweeney's*, *n+1*, *The New Yorker*, and *Harper's*. In 2010 he was named one of *The New Yorker's* “20 Under Forty” list of authors who capture the inventiveness and vitality of contemporary American fiction.

Alarcón names Ryszard Kapuscinski, Mario Vargas Llosa, J.M. Coetzee, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Tobias Wolff, Carson McCullers, Roberto Bolaño and Joseph Roth as some of the authors to whom he is greatly indebted. He holds a BA in Anthropology from Columbia University and an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. He is a former Fulbright Scholar to Peru.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Lost City Radio by Daniel Alarcón

- 1 The novel was inspired by the politics and events that occurred during the Peruvian civil war of the 1980's, but the author also drew on his research into war-torn societies around the world, such as Bosnia, Chechnya and Ethiopia. Do you think it was a good choice not to name the city and country where the novel takes place?
- 2 Our society generally approves of the outcome of our own civil war, with the union preserved and slavery ended. Some of the civil wars of the 21st century have turned out to our liking, with the success of insurgencies against dictators. How did it feel to read a novel about a civil war that ended badly for the insurgents, that ended with an oppressive regime still in power?
- 3 The book portrays Norma's radio station as a tool of the government, managed by men without dignity or courage. She follows the station's edict when she reads the news, "to read good news with indifference and make bad news sound hopeful." Is there hope for a society that does not have a free media?
- 4 The author says that it is possible for fiction to be more effective in telling a historical story, since "when a story is particularized, when it is no longer abstract...it becomes more true. It becomes something we can process – whereas I've always felt that the grand sweep of history strains our ability to empathize." Do you agree? Do you enjoy reading history, or do you enjoy learning about real events through a fictional retelling?
- 5 The author says that in this novel he wanted to describe "a country that has embraced collective amnesia, and made forgetting a kind of state religion." Does our society ever embrace amnesia? The boy Victor at one point reflects that happiness is a type of amnesia. Is forgetting always a bad thing?
- 6 In the author Q&A, Alarcón says that democracy often disappoints us, and "It's so easy...to throw up one's hands and accept despair." Do you have hope for our democracy? How do you deal with the disappointments of our democracy?
- 7 Several episodes occur which show the insurgents (the IL) to be as cruel and arbitrary as the soldiers. How did this portrayal of the insurgents as less than heroic affect your understanding of the story?
- 8 The story shifts back and forth between the present, the near past and the far past, sometimes in the course of the same paragraph. Why do you think the author did this? Was this a good way to tell this particular story?
- 9 The book portrays many different kinds of violence. Before the war begins, Norma's contemporaries speak of violence with "awe and reverence: cleansing violence, purifying violence, violence that would spawn virtue." Do you feel that the use of violence in politics can ever be justified?
- 10 During the Peruvian civil war, the author's family experienced the disappearance of an uncle whose death was never confirmed. Rey is in "that netherworld between death and life – despicably, sadistically called missing..." Why is it sadistic to call someone "missing" and hold out some hope that they are alive?
- 11 How did you feel as the book ended? Is there any cause for hope at the end?

AN INTERVIEW

with author *Daniel Alarcón*



In what ways is your book *Lost City Radio* a book about democracy?

A novel is always about a lot of things at once. At the most basic level, it's about the characters, about Norma and Victor and Rey and Manau and Zahir, ordinary people with faults and virtues, living in a troubled, post-war society, and trying to get by. They are affected by the context in which they live, but the novel is fundamentally about them, not about the political situation that surrounds them. When I write, I generally avoid thinking about large issues (democracy, for example) and tend to focus instead on the individuals whose personalities and whose choices dramatize and reflect their conditions. It's what I find most engaging, most compelling, at the moment I sit down to write.

It's only afterward, when I've finished, or even later, when I go out into the world to discuss a work, that I really begin to have a sense of what a book is about. Or how it's being interpreted, what its themes are. In the case of *Lost City Radio*, I think one of the basic questions the book poses is what it means to be a citizen. What responsibilities does a citizen have? At what point do people renounce those responsibilities, and why? Do those responsibilities change if the society is fundamentally unjust? Violent? Unstable? Political violence has a way of making people forget why they believe in little things like civil liberties or the rule of law. The book unpacks (though quite by accident) these questions.

Do writers have special roles or responsibilities in democratic societies?

I'm not sure I agree with the premise of the question. I find it very difficult to talk about the responsibilities that writers have, or that any artists might have, for that matter, no matter the political structure of the society in which they live. It's all very personal, very idiosyncratic. It might even shift on different days. I'll say this: I generally feel an obligation to do my best work, to think very deeply about my characters, to push myself to write the scenes that make me uncomfortable. I feel a responsibility to read a great deal, to think in the possibilities of literature, but as you can see these are artistic commitments, not political ones. The sense of responsibility I might feel as a citizen is very different from what I feel as an artist, and while citizenship—a sense of belonging—is part of my life, and inevitably affects my work, I'm not sure how exactly.

What relationship do the literary arts and humanities have to democracy?

The promise of great literature is that you can, by reading, enter the worldview or consciousness of another person, someone who may be nothing like you, and in the process broaden your own vision of the world. If you love to read, then you accept this as part of the challenge and the joy of literature. That makes reading, as I see it, a fundamentally democratic enterprise. In a diverse and complex society, different groups of people must share their stories. We have to know where our neighbor comes from, what they believe, and why. We must get inside their stories, and be prepared to accept in the validity of their narratives. I don't see this as a luxury anymore—if it ever was—but an absolute necessity.

Do you think American democracy is fragile or robust?

In a sense, all democracies are fragile. So many things can go wrong, and the inevitable consequence of every disappointment is apathy. Democracy demands a lot, but it promises even more. It's so easy (and so seductive, in some ways) to throw up one's hands and accept despair. There are so many logically sound justifications for hopelessness, and I'm hardly immune. Every election cycle I have to convince myself there's a point to all this.

What concerns you about the current state and the future of our democracy? What makes you hopeful?

I find almost everything about the current situation to be just a little disconcerting. For starters: the surfeit of unregulated money disturbs me, as it will only further drown out ordinary voices of concern. I'm frustrated by the proliferation of media outlets bent on spreading fear—selling fear is more accurate, since it's impossible to disentangle the histrionics of the message from the profit motive. The effects are self-evidently corrosive. This is something my novel touches on: fear isn't, generally speaking, a great place from which to craft policy. There are certain examples that rise to the level of farce, instances which would be laughable if the consequences weren't so grave. The current crop of Republican presidential candidates, for example, all fighting to be seen as the cruelest, harshest victimizer of undocumented immigrants, is just one example I've had on my mind these days. This, in the context of President Obama's retrograde immigration policies, is frankly too much to take.

Though I'm generally not what would be called an optimist, I do take some comfort in the following: it requires a great deal of courage, in societal terms, to trust in a system based on the free exchange of opinions and ideas. And we haven't given up on that, not yet.

But generally, I've learned not to look to politics for hope. I find hope in beauty, which I look for in the realm of culture: in novels, for example, in visual art, or music, or film. I find that a culture, or a subculture, can become more democratic and inclusive over time, even if the political context surrounding it hardens.

What questions would you like readers to keep in mind as they read your book?

I think of books and art primarily as sources of pleasure and entertainment. And I should add that I think of pleasure and entertainment as very serious pursuits, and not at all frivolous, but necessary, part of what is required to be human. So, with that in mind, I want to seduce readers to the point where they aren't asking themselves questions at all as they read—unless that question is *Damn, what else has this dude written?* I want them to fall into the text and disappear for a few hours. That's my goal.

Ideally, the questions come after. And they should be a mix: the longing, affectionate sorts of questions you might have about a dear friend you've lost touch with (*I wonder what ever happened to Victor?* or more plaintively, *How could Zahir have done that?*), and perhaps a broader set of questions, about the world those characters inhabited (*Why did every-*

one leave Victor's village? or *Who else was hidden in that prison?*) The largest sorts of questions extend beyond the frontiers of the novel, and in the case of *Lost City Radio*, the questions have to do with war, its impact, its futility.

But these are just general thoughts, and I'm always surprised by the sorts of things that people ask me about my own book, which leads me to believe there are an infinite variety of ways to read any given text.

Do you see any parallels between the events/situation/world described in your book, and what's happening in America today?

The novel was always, in my mind at least, an "American" novel. Though I was born in Peru, I have lived in the United States since I was three years old, and my concerns are often American. In the aftermath of 9-11, I found that many of the questions I had about the body politic in 1980s Peru were suddenly relevant here—the diminishing rights of the individual in wartime, the cataloguing of different people based on their perceived level of threat, the censorship of dissent.

The US today is under extreme social pressure, and the strain is visible everywhere. I never thought I'd see a day when the economic outlook of my birth country was rosier than that of my adopted country. There's always the potential that today's high unemployment and economic despair could lead to great social upheaval. In fact, I find it somewhat surprising that it hasn't thus far.

Your book explores the meaning of personal and collective memory. Can you tell us why you think it is important that democracies remember their history?

The novel is all about history, about remembering. It ends with a body floating in a river, but if you come from Peru, the very fact that the story of how that body ended up there, and who that dead person was—all of this is positive. The story is being told. The dead are not anonymous anymore.

In an autocracy, it doesn't matter what the story is, or how it's told—the story is imposed by force. In a democracy, all political battles, no matter the details, are about narrative: who tells the story of how we got here, and how do they shape it? The story itself is the battlefield.

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTS *for further reading & viewing*

for adults

The Feast of the Goat by Mario Vargas Llosa (2000): Assassination of a Dominican dictator affects two generations of citizenry.

In Evil Hour by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1979): In an unspecified South American locale, seemingly random gossip and innuendo leads to murder, martial law, and a political crackdown.

The Moon Is Down by John Steinbeck (1942): A U.S. government-sponsored bit of literary propaganda, this novella was used to urge Europeans to join the Resistance during WWII.

for teens & tweens

Before We Were Free by Julia Alvarez (2004): A teenager and her family endure political tyranny in the Dominican Republic circa 1960.

Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi (2003): Memoir set in Iran as Islamic revolution reinstates a religious government. Told in comic strip images.

for children

We Are All Born Free: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Pictures by Amnesty International (2008): Illustrated version of the declaration adopted by the United Nations in the wake of World War II. (Translated into more than 30 languages.)

Every Human Has Rights: A Photographic Declaration for Kids by National Geographic (2008): Poems and pictures explicate the edicts of the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

for viewing

The Fall of Fujimori (2005): Documentary about exiled former Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori (who cooperated in its making) depicts his rise as a populist against a backdrop of political tyranny.

The Motorcycle Diaries (2004): Fact-based drama about the young Che Guevara and his friend Alberto Granado on a trek through South America that awakens their social consciousness.

Missing (1982): Thriller based on the true story of an American expatriate in South America who is abducted during a political uprising.

Innocent Voices (2007): An 11-year-old El Salvadoran boy becomes the "man of the house" just before the government engages in a war that recruits 12-year-olds as soldiers. Feature film shot in Spanish.

online resources

www.nonviolentconflict.org

Acting as a catalyst to stimulate interest in nonviolent conflict, the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict collaborates with like-minded educational institutions and non-governmental organizations to educate the global public, influence policies and media coverage and educate activists and organizers.

www.cverdad.org.pe

This is the site of the final report of Peru's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, created to investigate and identify those responsible for horrific political violence between 1980 and 2000: assassinations, kidnappings, disappearances, tortures, and unfair detentions. It was also charged with the responsibility of proposing initiatives to strengthen peace and reconciliation among all Peruvians.

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The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of The National Endowment for the Humanities, the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services, the California State Library, Cal Humanities and/or its funders and no official endorsement by any of these institutions should be inferred.

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about cal humanities

Cal Humanities is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting a greater understanding of the human condition. We produce, fund, and support cultural experiences in media, literature, discussion programs and more. Through engaging and inspiring work, we encourage our audiences to learn more, dig deeper, and start conversations that matter to create a State of Open Mind.

To learn more about us, please visit www.calhum.org

about the california center for the book

As part of a network of Centers for the Book in every state of the Union, all affiliated with the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, the California Center for the Book develops statewide programs that celebrate California's rich literary heritage, encourage reading and discussion, and promote libraries as centers for community engagement and lifelong learning. It is supported by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act, administered in California by the State Librarian.

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