

---

## Daniel Alarcon

**War by Candlelight**  
ISBN13: 9780060594800

### A Conversation with Daniel Alarcón

**Last year you wrote for Salon.com about writers of color being "plugged into an authenticity equation to determine, once and for all, how real the work is." How do you reconcile the writer's dictum — write what you know — with your ability to imagine and empathize?**

I've never really liked that phrase write what you know. I think a much more useful dictum (acknowledging that all pithy writing advice has inherent limitations) is write what you want to know. I'm curious about how other people experience this life. I've never really had much interest in writing about myself — I can't fathom ever writing a memoir, for example — but I am always excited by the possibilities that arise from simply listening. When I wanted to write about the war in Peru as it was experienced by people who lived through it, I went out, found those people and talked to them. I let them talk. I spent years doing it. It became part of who I was. One night I was having a drink at a bar in Jackson Heights, Queens, when I overheard a couple of men speaking Spanish. I knew they were Peruvian right away, by their accents. One of the men mentioned the UNI, the national engineering university, where an uncle of mine used to work before he disappeared. My uncle was politically involved at a time when it was very dangerous to do so. I didn't think twice before interrupting them: "Did you, by any chance, know Javier Alarcón?" and one of the men just went pale. Like I'd punched him in the gut. This is what the war does: it stretches out from one place and time with such live-wire ferocity that people carry it with them everywhere they go, forever and always. Years later a name can carry you back. And it can stun you. We sat for hours, these two strangers and I, talking and drinking and remembering.

Once you start looking for something, it comes at you everywhere, all the time, and then the writing of it becomes if not easy, then necessary.

**The stories set in Peru highlight America's dreamlike power, while those set in NY seem to rather determinedly underscore the gritty reality. What is it about America, do you think, that casts such a hypnotic spell, one at odds with the violence and poverty within it?**

It used to be Europe, but now our great illusions are housed in the United States. The exportation of American culture on a global scale has created this strange moment where everyone feels like they are just a little bit American. Just a little. We sing the songs and watch the movies, we know the names of the cities, we wear the NBA jerseys, and we all know someone who has gone, who is there now, who is making it. Peru is a country where more than half the people would emigrate if given the chance. That's half the population that is willing to abandon everything they know for the uncertainty of a life in a foreign land, in another language. This is economics, but it's something else too: as the codes of the American way of life reach the most remote corners of the planet, you're going to see this personal identification with the US that has as its logical conclusion the desire to emigrate. And of course it's a leap into the unknown, and for many people, the uncertain quality of the landing is precisely what is most attractive. Aren't we already living on the edge? Weren't we always meant for greater things? Haven't we been singing Michael Jackson songs since we were children?

How emigration is actually lived — well, this depends on many factors: education, economic station, language, where one lands and what support network is in place at the site of arrival. The New York stories are set there because that's where I used to live, but I think they're also a bit out of date: my sense — and I could be wrong — is that most immigrants are now skipping the larger cities, and heading directly to medium-size cities, or even rural areas. The South for example, where I grew up, now has large Latino communities living in very small towns, working in industrial-agriculture and meat processing. That is an experience completely different from the one I saw in New York. One has to wonder, or I do, what that's like. Certainly it's not the vision of America exported by Hollywood.

And one more thing: the US is not poor. Violent, yes, but not poor. Or rather, not poor like Peru is poor. Not even close.

**The last sentence in *City of Clowns* — "I knew in my heart that the clown was lying" — is extremely disconcerting. Clowns make for such strangely potent symbols — absurd, tragic, scary. Did you ever have a particularly horrifying run-in with one?**

No, I haven't had much experience with clowns actually. It's only that they were there for the taking, walking the streets of Lima begging to be written about. I'd see them everywhere, all the time, and was always fascinated by them. In mid 2002, I'd been living in Lima for about a year and was nearing the end of my stay, and the woman I was dating wanted me to teach her how to use a camera: I was really into photography back then. So we went to central Lima early for a couple of mornings to take pictures. It was our project. We walked all over, and talked to all kinds of people. In front of a church just off the main plaza, we met these two clowns, one on stilts, getting ready to go out and work the streets. They were amazing, drinking wine, talking shit. And that was all it took; that's where the story began — that one conversation, while we watched them get ready. My then-girlfriend had this really incredible ability to put people at ease, enough so that they felt comfortable talking about the economics of their lives. She was doing it all the time. She had worked interviewing women in the North to assess their viability as recipients of micro-loans, so I guess she just had the language down. I remember we sat on the steps of the church, talking to the clowns, the street vendors, the artisans, little by little getting the arithmetic of their survival: this much for transport, this much for food, this much for rent, this much for if I buy candy in bulk, this much profit if I sell it piece by piece, this much an hour. And finally that is what is most impressive about Lima: being a clown is simply a costume one wears in order to make it. It is perhaps the most declarative costume, but in essence it is no different from a hundred other occupations. It was the spectacle of human survival that shook me then and still does. There are other costumes, and an entire city that lives this way: life as improvised endurance.

**Who are your favorite authors, and who influences your own work the most?**

This is always a difficult question to answer. I'm greatly indebted to Ryszard Kapuscinski, Mario Vargas Llosa, J.M. Coetzee, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Tobias Wolff, Carson McCullers. I'm in the process of trying to educate myself in the canon of Western literature. I missed out since I was studying Anthropology in college and never had the chance to take an English Lit class. I do feel fortunate to have some knowledge of the great Latin American writers, including some that are probably not that well known in English. I'm thinking of José María Arguedas, whom I read when I was living in Lima, and who really impacted the way I viewed my country. But still, I'm afraid I'm there are tremendous gaps in my knowledge, and I have a list of hundreds of books I'd like to read. It just keeps growing, and I get further and further behind.

**What do you think your next project will be?**

I've just finished a novel entitled *Lost City Radio*, and with it, I've come to the end of a cycle. I'm done, for now, with stories played out against the backdrop of Latin American politics. It's something I've been obsessed with for a long time, and now it's time to put it behind me. I want to push myself to write stories that are stranger, more disconcerting, and more challenging. I'm proud of *War by Candlelight*, I really am, but it's also a first book, and as a writer, I'm still young. In some ways, *Candlelight* is disappointingly conventional: the basic structure of a story is not challenged. The merits of this book lie perhaps in that it focuses on people and places that are not often represented in the English language, and does so — I hope — with a lot of empathy, a lot of realism, illuminating worlds that might be new to some. That's why I'm proud of the book, and while this is important, it's also not enough: I have aspirations that go beyond this. I don't simply want to write books that function as reports on the developing world for American audiences. I want to write books that advance the cause of story-telling. The books that I want to write, the books I dream about writing, will be more ambitious in terms of form, in terms of language, in terms of structure. I hope I can pull them off, but who knows?