



War by Candlelight

By Daniel Alarcón
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Introduction

"Standing in front of a map of the Americas tacked to the mossy trunk of a jungle tree, Fernando ran his finger up and down the peaks of the Andes, the spine of his continent, and told the tattered and inexperienced group of fighters what he would die believing that very day: All of this will be ours once more."

War by Candlelight travels from the poverty-ridden shantytowns of Lima, to the matchbox studio apartments of Manhattan, giving us a vision of a world in flux: a Peruvian revolutionary is torn between giving his life for the cause and saving it for his daughter; a young man tries to respect his Punjabi American girlfriend's insistence on secrecy while desiring the acknowledgement of his existence from her family. In this collection of nine finely crafted stories, Daniel Alarcón vividly depicts the despairing reality and tenacious hopes of people caught in the crosshairs of social, political and ecological

upheaval.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does *Flood* depict the grim future awaiting barrio children? Although Oscar escapes a similar fate in *City of Clowns*, why does he remain trapped in his head, in his own conflicted conscience?
2. "Lima was full of those worn down by living," notes the narrator of *Lima, Peru, July 28, 1973*, but for a suspended moment in time before life caught up to them, his adversary, the policeman, was a *companero*. As wife befriends mistress in *City of Clowns*, as David and Mrs. Shah silently take turns caring for Reena in *Third Avenue Suicide*...how has life worn down and reversed natural amity or enmity in these stories?
3. By structuring the story *War by Candlelight* as a series of snapshot vignettes set in a chronologically scrambled order, how does the author subvert a predictable narrative arc (idealistic student becomes revolutionary fighter) and instead draw the reader to the human suffering that motivates such a painful decision?
4. In *Absence* and *A Science for Being Alone*, characters face the inexorable pull of "Los Unidos." How does *A Strong Dead Man* depict a New York reality that belies the illusion that life is without struggle in America as well?
5. In *The Visitor*, the earthquake survivor envies the "youthful amnesia" of his children as they forage for aid packages above their buried village. In *Third Avenue Suicide*, Dave and Reena escape their quandary in "those amnesiac moments" of being in love. Do other characters in *War by Candlelight* fight against their own memory? Why?
6. What is missing in *Absence*? How does immigration involve the loss of everything Wari left behind, as well as the absence of himself, the negative space he once occupied in Peru? Do you find Wari to be a sympathetic character or an opportunist?
7. Who or what do you think dies in *Third Avenue Suicide*? Why does Reena fear her relationships -- with David, with her parents -- would become "an international crisis areas, civil wars"? How does violence thematically connect the stories?
8. Consider the images and events that reappear throughout the stories -- clowns, landslides, painters, leather-workers, feral dogs, street kids. How does the author use each as a metaphor for transience and uncertainty?
9. Wari notes, in *Absence*, "Americans always feel bad. They wander the globe carrying this opulent burden." What do you think he means? How do the aid packages that fall on the earthquake survivors in *The Visitor* symbolize clueless attempts at beneficence, attempts to alleviate that burden?
10. The titular short story, *War by Candlelight*, contains a subsection -- *II. War by Candlelight, 1983* -- in which Fernando and Maruja, "sat by candlelight" arguing over whether they should have a baby. Does the refraction of this title through the entire collection upend conventional notions of war? How does the title reflect, and telescope, the theme of battlefields?

About the Author

Daniel Alarcón was born in Lima, Peru, and raised in Birmingham, Alabama. His work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, and elsewhere. He is Associate Editor of *Etiqueta Negra*, an award-winning monthly magazine published in Lima. A former Fulbright Scholar to Peru and the recipient of a Whiting Writers' Award for 2004, he lives in Oakland, California.