



The King Is Always Above the People: Stories

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A slyly political collection of stories about immigration, broken dreams, Los Angeles gang members, Latin American families, and other tales of high stakes journeys, from the award-winning author of *War by Candlelight* and *At Night We Walk in Circles*.

Migration. Betrayal. Family secrets. Doomed love. Uncertain futures. In Daniel Alarcon's hands, these are transformed into deeply human stories with high stakes. In -The Thousands, - people are on the move and forging new paths; hope and heartbreak abound. A man deals with the fallout of his blind relatives' mysterious deaths and his father's mental breakdown and incarceration in -The Bridge.- A gang member discovers a way to forgiveness and redemption through the haze of violence and trauma in -The Ballad of Rocky Rontal.- And in the tour de force novella, -The Auroras-, a man severs himself from his old life and seeks to make a new one in a new city, only to find himself seduced and controlled by a powerful woman. Richly drawn, full of unforgettable characters, *The King is Always Above the People* reveals experiences both unsettling and unknown, and yet eerily familiar in this new world.

The King Is Always Above the People: Stories Details

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David says

It is unfortunate that these stories are collected. Individually some show promise, but there is a sameness to many of them and so they are less powerful gathered together. Here are four opening lines:

"It was the year I left my parents, a few useless friends, and a girl who liked to tell everyone we were married, and moved two hundred kilometers downstream to the capitol."

"I'd been out of the conservatory for about a year when my great-uncle Raul died."

"I'd been in Lima for the first half of the year."

It's early March when Hernan arrives in the port city."

Ho hum. All are solid sentences and perfectly good ways to start a short story, but taken in succession they become formulaic and workaday. The same is true for the stories themselves with their common themes, similar settings, and overlapping tones. And so I found this to be a thoroughly mediocre undertaking.

Audacia Ray says

As I read these stories about men and boys doing fucked up things, I kept wondering: are these stories about toxic masculinity or an embodiment of toxic masculinity? I don't know that I found the answer exactly but I wasn't into it.

Mel says

This was just ok. The writing itself is exceptional, and overreaching. It demanded more of myself than I could invest- it was like the style itself wanted to prevent the stories from really being known. There were several moments where I lost the thread of what was going on and didn't care to pick it up again.

jo says

dayum, this book. daniel alarcón is my new bff.

José Vivas M. says

Qué vaina más loca estos cuentos. Tal vez puedo pasar "El Puente" y "Los miles" como del tipo de relato que

entiendo/siento/disfruto. Los demás me dejaron desconcertado, tal vez por su sofisticación, no sé si por un nivel de experimentación que me pierde, quizá por una estructura demasiado extraña para mí. Debí sospecharlo por las revistas en las que ha publicado Alarcón, de marcada tendencia hacia la narración "de avanzada".

Compré el libro emocionado por leer algo más del autor de "Radio Ciudad Perdida", novela que me gustó mucho (y de cuya lectura, a la luz de estos cuentos, confieso recordar una vaga sensación de desconcierto al inicio), pero no me rindo. Tal vez encuentre en otra de sus obras el registro con el que conecté en "Radio...". Tal vez aprenda a leer en la clave de estos novísimos y laureados escritores.

Doug says

I really liked Alarcón's last novel, which I gave a 5 star rating, so am rather surprised and disappointed that I found this NBA nominated follow up so utterly lacking. Partially this MIGHT be due to my antipathy towards the short story format, but mainly I just found these ten brief works to be dull and uninteresting, and while competently written, rarely surpassing that adjective. Seven of the stories are very short, and these just never seem to gain any momentum before they are over. (One of these inexplicably takes place in the present day, but is narrated by President Lincoln's gay lover - and just seems bizarre for the sake of being bizarre). The three longer stories have the opposite problem - they drone on and on with things happening, but rarely with any discernible point.

jeremy says

life has a way of punishing brave boys like you. life has a way of making brave boys like you punish themselves. particularly here. where you live. you already know that.

daniel alarcón's writing seems to become tighter and more focused with each passing book. always a gifted storyteller, a notable poise or confidence now permeates his pages, whereas before it came but in passing phases. the first story collection since his pen/hemingway-nominated debut, *war by candlelight*, his new one, *the king is always above the people*, features 10 stories (9 and a novella? 8 and 2?), each tinged with a certain yearning or desperate/despairing reality to them. the collections longest pieces, "the auroras," "the provincials," and the title story stand the tallest.

of the original bogotá39 list (a new one was celebrated earlier this year), only junot díaz has enjoyed greater stateside success than alarcón (though both are in otherwise exceptional company). melding the political and the personal, or at least acknowledging that the twain seldom exist separately, the peruvian-american's sweet spot seems to be the place where his characters seek to transcend the limits of one, while forever being encumbered by the other. *the king is always above the people* is a solid collection, with nary a weak story to be found.

but still, hernán didn't leave. people far better than him in every way have skated to their graves stuck in bad relationships, such is the coercive power of inertia.

Trish says

One assumes from the title that the king spoken of is revered and placed in a position of honor. Very shortly we learn that the king is actually hanging by his neck, above the central square, the people looking up at him swinging there. Many things are different from the perspective of those on the flip side of north.

Alarcón is Peruvian-American, and his voice is strong (having seen poverty), male (having known brutality), and distinctive (not being North American). His biography is fascinating. He is an investigative journalist; he teaches both broadcast journalism and writes novels. He collaborated with partners to establish a Spanish-language podcast, *Radio Ambulante*, telling Latin American stories for NPR.

This collection of stories may be a perfect way to be introduced to his work. Some stories have a knife hidden somewhere in the folds. We are reading along, interested and engaged, and suddenly we remember the world is not kind. We might have moments of carefree pleasure but it is not too long before the reality comes flooding back. Until then, however, there is a sense of release most intense.

“The Provincials” is the longest story and it is something altogether new. A father and his son return to the town the father had fled some years before. He is now working at a job unimaginable to those people in the town—Head Librarian of the Rare and Antiquarian Manuscripts division of the National Library—and has one son in America. The son traveling with him is an actor. Because the townspeople mistake him for his cross-border brother, he accedes to this role. He discovers there is, in fact, something of value here in this tired town they’ve left.

“República and Grau” may be my favorite story, a story of a wily blind man begging for coins. He is accompanied by a ten-year-old who is being pimped by his father to bring home half the take. Life is hard. The begging blind man seems happy to share his income, such as it is, with the neatly-dressed boy. One day, after his father beats the boy for such a small take-home, the boy’s bruised, bloody face and uncaring demeanor earns the two beggars more.

The second-longest story in the bunch, “The Bridge,” is as filling as a novel. There is so much to think about, so much alluded to, so much desire and despair in it that one has to pause, and pull in the oars. Let’s just think about what he is saying, if you don’t mind. It won’t hurt you to know the story ends with a recording of an audience roaring back at an opera performer who left them momentarily speechless.

In the best of all possible worlds, I would read this collection slowly, allowing time between stories as though each were a square of bitter chocolate. But I am a traveler, too, and fear I will lose the opportunity to share in this strongly South American-flavored story-telling so must finish it quickly. All the way through we sense the movement of individuals, tied in some mysterious psychic way to the mother country but mostly adrift, seeking rest. The North, when it is perceived at all, is “other.”

The final story, “The Auroras,” couldn’t have come at a more opportune moment, considering the state of discussion around the world on the subject of sexual relations and exploitation. The story pained me. While we experience a curious role-reversal in the sexual arena, we also have a queer example of the effect of social groups on attitudes...something like the Facebook effect. The main character was influenced to find his inner malice and express it, only later understanding how thoroughly he’d been manipulated. It was a distressing story to end on.

Alarcón is interesting enough that I set out immediately to see if this set of stories is representative of his

work. He has two earlier novels, his debut called *Lost City Radio* (2007) about a radio show that recounts for families the status of victims of a war in a nameless South American country, and *At Night We Walk in Circles* (2013) featuring people with names and backgrounds the same as those in his story mentioned above called “The Provincials.”

But there is more. Alarcón collaborated on a graphic novel and several story collections. He is a journalist, and just kind of endlessly fascinating. He appears to write in English: no translator is listed. He also teaches or has taught at several universities in the United States. You must sample his work if only because South American writers are too scarce—for whatever reason—in North America, and I presume, in Europe. South America is simply too often overlooked in our hurry to discover larger targets or exotica.

Carol says

I rarely read short story collections and I'd not heard of Daniel Alarcon prior to checking this book out of the library. Was it the cover? The title? It's certainly not that I don't have plenty of books to read that I'm excited to read. And still. The wonder of libraries.

I knew in the first seventy-five pages that this would be on my "top 10 reads of 2018" list, no matter what the rest of the year holds, because of passages like this:

Geography is an accident, he said. The place you are born is simply the first place you flee. And then: the people you meet, the ones you fall for, and the paths you make together, the entirety of one's life, a series of mere accidents. And these too are accidents: the creeks you stumble upon in a dense wood, the stones you gather, the number of times each skips across the bright surface of the water, and everything you feel in that moment: the graceless passage of time, the possibility of stillness.

and this:

This town brought up bad memories for my father, who was, in those days, entering a pensive late middle-age. That was how it seemed to me at the time; but what does a twenty-two-year-old know about a grown man's life and worries? Very little, of course. I was too young to recognize what would later seem more than obvious, that I was the greatest source of my old man's concern. That, if he was growing old too soon, I was at least partly to blame. This would've been clear had I been paying attention. We hadn't come to see about Raul or his house or his things. We'd come to see about me.

and then this:

The registrar was a small, very round man named Juan, with dark skin and a raspy voice. He'd been my father's best friend in third grade, or so he claimed. My old man didn't bother to contradict him, only smiled in such a way that I understood it to be untrue; or if not untrue exactly, then one of those statements that time had rendered unverifiable, and about which there was no longer any use debating.

and, finally, this:

The town itself was interesting enough, with crumbling houses and narrow streets full of people who seemed not to know how to hurry. I learned to walk slowly and so this pace was not difficult for me. That day was absurdly sunny. In the afternoon I rode one of the funiculars to the top of a hill, an outcropping of rock high

above the sea where the wind blew so hard it forced my eyes to shut and dusted my face with a fine film. From there, between gusts, I could see the port, its gleaming metal claws, its workers scurrying between acres of containers stacked one on top of the other. Beyond it was the ocean, a beautiful, roiling sheet of silver.

Of course, the real work of the day was pretending I wasn't lonely.

Alarcon's protagonists are men going places. Something happened. They are returning home for a funeral, or have left home some time ago and are still in the process of determining what comes next. They are in their 20s - 40s and a little bit lost. Things haven't worked out as they might have thought. Family is difficult. So is marriage. They seek freedom. A new set of options. The ability to escape the past. To fit within a community but not be locked in by it. To be free of loneliness.

Alarcón is 40, but he notices tells and the nuances of behavior and relationships as if he was born an old soul. Originally from Peru, he was raised in suburban Birmingham, Alabama. Somewhere along the way, he became a wicked observer of human behavior with writing talent to spare. His stories will appeal to anyone who is a fan of Mohsin Hamid, and also to the many who find Hamid's writing too lightweight.

The standouts were *The Thousands*, *Abraham Lincoln Has Been Shot*, *Republica and Grau*, *The Bridge* and *The Lord Rides a Swift Cloud*. If you only have time for a single story - read *Abraham Lincoln Has Been Shot*. You're welcome.

Fran Becker says

I don't usually read short story collections. I feel that as soon as I get to know a character the story is over and I feel vaguely unsatisfied.

But a couple of these stories were brilliant. I chose this book because much of it took place in Peru, part of a World Cup reading challenge - read 32 books representing the 32 countries competing in the World Cup. I was not disappointed. I can't say I learned all that much about Peru, but these stories explore the human heart and relationships: lovers, fathers, and sons, with intimacy and grace.

Well worth the time, especially the final, longer story, *The Auroras*. It left me breathless. And very sad.

Dan says

Daniel Alarcón is one of my favorite contemporary writers. I know him mostly from his novels and his work on the radio show *Radio Ambulante*. This is the first of his short story collections that I've read and it met with my expectations.

The stories are all free standing, yet a current of restless individualism animates them all. Most of the stories concern themselves with a young man, kinda single kinda not, who's arrived at a crucial juncture in his life. Does he do what's expected of him or does he choose a different, unknown path? Alarcón explores both possibilities throughout the collection, and, as you might expect, avoids pat resolutions. Both paths are fraught for his protagonists, suggesting that happiness (or at least a sense of contentment and purpose) must ultimately be achieved internally, irrespective of the external circumstances.

The sea and the city are used as enduring metaphors throughout the collection as is, to a lesser degree, the United States. I liked how in each case, these places represent a kind of guarded Utopia for Alarcón's protagonists, yet very little in the stories themselves suggests that any of these places — the sea, the city, the US — can bear the brunt of a Utopian imaginary for long. And the characters seem to know it. In a way, Alarcón vision is bleak here, but it's also beautiful.

A subtly political, unfailingly human collection rendered in sparse prose. Perfect for fans of Viet Thahn Nguyen's *The Refugees*.

If you liked this, make sure to follow me on Goodreads for more reviews!

Sadaf Sagheer says

Damn, Daniel Alarcon knows what's up.
This was such a good collection.

Elizabeth? says

This started out promising and then fizzled. Just when I thought it was gaining momentum, I fell asleep several times trying to get through one of the longer stories. Time to move on.

Gwendolyn says

I enjoyed this imaginative and versatile story collection. Alarcon explores issues of immigration, displacement, and powerlessness. The male characters, in particular, are well-drawn and complex individuals. (Small complaint: the female characters tend towards stereotypes.) Some of the stories include fantastical elements, so be prepared for that. The final story in the collection is really a novella, and it was my favorite.

Monica says

So...Daniel Alarcon. This young man has taken the literary world by storm with this collection of stories. I have become a huge fan short story collections. These stories are fascinating, well crafted, interesting and odd. This is my wheelhouse and Alarcon is very talented writer with a new and different perspective. Alarcon writes about men of color of Latin descent. I don't read often enough about how men of color view the world and themselves. That said, it seems as if the collection only has one voice. Honestly each story could have been about the same person at different points in his life. The circumstances varied but the emotional resonances were very similar. Basically these are stories of men who are disillusioned with their place in the world. And they are all dissatisfied or restless or uncomfortable about something in their lives. It's kind of an open spicket of discontent and missed opportunity. The dice have been rolled and they came up snake eyes. I need to believe that there is more for these men than the bitterness and melancholy presented here.

(view spoiler)

I've read a few short story collections and what usually varies about them is the atmosphere, the temperature, the texture. Often times different stories reach for different emotions. Tugs on different parts of the heart. This book was very emotionally focused on nostalgia, regrets, selfishness, hubris, conceit, entitlement, callousness and a strange self-awareness in the midst of self-absorption. There is (a mostly unstated) acknowledgement that things could be better if these men were better people. All of this assessing and a touch of self-pity makes for a lyrical yet slightly unpalatable experience. Beautifully written, poignant and gloomy. The standouts for me were The Provincials, Republica and Grau, The Bridge and The Auroras. Reminiscent of Toni Morrison, and Jesmyn Ward, reading Alarcon is a brilliant, unsettling and craggy experience.

4ish Stars

Read on kindle.
