

## Beyond the Beautiful Forevers by Katherine Boo



Review by: Steve Wanta

*Beyond the Beautiful Forevers* is narrative nonfiction that vividly depicts a group of families that live in the slums next to the encroaching Mumbai International Airport. There is much symbolism in the title of the book and its origin. A large wall is erected to keep the slum out of the reach and sight of the airport and the Indian boom times it represents. The wall, both symbolic and functional, is plastered with an advertisement for flooring, the New India-*Beyond the Beautiful Forevers*.

I read the book at a particularly timely point, during a recent trip to the slums of Delhi where we visited a local NGO that offers many of the social programs referenced in the book. In our short trip, we saw a wide array of people living in the predominately Muslim community – beggars, microentrepreneurs, passionate community workers, and committed Westerners. There was a supportive community in the midst of chaos. Our time and scope was limited which always begs the question, was it an authentic representation of the reality and a fair sampling?

Katherine Boo spent years researching the book and its characters. The challenges facing people in *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers* seems endless and there appears to be little hope that they have the ability to live virtuous lives. The story told is one of corruption around every corner and those that “succeed” financially cling to the opportunity of corruption. As she writes, “But for the poor of a country where corruption thieved a great deal of opportunity, corruption was one of the genuine opportunities that remained.”

I do not doubt the accounts of the book happened and continue to happen to the poor around the world but I wonder if the magnitude to which Boo writes is overstated. Authors hold the creative license to write a story. The author decides the type of story he or she wants to write. Yunus has told a story of great triumph of the poor for which he is now criticized. Boo’s story paints the bleak parts of poverty, especially urban slums. It tells the sad stories of the light in bright souls being squashed by the overwhelming weight of their circumstances. Although there is a level of admiration of the people she chronicles, the focus is overwhelmingly centered on the powerless nature of poverty.

When looking at narrative or creative nonfiction, I am left with the question-what is the point? What is the point of Yunus’ story and now Boo’s? Do we want to entertain, inspire

action, or muckrake for change? I recommend this book as a stirring account of the challenging side of poverty.