

BEHIND THE BEAUTIFUL FOREVERS**Winner of the National Book Award for Nonfiction**

In this brilliantly written, fast-paced book, based on three years of uncompromising reporting, a bewildering age of global change and inequality is made human.

Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forever: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*, a gripping work of reportage based on the three years she spent in Bombay's Annawadi slum, is a truly deserving National Book Award finalist.

Earlier in the year when I read the book, I hoped it would be in line for the major awards. I was impressed with the way Boo keeps herself out of the narrative, giving us a no-holds-barred dramatization of life in the slums, without any element of romanticization or exoticization. Boo is a staff writer for the *New Yorker*, married to the Indian academic Sunil Khilnani, and has previously written about poor communities in the U.S. There isn't a single jarring note as she transitions to reporting about Annawadi.

Most of these brilliant new books are by authors who either live in India or have returned there, as opposed to fiction writers based in America or Britain who typically offer magical realist multigenerational family secrets sagas that have little resonance with India's new reality but are beloved by publishers and book clubs in the West. It's as if a strong narrative countermovement has arisen in India as the country takes stock of the real costs of globalization, and the mass of critical books amounts to a declaration of independence on the part of the Indian publishing industry.

Annawadi is a makeshift settlement in the shadow of luxury hotels near the Mumbai airport, and as India starts to prosper, Annawadians are electric with hope. Abdul, a reflective and enterprising Muslim teenager, sees "a fortune beyond counting" in the recyclable garbage that richer people throw away. Asha, a woman of formidable wit and deep scars from a childhood in rural poverty, has identified an alternate route to the middle class: political corruption. With a little luck, her sensitive, beautiful daughter—Annawadi's "most-everything girl"—will soon become its first female college graduate. And even the poorest Annawadians, like Kalu, a fifteen-year-old scrap-metal thief, believe themselves inching closer to the good lives and good times they call "the full enjoy."

But then Abdul the garbage sorter is falsely accused in a shocking tragedy; terror and a global recession rock the city; and suppressed tensions over religion, caste, sex, power and economic envy turn brutal. As the tenderest individual hopes intersect with the greatest global truths, the true contours of a competitive age are revealed. And so, too, are the imaginations and courage of the people of Annawadi.

With intelligence, humor, and deep insight into what connects human beings to one another in an era of tumultuous change, *Behind the Beautiful Forever* carries the reader headlong into one of the twenty-first century's hidden worlds, and into the lives of people impossible to forget.