

2. As Abdul works day and night with garbage, keeping his head down, trying to support his large family, some other citydwellers think of him as garbage, too. How does Abdul react to how other people view him? How would you react? How do Abdul and his sort-of friend, Sunil, try to protect themselves and sustain self-esteem in the face of other people's contempt?

3. The lives of ordinary women—their working lives, domestic lives, and inner lives—are an important part of *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. The author has noted elsewhere that she'd felt a shortage of such accounts in nonfiction about urban India. Do women like Zehrunisa and Asha have more freedom in an urban slum than they would have had in the villages where they were born? What is Meena, a Dalit, spared by living in the city? What freedoms do Meena, Asha, and Zehrunisa still lack, in your view?

4. Asha grew up in rural poverty, and the teenaged marriage arranged by her family was to a man who drank more than he worked. In Annawadi, she takes a series of calculated risks to give her daughter Manju a life far more hopeful than that of other young women such as Meena. What does Asha lose by her efforts to improve her daughter's life chances? What does she gain? Were Asha's choices understandable to you, in the end?

5. Does Asha have a point when she argues that something isn't wrong if the powerful people say that it's right? How does constant exposure to corruption change a person's internal understanding of right and wrong?

6. Many Annawadians—Hindu, Muslim, and Christian—spend less time in religious observance than they did when they were younger, and a pink temple on the edge of the sewage lake goes largely unused. In a time of relative hope and constant improvisation for the slumdweller, why might religious practice be diminishing? What role does religious faith still play in the slumdweller's lives?

7. Who do you think had the best life in the book, and why?

8. In the Author's Note Katherine Boo emphasizes the volatility of an age in which capital moves quickly around the planet, government supports decline, and temporary work proliferates. Had the author followed the families of Annawadi for only a few weeks or months, would you have come away with a different understanding of the effects of that volatility? Does uncertainty about their homes and incomes change how Annawadians view their neighbors? Does economic uncertainty affect relationships where you live?

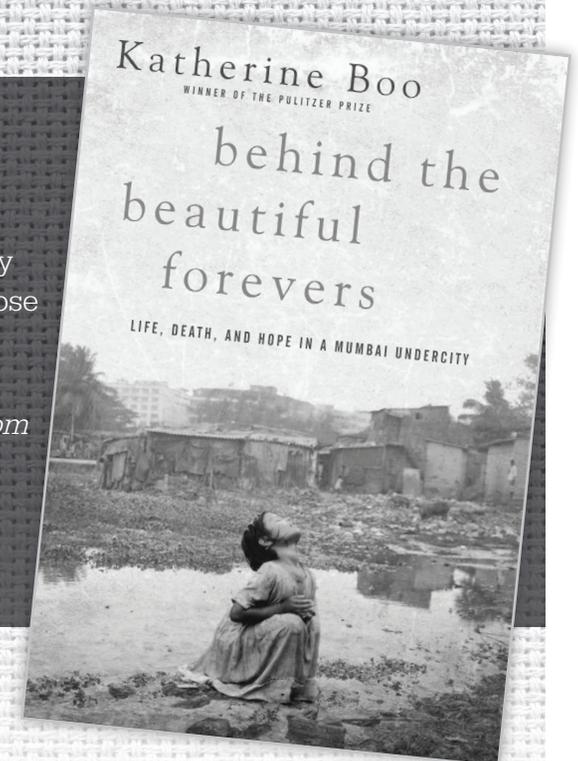
Source: issued by publisher.

Discussion Questions

"Boo's rigorous inquiry and transcendent prose leave an indelible impression."

- *Publishersweekly.com*

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Katherine (Kate) J. Boo

is an award-winning journalist and author known primarily for writing about America's poor and disadvantaged.

A native of Washington, D.C., Boo attended the College of William and Mary and graduated summa cum laude from Barnard College and began her career in journalism with editorial positions at Washington's City Paper and then the Washington Monthly. From there she went to the Washington Post, from 1993 to 2003.

In 2000, her series for the Post about group homes for the mentally im-

paired won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. The Pulitzer judges noted that her work "disclosed wretched neglect and abuse in the city's group homes for the mentally retarded, which forced officials to acknowledge the conditions and begin reforms."

In 2003, she joined the staff of *The New Yorker*, to which she had been contributing since 2001. One of her subsequent *New Yorker* articles, "The Marriage Cure," won the National Magazine Award for Feature Writing in 2004. The article chronicled state-sponsored efforts to teach poor people in an Oklahoma community about marriage in hopes that the classes would help people avoid or escape poverty. Another of Boo's *New Yorker* articles, "After Welfare," won the 2002 Sidney Hillman Award, which honors articles that advance the cause of social justice.

She was a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, from 2002 through 2006. In 2002, she won a MacArthur Fellowship.[7]

In 2012, Boo published her first book *Behind the Beautiful Forever: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*, a non-fiction account of life in the Annawadi slums of Mumbai, India. (Author bio from Wikipedia.)

Book Summary

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.

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. (From the publisher.)

Discussion Questions

1. Barbara Ehrenreich calls *Behind the Beautiful Forever* "one of the most powerful indictments of economic inequality I've ever read." Yet the book shows the world of the Indian rich—lavish Bollywood parties, an increasingly glamorous new airport—almost exclusively through the eyes of the Annawadians. Are they resentful? Are they envious? How does the wealth that surrounds the slumdweller shape their own expectations and hopes?
