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**Review of *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*. Katherine Boo. Reviewed by Edward U. Murphy.**

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and infrastructure; reigning in corporate power; reforming tax codes to make them more progressive; and protecting the safety net for the most economically vulnerable. He recognizes how difficult this will be but warns that we risk our future as a nation if we settle for anything less.

*Mary Huff Stevenson, Emerita, Economics Department,  
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Katherine Boo. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*. Random House (2012). \$27.00 (hardcover).

Katherine Boo has written an astonishingly beautiful account of an unforgiving world of bleakness and hope. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* chronicles the lives of people of Annawaldi, a slum near the Mumbai international airport. With vivid detail and profound respect, Boo paints acute, poignant portraits of the struggling urban poor in globalizing India. Here's the striving Abdul, a boy who has made a profitable business scavenging and reselling recyclable materials. There's embittered, one-legged Fatima, in constant war with Abdul's family over a crumbling wall they share. Here's Asha, who obtains a degree of economic security as a corrupt local politician. Manju, her daughter, hopes to go to college. Kalu, a young boy, scrapes by as a trash picker. These are a few of Boo's key informants, and not all of them make it out of the book alive.

One of the many virtues of *Forever* is its unsparing description of how these hard lives are shaped, and misshaped, by the moral and social ecology of Annawaldi. Corruption is the rule, trust the exception. When Boo's principals encounter the local police or courts, the results usually have nothing to do with fairness. It is striking that in this Mumbai slum practically no one trusts anyone. Social capital is low and cooperation is rare. The personal animosity between Fatima and the Hussains, her neighbors, has consequences both tragic and absurd. In Annawaldi, poverty is hardly ennobling. Readers will come to care deeply about the individuals in this book but will also be struck by how many live by a harsh zero-sum morality only partially alleviated by the bonds of family. With its

harsh truths and indelible characters, *Forever* evokes Dickens but without the sentimentality.

Many readers will be familiar with Boo's work in the *New Yorker*. She is a Pulitzer-winning American writer who specializes in long-form journalism, describing the lives of the poor in great empathetic detail. Until this book, her first, she focused on the poor in the United States. Having married an Indian national a decade ago, Boo found herself spending considerable time in Mumbai. To research this book, she spent three or four years hanging out with the people of Annawaldi. The result is a truly remarkable achievement that won the 2012 National Book Award for non-fiction. It has the power of a great novel in its compassionate depiction of a little-known world, its emotionally moving narrative arc, and Boo's concise, elegant prose. This is ethnography of the highest order.

Boo clearly intends for *Forever* to stand on its own as a clear-eyed, honest portrayal of a poor community in India. Compelling fiction, narrative non-fiction, ethnography, film, and other forms have the capacity to evoke sympathy for marginalized "others." If we walk in the shoes of those different from us, does this deeper understanding lead us to take compassionate action or seek political change? Perhaps. Upon meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lincoln joked that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* caused the Civil War.

Although readers will likely be deeply affected by this work, important questions remain unaddressed. Boo attributes the formation of this relatively new shantytown to India's entry into the global economy and points out that the urban poor she depicts are much better off than India's rural poor. But we are left with little idea how public policies at local, national, or international levels may have contributed to the bleak world she describes. Can we find political strategies to create a better world, where slum dwellers' hopes are not so consistently frustrated?

*Behind the Beautiful Forever* has the potential to change the way its readers think and feel about urban poverty in India. It recalls George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which documented living conditions in the industrial north of England, but Orwell also offered extensive ethical and political commentary. If Boo had panned back from Annawaldi to examine the larger political and economic context, and to link her

empathic portrayal of real lives to the political economy of global inequality, this superb ethnography would have had more analytical power and even greater impact.

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Steven Conn, (Ed.), *To Promote the General Welfare: The Case for Big Government*. Oxford University Press (2012). \$19.95. (paperback).

During an era when “big government” is vilified as the root of all evil by Right Wing pundits and politicians, and when even the anemic attempts of a Democratic president to use the power of the federal government to reform the health care system or to keep our air clean are denounced as “socialism,” it comes as a welcome antidote to read a book like Steven Conn’s edited collection, *To Promote the General Welfare*. Conn’s book is not the only recent challenge to anti-government rhetoric. Recently, a few books—Jeff Madrick’s *The Case for Big Government* and Paul Krugman’s *End This Depression Now*—and many blogs, articles and institutes, like the Roosevelt Institute, have made the case that government can be a source for good. But rather than present an ideological argument for big government, this book takes a more nuanced approach. The question, Conn argues in the book’s Preface, is not whether the federal government should intervene in the market as liberals advocate, or rely solely on the private market to meet our needs, as conservatives argue. Rather, because the federal government has always been involved in creating the kind of society Americans have wanted, the appropriate question is, “how, on what terms, and for whose benefit?” (p. xi)

Conn has assembled a distinguished group of scholars—most of them historians—to answer this question through a series of essays focused around a variety of policy arenas, including transportation, education, banking, national security, housing, health care, arts and culture, and communications. Absent, however, are arguably three of the most important policy arenas today: employment, old age security, and the environment. These are stunning omissions when we consider