

## April 2012

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### Jenny McPhee

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### The Bombshell

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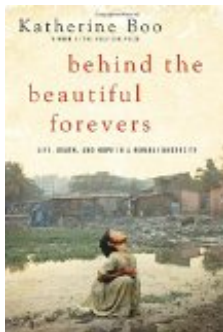
### The Art of Voyeurism in Mumbai's Underworld: Mary Ellen Mark, Sonia Faleiro, and Katherine Boo

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One of the most beautiful and disturbing books I own is the photographer Mary Ellen Mark's *Falkland Road: Prostitutes of Bombay* (1981). Mark's portraits of prostitutes, transvestites, madams, customers, boyfriends, and children, shot in an impoverished red-light district in India's largest and richest city, are exquisite. The photographs' blazing colors, destitute settings, precision of detail, jarring juxtapositions, awkward body poses, and intense facial expressions catapult the viewer into the squalid, yet captivating world they depict -- rendering its extreme otherness beautiful.

In viewing, we are simultaneously compelled and repulsed by the images, by what we see and what is reflected back to us of humanity and of ourselves. Though sex is everywhere in the images, the erotic is absent, powerfully so. Our fantasies yearn to eroticize the images but their stark reality inhibits us. Mark's book boldly reminds us that art by its very nature is voyeuristic. The portrayal of a subject's nakedness, real or metaphoric, arouses our horror, desire, pity, mirth, joy, and, at its most successful, inspires self-reflection and empathy.



Sonia Faleiro's *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars* (2010) and Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (2012) are literary

complements to Mark's photography some thirty years on. Faleiro, an Indian-born journalist living in the south part of the city known as the "Manhattan of Bombay\*," turned "from writing about the mainstream to writing only of the margins" where "the condominiums of the wealthy tower above the tarp roofs of the poor so that when they turn to the heavens in prayer they see instead the rich at play." Bombay, home to India's largest number of dollar millionaires, is often compared to New York, Moscow, and Shanghai in terms of its global economic power, yet more than half of Bombay's 18 million inhabitants live in slums, a third have no access to clean drinking water, two million have no toilet. Faleiro's foray into the underworld began after she met a young *hijra*, or transgender, on an assignment.

Eventually, she met Leela, a nineteen-year-old bar dancer, who was such a whirlwind of intelligence, magnetism, and drive, Faleiro decided that if she was going to peer into the dance bar world and Bombay's sex trade, she wanted to do so through Leela's eyes.

Faleiro's five-year chronicle of Leela's life as the highest paid bar dancer at one of the city's 1,500 clubs is a tour-de-force of the literature of fact. She seamlessly weaves politics, history, sociology, urban activism, and healthcare into her portrait of Leela's life as an erotic dancer, infusing her rhythmic sentences with Leela's and her coterie's sharp-witted and colorful patter.

Though Leela is extraordinary, her biography is typical of Bombay's sex workers. She ran away from her village at thirteen after her father, who regularly beat and raped her mother, began pimping Leela to policemen at the local station. Once in Bombay, after a brief stint in a brothel, Leela's luck, ambition, and beauty led her to a job in a dance bar, the pinnacle of the sex trade's hierarchy because "selling sex wasn't a bar dancer's primary occupation and because when she did sell sex she did so quietly and most often under her own covers." In Bombay, Leela feels in control of her life, she has her own small apartment, is well paid, and above all is free to do as she likes. When Faleiro questions this interpretation of her emancipation, Leela enlightens her: "When you look at my life don't look at it beside yours. Look at it beside the life of my mother and her mother and my sisters-in-law who have to take permission to walk down the road. If my mother talks to a man who isn't her son, brother or cousin, she will hear the sound of my father's hand across her face, feel fists against her breasts. But you've seen me with men? If I don't want to talk I say, 'Get lost, Oye!' And they do."

Apsara, Leela's mother, escapes her abusive husband and comes to live with Leela for a time in Bombay. Depressed, for months she arises from Leela's bed only for food and customers. Faleiro masterfully portrays the complexity of these women's lives. When Apsara absconds with a considerable amount of Leela's money, we fear she has returned to Leela's terrible father. Upon learning that she has, instead, bought herself three girls and opened a brothel in a Bombay suburb, we are relieved, even a little proud of her bravado.

Witnessing Leela's struggle for a better life, watching her obsess over the latest designer bags, iPhones, face creams, and surgical beauty treatments, yearn for a man who will marry and rescue her from a heartless, corrupt world, we realize that Leela's self-delusion about her freedom rivals our own self-delusion that the Leelas and Apsaras of the world have little to do with who we are. Leela understands: in a beauty parlor she scolds her pedicurist for eavesdropping, then relents, telling the girl: "That's okay... Listen, listen. Maybe you will learn something useful. After all, in this world of men if one woman doesn't help another, we will all suffer."

*Behind the Beautiful Forevers* follows four years in the lives of several inhabitants of Annawadi, a slum where 3,000 people are crammed into 335 makeshift huts near Mumbai's international airport. Boo, a Pulitzer-Prize-winning American journalist and *New Yorker* staff writer, has written extensively about poverty in America. She was led to this project, she writes in her author's note, when "I fell in love with an Indian man and gained a country." Though in a

very different setting, the questions about what it takes to rise out of poverty were the same. "What is the infrastructure of opportunity in this society? Whose capabilities are given wing by the market and a government's economic and social policy? Whose capabilities are squandered? By what means might that ribby child grow up to be less poor?...When I settle into a place, listening and watching, I don't try to fool myself that the stories of individuals are themselves arguments. I just believe that better arguments, maybe even better policies, get formulated when we know more about ordinary lives."

In stunning prose hailed as "novelistic," Boo profiles various Annawadi characters: Abdul, a teenager who runs a highly successful business collecting and selling recyclable garbage; Asha, a politically ambitious thirty-nine-year-old determined to become Annawadi's first female slumlord; Asha's sensitive, smart daughter Manju, slated to become Annawadi's first college graduate; Meena, Manju's best friend, terrified of the arranged marriage her parents are planning for her; Kalu, a fifteen-year-old homeless petty thief, who acts out Bollywood movies for children who can't afford the cinema; One Leg (nicknamed for a congenital defect), who, frustrated at life's injustices, commits a desperate act. Through these portraits, Boo paints a vivid picture of slum life -- the filth, stench, airlessness, the fierce desire to improve one's lot, the exhaustion of hard work and hopelessness, the relentless tragedies, the suffocating and irradicable corruption on every level.

Because these books portraying the Mumbai underworld are tied to fact, redemption is rare. These authors' visions of a predominantly unseen world leave us with a view into an abyss of futility. Now and again we glimpse the dark beauty of the inhabitants' lives -- and of our own.

\* Sonia Faleiro prefers to call her city Bombay, which is closer to the Hindi, Persian, and Urdu pronunciation. Bombay was changed to Mumbai -- the Marathi pronunciation -- when the right-wing Hindu nationalist party Shiv Sena won elections in 1995, pushed through the new name as part of a larger movement to strengthen Marathi identity in the Maharashtra region.

*Jenny McPhee's most recent novel is [A Man of No Moon](#). She lives in London, but mostly resides at [www.jennymcphee.com](http://www.jennymcphee.com)*