

Escape From Camp 14

One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West

BY BLAINE HARDEN

NEW YORK: VIKING, 2012

224 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0670023325, HARDBACK

Reviewed by Michael J. Seth



This is a book that should be read by anyone interested in North Korea and in human rights issues. It joins Kang Chol-Hwan and Pierre Rigoulot's *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* and Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy* as among the most engaging and insightful accounts of life in that secretive country. *Escape From Camp 14* is the story of Shin Dong-hyuk, the only known inmate in North Korea's "total control" political prison camps to have escaped and made it to the West. The author, Blaine Harden, former *Washington Post* bureau chief in East Asia, based his account on interviews with Shin, other

refugees, and North Korean experts. Harden presents a tale so incredible, strange, and harrowing that one needs to be reminded that it is, in fact, true. Most readers, even if they are aware of the brutal, repressive nature of the regime, are still likely to be shocked at what they learn from this book. Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of others have shared the unimaginably horrific life Shin experienced in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Shin was born in Camp 14, one of the most notorious in North Korea, the product of an occasionally allowed union of two inmates. He grew up without any knowledge of the outside world. He was a product of the camp culture, where overworked, brutalized, and underfed prisoners struggled to stay alive. He witnessed a fellow student beaten to death; he was badly burned over hot coals; had a finger chopped off; was lice-ridden, cold, and was nearly always hungry. He betrayed his mother and brother when they tried to escape in the vain hope of getting more food; and felt no guilt, because this was a world that was all about survival and not trusting anyone. He knew nothing of human rights and escaped merely because he was hungry. An inmate told him he could eat cooked meat if he could get to China, although he had little notion about where China was. His escape at age 24 was nothing less than miraculous. But then, he had to somehow reach China, where he earned a living while hiding from authorities. By good luck, too, he made it to South Korea and eventually to the US. Shin became a human rights advocate. However, his life in America has not been easy; as with most refugees from North Korea, he bears emotional scars that make any kind of normal adjustment extremely difficult.

The book is easy to read, divided into short chapters, and written in an engrossing style. "Easy" only because of the author's fluent style—the experiences of Shin can at times be very unpleasant. Besides being a valuable look into the political prison system, *Escape from Camp 14* can serve as an introduction to North Korea. Harden skillfully weaves background

information, providing a succinct summary of social structure and recent history into his account without disrupting the narrative flow. Since it is so accessible, it could be assigned for high school or college students with the warning that it is not a story for the squeamish. Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of other North Koreans share many of the horrors Shin experiences. This leads Harden to point out two puzzling facts: the relative indifference by most South Koreans to the human rights situation in North Korea and the lack of interest in it by Westerners who mainly focus on the nuclear issue and sometimes treat the regime as a bad joke. The inaccessibility of North Korea, that state's ability to suppress any opposition, and the language barrier may explain why there has been less international attention and outrage toward its human rights abuses than with other places, such as Tibet or Darfur. Perhaps this book will make some progress toward changing this. ■

MICHAEL J. SETH is an Associate Professor of History at James Madison University. He received his PhD from the University of Hawai'i. He is the author of four books on Korea including *Education Fever: Society, Politics and the Pursuit of Schooling in South Korea* (2002) and *A History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present* (2010). He is currently working on a handbook on Korean education and a history of North Korea.

Behind the Beautiful Forevers

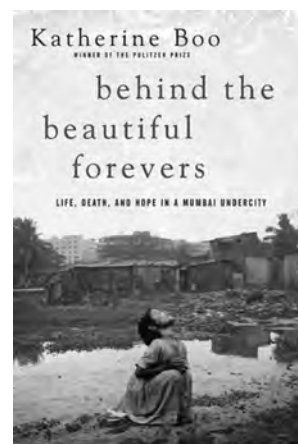
Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity

BY KATHERINE BOO

NEW YORK: RANDOM HOUSE, 2012

288 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1400067558, HARDBACK

Reviewed by Alice Luthy Tym



At the 2012 University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Asia Conference, keynote speaker Professor Yasmeen Mohiuddin concluded that India's greatest challenge in the future is to spread its concentrated wealth among more of its citizens. Katherine Boo's nonfiction book, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, portrays that challenge in heart-wrenching detail. This is an excellent read for high school and college students because it is a poignant story on one level and thought-provoking on many levels. It is a must-read for high school and university teachers of cultural anthropology, economics, and human geography because the book clarifies the many facets of corruption in India, portrays the action of the poor in a global market, and places the reader in the seldom-visited undercity of modern Mumbai.



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This book's characters are living economics models. They understand the reality of their lives, but many aspire to more as they see the world changing around them.

The story takes place in the slum of Annawadi near the Mumbai airport, where “the new India and old India collided and made new India late.” (5) The land is owned by the Airports Authority of India; the 3,000 residents are squatters who are part of the informal, unorganized economy. Only six have permanent jobs. The rest find opportunity in construction and garbage from the nearby airport and hotels. Many of the characters are the children who collect the garbage, suffer from related diseases, and deal with the competitive nature of the business. When Abdul, one of the collectors, sees a boy's hand cut off in a plastic shredder, and the boy apologizes and assures the owner of the plant that he won't report it and cause problems, Abdul realizes that “India still made a person know his place.” (15)

The mosaic of regions and religions of India is distinct in Annawadi. Many have come from the countryside seeking relief from grinding agricultural labor. Asha, a central character in the book, finds her entrepreneurial skills are best-served through politics and corruption. She realizes that she gets what she wants from the gods whether or not she prays and fasts. Asha works the system of donations for schools to her advantage so that she can send her daughter, Manju, to college. “Corruption,” the author concludes, is “one of the genuine opportunities that remained.” The reader can truly understand this by observing Asha's journey through the political maze of the undercity.

The complex legal system is revealed when the one-legged Fatima pours kerosene on her head and sets herself on fire to protest a minor incident of dust in her cooking as a result of Abdul's family's home improvement. The cultural attitudes of India are revealed throughout the book in the attitudes of its characters. Abdul's family is accused of the crime and must go to court. Muslims represent a disproportionate number of incarcerations in India, but Abdul's Muslim family sticks together like bundled bamboo for strength.

The competition of the poor for slender gains kept them from uniting. Global market capitalism seemingly presented opportunity, but “powerless individuals blamed other powerless individuals. The gates of the rich, occasionally rattled, remained unbreached. The politicians held forth on the middle class. The poor took down one another, and the world's great, unequal cities soldiered on in relative peace.” (237)

This book's characters are living economics models. They understand the reality of their lives, but many aspire to more as they see the world changing around them. The key to success in the largest democracy in the world is how to fulfill those aspirations of the inhabitants of the undercities of India. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* illustrates that challenge in a very personal way. ■

Alice Luthy Tym is an Instructor of Geography at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC). Her interest in India began when she was a world-ranking touring tennis professional in the 1960s, playing the Indian circuit. She initiated and also directs the annual UTC Asia Conference. Her online *Centripetal Forces of Japan* is at <http://bit.ly/Vqj9dA>.