

Beautiful Girls: PW Talks with Sonia Faleiro

By Kat Laskowski

Oct 28, 2011

Journalist Faleiro delves into Bombay's underworld to reveal the secretive world of bar dancers in [Beautiful Thing](#).

What drew you to the dance bars?

I knew the dance bars existed—they've been around since the 1970s. But even in the course of my reportage, I never had the opportunity to visit one. At one point, there was a news report about bar dancers, and I asked a source of mine, a dance bar owner, whether he would introduce me to some bar dancers. He said, "Yes. But trying to get information out of them is like getting water out of stone." He called me over, and there were five girls waiting for me in this dingy, smoky little bar in South Bombay. And one of those girls was Leela. The first thing I noticed about Leela was that she took over the entire room. She flirted with everybody in the bar, from the bar owner to the steward—even with me. It was clear that she had a profound understanding of her place in the world.

How were you able to capture the distinctive voices of Leela and her friends?

Language is so telling of who we are, where we are from, what our experiences have been like, so it was crucial for me to capture the language of the bar dancers. Even somebody who has lived in Bombay and who speaks Hindi would not be comfortable speaking their twist on Hindi and English. It can be incredibly salty, incredibly spicy. There's a lot of language that even I needed translated. But it speaks of who they are and the lives they live.

You've reported extensively on marginalized communities. Why has your journalism taken this particular angle?

I used to write feature stories when I first started out, because I wanted to write fiction, and it just seemed like the most obvious thing to do: to write about other writers and books. I actually started pursuing this sort of reportage around 2004. There is a district in Maharashtra where farmers started committing suicide at the rate of one every 12 hours, because they couldn't repay their debts. None of the reportage that came out of Vidarbha really represented, to my mind, the voices of the families that had been left behind and the voices of the farmers themselves. And so on a whim, I decided to go to Vidarbha. I spent days and nights in several of the farmers' households. And that was the turning point for me, because it just showed me: if you really want to understand how our world works, there is no better way than to pursue the story yourself.

What role did Bombay itself play in the book?

As a reporter, the best compliment I can give to Bombay is that I would not have felt safe researching this book in any other city in India. There's no other city where a young woman can go to a brothel or a dance bar in the middle of the night, or can travel from one very distant suburb to the other in an auto-rickshaw, or can have a meal with a gangster in his house at any time of day or night. So that was the great advantage of finding the story in Bombay. There's a hold that Bombay has on you. But of course, it's also a city that perpetuates huge cruelties of the sort Leela suffered through.

