

Greatness wrapped in humility

Pallab Bhattacharya studies the life of a cinema icon

As you flip through the first few pages of London-based documentary filmmaker Nasreen Munni Kabir's book, *Conversations With Waheeda Rahman*, on the Bollywood legend, the first thing that strikes you about it is its refreshing format. After seven pages of the preface titled, "Encounters with Waheeda Rahman", the book slips into smooth-flowing dialogues between the actress, who has delighted generations with her roles in super hit films like "Guide", "CID", "Pyasa", "Kaagaz Ke Phool", "Chaudhvin Ka Chand", "Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam", "Bees Saal Baad" "Mujhe Jeene Do", "Khamoshi", Bengali film "Abhijaan" (directed by Satyajit Ray), "15 Park Avenue and "Rang De Basanti".



Conversations With Waheeda Rahman
Nasreen Munni Kabir
Penguin/Viking

In a career spanning more than five decades and beginning at the age of seventeen with a dance sequence in a Telugu language film in 1955, Waheeda has acted in diverse roles in 83 films and worked with all leading directors of Hindi cinema, including Guru Dutt, Raj Khosla, Ray, Vijay Anand, Dev Anand, and with prominent actors like Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt, Dev Anand, Sunil Dutt, Rajendra Kumar, Soumitra Chatterjee and Rajesh Khanna. And that is remarkable for Waheeda who, as she herself says, was forced into film acting more by circumstances after the death of her father Mohd Abdur Rehman, a bureaucrat, than by choice and signed her first big break in Guru Dutt's "CID" without any audition and camera test and just on the basis of some still photos. Remarkable for Waheeda, the minor girl prone to frequent illness due to vulnerability to allergic asthma.

The trials and tribulations and successes of Waheeda's life are beautifully brought out in the book primarily due to its refreshingly different format of interview (Question and Answer). It is as if the reader is watching a documentary film in printed form, barring the images. It must be said to the credit of Nasreen Munni Kabir that the book gives readers a deep insight into different aspects of Waheeda Rahman's life not only as an actress but as a human being who, like her parents, was much ahead of her time and broke new ground.

The preface chronicles the seven-to-eight year-old story of Kabir's efforts to write the book on Waheeda, beginning in 2005 and fructifying in 2012 due to the writer's sheer perseverance. Another reason why the preface is important is that it brings out, in the writer's own words of course, some key features of Waheeda's persona—her "genuine humility" reflected in her initial reluctance to the idea of a book because she wondered why anyone would be interested in her story in the first place and the actress' "deep modesty" manifested in her belief that whatever she is today has nothing to do with her natural talent but just being lucky.

Like her father, who broke with tradition by moving away from his landowning family and opting for a career as a bureaucrat rather than live like a zamindar, the book leaves the reader with the inescapable conclusion of Waheeda being a woman who has lived life on her own terms. One cannot agree more with Kabir's observation towards the end of her preface that Waheeda is a "feisty lady and has always fought her corner, even from a young age".

And that is borne out when she travels to Bombay to sign the contract for her first Hindi film "CID" and putting two key conditions relating to her costume and refusal to change her

name in keeping with the trend among the first generation of Muslim actors and actresses, such as Dilip Kumar (originally Yousuf Khan), Meena Kumari (Mahajabeen Bano), Madhubala (Mumtaz Jahan) and Nargis (Fatima) That came as a surprise to producer Raj Khosla who, according to Waheeda, told her that 'newcomers don't usually make demands. Just sign'

Regarding the condition related to costume which Waheeda insisted on for inclusion in her contract, the actress says she told Khosla, "When I am older, I might decide to wear a swimsuit. I won't now because I am very shy". Khosla told her, "If you're so shy, why do you want to work in films?" Waheeda, according to her own words, shot back, "I haven't come here of my own accord. You called us." This is something unimaginable even today in the cut-throat competition that Bollywood is.

The book also contains certain new and interesting information coming from Waheeda. For instance, she tells Kabir that Satyajit Ray was considering adapting for the celluloid novelist R. K. Narayan's novel "Guide" and had asked her to read the book as "he told me that if the film ever took off, he would cast me as Rosie." Later, the film was made by Dev Anand although Waheeda played the leading lady opposite him. "Satyajit Ray would have conceived the film in a completely different way", Waheeda says.

A most interesting part of the book relates to Waheeda's comments on Ray, how the maestro had approached her for the role of Gulaabi in "Abhijaan", how honoured she felt to work with him, her assessment of Ray as a "towering personality" and how he helped her in acting in the film "in an unfamiliar language" of Bhojpuri-Bengali.

"Ray Saab was meticulous and explained everything in great detail. He sketched every scene and made detailed shot breakdowns, even noting the lens he planned to use. His storyboarding was extremely helpful. In those, days, no one had heard of storyboarding. He was one of the few directors who gave me a bound script", recalls Waheeda.

The reader also learns from Waheeda how Ray had once told her that if he ever made a Hindi film (which he eventually did with "Shatranj Ke Khilari), he would cast her. But while making that movie, Ray made it a point to tell her, "Waheeda, I promised to cast you but I don't feel the role in this film will suit you".

Waheeda essaying the role of Jaya Bhaduri's mother in the film "Phaagun" at the age of 35, her marriage to Shashi Rekhi, a Punjabi, in 1974, the birth of their son and daughter, her husband's death in the year 2000 and her acting career progressing through all those years, her equations with the leading Bollywood heroines of her time, such as Meena Kumari, Madhubala, Nargis and Nanda, tips for aspiring actresses—the Bollywood veteran tells Nasreen Munni Kabir about all this in an engrossing manner.

Through *Conversations with Waheeda Rahman*, Nasreen Munni Kabir has made a valuable addition to film lovers' search for the life and personality of Hindi cinema's leading heroines, coming as it does after her previous two books on singer Lata Mangeshkar and composer A R Rahman in the same format.

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Mothers, daughters and dreams

Mehnaz Tabassum reflects on ambition and desire

THE *Joy Luck Club* seemed interesting for many reasons, and I must admit that among all those, being a daughter in a complicated relationship with her mother, thanks to the generation gap; was a major one. Much has been said about how this book was influenced by Amy Tan's own experiences with her mother, and their diasporic identity, but the book goes beyond the feminist and/or nationalist tag it has been bearing. It becomes more about the journey, the heritage, the lessons handed over by mothers to daughters; to know the person behind the womanly wool, to know what made her so. Coming out as Tan's first novel in 1989, this was enough to establish the belief that Asian-American writers are going to deliver bestsellers indeed, which was initiated by the release of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* in 1976.

The story travels back and forth with the characters, as they go down memory lane, in between China and current-day America. Like the game of Mahjong, the story has four parts, each having four chapters, dedicated to each mother and daughter duo. The parts are indeed a parable to the actual game and it is like telling the story through the Mahjong tiles. Amy Tan's mellifluous and effortless way to continue the stories, in a composed, secluded tone, with her attempts to signify all the women in concern, with an equal amount of attention again resembles one set Mahjong table, open and inviting to be played. The issues with the migrated people, the dilemma and determination to continue the legacy, and living between the Chinese past and the American Dream are something Amy Tan could portray efficiently.

The four stories can be started at any point as individual ones, and would still make sense. The mother's and their (hi)stories are packed with every possible essence of China, and the extreme situations women, particularly among the financially insufficient ones, might face. The comparison between their life in America and in China is very obviously distinct, and that is something Amy Tan has focused on deliberately. The trauma, the memories, the past and the gaps are hard to ignore, or irrespective of. Of course the concerns of nationalism, friendship, sufferings, sacrifices, new generation diasporic Americans and the inheritance that womanhood receives keep coming back, and keep forming the contents of the novel. It is how the mothers connect with their daughters; it is how they leave their mark on the world that scarred, soothed, scattered, and structured their own little worlds.

The book begins with a prelude, of how a woman made her journey towards a new life, with hopes larger than life. This portion is written so engagingly that a reader would find it almost impossible to let go of the book. Suyuan Woo, and her desperate attempts to be able to get out of her unbearable wounds, to be able to begin a new life in the "Land of Dreams" and to hand over all she had left in the form of a single feather from the duck, that stretched its neck to be a goose, entangle the readers. She was the duck, indeed,

who wanted to be something she would give everything to be: happy, secure, and a mother. Amy Tan succeeds in putting that in a way that readers will read the following lines twice, while thinking about all the time they had to overcome the past, with the hope of a better future.

"On her journey she cooed to the swan: 'In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English.'" (I.Prologue.2)

The novel also deals with one significant belief very interestingly, and that is in ghosts and spirits. The superstition traveled with the mothers from China. It is also one particular heritage that the mothers want to pass over to their daughters, like their mothers did. The superstitions also helped the mothers to escape their miseries, like Lindo did from her nightmare of a marriage. It was possible only because the people she was being tortured by had their superstitions strong.

Since all the mothers wanted to give only those things that, at certain points of their lives, helped them overcome their barriers; real and cruel ones, they made sure superstition was there in the list.

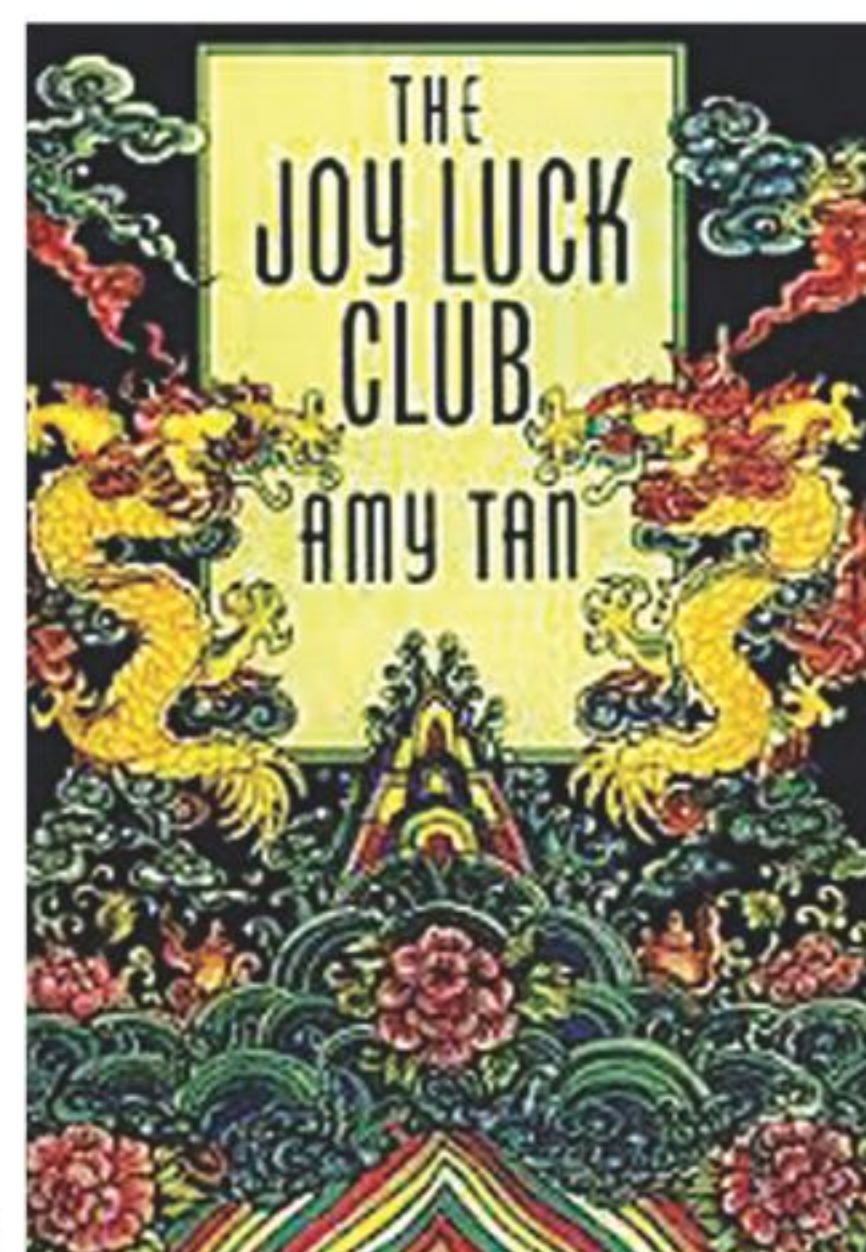
Even the presence of Suyuan Woo from the very beginning of the story as an essence, resembles the feel of a ghost, or perhaps a holy guardian, watching over the lives of her near and dear ones, to mend the patches that she could not get enough time to do, to get the pieces of her family, her parts together which she has lived for her whole life.

The chapter names are quite suggestive, too. Tan has this tendency to pre-hint the readers to what they can expect to experience, and ends up adding some surprises. The storytelling is so engaging that one might even forget at certain points what the chapter previewed is to be about, because they are already glued to

it. Amy Tan's heartfelt, close-to-authentic approach to set her stories made those seem pages out of our daily lives, vivid and imaginable.

Jing-mei's attempt to visit China to be the final substitution of her mother in finding her sisters is perhaps also an attempt to see what happens when representation of memory enters another phase of transition through diverse ethnic perspectives as well as to find what is lost in these multiple transmigrations. The fact that often the stories shared by the mothers seem so fairy-tale like puts Amy Tan's uncertain approach to her never-seen homeland in the Far East. Also, her treatment of the East as the dungeon for people to live, especially women of various ages, can be taken as biased sometimes, whereas the problems the daughters face in America are less humiliating, less violent and more of psychological ones, apparently.

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The Joy Luck Club
Amy Tan
G.P. Putnam's Sons

In search of love

Nahid Khan speaks of yearnings

AMARO *Ekta Prem Kahini Aachhe* is a polynomial love story where some people never find true love. The protagonist, Eva, falls in love in the most right way possible, arranged by her parents. But after some usual ups and downs in the relationship, she finally discovers the betrayal. It would have been pretty straightforward if the story had just ended there. But she falls in love three more times, even with the first person for the second time. She loves another person who happens to be a lookalike of her first lover and finally with the other narrator of the story who she finds an open window and feels alive telling her love story.



Amaro Ekta Prem Kahini Aachhe
Anisul Hoque
Prothoma Prokashon

Every time it is true from her side but the other side doesn't respond in the right way. This is pretty much the story in a nutshell, but the beauty of the novel is in its presentation, in its unprecedented manner of narration.

There are two narrators in the novel, Eva and the listener of the story. The chapters proceed like Eva's Story (Eva-r Kotha) and My Story (Amar Kotha). So all along the prose remains in the first person and is put together in such a clever way that to the end the reader will wait to see what follows next. Usually stories written in the first person somehow compel readers to believe the storyteller's innocence, thus subtly influencing their judgment. But this one is an exception where the purpose of those many punctual coffee breaks any time anywhere is made unambiguously clear. Just shows that the telling and listening have reached a climax as if the little vine has climbed to the top to find there is nothing to hold on to anymore. Very sad story but doesn't make you sob. It rather makes you think, makes you long for something that could have been yours but has never been quite yours, whether a person or a possession or something that means a lot to you.

I am impressed by the ingredients used in telling the story. They are contemporary in nature and characteristics, showing how life has changed in the twenty first century. There is a vast use of so-called modern connectivity such as sms, chatting, facebook, skypes, so much so that no rational, awakened person can escape them. But, thankfully, such phenomena are not shown to be detrimental only. They show how the first betrayal is

detected caught through the use of the facebook. It probably is a wake-up call for the young, informing them that these gadgets can become lifesavers if used sensibly.

The story continuously travels from Dhaka to Rhode Island and back almost effortlessly without any sharp break or bend. The two lives in these two towns are portrayed as picturesquely as imaginable. From rains in Dhaka to spring breeze on Rhode Island stirs readers' imaginations about the ambience. The simple sketches are farfetched, wonderful. In one word, they speak of life being lived in simple beauty and that in brevity of affluence.

Mention of the colour combination of blue and green becoming popular is a new development in the matter of preferences. This is how people change, a norm changes, family values change. Discussions between parents and daughter are very different these days, a truth captured in the novel admirably. Also captured is some unpleasant dialogue between two friends. I wonder if the situation could have been avoided. Sometimes I like to pose a question, not necessarily criticize: Is it a writer's choice to present something that is crude and raw just to depict some mere happenings. Perhaps writers can actually modify that kind of language into some decent words without losing the sharpness of ugliness? I don't know. This is a dilemma I always dwell on even when reading Akhtaruzzaman Illias or Shahidul Zahir. To me literature is beautiful and it hurts to see when some crude words or gestures reduce its grace.

But I loved the openings of every chapter, made me stop to either hum a familiar tune or

recite a few lines of my favourite poetry. Those lines of songs and poetry were so gracefully chosen as to touch the heart, and for some time the verses persisted enduringly in mind. The events intermingled with those lines beautifully. The story stops at some stage. But Anisul Hoque entwines those verses into yearnings for years to come --*mone ki didha rekhe gele choley*.

Amaro Ekta Prem Kahini Aachhe is a literary musical, highly recommended for reading.

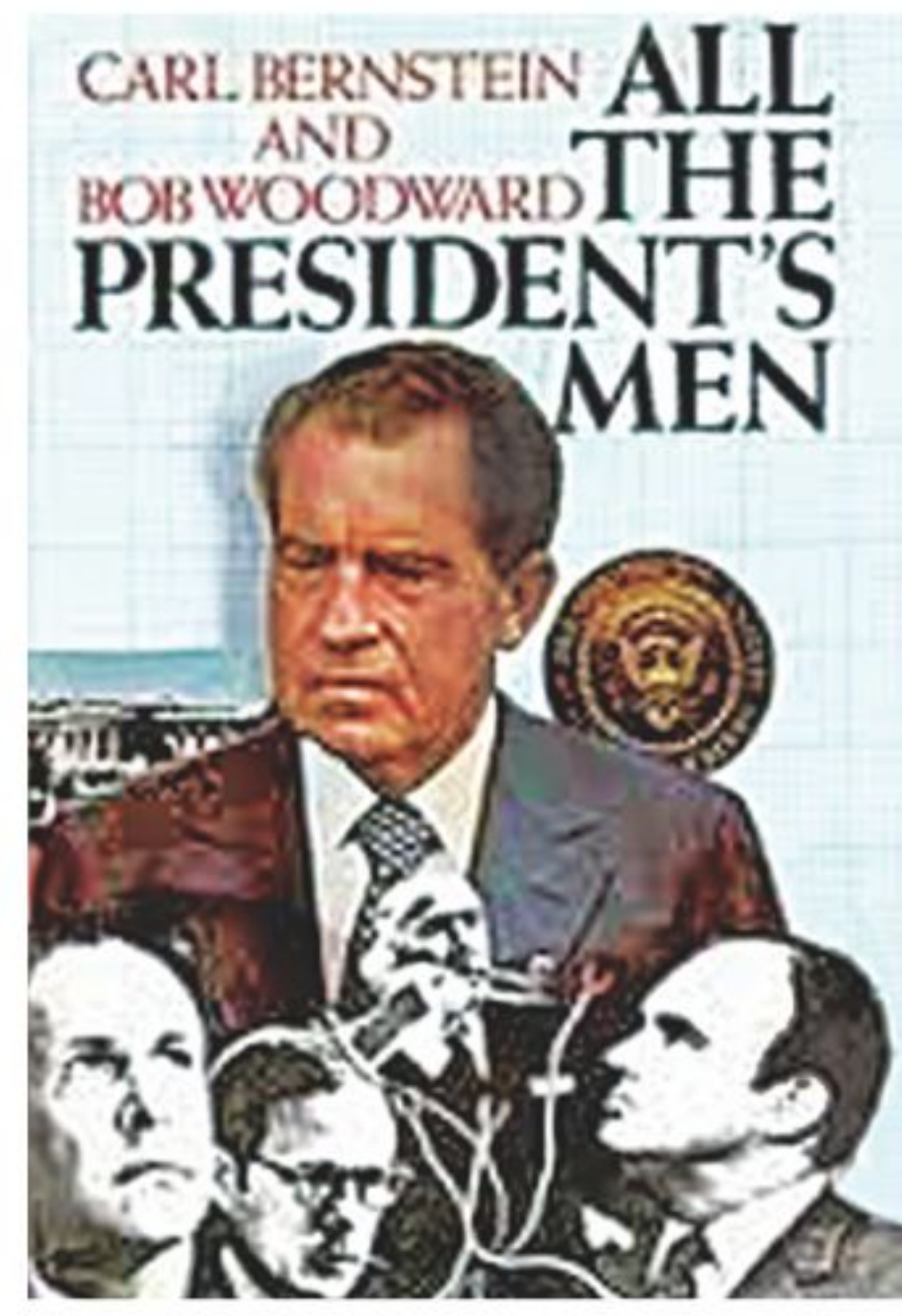
NAHID KHAN WRITES POETRY AND FICTION AND IS WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

RE-READINGS

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall

Moyukh Mahtab takes one back to the mess of Watergate

IN retrospect, Richard Nixon's presidency was destined to be a failure. Leaving aside his diplomatic and foreign policy debacles—the most significant of which has to be the support rendered to Pakistan as it waged a systematic genocide on its own people—Watergate was enough to taint his name forever. What happened in 1972 at the Watergate building is relevant today, as wire taps and illegal bugging have been taken over by mass surveillance in the name of national security by the NSA. But even more relevant is the role of a journalist in pursuing a story and holding those in power accountable. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's book, *All The President's Men*, is a documentary, a thriller and a lesson in journalism all at once, portraying the duo's rollercoaster ride of reporting which started with five men caught during a burglary and culminating in the resignation of the president of the United States.



All the President's Men
Bob Woodward, Carl Bernstein
Simon & Schuster

Woodward, a reporter for the Washington Post for just nine months at the time, was assigned the job when five men, four of whom had ties to the CIA and the other a former employee of the agency, were caught in a burglary gone wrong. Bernstein, who had more experience in hard news, was quick to smell out a potential story, and the book truthfully narrates how he barged into the job alongside Woodward.

It is right after this that the book starts sounding like a paperback spy thriller one would buy at an airport. As the movie by the same name put it, Woodward and Bernstein started to "follow the money". On one hand, two young reporters had stumbled onto something big and potentially disastrous for the Post if they made a mistake; and on the other the unwillingness of witnesses and officials to talk was proving to be a major challenge for the Post high-ups. This is the point where the book reads best as Woodward and Bernstein knock on every door, corner lawyers and borderline manipulate sources into giving them information. But in spite of that, the biggest help came from a mysterious source of Woodward's, who was never quoted even as an anonymous source, and named by the Post's managing editor as Deep Throat.

Deep Throat's identity (then Associate Director of the FBI, Mark Felt) was only revealed in 2005. Guided by him, the reporters scrambled, trying to connect the Watergate burglary to a bigger picture. What they uncovered, after hundreds of reports, phone calls, interviews

and one report where they got some facts wrong, was beyond what anyone then could have imagined.

From the existence of a secret fund in a committee to re-elect Nixon, money siphoned and channelled to people across America to spy on the Democrats, connections to the White House Chief of Staff and finally Nixon's own attempts at a cover-up, the Watergate stories have all the twists and turns to keep one glued to the book.

The two reporters were on a par with what the FBI was doing in the same case, sometimes uncovering more than them. And though all evidence proved that Nixon himself did not have any idea about the burglary before the incident, he did attempt a cover up to save those responsible.

All The President's Men is a brilliant work of documenting one of the most historic moments of US history. If the legacy of Nixon is that every political scandal ends up with a --gate suffix, then that of the Washington Post reporters is an example of investigative journalism done right.

As history shows, for the longest time, the duo's work was largely ignored, the White House categorically denied till the last moment it had any ties to the burglary. Sometimes with carefully drafted statements and sometimes with outright denials, the response of the government seems very familiar to those who know how the NSA did the same about the scope of their surveillance and still does to a point.

From Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras' investigative reporting on the Snowden files to portals and news agencies like The Guardian, Pro Publica and the more recent, The Intercept, journalism has never been more important for the public interest. And though, as the Washington Post on its Watergate special pointed out, what Woodward and Bernstein did was nothing new, it's their persistence and resilience which becomes a lesson for journalists.

As the scope and legality of a government's right to infringe on those of its people are challenged more and more each day, investigative journalism becomes more important than ever. Because sometimes, a journalist's work can make sure that all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put everything back together again.

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