

COMMENT by Dr Ng Kwan Hoong

Looking beyond first impressions

It was one of those rare free Saturdays. My wife and I decided to take it slow. No schedules, no errands. Just tea and a quiet movie at home.

We chose *Mary Poppins Returns*, more out of curiosity than nostalgia. The dancing lamplighters and flying umbrellas brought a familiar warmth, and for a while we let ourselves drift with the music.

But one song stayed with me longer than expected – a playful, bouncy tune with a line tucked inside it like a quiet invitation: “The cover is not the book, so open it up and take a look.”

It made us smile but also pause. Beneath the cheerful rhythm was a truth worth sitting with. Appearances often distract us from what matters most.

In a world where first impressions carry so much weight, where titles impress and profiles gleam, it is easy to forget that understanding takes time. Real depth asks to be noticed slowly, beyond the surface.

The song continues, almost cheekily: “Because under the covers, one discovers that the king may be a crook.”

Not everyone who wears a crown leads with justice. Not every confident voice is honest. And not every polished exterior speaks of integrity. History, both distant and recent, reminds us that the most

visible are not always the most virtuous.

Today, we live surrounded by “covers”, whether online or offline. Curated images fill our social media feeds. Headlines are written to spark outrage or applause. Even our profile photos on WhatsApp or Telegram are carefully chosen, often showing who we hope to be.

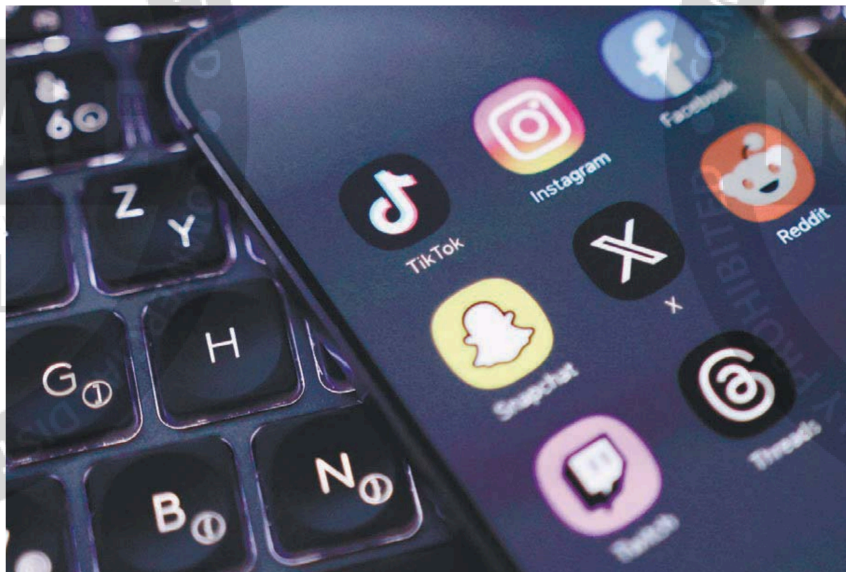
There is nothing wrong with a beautiful cover. It can be thoughtful, even artful. But always remember that it is only the beginning of the story, not its essence. What matters most still lies beyond what is seen, in the parts that cannot be filtered, framed or easily explained.

The subsequent line from the song offers quiet wisdom too: “Chapter titles are like signs, and if you read between the lines, you’ll find your first impression was mistook.”

Most of us have experienced this. We form judgements based on a passing remark or a single encounter. Only later do we uncover someone’s quiet generosity or the burden they carry silently. An old proverb reminds us: “Do not judge by appearances; a rich heart may be under a poor coat.”

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is to listen with care – to notice the hesitation behind a smile, the calm behind quietness and the meaning behind silence.

The more we practise this kind of seeing, the more we will find ourselves softening. We will judge less, connect more and slowly learn that the stories others carry are not so different from our own.

Perhaps what stays with us longest is not the cover but what lies quietly beneath it – honesty, kindness, gratitude and grace. These qualities do not shout; they are rarely displayed but they shape the people we remember and trust.

There is also the question we often avoid: What cover do we wear? Some of us hide behind achievements or

busyness or humour – not out of deception but out of habit. We all have our ways of being seen and also our quieter truths waiting to be understood.

Maybe life is not about perfecting the cover but about living a story worth sharing – one with both joy and heartbreak, light and shadow, strength and vulnerability. When we permit ourselves to be real, we create space for others to do the same.

As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote in *The Little Prince*: “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye.”

Towards the end of the movie, as the final tune played, I found myself humming along. My wife reached for

the empty cups and we began tidying up in silence. The moment had passed but something stayed. It reminded me that we do not always need grand revelations. Sometimes, it is enough to pause, notice and read a little deeper. The cover is not the book. The story is always inside.

Dr Ng Kwan Hoong is an emeritus professor of Biomedical Imaging at the Faculty of Medicine, Universiti Malaya, a 2020 Merdeka Award recipient and a medical physicist by training, who enjoys writing, drawing, listening to classical music and bridging the gap between older and younger generations. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com