Novel tale of the tapes

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Four decades after the botched break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office complex - and the cover-up by the Nixon Administration - the word "Watergate" remains synonymous with political scandal.

It continues to fascinate political junkies who wonder "What did the president know and when did he know it" and speculate about the 18 1/2-minute conversation that was erased from the White House tapes.

In "Watergate," Thomas Mallon, the author of eight novels and seven works of nonfiction, re-imagines the aftermath of the "third-rate burglary" through the rotating perspectives of seven colorful characters:

E. Howard Hunt, a White House "plumber" charged with fixing leaks, who organized the bugging of the DNC;

Fred LaRue, a Nixon aide, who delivered more than $300,000 of hush money to the conspirators;

Elliot Richardson, the Attorney General of the United States, who resigned when ordered by Nixon to fire Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox;

Rose Mary Woods, Nixon's personal secretary;

Pat Nixon, the president's wife;

Alice Longworth, the tart and smart 90-year-old daughter of Theodore Roosevelt;

And, of course, the president himself.

Knowledge of the scandal - an ability, for instance, to conjure up the visages and voices of Tony Ulasewicz and United States Senator Sam Ervin - will make "Watergate" more enjoyable and edifying. It will allow readers to follow Mallon along "the sliding scale of historical fiction" and to identify deviations from fact that, he acknowledges, "some will regard as unpardonable."

Even those who miss some good stuff (George McGovern, Mallon writes, was a candidate for whom Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley "didn't even want to turn out the living") are likely to find "Watergate" a compelling novel that captures the sense and nonsense of American politics in the 1970s while examining, sympathetically and satirically, the human beings caught up in the scandal.

Mallon's portraits of Rose Mary Woods and Alice Longworth are memorable. He imagines that Woods, intensely loyal to the president, had a beau, an executive at Harry Winston, who "had had Clare Luce and Joan Crawford on his arm."

Known as "the other Washington Monument," Longworth, Mallon writes, was "a creature of motiveless mischief," capable of saying things with "more finality and less foundation" than just about anyone.

Mallon's Richard Nixon can't dance - and practices show business the way he once played football: "via earnest application of the playbook, without any brawn or natural talent." After he resigns, he asks Pat a question he has not asked in 30 years: "Do you love me?"
As she kisses his forehead, Pat searches for an answer, and it comes to her, from a campaign banner she had seen two years earlier: "Now more than ever."

The former president, Mallon tells us, blamed Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein for the stroke Pat suffered in the summer of 1976. Their book, Mallon guesses, actually had not made much of an impression on her. After Pat died, Nixon gave the press "what they'd always wanted from her," tears and sobs, and went about the business of rehabilitating his reputation.

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