

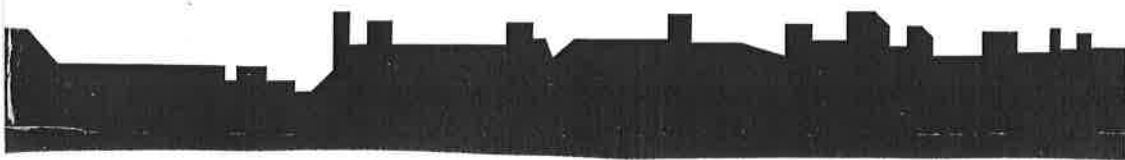
Explores the events that inspired the major  
motion picture Disney's *SAVING MR. BANKS*

# MARY POPPINS, SHE WROTE



*The Life of  
P. L. Travers*

VALERIE LAWSON





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# 7

## *Poppins and Pamela in Wonderland*

**W**ho is Mary Poppins? In our mind's eye we see Julie Andrews in a pastel Edwardian dress, smiling as cheerily as the star of a toothpaste commercial, as saccharine as the spoonful of sugar that helped the medicine go down, as jolly as a jolly holiday with Bert, as cheery as "Chim Chim, Cheree." Such is the power of Walt Disney. The original Mary Poppins was not cheery at all. She was tart and sharp, rude, plain and vain. That was her charm; that—and her mystery.

Mary Poppins is snap frozen in the 1930s; a nanny of her day and age, not one of today's country girls dispatched by an

agency to mind the offspring of working parents—always half wondering if they have a baby killer in the house. Mary Poppins is a nanny from Wonderland or Neverland, who strolls along the riverbank of *The Wind in the Willows* or through the Hundred Acre Wood of *Winnie-the-Pooh*. She and her colleagues could still be seen, mid-twentieth century, in Hyde Park or Kensington Gardens, in a buttoned up, belted topcoat and non-sense hat, pushing a high-wheeled Victorian pram.

That was the workaday Mary Poppins who blew in to the Banks residence in 17 Cherry Tree Lane. But where did she come from, and where did she go when she left at the end of each book, lifted to the heavens by her parrot-headed umbrella or a runaway merry-go-round? Why did she *have* to go? Children, academics, reporters, and readers from Sweden to Trinidad, from the 1930s to the 1980s, all wanted to know. Pamela Travers brushed them off, always. From the day the first Mary Poppins book was published in 1934, she preferred silence or allusion.

The many adventures of the magical nanny have their genesis in Pamela's childhood—her loneliness as a little girl, daydreaming in Allora, her domineering great aunts, her precepts and rules for living—and in her love for AE and the mysteries of creation she heard from him and read in the poems of Yeats and Blake.

Each of the female characters in *Mary Poppins* contains a little slice of Pamela. She appears in the guise of Jane, the eldest child of the Banks family; as her mother, Mrs. Banks; as Miss Lark, Miss Andrew, Mrs. Corry; a grab bag of weird and magical hangers-on; and as Mary Poppins herself.

Mary Poppins represented one of Pamela's most treasured beliefs: that a woman passes through three phases of life—first maiden, then mother, then crone. By crone, she did not mean a doddering old woman hobbling along with a stick. Her crone was a woman who had "gathered up all the threads of life, and

all they've found and known, and had it there as wisdom."<sup>1</sup>

Mary Poppins has the superficial manner of a nymph or virgin waiting for the right admirer. But her next layer is one of a nurturing mother, not an absentminded one, like Mrs. Banks, but a mother sensitive to the needs of children, emotional and physical. That is why all children love her so much, why her disappearance is like a death, not like the death of a mother of young children but the death of a mother whose adult children have grown wise from her loving care. But peel back another layer and Poppins is revealed as a crone or grandmother, imparting the wisdom of the ages, a witch or wise woman. All these feminine qualities Pamela found, and loved, in fairy tales, the "marvellous heroines, the villainesses—all the women. I think the fairy tales have a very great deal to tell us about the life of a woman. I think they are all really one person rolled into one and tell us what we should be."<sup>2</sup>

She said every woman could find her prototype or a model for her role in life in the fairy tales collected by the brothers Grimm. They might be apparently passive heroines, such as Cinderella or the Goose Girl, a simple maiden like the Miller's Daughter, a heroine like the sister in "The Seven Ravens," who had to go to the end of the world—"to the sun and moon and stars and back"—to save her brothers, or the twelve dancing princesses who explored the mysteries of the world below our world. Or the grandmothers and witches in "Rapunzel" and "Hansel and Gretel," or the numerous queens, wise women, and priestesses.

Mary Poppins has been called the "mother Goddess," a witch, the good fairy, a wise woman, the "ecstatic Mother" as exemplified in Artemis and Sophia,<sup>3</sup> Mary Magdalene or the Virgin Mary. She is said to contain Zen secrets or to epitomize Zen. Professors have written books analyzing Mary Poppins. Earnest students and ordinary readers wrote to Pamela suggesting who Poppins might actually be. "You tell

me," she liked to tell them, and shrugged in mock amazement: "The readers tell me things I never dreamed."

Although she shares qualities with Peter Pan and with Alice in Wonderland's surrealistic friends, the Queen, the White Rabbit and the Mad Hatter, Mary Poppins is unique: lovable because of her mixture of magic and sternness, her fantastic abilities hidden behind the facade of an extremely ordinary woman.

Walt Disney saw the fascination of Mary Poppins and, although his movie contained none of the mystique and symbolism of the original *Mary Poppins* books, it held enough magic to become a much-loved classic. Julie Andrews did not resemble the Mary Poppins created by Pamela and her illustrator, Mary Shepard. Andrews was sweet faced and exuded charm. The original Mary Poppins was never charming. Her appearance was based on a Dutch doll or peg doll that Pamela said she owned as a child. The doll had shiny, painted coal-black hair and a turned up nose, attributes she gave Mary Poppins, who also saw the world clearly through her rather small bright blue eyes. Mary had rosy cheeks, big hands and feet, and a bony frame. She wore shapeless coats and suits, cut to an unflattering low calf length, mufflers, gloves, sensible Mary Jane shoes and carried a businesslike handbag.

The Poppins adventures were written over a fifty-four-year period, but in the stories nobody ever gets any older and the adventures have the freshness of tonight's bedtime tale. The reader is led gently to the possibility that Number 17 Cherry Tree Lane might still exist. If Pamela was explaining it one more time she might tantalize the reader, "You will find it hard to find Cherry Tree Lane, exactly." She once wrote that it was one of those byways not important enough to show up on a map.<sup>4</sup>

Cherry Tree Lane appears to be in Kensington or Chelsea, but is definitely not in the most fashionable precinct of either suburb. A chemist's shop stands on one corner, a tobacconist at the other. On one side of the street is the entrance to a

park as big as the imagination of a child. Inside the grounds are a merry-go-round, a lake and classical statues. A row of cherry trees goes dancing down the middle of the street. On the other side is a handful of houses. The most eccentric, at one end, is the home of that cheery soul Admiral Boom. The house, built like a ship, is crowned with a gilt weathercock resembling a telescope. The garden is dominated by a flagstaff.

An elderly spinster, Miss Lucinda Emily Lark, and her pampered hound, Andrew, live next to the Bankses. Miss Lark has the grandest home in the street, with two entrances, one for friends and relations, the other for tradesmen (not tradespeople—this is the 1930s). Number 17 is rather dilapidated and the smallest house in Cherry Tree Lane but somehow big enough to accommodate five children—Jane and Michael Banks, the twins John and Barbara, the new baby Annabel—Mr. George Banks and Mrs. Banks (whose first name is a mystery), a nanny who never stays long, a cook, Mrs. Clara Brill, a maid, Ellen, and an odd, odd job man, Robertson Ay.

Mr. Banks can afford either a smarter house, or all those children, but not both. As a banker, he is keenly aware of budgets and often complains, as Pamela's father complained in Allora, that there is no extra money to bring home today as "the bank is broken." George Banks, balding, is neither handsome nor plain. He wears proper banker's attire, bowler, suit, overcoat. George is short tempered and expects the worst. Once he threatened to leave home for good. He is finicky, even obsessive. Everything has a place and everything *must* stay in that place. Yet there is also something rather wistful and boyish about George. One day of the year—only one—he sings in his bath. He likes to smell the tulips in the garden and has a secret longing to be an astronomer. Just last summer, he told his children about the constellation called Pleiades, the seven sisters. He is forever hopeful that a new star might light up in the sky.

Mrs. Banks seems vain and proud but is really terribly inse-

cure and succumbs easily when Mary Poppins tells her she has no references, because producing references these days is *frightfully* unfashionable. Nor do smart people give their servants every third Thursday off each month. To be really chic, Mary tells Mrs. Banks, they should allow her every second Thursday off. Mrs. Banks is a bit silly, anxious and soft.

Jane Banks is a proper little girl, quiet and thoughtful, occasionally naughty, and wishes so much that she was not the oldest. She broods sometimes and pretends she is a hen about to lay seven nice white eggs. Pamela told a university student in 1964 that the tale of Jane in the chapter "Bad Wednesday" laying imaginary eggs was "a definite element" in her own childhood.<sup>5</sup> Michael, Jane's younger brother, is like all younger brothers in children's stories: naughty, quick to speak his mind and then to regret it.

None of the servants is quite up to his or her duties. Oh, they cope, just, but when the unsuccessful nannies leave, the other servants fall apart. Not that Robertson Ay even needs to cope. A sleepyhead, not much more than a boy, Ay is supposed to shine the shoes and keep the lawns in order. Instead he snoozes all day in the broom cupboard or garden. Robertson Ay, we learn later, is not like the other servants but really one of Mary Poppins's mystery gang, one of the Ancient Ones, the supernatural creatures from myth and fairy tale. He is the Fool or the Dirty Rascal to the Wise Woman of Mary Poppins.

Not that we know, in the beginning, that Mary is anything but a servant with an unconventional way of arriving at the door. The Banks household is in a state of disorder if not chaos, as the previous nanny, Katie Nanna, has just disappeared. As Mrs. Banks writes advertisements to send to the newspapers for a new nanny, the East Wind suddenly flings Mary Poppins against the front door, complete with carpetbag, umbrella, shallow-brimmed straw hat, long scarf and a bad attitude.

She gives the strong impression that she is doing the Bankses



a favor by accepting their offer to become the new nanny. The children are astonished to see that she slides up the banisters and that from her ordinary-looking carpetbag she takes out a starched white apron, a large cake of Sunlight Soap, a toothbrush, a packet of hairpins, a bottle of scent, a small folding armchair, a package of throat lozenges, and a large bottle of dark red medicine that is as magic as *Alice in Wonderland's* "Drink Me" bottle. Mary's luggage and its contents seem rather like Aunt Ellie and Aunt Jane Morehead's travel requirements, especially when it comes to the next layer of contents: seven flannel nightgowns, four cotton nightgowns, one pair of boots, a set of dominoes, two bathing caps, one postcard album, one folding camp bedstead, blankets and an eiderdown.

Mary settles into the nursery for the night. When Michael asks her if she will stay forever, Mary displays her disagreeable habit of responding with a studied insult or threat. If he persists in this line of questioning, she will call a "Policeman" with a capital P.

Mary Poppins seems the epitome of the punishing governess, the bullying woman who has an apt saying for every occasion, and who subdues children as they were subdued in the Victorian age, when they were seen and not heard. "Spit spot into bed" is her most famous order, but Poppins is an absolute compendium of instructions, cliches, declamations and proverbs, among them: Strike me pink; Early to bed, early to rise; Curiosity killed the cat; Trouble trouble and it will trouble you; Don't care was made to care. She carefully hides her compassion. Almost sadistic at times, Mary is never really nasty but often very sharp. She is a controlling force, making order from disorder, making magic, then never admitting magic took place.

Mary has one great weakness: her vanity. She is endlessly fixing her hat and checking her clothes, always pleased with her reflection, and clearly believes in retail therapy. She is

especially chirpy about her new clothes. Mary loves her blue coat with silver buttons, white blouse with pink spots, the hat with the pink roses, the hat with the daisies, the brown kid shoes with two buttons, white gloves, fur-trimmed gloves, and of course the parrot-headed umbrella, which is also her means of transport to the stars.

Mary Poppins threatens to leave at a point of time which only she controls. She tells her charges she will be with them until the wind changes or until her necklace breaks. She never tells where she has come from, where she intends to go or who she really is. But she leaves many clues. Like Francis of Assisi, she is close to animals and birds, with whom she can talk. Like Jesus, she helps the poor and weak. She understands the universe and seems to take part in its creation and renewal. She is known as the Great Exception, the Oddity, the Misfit.

The shopkeepers and neighbors treat her with respect and bluster and bumble when she is around. Mary takes the Banks children on many adventures to visit her most peculiar friends and relations. It is the contrast between these adventures in Fairyland, or Wonderland, or Neverland, and the reality of life in Cherry Tree Lane and its environs that gives the Mary Poppins stories their special charm. The real world is one of teatime, and sensible shoes, and being tucked into bed, of the ice cream man, the butcher, fishmonger, the grocer and above all the nursery food, the gingerbread, raspberry jam, buttered toast, thin bread-and-butter slices, crumpets, plum cakes with pink icing, warm milk, baked custard, apples on sticks, lamb cutlets, wholemeal scones, arrowroot biscuits, porridge, coconut and walnut cakes, rice pudding with honey in it, macaroons, tapioca, conversation lollies, chocolate drops, sherbet and licorice.

In the real world live forlorn and rather lonely figures: Mr. and Mrs. Banks; Miss Lark, bedecked with brooches, bracelets and earrings, cared for by two maids, and mothering silly, silky, fluffy Andrew, who wears leather boots and is awfully

spoilt; and the power-crazed Park Keeper, Frederick Smith, whose badge of authority barely disguises that he is a boy at heart. He is the voice of authority—no litter here, obey the rules, this won't do at all, it's against the regulations!

In the unreal world live happier folk, fantastic creatures who float upside down, laugh so much they fly to the ceiling, or construct the universe by painting springtime or gluing stars to the sky. The fantastic people are often relations of Mary Poppins. The bald Mr. Alfred Wigg, who is her uncle, is round and fat. On his birthday (if it falls on a Friday) he floats in the air. Mr. Arthur Turvy, her cousin, mends broken things, even hearts, but every second Monday he is compelled by supernatural forces to do the opposite of everything he wants to do.

Her first cousin, once removed, is a scary snake, the Hamadryad, also known as "the lord of the jungle." Mary Poppins is also intimate with the ancient Mrs. Corry who runs the sweet shop and who knows Guy Fawkes, Christopher Columbus and William the Conqueror. Mrs. Corry likes to paste stars on the sky, breaks off her fingers (made of barley sugar), and has a soft and terrible voice. She is the Queen of the crones; Mary Poppins treats her with the utmost respect. The Bird Woman is another Ancient One, as is the old woman in a chapter called "Balloons and Balloons." All the old people in the Mary Poppins books appear to be happy—crones who have found the meaning of life.

The animals and birds in the stories are also members of Mary's fantastic world. Mary Poppins speaks to Andrew the dog and to the starling who knows how to talk to babies. Animals at the zoo behave like humans, locking the humans in the cages and laughing at the baby children.

Most of the adventures in the first Mary Poppins books, *Mary Poppins* (published in 1934), and *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935), are concerned with flight, flying, or simply the air. The first book begins with Mary being blown in on the East

Wind and ends with her floating away on the West Wind. Men, women, children, and animals all float or soar in space—on laughing gas, over the moon, around the world with the whirl of a compass, over St. Paul's, up to the heavens. A naughty starling flies in the window to talk to the babies and Maia, a star, flies down from the sky to do her shopping.

In the second book, Mary arrives on the tail of a kite, a baby tells how she flew through the world, everyone flies on balloons and Mary disappears on an airborne merry-go-round.

X The Banks children understand simply this: out of the sky she came, and back to the sky she must go.

The theme of stars constantly recurs in the Mary Poppins books, with the first imprints decorated with printed stars. Mrs. Corry glues stars, the Cow jumps about the stars, Maia is a visiting star, and shooting stars guide the way to the zodiac circus.

Pamela constantly returned also to the idea of the unity or duality of things. She really did believe, along with the god-like snake, the Hamadryad, in the "Full Moon" chapter of *Mary Poppins*, that birds and beasts and stones and stars are all one.<sup>6</sup>

The books can be read as an ode not just to "oneness" but to the dual nature of every creature, and of the world itself. Not only are there two distinct sides to Mary, goodness and sharpness, reality and unreality, and to George Banks—softness and crankiness—but there are twin babies, day and night, the sun and the moon, the East Wind and West Wind, the seasons and opposing points of the compass.

Pamela's fourth Mary Poppins book, *Mary Poppins in the Park*, published in 1952, was the most mystical, made up of discrete chapters or incidents which could have happened at any time. The first three books, culminating in *Mary Poppins Opens the Door*, published in 1944, have a different kind of symmetry: in each, eight to twelve adventures are sandwiched between chapters heralding Poppins's arrival and departure. The adven-

see "The Dancing Cow" chapter  
of  
MP

tures range from visits to Mary's bizarre relations, whom she is often able to save from outlandish trouble, encounters with the neighbors in which Mary puts things to right, misadventures of the Banks children in disagreeable moods, and sometimes, a story within a story. The emotional climax of the books is a fantastic or surreal journey ending with an apotheosis. At the end of the adventures, which involve another dimension, someone leaves a sign or souvenir of the visit with Mary or the children. If the children point this out to Mary, she angrily denies anything has happened.

The first two books mirror one another, even to chapter titles—"Bad Tuesday" and "Bad Wednesday," "Miss Lark's Andrew" and "Miss Andrew's Lark," "The Day Out" and "The Evening Out." Mrs. Corry and the Bird Woman of the first book relate to the Balloon Woman of the second, and the Dancing Cow in the first book and Robertson Ay's story of the second both tell nursery rhyme tales mixed with parable.

In *Mary Poppins*, the most eerie and fantastic story concerns Mrs. Corry and her two big daughters Annie and Fannie. In *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, an equally frightening adventure, "Bad Wednesday," is a cautionary tale; Jane in one of her rare naughty moods gets trapped in time, inside the lives of boys who live on a Royal Doulton bowl. She might have been there forever if Mary had not dragged her back home. The most charming adventure in *Mary Poppins* is "John and Barbara's Story," the tale of the baby Banks twins who know the language of the universe but only for a year or so, until they become fully human. The most wistful adventure concerns the visit of Maia, the second-eldest of the Pleiades, who has come to earth to do some Christmas shopping for her six sisters.

Both *Mary Poppins* and *Mary Poppins Comes Back* include chapters in which Mary guides the children to the secrets of the universe. In "The Evening Out" (*Mary Poppins Comes Back*), Mary is the honored guest at a huge circus in the sky. The Sun is

see posted  
Sections from  
Mary Poppins Comes Back

the ringmaster while Pegasus, Orion, Pollux and Castor, Saturn and Venus are among the entertainers whose finale is the Dance of the Wheeling Sky.

This great cosmic dance, with its literary and mythological connections, touches on Yeats's theory, explained in his book *A Vision*, of wheels and gyres, and on the dance of the spheres in Dante's *Paradiso*.<sup>7</sup> "The Evening Out" reveals how much faith Pamela put in astrology and has its precursor in the Grand Chain dance of the animals in "Full Moon," in *Mary Poppins*. One night—the night of Mary Poppins's birthday—there is a full moon. The Banks children and Mary visit the zoo where the animals strut around outside, laughing and pointing at the antics of the humans inside the cages.

In both "Full Moon" and "The Evening Out," the children appear to encounter God in the shape of the Hamadryad and the Sun. In "The Evening Out," Mary Poppins dances with the Sun who plants a kiss on her cheek. Next day, back at Cherry Tree Lane, the Sun's lip marks can be clearly seen by the children, burnt into the flesh of her cheek.

*Mary Poppins Comes Back* contains one chapter that takes the reader beyond the fantastic, to the realm of myth, religious symbolism and poetry. Called "The New One," it is inspired by Wordsworth, and by AE's favorite poet, William Blake, whom Pamela also revered. The "new one" is Annabel, the Banks's new baby, who has traveled on a long journey through the universe to arrive in the Banks household. She is not just a time traveler, but part of the universe itself, every part, from the sea, to the sky, to the stars, to the sun. Eventually, she forgets her origins, just as her older siblings, John and Barbara, have forgotten their journey and how they could talk to the sun and wind. Pamela wrote "The New One" with no experience of staring in awe at a newborn baby of her own, with that instinctive feeling that a child has come from God.

But she did have the example of Blake's view of children,

*Songs of Innocence*, and especially one poem in that series, "A Cradle Song," which expresses each parent's wonder at their baby and the feeling that this child must have come with the blessing of "all creation." In his "Immortality Ode," Wordsworth puts forward the same idea that "our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting... trailing clouds of glory do we come from God who is our home..." Staffan Bergsten, the Swedish academic who wrote *Mary Poppins and Myth* in 1978, pointed out that one of the poems of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* was one Pamela applied to herself, "The Little Black Boy."

An adult looking for deeper meaning in the books will understand that Mary Poppins lives in a land where religion, fairy tale and myth combine. Despite her knowledge, she does not moralize, but simply allows the Banks children to experience mysterious other worlds. She tells parables and allegories. Lessons can be learned. The grass is always greener, but don't always want what you haven't got. Things are not what they seem; don't judge a book by its cover. Have faith.

Mary Poppins was a direct descendant of the heroines Pamela had loved since she was four. Her closest literary relative was Alice in Wonderland. Back in 1928, Pamela wrote in *New Triad's* "London Letter" that everyone loved Alice who "delighted our mothers... The world began to change with the advent of Alice. How could Alice help changing a world that was preoccupied with stories of little children dying prettily and with their last breath bidding their parents not to grieve... Before Alice came... literature for the young was sentimental and unreal. It needed the cold philosophical thought of Alice to put things right."<sup>8</sup>

Mary Poppins has much in common with the girl who fell asleep one summer afternoon. Mary travels to Fairyland. Alice goes to Wonderland. Mary meets weird floating creatures and flies through the sky or sinks to the ocean floor. Alice sinks down a hole in the ground. Mary talks to animals who talk

about Mary Poppins  
and Alice in Wonderland have  
in common

right back to her. So does Alice. Mary Poppins might be only a fantasy, just an ordinary nanny whose adventures happen in the dreams of the Banks children. After all, Alice dreamed her entire adventure.

Mary springs from the same family tree as Peter Pan, another night flyer who comes to a London household as middle class and respectable as the Banks's. The head of the family, Mr. Darling, loves his children but is always worried about money. The children, Wendy, John and Michael, are minded by a nanny who is in fact a sheepdog called Nana. (John and Michael are also the names of the two boys in Mary Poppins's care.) Peter Pan, the boy who never grows up, arrives one night and teaches them how to fly to Neverland, his magic island. Mary Poppins, who seems to be twenty-seven but is in fact ageless, is also a children's escort for night flying adventures.

Both *Alice* and *Peter Pan* were part of Pamela's childhood, but then again they were part of the childhood of every middle-class child in Australia and Britain. *Alice in Wonderland* was written by Lewis Carroll in 1866. *Peter Pan* by James Barrie was published as a play in 1904 and a story in 1911. Both helped create a new fashion for children's fantasy, acknowledging the child as a reader with his or her own interests, yet, at the same time, appealing to adults.

The Victorians had romanticized childhood and invented the idea of children's books, but it took the Edwardians to make a cult of it. They were "fixated on children's pursuits," wrote Jackie Wullschlager, who studied Carroll, Barrie, A. A. Milne, Kenneth Grahame and Edward Lear for her analysis of Edwardian children's literature, *Inventing Wonderland*.<sup>9</sup> From the 1860s to the 1920s, England was awash with children's fantasy books, among them the riverbank tales of *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, published in 1908, and the Bastable books, by E. (Edith) Nesbit, begun in 1898. Both Nesbit and Frances Hodgson Burnett, with *The Secret Garden* in 1911, brought the

How Mary Poppins  
is like Peter Pan

\* See the Queen's  
Doll's House



idea of magic to the lives of children, while A. A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh books in the 1920s were a reminder of a prewar idyll where Piglet, Eeyore, Pooh, Owl, Kanga, Roo and Tigger were as cozy in their Hundred Acre Wood as Mary Poppins, Jane, Michael and the twins were in their park next to Cherry Tree Lane.

*Mary Poppins* drew on the traditions of nonsense and anarchy in Victorian children's books and the romance, whimsicality and middle class settings of the Edwardian books.

Like A. A. Milne's characters, the Banks family and Mary herself would be perfectly happy in Harrods, frolicking about a Sussex garden or cozily tucked into a Chelsea or Kensington nursery. Wullschlager wrote of the Winnie-the-Pooh books

\* "what draws both adults and children to the books is the ironic, biting tone mixed in with the safe setting." *Mary Poppins* adopts the same tone, sharp, unsentimental, but with the certainty of the most comforting moments of childhood.

Part of *Mary Poppins*'s appeal lies in her streak of rebelliousness, a quality she shares with the naughty Peter Pan, with Peter Rabbit created by Beatrix Potter, with Toad of *The Wind in the Willows*, and the peculiar fantasy animals of *Wonderland*. All these creatures influenced Pamela, who acknowledged her debt to the authors. But it annoyed, even "pained" Pamela when *Mary Poppins* was called a direct descendant of Peter Pan. "Must you say that?" she grumbled to one analyst of her work.<sup>10</sup> Pamela's literary heroine was Beatrix Potter. "To me she was one of the archangels." She loved "her understatement, her bareness, her surrealism, her non explaining."<sup>11</sup>

Potter had said "I painted most of the little pictures [of Peter Rabbit, the Flopsy bunnies, Mr. McGregor and the rest] mainly to please myself." Pamela loved that phrase, repeating it ad nauseam and adjusting it to apply to herself: "I write to please myself." Potter's sweet little animal tales, published from 1902, were on the Goff family's bookshelves in Allora. Pamela devoured

pre-war coziness

Mary Poppins and Winnie-the-Pooh

them all. She adopted some of the characteristics of Potter. Pamela liked to say she was educated by a governess (Potter was), she took up gardening with passion (Potter loved gardening), moved to a country house that looked like Potter's animal farmhouses, and began her serious analysis of fairy tales. Potter illustrated traditional fairy tales and was so interested in "Cinderella" that she once wrote her own long and detailed version.<sup>12</sup>

Pamela saw that each of Potter's tales was built on a simple everyday happening, without sentimentality, but suggesting magic. Each had an element of irony, toughness, danger, suspense and even terror. She was impressed with the sudden, wild inconsequence which from time to time took Potter into a "mad and beautiful, almost surrealist dream where everything is a non sequitur." And she loved the sweet femininity of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, Jemima Puddle-Duck, Mrs. Tabitha Twitchit and Mrs. Tittlemouse, four creatures who seemed to sum up women's ability to nurture and put things to right.<sup>13</sup>

But the essence of Beatrix Potter that appealed most to Pamela was the "non explaining." Mary Poppins never explained and neither did Pamela. The reader had to discover where Mary went between sojourns with the Banks family. In one interview Pamela added, in an arch and infuriating way, that if she knew where Poppins went, she would have said. "She never explains, that is her chief characteristic, and I think it must be mine." Then, Pamela threw in an extra piece of *Alice in Wonderland*-like nonsense: "I don't not explain because I'm too proud to explain, but because if I did explain, where would we be?"<sup>14</sup>

"Mary Poppins is never explicit. Perhaps she has Oriental blood. Did you know there is a Chinese symbol called pai? It has two meanings: one is explain, the other in vain. If the book were to be publicly translated [into Chinese—it had been privately], I think it would have to be called Pai."<sup>15</sup> The kind of writing she liked was done between the lines. "I like understatement, hints."<sup>16</sup> The Poppins stories all revolved around questions.

Travis &  
Beatrix Potter  
fascinating!

1  
Pai  
2

Pamela maintained there was never anyone remotely like Mary Poppins in her life. "Perhaps as a child I may have wished there were. I did not even visualize her. She just appeared fully armed with umbrella and carpetbag rather in the way that Pallas Athene sprang from the brow of Zeus."<sup>17</sup> But while Mary Poppins did not really refer to her, "there must be some element in me to which she hooked herself I suppose."<sup>18</sup>

One element was Pamela's apparent strictness. In Mary Poppins, the strictness was, she said, only skin deep, the wise woman's strictness. She denied that Poppins's authoritarianism was a masculine characteristic, and pointed out "how the men all turn to her," just as the Irish literary set all turned to Pamela. Mr. Banks, the Lord Mayor, the Butcher, the Baker, Bert and even the Park Keeper all had a special feeling for her.<sup>19</sup> "Men do fall in love with her."<sup>20</sup>

Mary Poppins's impact on men and appreciation by Mr. Banks is an expression of Pamela's own desires. The vanishing act of Poppins into the sky at the end of the first two books recalls the death of Travers Goff, a disappearance that Lyndon knew mysteriously as "Daddy going to God." Years later she felt the true impact when she gazed up at the night sky. Pamela visualized her father transforming into a star, just as Mr. Banks believed Mary Poppins's ascent into the sky on a merry-go-round was a new star. As an adult she could make another connection—in many Greek myths heroes turned into stars and constellations.

From the very first Mary Poppins book, it is clear that Mr. Banks has adopted many of the traits of Travers Goff. He harbors the same mixture of melancholy and gaiety. Like Goff, his abruptness is softened at odd times as he searches the sky for his favorite stars. Pamela knew Mr. Banks had "a strong inner urge to be an astronomer."

Pamela said Mr. Banks was the complement of Mary

where is this urge expressed in the books?

Mr. Banks



autobiographical mentions in the books

Poppins because he "almost knows."<sup>21</sup> Without understanding anything consciously, he was involved in the adventures. Somewhere in his masculine nature, he understood Poppins's feminine being.<sup>22</sup> It was Mr. Banks, not Bert, who was Mary Poppins's opposite number, who sometimes subconsciously understood who she was.

Other characters from Pamela's childhood appear in the books, Nellie Rubina and Uncle Dodger from Bowral feature in *Mary Poppins Comes Back* as the couple who live in an ark and prepare the world for spring. The Goffs' maid, Kate, appears as Banks's former nanny. Miss Quigley, the sad woman with a music box in Bowral, was written into *Mary Poppins Comes Back* as a piano-playing governess who arrives and departs quickly after Mary Poppins's first disappearance.

Pamela also borrowed from her adult life—the Pegasus she won at a fairground at Tunbridge Wells and the woman she called the "Duchess of Mayfield," apparently a snob from the local village. In the "Balloons" chapter in *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, the illustrator Mary Shepard sketched herself, Pamela and her pet dog, Cu, all holding balloons with their real names on the side.

The Poppins adventures are crammed with other, incidental, autobiographical detail. Pamela wrote that "every Mary Poppins story has something out of my own experience... several record my dreary childhood penance of going for a walk. But against that is set the blissful forgiving moment at bedtime when I suddenly felt so very good. Of the glimpse when the fire was lit and the lamp glowed, of the nursery reflected upon the garden."<sup>23</sup>

Pamela always insisted that both she and Mary Poppins were servants who served a purpose. Pamela became a servant of a succession of gurus while Mary Poppins was both guru and handmaiden. She claimed that Mary had lived for centuries, that she was "the nurse of Beauty, Truth and Love" (an idea developed in the fourth Mary Poppins book, published in 1952) and

MAGIC OF BEDTIME



refer to "Christmas Shopping" that "she knows an awful lot about the stars,"<sup>24</sup> implying she might be part of the Pleiades or another constellation.

Like Mary Poppins, though, Pamela never became too pompous about it all. She continually stressed that her nanny represented the business of ordinary, everyday life. As Pamela said, "We cannot have the extraordinary without the ordinary. Just as the supernatural is hidden in the natural. In order to fly, you need something solid to take off from. It's not the sky that interests me but the ground... When I was in Hollywood the [script] writers said, surely Mary Poppins symbolizes the magic that lies behind everyday life. I said no, of course not, she is everyday life, which is composed of the concrete and the magic."<sup>25</sup>

Pamela claimed she scribbled the Mary Poppins stories on any bits of paper that came to hand at Pound Cottage, old bills and envelopes, even income tax demands.<sup>26</sup> But it's more likely that one evening, she showed Madge Burnand her old stories, pasted into scrapbooks.

Madge, who had many contacts in London publishing houses, might have encouraged Pamela to expand her articles into a book of short stories that Madge herself could try to sell. Pamela did say that the stories were taken by "a friend" to show publishers. And it was Madge who eventually found a buyer in Gerald Howe, head of a small publishing house in Soho. Howe asked to see the author.

Pamela insisted that her rules applied from the start. She told Howe she wanted a major role in the publication, suggested she would find an illustrator and would even choose the type—in consultation with him.<sup>27</sup> It was not a happy beginning. Pamela later remembered Howe as an enemy. He was, she said, only a very small publisher and she an "innocent," without an agent. She complained that the contract was

"bad," but in any case it hardly mattered because the manuscript was sent to the United States, where more than ten publishers wanted to publish.<sup>28</sup> She settled with Eugene Reynal of Reynal & Hitchcock (later taken over by Harcourt Brace and her agent, Diarmuid Russell, AE's son in Chicago).

Pamela claimed she wanted the author of the book to be called "Anon," but "the publisher threw a fit and put my name on it."<sup>29</sup> I signed my name P. L. Travers originally because it seemed to me at the time that all children's books were written by women and I didn't want to feel that there was a woman or a man behind it, but a human being."

She definitely did not want to be "one more silly woman writing silly books. That's the idea, among publishers: "Oh yes, these curly headed women, they do it very nicely." It's never respected as literature, it's never given a high place in that sense."<sup>30</sup>

*Mary Poppins* was dedicated to her mother, who had died six years before. About a year later, the sequel was published by Lovat Dickson & Thompson.

The period charm of the books lies not just in the text but in the delicate drawings of Mary Shepard, the daughter of *Winnie-the-Pooh* illustrator Ernest Shepard and his artist wife, Florence. Pamela had wanted Ernest Shepard himself to illustrate the *Mary Poppins* books. She knew his cartoons and drawings from *Punch*, essential reading at Pound Cottage, partly because Madge's father had once been the editor. Ernest Shepard illustrated A. A. Milne's *When We Were Very Young* verses, which had appeared in *Punch* in 1923. Pamela never admitted she had asked Ernest Shepard, but in unpublished autobiographical notes Mary Shepard wrote: "In 1933 Pamela Travers approached my father with her first *Mary Poppins* book of the series, but he had to turn down the offer, very regretfully, because by this time he already had too much work in hand."

Pamela found his daughter's work by accident, through a Christmas card sent to Madge. Florence Shepard, who had

1/11/20  
Dick. Poppins?  
pictures?

Mary Shepard's  
book illustrator

3/10/21

died in 1927, was an old friend of Madge's. At Christmas 1932, her daughter, Mary Shepard, sent Madge a card which she had drawn herself. It showed a gloomy horse, resembling a rocking horse, ridden by a little knight holding a banner. He soared through the sky, just like Mary Poppins. In the snow underneath was a hoofprint.

There it stood among the many other Christmas cards on the old mantelpiece at Pound Cottage. "Of course it wasn't Leonardo, but I didn't need Leonardo," said Pamela in a later interview. "I was after a happy imperfection, innocence without naivete and, as well, a sense of wonder. The flying horse did indeed look dejected, as though it had just received bad news. But the rider was joyfully waving his banner, sunlight behind him, snow light before, a paradigm for the human condition, and, best of all, down in the castle courtyard the horse, as he took off into the air, had left in the snow a footprint!"<sup>31</sup>

She thought there was something happy about the drawing, imperfect though it was, and asked Madge to introduce her to Mary Shepard.<sup>32</sup> Shepard, then twenty-four, had just left the Slade School of Art. From the day she agreed to illustrate the books, the relationship of teacher and pupil was established. Shepard felt she had to do whatever Pamela asked her to do. Privately, she called herself Eeyore, after the downcast donkey in *Winnie-the-Pooh*.<sup>33</sup>

Pamela explained to interviewers that Mary Shepard "struggled nobly with the text."<sup>34</sup> She found her first drawings impossible. Pamela showed them to AE and Orage, who both suggested she should try another illustrator. But she persisted, taking Shepard for walks in Hyde Park, pointing out children as suitable models.

"We walked, like explorers... 'There,' I would say, and again 'Look, there!' And still Mary Poppins was not in the sketch book. Other young ladies. But not she."<sup>35</sup> At last they discovered the right look when Pamela found a Dutch doll

where the card is  
this card is  
not covered  
to look like  
Travers's illustrations  
of Mary Poppins  
in the first  
Poppins  
book

Mary Poppins arrives for the first time



*Holding her hat on with one hand and carrying  
a bag in the other*

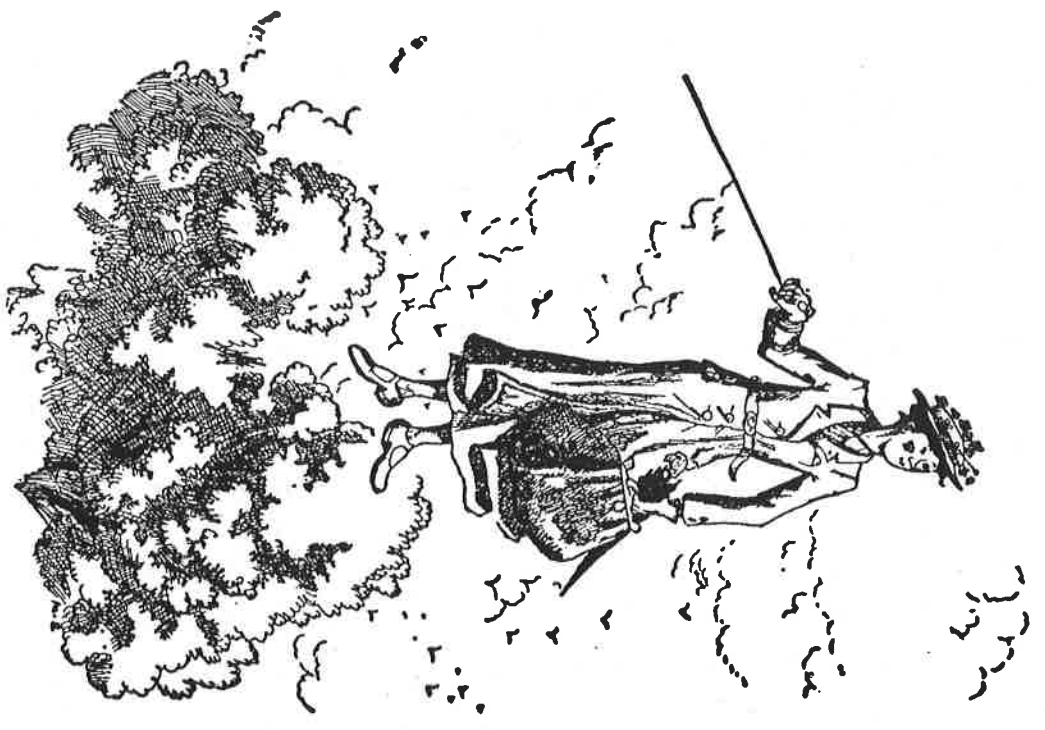


Mary Poppins arrives for the second time

"At last! At last! At last!" shouted Michael wildly, clutching at her arm, her bag, her umbrella—anything, so long as he might touch her and feel that she was really true.

"We knew you'd come back! We found the letter that said *au revoir!*" cried Jane, flinging her arms round the waist of the blue overcoat.

A satisfied smile flickered for a moment over Mary Poppins' face—up from the mouth, over the



On sailed the curious figure, its feet neatly clearing the tops of the trees

Mary Poppins arrives for the third time

"Somebody will be sweeping you, if you don't look out!" she retorted.

"But-but! Glog-glog! Er-rumph! Glug-glug!" Speechless with astonishment, the Park Keeper blocked their path.

"Out of my way, please!" said Mary Poppins, haughtily brushing him aside as she pushed the children in front of her.

"This is the Second Time!" he gasped, suddenly finding his voice. "First it's a Kite and now it's a— You can't do things like this, I tell you! It's against the Law. And, furthermore, it's all against Nature."



Out of the glowing core of light emerged a curious figure



*A day in the Park*

Mary Shepard illustration



the  
illustrator, Shepard

like the one she had as a child—and gave it to Mary, “and suddenly it seemed as though she... came to life, tentatively, very imperfect, but some of the atmosphere of the book came through.” At various times Pamela said she came across the doll in “an antique shop,” while at other times she claimed the doll had been found in an attic. Shepard maintained that it was she who bought the Dutch doll, and that it was only then that she managed to get a suitable-looking Mary Poppins.

“Eeyore” was overruled on many suggestions. She wanted to show Mary Poppins standing in the fifth ballet position, feet turned out, the heel of one foot lined up with the toes of the other. As a compromise, Mary usually did appear with turned-out feet, but in first or fourth position, or up on half pointe. This was appropriate as the books are full of dancing. Mary dances, of course, but so do inanimate objects, from the trees to the stars. In her normal nanny mode, however, there was nothing balletic or theatrical about Poppins. Pamela even insisted to Mary Shepard that she “must have no figure.”<sup>36</sup> \*

Later, Shepard’s Mary Poppins drawings tended toward the comic, becoming too pert, and rather like the cartoons in *Punch*. Pamela believed Shepard was greatly influenced by *Punch* and the *Strand* magazine. Gerald Howe was very skeptical about Shepard, asking Pamela, “But has she any experience?” “Well, no, not really,” she answered, “but then neither have I.” “Mmm,” Mr. Howe said and, when he was shown the scrapbooks with Shepard’s first attempts, muttered, “Mmm” again.

Mary Shepard illustrated all the Mary Poppins books, completing the first two at her father’s Surrey home. In 1937 she married the editor of *Punch*, E. V. (Edmund Valpy) Knox, whom she met through her father. After the war, when the Knoxes lived at Hampstead, “Evoe” Knox, as he was known, sat as a model for Mr. Banks in the fourth book, *Mary Poppins in the Park*.

Despite the obvious appeal of the Mary Poppins books for

how to  
draw  
Mary  
Poppins

What is  
this  
Punch?

children, Pamela always denied that she wrote with an audience in mind. "I wouldn't say *Mary Poppins* is a children's book for one moment. It's certainly not written for children."<sup>37</sup> "I never know why *Mary Poppins* is thought of as a children's book," she grumbled to an audience of students at Radcliffe College at Harvard in the mid-60s.<sup>38</sup> "Indeed I don't think there are such things. There are simply books and some of them children read. I don't think there is any such thing as a children's book... I dislike the distinction very much. People say "tell us the secret, how do you write for children?" I have to say that I don't know because I don't write for children."

She knew she would be more readily accepted as a serious writer if she was not labeled a children's writer, but there was another, private reason for her insistence. She was writing to please a man she was beginning to love—Francis Macnamara, whom she described over the years as "an Irish poet," "the great Irish critic," "a great friend," "very beautiful, fair, highly intellectual, loved by women and much liked and envied by men." He had warned Pamela not to expect him to read *Mary Poppins*. He hated children's books. She sent it to him anyway and he read it, reluctantly. His reaction had a profound effect on her. He wrote, "Why didn't you tell me? *Mary Poppins*, with her cool green core of sex, has me enthralled forever."<sup>39</sup> Pamela believed Francis Macnamara understood more of *Mary Poppins* than anybody ever had, even more than she did herself.

The trouble was, Pamela did not understand Francis at all, though he understood women perfectly. He knew what they wanted to hear. Francis told them how he loved their minds, so funny and bright and witty, and watched as their pupils dilated as they grew more and more sure of their own charm and wit, until suddenly they were laughing all the way to bed. Other women he reserved for vestal virgin status, fantasizing that they *were* actually virgins, his untouchable ones.

In her never-ending search for Mr. Banks, Pamela could not

not written for children - I think it's written for more children

what?

?

have chosen a worse candidate than Francis Macnamara, but it was easy to see why she fell. Tall, golden-haired and blue-eyed, Francis was a wit, dandy, thinker, poet, sometimes riotous and great fun but more often slipping into a maudlin state. Francis Macnamara was expected to make a fortune or write a masterpiece. He did neither. Like most of his contemporaries, he was a boozier, happy in any pub from Chelsea to Galway Bay. There he flirted, said his daughter Nicolette Devas, in the manner of Fielding's Tom Jones.<sup>40</sup> He told anyone who would listen that he believed in "free love," that "women were a blank slate for a man to scribble on."

Francis did not have to struggle. He was the son of the high sheriff of County Clare, Henry Macnamara, who owned a great deal of land in the county including the market town, Ennistymon. His Australian mother was Edith Elizabeth Cooper, the daughter of Sir Daniel Cooper of Woollahra who made his fortune from gin distilling. She delivered all her children in a suite she booked specially for the purpose at Dublin's Shelbourne Hotel.

Francis was sent to Harrow and Oxford, but the temptations of a bohemian life were too great. He gave up his legal studies to mix with the Bloomsbury and Slade School of Art sets who congregated around Augustus John. He wrote a book of poems, *Marionettes*, in 1909, and became close friends with Augustus John, who wrote that Francis was "much given to solitary and gloomy cogitation" until, "warmed with what he called the hard stuff, became genial, popular and, the police were apt to think, dangerous."<sup>41</sup>

In 1907, Francis married a pretty Frenchwoman, Yvonne Majolier, whose sister was even prettier, according to Oliver St John Gogarty, who spread the word that "he slept with his sister-in-law and wife in the same room to save hotel expenses."<sup>42</sup> But in 1914, Francis abandoned Yvonne and their four children, including Caitlin (who was to marry Dylan

Thomas), for another woman. In the 1920s he married Edie McNeil, the sister of Augustus John's wife Dorelia. He liked to call Edie the "Virgin Goddess."

Francis was equally at home in Dublin, on his yacht, the *Mary Anne*, or at the family seat, Ennistymon House, a Georgian mansion overlooking a valley across to the town of Ennistymon, or at his flat in Regent's Square, London. Like many of his homes, the London flat was arranged with the compact look and efficiency of a ship. At Ennistymon and the nearby fishing village, Doolin, he was treated as the hereditary squire. His daughter Nicolette heard it rumored that Francis had fathered many illegitimate children "trying to produce a child worthy of himself."<sup>43</sup>

He met Pamela through the Irish literary network. Francis had idolized Yeats, and was the guest of Yeats and Lady Gregory at Coole Park during his honeymoon. Yeats offered to help him with his writing, but Macnamara did not take him up on the offer. Many years later, Yeats said, "Francis Macnamara had some poetic talent once but he lost it by not attending to the technique of verse."<sup>44</sup>

When Pamela sent Francis her *Mary Poppins* adventures in 1933, Francis was preoccupied with his next big affair, this time with a sensual young woman, Iris O'Callaghan. She lived on his yacht, then moored in Dover Harbor. Iris had pursued Francis like a stalker. Her great weapon was her youth. At twenty-two—less than half his age—she had him thoroughly flummoxed. She might have been almost illiterate, with a chaotic mind and a tendency toward screaming matches in which clocks and crockery were thrown and clothes cut up. But Iris, full-lipped and absolutely ripe, was a lethal weapon herself. While Pamela dreamed of life with Francis at Regent's Square, Iris had already moved in.