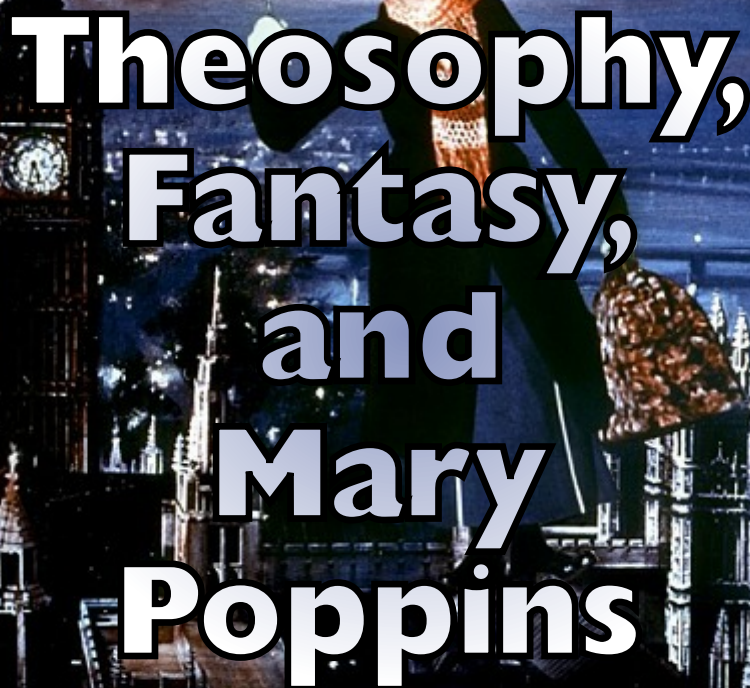


# Theosophy Forward

Moving  
ahead in  
the 21st  
century



# Theosophy, Fantasy, and Mary Poppins

Theosophy, Fantasy , and Mary Poppins  
By John Algeo

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Theosophy, Fantasy,  
and  
Mary Poppins

by John Algeo



P. L. TRAVERS

NOW A  
BROADWAY  
MUSICAL

# MARY POPPINS

& MARY POPPINS COMES BACK

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# Foreword

After the first issue of the magazine Theosophy Forward appeared in 2009, its e-book group, so very well maintained and headed by Anton Rozman in Slovenia, published in 2011 John Algeo's *The Ancient Wisdom of Harry Potter* and in 2012 *Reincarnation Explored*, by the same author. Now, in 2013 it is time for another Algeo treat: *Theosophy, Fantasy, and Mary Poppins*. The series in five chapters started in the third quarter 2012 issue of Theosophy Forward and is now presented to the world as an e-book.

From the introduction:

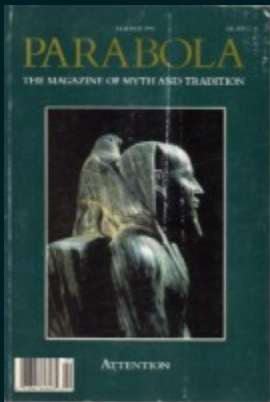
"Some books ostensibly written for children in fact appeal also to adults; they attract both age groups, albeit for different reasons. Such books are mainly in the genre of fantasy (or fairy tales, to use an older designation for the genre). Fantasy fiction consists of stories that are not about the world we know through our physical senses, but about an archetypal world we access through our imagination. Their truth is not literal and limited, but metaphorical and expansive. Because fantasy is archetypal, it is a form particularly adaptable to Theosophical interpretations. Adults will be more likely than children to puzzle out — either consciously or subconsciously — the archetypal metaphors and to expand the meaning of fantasy stories in more sophisticated ways. However, children will appreciate the stories and may absorb the meanings they embody on a subconscious level, which is more powerful than a conscious intellectual understanding."

In his easy to read but always profound style, with an eye for the smallest detail and looking at all that concerns Pamela Travers' brainchild Mary Poppins from a Theosophical perspective, Algeo guides his readers through the realms of a world we cannot see with the limited senses we have now at our disposal.

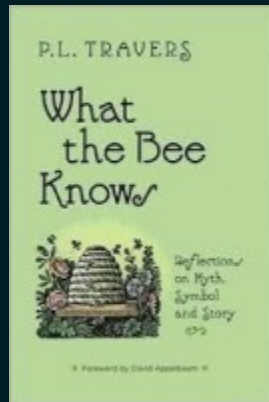
In the autumn of his life, seeking serenity and quietness, surrounded by some of his favorite books and looked after so well by his daughter, John Algeo remains a formidable contributor to the Theosophical cause, while remaining cheerful and intellectually engaged with projects he devises for himself.

*Theosophy, Fantasy, and Mary Poppins* is a delightful book that will please many, and I wish to express my sincere gratitude to John for allowing us to make it available for anyone interested.

Jan Nicolaas Kind



*Parabola,*  
The magazine of  
Myth and Tradition



*What the Bee Knows*

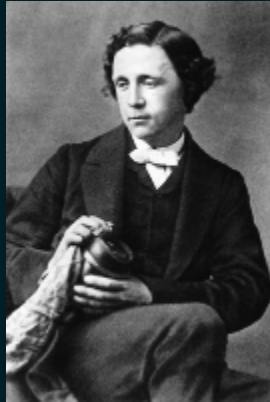


## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction: Pamela Travers and the Mary Poppins Cycle

Some books ostensibly written for children in fact appeal also to adults; they attract both age groups, albeit for different reasons. Such books are mainly in the genre of fantasy (or fairy tales, to use an older designation for the genre). Fantasy fiction consists of stories that are not about the world we know through our physical senses, but about an archetypal world we access through our imagination. Their truth is not literal and limited, but metaphorical and expansive. Because fantasy is archetypal, it is a form particularly adaptable to Theosophical interpretations. Adults will be more likely than children to puzzle out - either consciously or subconsciously - the archetypal metaphors and to expand the meaning of fantasy stories in more sophisticated ways. However, children will appreciate the stories and may absorb the meanings they embody on a subconscious level, which is more powerful than a conscious intellectual understanding.

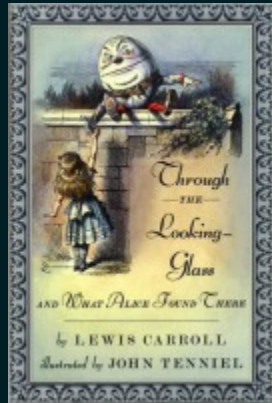
Pamela Travers, the author of the *Mary Poppins* books, wrote an essay called "Re-storying the Adult" (originally published in the journal *Parabola*, but reprinted in *What the Bee Knows*, pp. 141-4). In this essay, Travers refers to the work of an analytical psychologist, James Hillman, who wrote of the importance of "re-storying the adult." "Re-storying" is retelling stories about one's life experiences as a form of therapy. Travers says, "There are, indeed, books that purport to be written for children that, in fact, do exactly this for the



*Lewis Carroll  
alias  
Charles Lutwidge Dodgson*



*Alice's Adventures in  
Wonderland*



*Through the Looking Glass,  
and What Alice Found There*

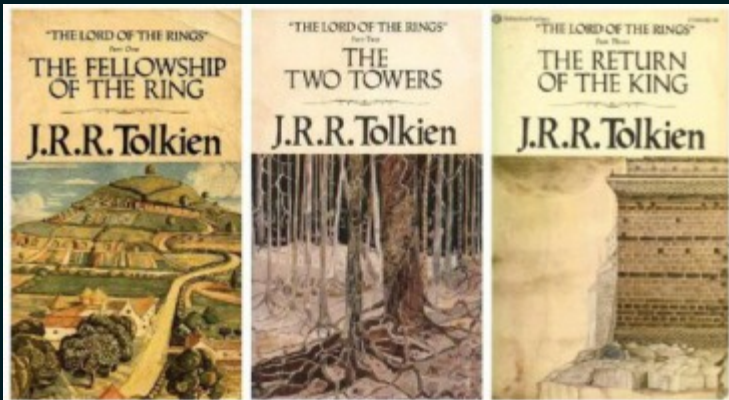
grown-up.” Such “re-storying” can be thought of as actually “restoring” the child’s view of the world in the adult. That is, a child perceives every new experience newly, on its own terms. But then the child files way that experience and his or her reaction to it in the filing cabinet of the mind. As children grow toward and enter upon adulthood, they gradually stop reacting spontaneously and newly to new experiences. Instead, when a new experience occurs, the adult (or soon to be adult) goes into the mental filing cabinet and finds there an old experience that is similar in some way to the new one; the (incipient) adult takes the old response to that old experience, and projects it onto the new one. Thus, effectively, the adult stops responding altogether to the new and lives instead, not in the present (as the child did), but instead in the past. To be psychologically and spiritually healthy, we all need to remain childlike (not “childish”). And we do that most easily through fantasy stories.

Perhaps the best known of fantasy stories written ostensibly for children but appealing also to adults and promoting a childlike grasp of the present moment are the *Alice* books of Lewis Carroll: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There*. “Lewis Carroll” was the pen name used for his children’s books by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. His nom de plume is a sort of “looking glass” name, converting his first given name, Charles, into the Anglicized version Carroll (used as a surname), and his second given name, Lutwidge (which was his mother’s maiden surname), into an Anglicized version, Lewis (used as a given name). Thus he flip-flopped or mirror-imaged his proper name into his pen name. Dodgson/Carroll was an ordained clergyman and an Oxford don of mathematics who was conservative in almost everything except his writing for children. In his academic specialty of mathematics, for example, he opposed the rising interest in non-Euclidian geometry, notably in his book *Euclid and his Modern Rivals*. A friend of mine wrote his doctoral dissertation on Dodgson/Carroll, arguing that in his children’s fantasy books, the conservative Dodgson gave free rein to the imaginative Carroll, adopting a literary parallel to non-Euclidian geometry as their basis. It is a persuasive argument, but not one that would ever occur to or interest a child reader of the *Alice* books.

Other similar examples of adult interest in ostensibly children’s books include J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Hobbit and Lord of the Rings* trilogy. *The Hobbit* was



*J. R. R. Tolkien*



*Hobbit and Lord of the Rings trilogy*



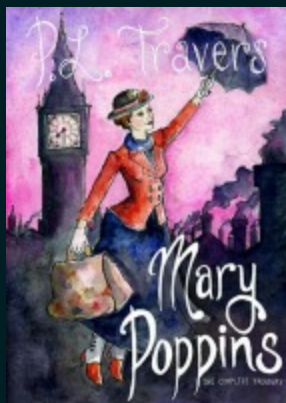
*Joanne "Jo" Rowling*



*Harry Potter series of seven primary books*



*P. L. (Pamela Lyndon) Travers,*  
a stage name adopted by Helen Lyndon Goff, an Australian  
actress, journalist, and novelist



*Mary Poppins*



*Mary Poppins  
comes back*



*Mary Poppins  
opens the door*

published by recommendation of one of the publisher's children, to whom he had shown the manuscript. Yet all of the Middle-earth stories have attracted primarily adult readers. And an archetypal, Theosophical commentary was published by the comparative-religion scholar Robert Ellwood in *Frodo's Quest*.

Another more recent example is the *Harry Potter* series of seven primary books, plus several supporting volumes. They were first published for the children's market, but have been avidly taken up by adults and interpreted in a variety of sophisticated ways. I wrote a collection of articles on the books, compiled into an electronic book by the Website *Theosophy Forward*, under the pen name Prof. Abditus Questor: [The Ancient Wisdom of Harry Potter](#).

Yet other examples are the *Mary Poppins* books of P. L. (Pamela Lyndon) Travers, a stage name adopted by Helen Lyndon Goff, an Australian actress, journalist, and novelist (Travers being her father's first name). Born in 1899 and died in 1996, she moved to England in 1924. She met the Irish Theosophical poets George William Russell (AE) and William Butler Yeats, through whom she developed an interest in the mythologies of the world. She also met and was greatly influenced by the Russian mystic George Gurdjieff. She was an early and long-time contributor to *Parabola: The Magazine of Myth and Tradition*, founded in 1976. Among her many contributions to that magazine were "On Unknowing" (10.3, Aug. 1985), "The Unsleeping Eye" (11.1, Feb. 1986), and "Nirvana Is Samsara" (11.2, May 1986).

A collection of Travers' articles, many originally published in *Parabola* but others in a variety of places, is *What the Bee Knows*. The articles in this collection show Pamela Travers to have been an inspired and inspiring writer on the topics of myth, symbol, and story. The book's title is notable. Travers explains it in a headnote on page 3: "'Ask the wild bee what the Druids knew' / Old English adage." Here "Old English" refers to an older form of the English language, rather than to the scholarly use of that term for what is more popularly called Anglo-Saxon. As Travers acknowledges elsewhere in *What the Bee Knows* (p. 81), the adage goes back to the Scottish Highlands. It was popularized by the Scottish author William Sharp (1855-1905), who wrote under the penname of Fiona MacLeod. In addition, however, there is a long tradition associating bees with instruction and entertainment. Bees produce honey and wax (in their honeycombs). Honey is taken as a symbol of

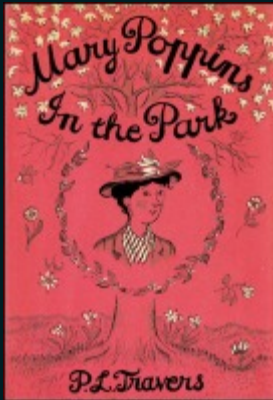
sweetness, entertainment, pleasure; and wax, from its use for candles, is taken as a symbol of light, instruction, knowledge. That apian connection of entertainment (honey) and instruction (wax) is highly relevant to all the writings of Pamela Travers, especially the *Mary Poppins* books.

With regard to the opening statement of the present chapter - that books ostensibly written for children appeal also to adults - Pamela Travers denied the distinction altogether, saying that books actually written for children were invariably bad literature, and that the most adult-oriented of books can appeal to children. In an essay titled "I Never Wrote for Children" (first published in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1978 and reprinted in Draper and Koralek's *A Lively Oracle*, she wrote that, "even though children throughout the world have, some of them, been kind enough to read what I write ... I didn't write for children at all, ... the idea simply didn't enter my head."

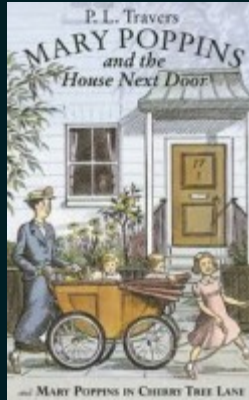
A well-done and useful work combining biographical studies drawn from Pamela Travers's own writings, commentaries on her works, and the texts of some of her rarer articles is Ellen Dooling Draper and Jenny Koralek's *A Lively Oracle*. Travers, herself, did not want any biography written about her after her death - with good reason. Valerie Lawson's *Mary Poppins, She Wrote* is an example, mentioned here as something to be warned about. It has errors of fact, unwarranted speculation, and antagonistic comments about Theosophy and the Theosophical Society, which are wholly without justification either in the writings of Pamela Travers or otherwise. However, it does have some useful features, such as a chronological list of Travers's published books.

Pamela Travers wrote many books on the *Mary Poppins* theme, of which three are basic: *Mary Poppins* (1934), *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935), and *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (1943). Those three books are each self-contained but also follow one another in a continuous sequence, each treating a different visit by *Mary Poppins* to the Banks family, who live at number 17, Cherry Tree Lane. The father is a banker (obviously) and the mother is a harried housewife in desperate need of a nanny for her children: Jane and Michael (the eldest, in that order), the twins John and Barbara, and part way through the series a new baby, Annabel. *Mary Poppins* "pops in" on the Banks household in our ordinary world, which she causes to be an extraordinary world, full of surprises and archetypal experiences.

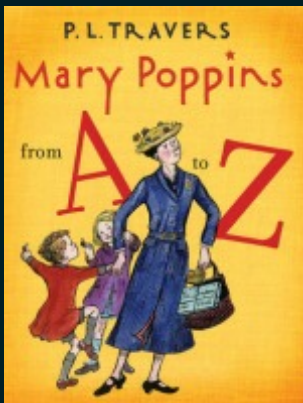




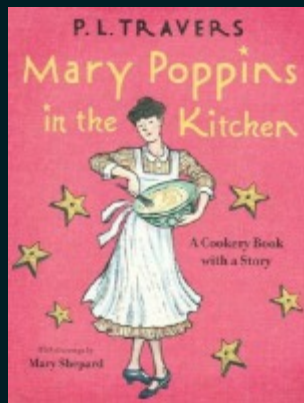
*Mary Poppins in the Park*



*Mary Poppins in Cherry Tree Lane and Mary Poppins and the House Next Door*



*Mary Poppins from A to Z*



*Mary Poppins in the Kitchen: A Cookery Book with a Story*

Three is precisely the right number for a series of fantasy or fairy-tale books, because three is the magic number in fairy tales. Pamela Travers calls it “a theme as universal as the universe” and asks, in fairy stories, “whether those three brothers are really three, or a threefold composite of one man, three stages in a single life? And whether the story is not a pattern, at once ancient and familiar, of how - if we could! - to live our own lives?” (*What the Bee Knows*, pp. 59, 63).

A fourth volume, *Mary Poppins in the Park*, consists of six episodes that the author says belong to various unspecified points in the first three volumes. This fourth volume lacks the coherence and chronology of the earlier three and so is not considered here. Two other additions to the *Mary Poppins* collection were added years later: *Mary Poppins in Cherry Tree Lane* (1982) and *Mary Poppins and the House Next Door* (1988). Two other useful, although whimsical, books are an alphabetical guide to the subjects (*Mary Poppins from A to Z*) and a cookbook (coauthored by Maurice Moore-Betty) with its recipes embodied in a story (*Mary Poppins in the Kitchen: A Cookery Book with a Story*).

A word of caution: The *Mary Poppins* movie (produced by the Walt Disney studio in 1964), through which many know the story and the character, is a very unreliable version of Travers's work. It has nice music, delightful acting, and is charming in many ways, but it is a Disneyesque version of the books. The published volumes include archetypal imagery clearly open to Theosophical interpretation, largely omitted from the movie. A London West-End musical version of 2004 was based on the movie, with significant additions from the books, and a New York Broadway production of that musical opened in 2006. The stage version is closer to the books than the film is; but any dramatization of a book has to depart in many ways from its original because of the different nature of the two forms, films and stage productions being basically visual and a book purely verbal and so visualized solely in the minds of its readers.

The overall theme of the *Mary Poppins* books can be seen in a poem Pamela Travers published in *Parabola* magazine (11.2, May 1986, p. 31):

## Nirvana Is Samsara

Did you look back, O Prajnaparamita, as the strand  
Sloped to its foamy edge to greet you  
And your foot felt for its sandy landfall -  
Did you look back and know, hand hard at your lip,  
The journey needless;  
That from there, looking back across the laboring waters -  
Arrival mirroring the setting-forth -  
*This is the Other Shore?*

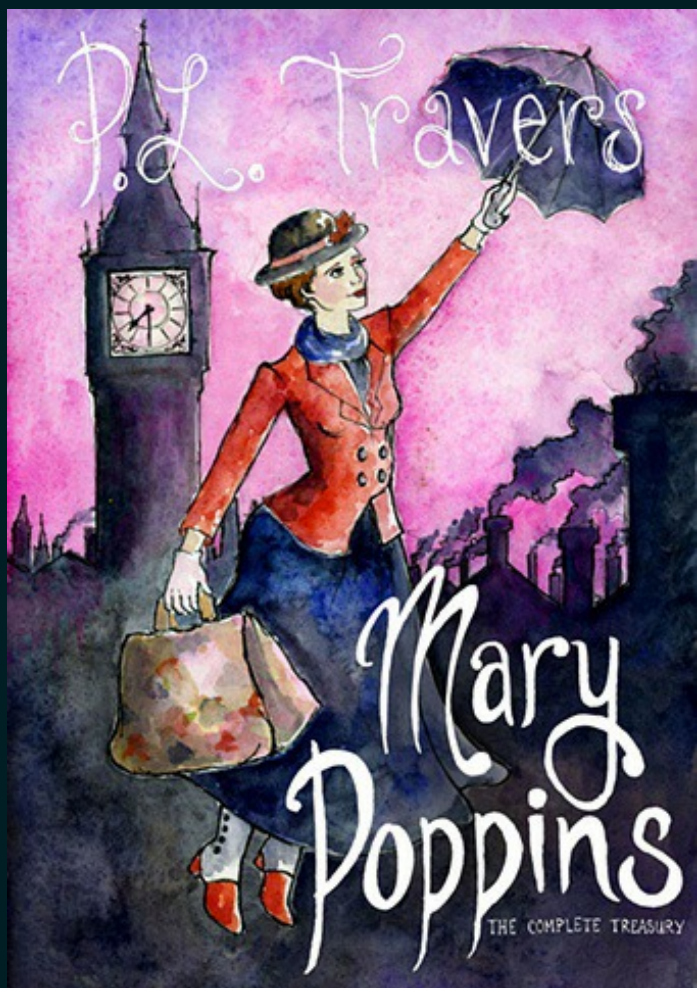
“Samsara” is this world we experience with our senses, the constantly changing world of birth and death. “Nirvana” is the “blowing out” of all misery; it is the experience of perfect peace, the goal of life. Going from Samsara to Nirvana is metaphorically described as crossing the ebbing and flowing waters of experience to the “Other Shore.” “Prajnaparamita” is the highest wisdom, here personified as one who possesses that supreme wisdom. The point of the poem is that our experience of this world determines whether it is Samsara or Nirvana, which are not places, but states of consciousness that we can experience anywhere and at any time. That is also the point of the *Mary Poppins* books and is the insight that Mary Poppins tries to bring the children of the Banks family to realize - and, of course, what all readers of the *Mary Poppins* books should also realize as the theme of those books.

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Travers, Pamela L.

*Mary Poppins*

London: Harper Collins Children's Books, 1998, c. 1934.

## CHAPTER 2

# The First Book of the Series: Mary Poppins

*Mary Poppins*, the first book of the series (with 161 pages of text), begins in the house at Number 17, Cherry Tree Lane, the home of the Banks family, consisting of Mr. Banks (appropriately a bank officer), his harassed wife, their four children (Jane, Michael, and the twins John and Barbara), a cook, a serving girl, and a general-work man who avoids work as much as he can. There was a nanny also, but she has left without notice, leaving Mrs. Banks frantic about how to replace her.

The house itself is the smallest in the Lane, dilapidated, and in need of painting. The condition of the house is an objective correlative of the state of the Banks family and, indeed, of most of us most of the time. ("Objective correlative" is a fancy term invented by T. S. Eliot for an external thing or state of affairs that symbolizes and evokes an internal emotional response in a reader.)

On the day the book begins, a strong cold East Wind is blowing (the capitalization in the book alerting us to the fact that this East Wind is more than air movement from a particular direction - it symbolizes change from the symbolic East, the place of enlightenment). The children, looking out the nursery window, see Mary Poppins arrive, not in a normal way, but blown along by the East Wind, carried over the gate of the house, and put down at the front door. Mrs. Banks immediately hires her, although Mary Poppins

refuses to give references, as doing so is a “very old-fashioned idea.” She comes up to the nursery not by climbing the stairs, but by sliding *up* the banister. She brings with her a carpet bag, which the children see is completely empty. Yet from it she extracts a seeming endless number of things, beginning with a starched white apron and ending with a folding bed with blankets and a quilt.

So begins a series of wonderful and highly improbable experiences and adventures the children have with Mary Poppins, who never explains those events but consistently rejects the children's reports and questions about them, implying that they did not happen, although the children often have physical evidence that they did. Each of the three basic books has at least one such adventure that embodies a central theme of the stories: the unity of all life and the order that guides and regulates the cosmos. Moreover, each of those central-theme chapters is set in different one of the traditional archetypal elements: earth, water, and air (which correspond with the Theosophical planes or dimensions of reality: physical, emotional, and mental. In the first book, that adventure is described in chapter 10, “Full Moon.” It is set in a zoo, thus representing the basic earthly, physical, animalistic world.

The occasion described in that chapter is a very rare one, namely, Mary Poppins' birthday coinciding with a full moon (the phases of the moon being another traditional symbol of change). The coincidence of those two events (full moon and birthday) always has a remarkable effect, which this time is witnessed by Jane and Michael. Just before bedtime, those two are counting the pennies they have saved, and Michael says he wants to use his to buy an elephant of his own, like the ones they have at the zoo. That leads him to ask Mary Poppins what happens in the zoo at night, when everyone's gone home. Jane tells him, “It's no good asking her. She knows everything, but she never tells.” The two children are about to find out what happens in the zoo at night.

Mary Poppins puts the children to bed and then hurries away “as though all the winds of the world were blowing behind her.” Almost at once, Jane and Michael hear an invisible voice urging them to get up, get dressed, and to come with the speaker, whom they never see. They are led to the zoo, where they meet a Bear who tells them that he (and the other zoo creatures) are out of their cages “only when the Birthday falls on a Full Moon.” They don't know whose birthday it is, but inside the zoo, they find that all the animals are out of



their cages, which instead are filled with human beings. The Bear then leads them to meet Mary Poppins and an ancient Hamadryad (or king cobra), who is the lord of the animal world, “the wisest and most terrible of us all,” the Bear tells them. The Hamadryad then gives Mary Poppins a birthday present, one of his own skins, on which he has written a greeting. Then he says he hears the signal for the Grand Chain, and he leads the children to a huge green square in the center of the zoo.

“As they drew nearer they could hear the animals singing and shouting, and presently they saw leopards and lions, beavers, camels, bears, cranes, antelopes and many others all forming themselves into a ring round Mary Poppins. Then the animals began to move, wildly crying their Jungle songs, prancing in and out of the ring, and exchanging hand and wing as they went as dancers do the Grand Chain of the Lancers.” That Chain is “a figure in formation dances, such as the lancers and Scottish reels, in which couples split up and move around in a circle in opposite directions, passing all other dancers until reaching their original partners” (*Collins English Dictionary*). It is a stately, solemn dance in which the dancers salute and bow to one another as they pass each other, a dance originally performed by military groups with lances in hand.

The Hamadryad explains that creatures that normally prey on each other do not do so on the Birthday: “Even I ... can meet a Barnacle goose without any thought of dinner - on this occasion. And after all, ... it may be that to eat and be eaten are the same thing in the end. My wisdom tells me that this is probably so.” That may seem like a shocking statement, but actually it is a reference to one of the Gnostic Gospels, the Acts of John, which tells of a dance and song done by Jesus and his disciples before going to the Mount of Olives, where Jesus foretold the events of his coming crucifixion. Here is part of that Gospel, as translated by G. R. S. Mead:

“... he gathered all of us together and said: / Before I am delivered up unto them let us sing a hymn to the Father, / and so go forth to that which lieth before us. / He bade us therefore make as it were a ring, / holding one another's hands, / and himself standing in the midst he said: / Answer Amen unto me. / He began, then, to sing a hymn and to say: / Glory be to thee, Father. / And we, going about in a ring, answered him: / Amen. ... I would be saved, and I would save. / Amen. / I would be loosed, and I would loose. /

Amen. / I would be wounded, and I would wound. / Amen. / I would be born, and I would bear. / Amen. / I would eat, and I would be eaten. / Amen.”

Thus the wisdom of the Hamadryad is actually a quotation from a Gnostic Gospel and should be seen in a spiritual archetypal sense, not a physical, literal one. The Hamadryad continues: “We are all made of the same stuff. The same substance composes us - the tree overhead, the stone beneath us, the bird, the beast, the star - we are all one, all moving to the same end. ... Look!’ and he nodded his head towards the moving mass of creatures before them. Birds and animals were now swaying together, closely encircling Mary Poppins, who was rocking lightly from side to side. Backwards and forwards went the swaying crowd, keeping time together, swinging like the pendulum of a clock. Even the trees were bending and lifting gently, and the moon seemed to be rocking in the sky as a ship rocks on the sea. [para.] ‘Bird and beast and stone and star - we are all one, all one -’ murmured the Hamadryad ... as he himself swayed between the children. [para.] ‘Child and serpent, star and stone - all one.’”

The Hamadryad's comment is clearly a Theosophical statement of the unity of all existence, the oneness of all being. And the Grand Chain is clearly a Theosophical image of the universal order of the cosmos. This whole passage is a magnificent example of why the Mary Poppins books can be regarded as expositions of the Ancient Wisdom presented in the form of fantasy fiction.

Jane and Michael are entranced by the Hamadryad's speech and slip off into a state between waking and sleeping. When they come into normal consciousness, it is morning and they are back in their beds in the Night Nursery at Number 17, Cherry Tree Lane. At first, both think that they had been dreaming, but when they discover that they had the same “dream,” they conclude that it must have been an actual experience. Jane then asks Mary Poppins, who is fixing their porridge, whether she, Mary Poppins, was at the zoo last night. Mary Poppins replies in her usual, offended manner to any such question, without actually answering it, but expressing outrage at its impertinence and changing the subject. Jane therefore concludes that the night's experience must have been just a dream after all. But Michael points out that Mary Poppins is wearing a belt made of golden scaly snakeskin, on which is written: “A Present from the Zoo.”

The question of what is dream and what is reality is also a Theosophical theme. Dreams are sometimes our daytime remembrance of actual experiences on the higher planes or dimensions of reality. Pamela Travers writes about “the Australian concept of the Dreaming, of which I know a little, having been brought up there. Everything that is not at this very instant - when we're chopping wood or finding witchetty grubs - is in the Dreaming. I can go into the Dreaming and you can go into the Dreaming at any moment and be refreshed. The anthropologists call it the Dreamtime but that word ‘time’ immediately makes things move serially, puts them into place and locality. The Aborigines speak of it as the Dreaming - in their tribal tongues, *Tamminga* or *Dooghoor* - and for them everything is there” (*What the Bee Knows*, p. 97).

In response to a question about where she got the idea for a particular scene, Travers responded: “I just put the scene down as it arrived. It comes out of something in me, but it isn't as though I invented it. ... In Celtic legend it's the Cauldron of Plenty, the Water of Life, and among the Australian aborigines it's ‘the dreaming’” (Draper and Koralek, *A Lively Oracle*, pp. 164-5). Elsewhere in that same work (p.212), Koralek writes: “**D** is for ... the Dreaming of the aboriginal people of her [Travers'] native land, of that ‘objective Now’ where time stops, that non-moment of wakefulness, the everlasting non-existence from which existence rises.” In that sense, dreams are more “real” than the ordinary reality of our physical consciousness.

Travers also wrote that “the Dreamtime ... was not, in fact, time at all, but rather timelessness; space, too, and spacelessness; matter, spirit, life and death, everything and always.” And farther on in the same article on “The Legacy of the Ancestors”: “Death on one plane may be life on another. ... [para.] ... Dreamtime teachings ... tell us, again mythologically, that what is irreconcilable is at the same time reconciled; that our profane, desacralized life ... is the seeding ground of the sacred; that if I forget thee, Jerusalem, Jerusalem nevertheless is there; that rock is gold that does not know itself; and that in the darkness of Kali Yuga fallen light is renewed” (*What the Bee Knows*, pp. 31, 34-4). That is a thoroughly Theosophical mode of thought.

At the end of the first book, another strong wind is blowing, but this time it is a West Wind. Both represent change; but as the East Wind begins things, the West Wind ends them. Mary Poppins has packed all her things into her cornucopian carpet bag; holding it and her umbrella, she steps out the front

door of Number 17, Cherry Tree Lane. The West Wind slips under her opened umbrella and carries her off into the sky or, it may be, into the Dreaming. She has left behind a message for the children, ending "Au revoir," which the cook translates as, "To Meet Again."



Travers, Pamela L.  
*Mary Poppins Comes Back.*  
San Diego: Harcourt, Odyssey/Harcourt Young Classic, 1997, c. 1935.

## CHAPTER 3

# The Second Book of the Series: Mary Poppins Comes Back

*Mary Poppins Comes Back*, the second book of the series (with 269 pages of text), is about 1.67 times longer than the first book, with ten chapters, compared with the first book's twelve chapters, so the episodes are significantly longer, as well.

At the opening of *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, the Banks' house, without Mary to give it order, has returned to its natural state of chaos. Mr. Banks complains, "I don't know what's come over this house ... Nothing ever goes right - hasn't for ages! Shaving water too hot, breakfast coffee too cold. And how - this!" Robertson Ay, the man of all work around the house (who does as little work as possible and sleeps as much as he can), has brushed Mr. Banks's hat with the boot-brush and polished it. "Oh, dear!" Said Mrs. Banks [as her husband left] "It is quite true. Nothing does go right nowadays. ... Ever since Mary Poppins left without a Word of Warning everything has gone wrong."

But Mary Poppins is about to return. In the first book, she is lifted and borne by the East Wind into the house at Number 17, Cherry Tree Lane. In this second book, she literally descends from the sky. The children are in the park alone, as they have no nanny to keep an eye on them. Michael is flying his green and yellow kite, which goes up very high indeed. A cloud drifts across the sky and hides the kite from sight: "The taut string running up from

Michael's hand seemed to link them all to the cloud, and the earth to the sky." They try to pull the kite back down, but it will not come. Then suddenly the kite string starts winding around the stick of its own accord. But what comes down at the end of the string is not the kite; it is Mary Poppins.

Mary Poppins takes the children home and puts them to bed. As she is changing her clothes, they notice a small golden locket on a chain around her neck. Michael asks what's in it, and she tells him a portrait. He asks, "Whose?" And she tells him that they'll know when she goes. They all beg her to stay forever, and she replies, "I'll stay till the chain breaks." "Chain" here refers not just to the physical one around her neck, but to the metaphorical one that connects her with this world, including Number 17, Cherry Tree Lane. Mary Poppins, as usual, emphatically rejects the children's account of her coming down out of the sky at the end of a kite string. But that night, the children spot her coat hung on a hook behind the door. "And dangling from the pocket were a row of paper tassels, the tassels of a green-and-yellow Kite."

A series of Poppins-esque adventures for the children follow. In chapter 2, Euphemia Andrew, Mr. Banks' governess when he was a little boy, comes for a visit. She is, in Mr. Banks' words, a Holy Terror, who trapped a lark and keeps it in a cage. Mary Poppins frees the lark and puts Miss Andrew in the cage instead, as a result of which she leaves posthaste. In chapter 3, Jane is having a bad Wednesday and ends up inside the world depicted on a Royal Doulton bowl that she has cracked. In that world, she is made into a servant until she calls on Mary Poppins, who comes to rescue her.

In chapter 4, Jane and Michael accompany Mary Poppins on a visit to her cousin, Arthur Turvey, who on the day they arrive is experiencing everything backwards, such as standing topsy-turvy on his head, as all his visitors do also. In chapter 5, a new baby, Annabel, is born to the Bankses. Like all newborns, she can talk with animals, and she tells a starling on the window sill, "I come from the Dark where all things have their beginning. ... I come from the sea and its tides ... I come from the sky and its stars. ... I heard the stars singing as I came and I felt warm wings about me. ... It was a long journey." Within a week of birth, however, all newborns forget how to talk with animals and where they came from. In chapter 6, Robertson Ay, the work-dodging man of all work at Number 17 turns out to have been a very wise Dirty

Rascal fool in the court of a king in another world who fell to earth at No. 17, Cherry Tree Lane.

Chapter 7, "The Evening Out," is the central-theme episode in the second book and is set in the sky, that is, the archetypal element of air, representing the mental plane or dimension. This evening is Mary Poppins' evening off, so after feeding the children and tucking them into bed, she scurries away. Jane and Michael lie in bed looking through the window at the shooting stars that fill the sky. Michael says it's like fireworks or a circus and wonders whether they have circuses in Heaven. Suddenly a large bright shooting star comes right into the bedroom and urges the two children to get dressed and come with him. They do, but Jane wonders whether she could be dreaming. The star that is leading them leaps into the air and tells the children to follow by stepping on stars. They do so and find themselves standing at the edge of a ring of shining sand, with the sky above it drawn up to a point, like a tent. They are in the circus in the heavens, where the Ring Master is the Sun, and the Performing Constellations participate in the Big Parade. Seated in the Royal Box is Mary Poppins. And then the Sun invites all to dance the Dance of the Wheeling Sky.

Michael wonders whether his experience is real or not, and the Sun replies: "What is real and what is not? Can you tell me or I you? Perhaps we shall never know more than this - that to think a thing is to make it true." Jane wonders whether it is true that they are there or only think they are. The Sun smiles sadly and responds, "From the beginning of the world all men have asked that question. And I, who am Lord of the Sky - even I do not know the answer. I am certain only that this is the Evening Out, that the Constellations are shining in your eyes and that it is true if you think it is."

Then Mary Poppins and the Sun dance together, without touching, but opposite each other, keeping perfect time together, as all of the constellations and planets join in the dance. At its end, the Sun lightly touches Mary Poppins' cheek with his lips. The dance being over, all the constellations rush from the ring. The children feel themselves in the rocking arms of Venus, the Homeward Star, and before they know it, they are back in their beds at home. The next morning, they ask Mary Poppins about what happened. As is her wont, she dismisses their question without answering it or denying the events of the night. But Jane points out to her brother that on the center of Mary Poppins'

cheek is a small fiery mark, round and with flame-shaped edges like a very small sun.

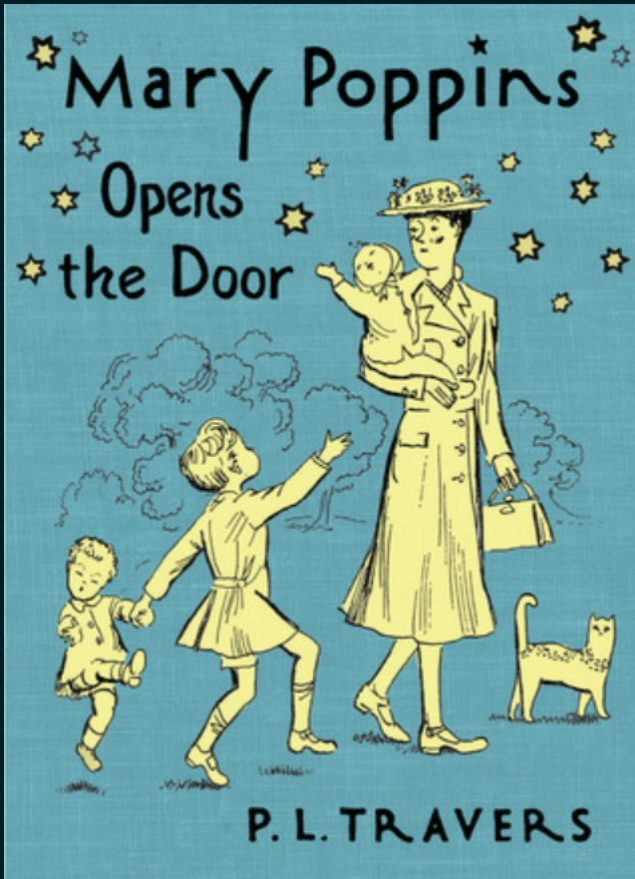
In chapter 8, Mary Poppins takes Jane and Michael and the twins, John and Barbara, on a shopping trip, in which they meet the Balloon Woman, from whom they all get balloons with their names on them. The Balloon Woman denies having put their names on the balloons and says, "All I know is that the names *are* there! And there's a balloon for everybody in the world if only they choose properly." The balloons, which let them float joyously through the air, may be taken as symbols of liberating self-knowledge. In chapter 9, Mary Poppins takes the children to meet Nellie-Rubina, a wooden-doll person who sells conversations, as a sort of candy.

Chapter 10 (which can be seen as a second central-theme episode) ends the second book appropriately with a merry-go-round, a symbol of life as a pleasant series of recurring cycles, which has come to the park near Number 17. When people hear that Mary Poppins is taking the children to it for a ride, they all assume that Mary Poppins is going to leave the world on that merry-go-round, and their expressions of farewell puzzle the children. Their ride on the merry-go-round is quite an experience: "It seemed as if they would never stop, as if there were no such thing as Time, as if the world was nothing but a circle of light and a group of painted horses. [para] The sun died in the West and the dusk came fluttering down. But still they rode, faster and faster, till at last they could not distinguish tree from sky. The whole broad earth was spinning now about them with a deep drumming sound like a humming top. [para] Never again would Jane and Michael and John and Barbara be so close to the centre of the world as they were on that whirling ride."

Then Mary Poppins goes to ride herself, first telling Jane to take care of Michael and the twins. The ticket collector asks her, "Single or Return?" She hesitates for a moment, then says, "You never know ... It might come in useful. I'll take a Return." The merry-go-round begins to revolve faster and faster. As Mary Poppins passes them on her wooden horse, something breaks from her neck and lands at the children's feet. It is her locket, whose golden chain has broken. Jane opens it and finds a picture of all five children with Mary Poppins. "And then a strange thing happened. With a great blast of trumpets, the whole Merry-go-round rose, spinning, from the ground. ... [para] On and on, pricking through the sky, went the Merry-go-round, carrying Mary Poppins with it. And



at last it was just a tiny twinkling shape, a little larger but not otherwise different from a star. [para] ... Out of the sky she had come, back to the sky she had gone."



Travers, Pamela L.  
*Mary Poppins Opens the Door.*  
San Diego: Harcourt, Odyssey/Harcourt Young Classic, 1997, c. 1943.

## CHAPTER 4

# The Third Book of the Series: Mary Poppins Opens the Door

*Mary Poppins Opens the Door*, the third and final volume of the three basic Mary Poppins books (with 255 pages of text), is almost as long as the preceding volume and has eight chapters.

The book opens on November 5, which in England is Guy Fawkes Day. Guy Fawkes was a Catholic in Protestant England under King James I. Fawkes became part of a plot to assassinate the King and blow up Parliament in what is called the Gunpowder Plot on November 5, 1605. Ever since then, that day on the calendar has been observed as Guy Fawkes Day, on which his effigy is burned on a bonfire to the accompaniment of fireworks, which are as closely linked to November 5 in England as they are to July 4 in America. The general term *guy* (which dates from 1806) has different meanings in England and America. In England, it means "a grotesque effigy of Guy Fawkes burned on Guy Fawkes Day, or a grotesque-looking person." In America, it used to be a familiar term for any man, but more recently, especially in plurals like "you guys" it can apply to both men and women.

The Banks family in Number 17, Cherry Tree Lane, is in its usual chaotic condition when Mary Poppins is not there to organize everything. Mr. Banks is particularly agitated on this bleak and chilly November morning because Robertson Ay (the man of all work who works as little as possible) has given him one black shoe and one brown one, and Mr. Banks announces that he will

not be home for dinner, which greatly alarms the children because he is the one who sets off the fireworks for them on Guy Fawkes Day. As he is leaving, the chimney-sweep arrives and offers to shake hands with him because it is lucky to shake hands with a Sweep; but Mr. Banks will have none of that. But the Sweep offers to take the children to the Park and set off some fireworks for them. So off they go.

In the Park, they have a fine time with splendid loud and colorful fireworks, but as closing time approaches, they set off the last rocket. It goes off and upward but does not end with the shower of sparks all the others did. Instead it creates only one tiny spark. The children watch it, and unlike the others it does not go out, but grows larger and brighter; and, as it comes down, it turns into Mary Poppins, with her carpetbag and parrot-headed umbrella. The Park Keeper is very upset at this irregularity and flings out his hand to stop her, but Mary Poppins puts into his hand a small piece of cardboard, which she says is her Return Ticket. She ushers the children home, where Mrs. Banks is delighted to see her, but complains, "You left me Without a Word, Mary Poppins ... I think you might tell me when you're coming and going, I never know where I am." Mary Poppins replies, "Nobody does, ma'am." Then her carpetbag slides up the bannisters to the Nursery, and her umbrella spreads itself like a bird and follows.

Mary Poppins is back, and the house is again orderly. The children want her to stay permanently. She says only, "I'll stay until the door opens." What door she refers to is unclear. To their observation that she came down from the sky from a spark that a rocket produced, she responds with her usual outrage at the impropriety of their observation. But when they are in bed, they see in the folds of her umbrella a mass of colored stars of a kind a rocket produces when it explodes in the sky.

In chapter 2, Mary, Jane, and Michael go to visit Mary's cousin, Fred Twigley, to get him to tune the Banks' piano. They are admitted, reluctantly and rudely by his housekeeper, Sarah Clump, who wants to marry him. Mr. Twigley's Godmother gave him seven wishes, of which he has used up two and is trying to save the other five, but he keeps on carelessly squandering them. Mr. Twigley is making a music box, into which he will put all the sounds of the Park, including "the slow, soft murmur of trees as they grow." Michael protests, "But you can't hear trees growing ... There's no music for that!" And

Mr. Twigley responds, "Of course there is! There's a music for everything. ... Everything in the world - trees, rocks and stars and human beings - they all have their own true music." That is a fundamentally Theosophical idea: everything vibrates, each thing produces its own characteristic sound. By the end of the visit, Mr. Twigley has gotten rid of Sarah Clump and used up all his wishes, the last one being to tune the Banks' piano.

Other adventures follow until chapters 6, "High Tide," and 7, "Happy Ever After," either of which could be taken as the central-theme episode of the third book; it is a role they share. In the first book, the central-theme chapter involved a visit to the zoo, which represents the earth. In the second book, the central theme concerns a visit to the heavens, the air. In this third book, chapter 6 appropriately takes the children under water. There Jane has a conversation with a Terrapin; she says, "I thought the Sea would be so different, but really, it's very like the land!" The Terrapin replies, "And why not? ... The land came out of the sea, remember. Each thing on the earth has a brother here - the lion, the dog, the hare, the elephant. The precious gems have their kind in the sea so have the starry constellations. The rose remembers the salty waters and the moon the ebb and flow of the tide. You, too, must remember it. Jane and Michael! There are more things in the sea, my children, than ever came out of it." The notion of the great sea as the source of life is widespread; and the concept of parallel lines of evolution is very Theosophical.

Chapter 7 ("Happy Ever After") takes place on the last day of the old year and introduces a concept that was central to Pamela Travers' thinking: that of a Crack in space-time, in which anything is possible and all problems disappear. That Crack is, as it were, an opening to the Dreaming. As he is going to bed, Michael suddenly sits up and asks:

"When igzackly does the Old Year end?"

"Tonight," said Mary Poppins shortly. "At the first stroke of twelve."

"And when does it begin?" he went on.

"When does what begin?" she snapped.

"The New Year," answered Michael patiently.

"On the last stroke of twelve," she replied, giving a short sharp sniff.

“Oh? Then what happens in between? ... Between the first and last stroke,” he explained hurriedly.

Mary Poppins turned and glared at him.

“Never trouble Trouble till Trouble troubles you!” she advised priggishly.

Michael gets his answer later, when the first strike of midnight ends the old year. Then remarkable things happen. Toys come alive: a Golden Pig, Alfred the Elephant, Pinnie the Monkey, and an old Blue Duck. They lead Jane and Michael out of the house and to the Park, where the following exchange takes place:

“Alfred flung up his flannel trunk and eagerly sniffed the air. / ‘Ha!’ He remarked delightedly ‘We’re safely inside, Pig, don’t you think?’ / ‘Inside what?’ asked Michael curiously. / ‘The Crack,’ said Alfred, flapping his ears.”

Then many other characters from nursery rhymes, such as Humpty-Dumpty, and stories, such as Robinson Crusoe, appear. They have all escaped from their books because, before leaving the Nursery, Mary Poppins had propped open their books. Jane wonders at the characters' ability to slip out of their books and into the “real” world and asks whether they can often do so. Crusoe answers, “Alas, no! Only at the end of the year. The Crack’s our one and only chance.”

“‘What crack?’ demanded Michael. ‘The Crack between the Old Year and the New. The Old Year dies on the first Stroke of Midnight and the New Year is born on the Last Stroke. And in between - while the other ten strokes are sounding - there lies the secret Crack.’ [Sleeping Beauty continues:] ‘And inside the Crack all things are as one. The eternal opposites meet and kiss. The wolf and the lamb lie down together, the dove and the serpent share one nest. The stars bend down and touch the earth and the young and the old forgive each other. Night and day meet here, so do the poles. The East leans over towards the West and the circle is complete. This is the time and place, my darlings - the *only* time and the *only* place - where everybody lives happily ever after.’

Mary Poppins also enters the Park. “‘But why is she here?’ demanded Jane, as she watch that shape come down the clearing. ‘Mary Poppins is not a fairy-tale.’ / ‘She’s even better!’ said Alfred loyally, ‘She’s a fairy-tale come true.

Besides,' he rumbled, 'she's the Guest of the Evening! It was she who left the books open.'" Everyone is dancing. Everyone has a partner. No one is left out. Everyone is happy. Then the strokes of the clock begin again, up to "Eleven! O fleeting moment! O time on the wing! How short is the space between the years! Let us be happy - happy ever after! / Twelve!" Then the dancing ends. All the characters seem to melt into the moonshine, as all the bells all over London ring in the New Year.

Jane and Michael open their eyes and find they are back in their beds, and Mary Poppins asks who wants crumpets for breakfast. "'Is today the New Year, Mary Poppins?' asked Michael. / 'Yes,' she said calmly, as she put the plate down on the table. / Michael looked at her solemnly. He was thinking about the Crack. / 'Shall we too, Mary Poppins?' he asked, blurting out the question. / 'Shall you, too, what?' she enquired with a sniff. / 'Live happily ever afterwards?' he said eagerly. / A smile, half sad, half tender, played faintly round her mouth. / 'Perhaps,' she said thoughtfully. 'It all depends.' / 'What on, Mary Poppins?' / 'On you,' she said quietly, as she carried the crumpets to the fire."

In chapter 8, "The Other Door," Mary Poppins leaves as she said she would. When she and the children are out and about, all her friends are saying good-by to her. At first, the children think that the friends are going somewhere, but when they get back to the nursery, they find that her camp bed is gone, and they realize that it is Mary Poppins who is leaving. They look out the window and see reflected in it an image of the nursery in all details, including the nursery room door. It is the "Other Door," and they see Mary Poppins carrying her carpet bag and umbrella walking through the reflected room and opening the Other Door. She walks through it and into the sky, from which she came. "We'll never forget you, Mary Poppins!" the children exclaim, as they look up at the sky. "Her bright shape paused in its flight for a moment and gave an answering wave. Then darkness folded its wing about her and hid her from their eyes." So ends the third and last of the three basic Mary Poppins books.

## CHAPTER 5

# A Review of the First Three Books and a Look Ahead

This last part of the present series on Mary Poppins offers some comments on books other than the three basic ones and sums up a Theosophical view of the subject. Those first three basic books, considered in chapters 2-4 of this series are *Mary Poppins* (1934), *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935), and *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (1943).

The fourth book in the series, *Mary Poppins in the Park*, 1952, is a collection of six episodes: Travers, Pamela L. *Mary Poppins in the Park*. San Diego: Harcourt, Odyssey/Harcourt Young Classic, 1997, c. 1952.

In that book, a beginning note tells us that its events “should be understood to have happened during any of the three visits of Mary Poppins to the Banks family. This is a word of warning to anybody who may be expecting they are in for a fourth visit. She cannot forever arrive and depart. And, apart from that, it should be remembered that three is a lucky number.”

For that reason, the present series of commentaries has been limited to the lucky first three volumes, The two last books in which Mary Poppins takes the children at Number 17 Cherry Tree Lane on adventures are, however, also especially worth noting: Travers, Pamela L. *Mary Poppins in Cherry Tree Lane*. New York: Dell, Yearling Book, 1983, c. 1982. Travers, Pamela L. *Mary Poppins and the House Next Door*. London: Puffin Books, 1990, c. 1988.

These two, like *Mary Poppins in the Park*, are not stories of additional visits, but episodes to be understood as happening earlier, both during book 2 (*Mary Poppins Comes Back*) or book 3 (*Mary Poppins Opens the Door*) as they have the new baby Annabel in them and *House Next Door* is about a reappearance of the Holy Terror Euphemia Andrew, both of those characters first appearing in book 2.

On the last page of an article entitled “The Interviewer,” originally published in *Parabola* and reprinted in *What the Bee Knows: Reflections on Myth, Symbol and Story* (Wellingborough, UK: Aquarian Press, 1989; London: Penguin, Arkana, 1993; pp. 203-9), Pamela Travers gives an insightful description of the process by which she wrote the *Mary Poppins* books, which is the same process that every reader goes through in responding to them: “C S Lewis, in a letter to a friend, says, ‘There is only one Creator and we merely mix the elements He gives us’ — a statement less simple than it seems. For that ‘mere mixing’, while making it impossible for us to say ‘I myself am the maker,’ also shows us our essential place in the process. Elements among elements, we are there to shape, order, define, and in doing this we, reciprocally, are defined, shaped, and ordered. The potter, moulding the receptive clay, is himself being moulded.” As Travers indicates elsewhere, every reader is also a co-author of what is read, because reading involves more than recognizing the words printed on a page. It also involves understanding the meaning of those words, and every reader’s understanding will be uniquely his or her own, shaped by the past experiences of personal history and changing as passing time changes the reader.

The point just made is also stated in an April 13, 2012, *Times Literary Supplement* book review entitled “English Made Me: We Are Different People When We Read a Book a Second Time — and We Are Often Reading a Different Book.” The review ends (p. 4) thus: “As we revisit the objects of our reading, like recognizable but weathered landmarks, there can be no full going back, because we are not exactly the same people we were; but the consolation of rereading is the knowledge that we are these different people in part because of what those books have made of us.”

Pamela Travers also emphasizes in many ways that life is a mixture of opposites, a fact graphically illustrated by the Chinese cosmological symbol of the “Great Ultimate” *Tai Chi*:





The complementary halves of this symbol are the black yin and the white yang, representing all opposites: dark/light, female/male, soft/hard, low/high, contemplation/action, sustaining/dominating, sensitivity/intellect — each turning into its opposite complement in harmonic equilibrium. Every person is likely to favor one or the other of those complements, generally or at least at particular junctures in life. Travers states that she gravitates to the dark complement, even when it is embodied in the villain, rather than the light complement embodied in the hero: “It is the lineaments of the villains — dwarf, giant and stepmother, wicked fairy, dragon, witch — that leap to me now across the years. Each one is different, each is its own — pitted, grained and cicatriced [i.e. scarred], battered by passion and power.” That statement may remind us of other similar ones in the great literature of the world. The novel *Anna Karenina* opens with the memorable line “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” And a witticism about the two main characters in the novel *Vanity Fair* (the cynical anti-heroine Becky Sharp and her opposite, the good-natured but naive Amelia Sedley) is “Moralists may preach and carp in platitudes most deadly; the world remembers Becky Sharp and not Amelia Sedley.”

It may say something about us that we find wickedness more interesting than goodness, and imperfection than perfection, but it is a very human reaction. A well-known observation is that “evil” is “live” spelled backward. Evil and good are ultimately our responses to various stages in the evolution of the cosmos and to the stages of our existence. That complex interaction is the theme of all the Mary Poppins books.

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