



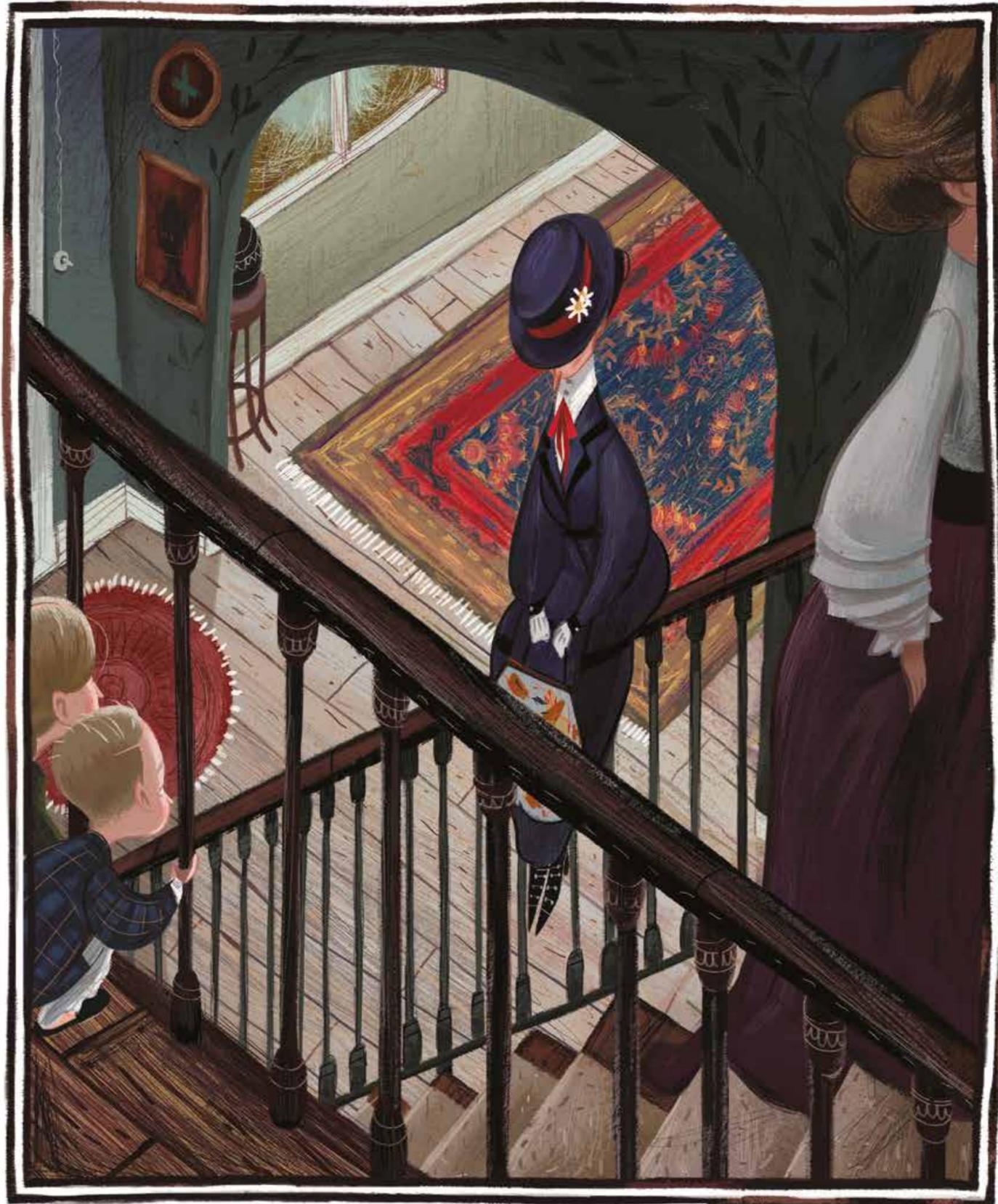
MARY POPPINS

# Don't you know that everybody's got a Fairyland of their own?

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*Mary Poppins*  
Ms P. L. Travers

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1. Los niños miraron con curiosidad a la singular niñera.

**P.** L. Travers, the Australian author of Mary Poppins, was as mysterious and elusive as her creation — the nanny who flew into the Banks’ family household with her parrot-headed umbrella, a carpetbag and no nonsense method of magically making order out of chaos.

“I think the idea of Mary Poppins has been blowing in and out of me, like a curtain at a window, all my life,” answered Miss Pamela Lyndon Travers in a 1964 interview. A global icon adored by adults and children alike, Mary Poppins is remembered as a charismatic Edwardian woman with a handsome, smiling face and song-filled lungs, who can cajole children into bed chanting about a ‘A Spoonful of Sugar’. Lesser known is the story of the real Mary Poppins, which begins long before an elegant Julie Andrews embodied one of the most famous children’s book characters of all time. Now, with the recent publishing of a new semi-autobiographical tale, the story of the real Mary Poppins is illuminated once more.

Mary Poppins was the masterpiece and most prized creation of P. L. Travers, an Australian-born writer whose real name was Helen Lyndon Goff. The eldest of three daughters, Travers adopted her stage name as a young actress by combining the popular name Pamela with the first name of her beloved father, Travers.

You might imagine that the woman who based her books on how to bring up children had a joyous youth. The reality is far from it. Born in Queensland, Australia on 9 August 1899, her life began with much creativity and happiness, spending time with her imaginative and charismatic father, whom she adored. Sadly, Travers’ childhood was complicated, and tragedy laced her early years. Mr Travers Goff was a bank clerk. Ignominiously demoted at work, he struggled with alcoholism and the pressures of his working life. He died soon after P. L. Travers’ 7th birthday.

Shortly after, her mother, struggling with the death of her husband and the strain of caring for three small children, announced that she was going to the lake to drown herself, and requested that the young P. L. Travers look after ‘the little ones’. Her suicide attempt was unsuccessful, but the family was left in disarray. And so, just as the Banks family of Mary Poppins needed saving from their dysfunctional lives, so too did a young Miss Travers.

Following her mother’s attempted suicide and father’s death, a stern and formidable woman with a ‘heart of gold’ blew in, and arrived on the doorstep carrying a parrot umbrella. Her name was Christina Saraset or Aunt Sass to the children. Aunt Sass was the woman who restored order within the Goff household, and became at least part of the inspiration for a certain children’s book character who emerged many years later.

# Mary

The sequence of events involving Aunt Sass's arrival are closely reflected in the original Mary Poppins books. In the opening chapter the reader is invited in to number 17 Cherry Tree Lane where the dysfunctional Banks family resides. An exasperated Mrs Banks faces the grueling task of finding yet another nanny after the mischievous children, Jane and Michael, have driven Katie Nanna from the house. In the midst of this mayhem, the children stand at the window and witness the most extraordinary sight: a woman clutching her hat to her head with one hand and grasping a carpetbag in the other. She is being blown by the east wind towards their front door, parrot umbrella in tow. They are watching Mary Poppins float elegantly, magically, into their lives at the moment they need her most. This is the modern woman who can turn medicine into rum punch, slide up bannisters and pack an armchair into her seemingly-empty bag, the woman who would save the Banks family, just as Aunt Sass saved the Goffs.

In November 2014, a previously unpublished P. L. Travers story adorned the shelves of bookstores globally. Semi-autobiographical, Aunt Sass was originally published as a Christmas present for Travers' friends and family, with only 500 copies ever printed. It tells the story of the dominant aunt's stay during her childhood. In recollection of her character, Travers writes, "imagine a bulldog whose ferocious exterior covers a heart tender to the point of sentimentality and you have Christina Saraset". Much like Poppins, she was reliable yet stern, present always when one needed her most, and used to say, 'spit spot, into bed'.

Years later, with Aunt Sass's death, Travers commented "I thought to myself, 'Some day, in spite of her, I shall commit the disrespectful vulgarity of putting Aunt Sass in a book.' And then it occurred to me that this had already been done. I suddenly realised that there is a book through which Aunt Sass, stern and tender, secret and proud, anonymous and loving, stalks with her silent feet. You will find her occasionally in the pages of Mary Poppins."

It would be easy to conclude, then, that Aunt Sass was Mary Poppins. Yet there are further nuances in the books that suggest otherwise. In the stories, Mary Poppins is described as "rather like a wooden Dutch doll", "thin, with large feet and hands, and small, rather peering blue eyes". She was a world away from the elegant Julie Andrews who took a Best Actress Oscar home for her performance. The original illustrations by Mary Shepard represent Poppins as closer in appearance in fact to the author in her youth. The New York Times describes a young P. L. Travers as "A gracious observer of the English proprieties who at the same time did not suffer fools gladly, Miss Travers had deep blue eyes, high cheekbones and, as a young woman, a cap of curly dark gold hair". The Mary Poppins of the books is also a cold and vain character — traits that were mirrored by the author in reality.

The patriarch of the family, Mr Banks, is also inspired by Travers' past. He is so obsessed with his working life he rarely makes time for his children, which rings true of the later years of Travers Goff's life and his subsequent demise. Under pressure at work, Mr Banks declares that "the bank is broken" in the original books when he can't spare any coppers to give to the children. When Mary Poppins arrives it is not only to care for the children, but to save Mr Banks from his discontented life before it is too late. Mary Poppins helps him realise that his family need him. It is understandable, of course, that P. L. Travers would want a part of her to be reflected in the Mary Poppins character, for as Mary Poppins saves Mr Banks, Miss Travers in turn wished she could have saved her own father.

# Mary Poppins



3. ¿Quieres más té? — dijo dirigiéndose a Jane.

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The Mary Poppins tales — there are five of them in total — were clearly hugely personal to P. L. Travers, but with their growing global interest came requests to adapt and interpret the stories in other art forms. In the years after the publication of her first story, Walt Disney famously made a promise to his daughter to turn her beloved books into a film. He contacted P. L. Travers as early as 1938 to acquire the rights. Fiercely protective of the stories with which she held such a strong emotional attachment, Travers turned down Disney's offers again and again.

It wasn't until the 1960s that Travers finally relinquished the rights under growing financial strain. A single woman living independently in a Sussex cottage in England, where she first penned Mary Poppins, the royalties from her book were dwindling. The deal secured her five percent of the film's royalties, as well as approval rights over the script. In 1964 the books were adapted into a musical film also titled Mary Poppins, starring Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke.

The film's success turned P. L. Travers into a multi-millionaire, although she despised the representation of her characters. Travers was troubled by the adaptation that lost much of the gritty darkness from her stories, and did not depict her real Mary Poppins. Interspersed with songs about jolly holidays and singing on rooftops, P. L. Travers felt the film grossly misconstrued her original ideas.

Her opinion was that the magic of the original Mary Poppins tales had the ability to captivate audiences not only because of the main character's stern yet loveable nature, but also for the dark mystery surrounding the events. On her death, a New York Times obituary of P. L. Travers said, "throughout her writing life, Miss Travers retained the extraordinary ability to tap into the private, wistful anguish of childhood, and often said that she viewed the passage from childhood to adulthood as a single unbroken thread". Travers once remarked "sorrow lies like a heartbeat behind everything I have written". It was this personal sorrow and pain from P. L. Travers' youth that was weaved into the books and the character of Mary Poppins amongst the magic, sorrow that was largely ejected from the Disneyfied films.

Darkness and disruption were not only present in Travers' childhood. In the well-known film, the Banks family live in Edwardian times,

but the books were set firmly in 1930s Britain, the setting and exterior more complex than the film would have us know. A nervous country perching between two World Wars, the first of P. L. Travers' famous book series was published as Churchill warned of German rearmament, and the country struggled through the economic slump of the Great Depression. Tellingly, the house in which the Banks family reside is not the grand Edwardian abode depicted in the films but "the smallest house in the Lane", which is "rather dilapidated and needs a coat of paint".

Society in the 30s was also gripped by the Suffragette movement, which had been sweeping the nation since the late 19th century with modern ideals of female empowerment. Mary Poppins is a modern woman with a modern perspective. When interviewing at the Banks household she refuses to provide references describing them as "a very old-fashioned idea, to my mind". Disney's 1964 film recognises this modernism for the most part — one element, at least, that wasn't lost from the books. Still, the Mary Poppins P. L. Travers saw on screen was far removed from being practically perfect in every way, and she was driven to tears of disgust at the premier. It is said that her last will bans any further adaptations of her work by Americans.

In a BBC culture show special called The Secret Life of Mary Poppins, producer Cameron Mackintosh, who met with P. L. Travers to acquire the rights to develop a theatrical adaptation of the books, is asked who he thinks the real Mary Poppins is. He describes her as, "a mixture of herself — Pamela — and her aunt". P. L. Travers was asked the same question in a 1977 Desert Island Discs interview. A deeply private person, she remained wryly ambiguous: "the great characteristic of Mary Poppins is that she never explains".

Travers died in 1996 having been made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for services to literature, taking with her the secret of who the real Mary Poppins was. In doing so, Travers not only immortalised her most prized character and her mysterious magic, but allowed us as readers to live in a world of imagination forever, where the east wind blows over the rooftops of Cherry Tree Lane and where medicine can inexplicably become rum punch.

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