



## A Spoonful of Depth Brings the Soul to Life: The Psychology of Mary Poppins by Stacey Jill Zackin (Depth Insights™, Issue 5, Fall 2013)

Depth Insights™ was a semi-annual peer-reviewed scholarly journal published by the Depth Psychology Alliance.

*“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.”*  
- P. L. Travers, author of Mary Poppins (in Lawson, 1999, p. 161)

Mary Poppins is one of the most recognizable characters in the world. As the central figure of eight storybooks, a Broadway musical, and the 24<sup>th</sup>[1] most successful feature film ever released in the United States (Sibley & Lassell, 2007), Mary Poppins is a cultural icon. Clearly, there is something special about Mary Poppins that captures the collective imagination, yet the goal of this essay is not to apply the analytic lens to better understand the character of Mary Poppins, but to utilize Mary Poppins as an analogical tool to better understand the character of depth psychologists.

Depth psychologists believe that within our unconscious lies a wealth of material that expands our capacity to understand, accept, release, and repair aspects of ourselves, that can lead to a more developed sense of wholeness and connection. Such information reveals itself through symbols, metaphors, dreams, imagery, intuition, synchronicity (meaningful coincidences), symptoms, negative patterns, and external projections. However, before one can find meaning in such information, one must be open to receiving it. For the fictional Banks children she cared for, and the millions of real children she has influenced, Mary Poppins opens the door to the unconscious.

Although many have read the books written by Pamela Lyndon Travers, most people, much to the author’s chagrin, identify with the character as brought to life by Julie Andrews in the 1964 Disney film, a film Travers thought was a superficial, unsubstantial simplification of her deep, dark, and complicated stories. Although not a very public person, Travers was not shy in sharing her opinion of Walt Disney, who had courted and negotiated with her for over twenty-years before she finally entrusted him with Mary Poppins’ welfare. A trust she felt was abused.<sup>[2]</sup> Travers is quoted as saying that “Disney was without subtlety and emasculated any character he touched, replacing truth with false sentimentality” (Lawson, 1999, p. 247). Travers felt that although the film had elements of fantasy, it eliminated the mystery and magic by being overly externalized, simplified, and generalized (Lawson, 1999).

In the film, Mary Poppins is portrayed as a beautiful, empathetic caretaker who is compared to a “jolly holiday” that “makes you feel so grand, your ‘heart starts beatin’ like a big brass band” (Stevens, 1964). Upon her arrival at 17 Cherry Tree Lane, Mary uses catchy melodies, quaint witticisms, and a cast of colorful characters to bring order to the chaos that rules the Banks’ household and to repair the dysfunction that defines the Banks’ family. Essentially, she transforms a typically complicated British family into a Disneyfied American ideal.

In the original books, Mary is described as plain and vain with big hands and feet and a well-pressed but unflattering wardrobe. She is terse, punitive, and contradictory. Her arrival does not result in the restoration of perceived norms or the transcendence of family tensions. In fact, if you look beneath the surface, you see that Mary’s impact leads not to the maintenance of the status quo but to its disruption. Mary appears to be a prim

and proper guardian who embraces the notion of keeping children in their ‘proper place,’ but in actuality she creates opportunities for Jane, Michael, Barbara, John, and Annabel to explore the unknown.<sup>[3]</sup> Mary Poppins is perceived as a confident authoritarian who knows all, yet she introduces the children to experiences beyond their comprehension without offering any explanations, interpretations, or confirmation that they even took place at all. It is this arbitrary, perplexing, and paradoxical Mary who will be the focus of this essay. For she is the one who embodies more secrets, more shadow, and more depth.

In the film, Jane and Michael Banks write an advertisement itemizing what they require in the perfect nanny. She must be “kind and witty,” “very sweet and fairly pretty,” “never be cross or cruel,” or give “castor oil or gruel” (Stevens, 1964). But much like unconscious elements themselves, in the original book, the children do not have an opportunity to ask for what they want. Instead, what they need is thrust upon them in a disorderly mess.

When Jane and Michael noticed an odd shape out their window, they saw a curious thing happen. As soon as the shape was inside the gate the wind seemed to catch her up into the air and fling her at the house. It was as though it had flung her first at the gate, waited for her to open it, and then had lifted and thrown her, bag, and all at the front door. The watching children heard a terrific bang, and as she landed the whole house shook. (Travers, 1934/1981, p. 6)

It is with the unceremonious introduction of Mary Poppins that the children’s perception of the distinction between the real world and the world of make-believe narrows and their sense of imagination and possibility expand.

One element of depth psychology is developing a relationship with the unknown. Where the conscious mind is one of fact, proof, causality, and absolutes, the unconscious is one of possibility, duality, synchronicity, and unknowns. Mary Poppins, although vain in appearance, avoids being vain in opinion. She takes the children on adventures that are bound to motivate their questions, yet she refuses to offer any answers. Thus, she forces them to derive their own meaning and distinguish their own reality.

Once, after returning from a visit with Mary’s Uncle Albert, Jane and Michael were reminiscing about how his contagious laughter had them all “bouncy and boundy” (Travers, 1934/1981, p. 45) up in the air and “rolling and bobbing on the ceiling” (1934, pp. 45-46). When Mary denied that she or any relative of hers would be involved in such unbecoming behavior, the children questioned, “is it true or isn’t it? Is Mary Poppins right or are we” (p. 47). It is in this state of wonder that Mary sent the children to sleep. And it is in this state of wonder that I woke in the middle of the night asking myself why I chose Mary Poppins as a focus of analysis, and contemplating the possibility that *she* chose *me*. I was a huge fan of the film but like many people I was unaware that the character originated in a popular children’s story thirty years earlier, let alone that she continues to live on in seven subsequent books written over the course of five decades. All I know is that she popped into my mind as spontaneously as she blew onto Cherry Tree Lane.

Upon finding out about Mary’s literary history I immediately ordered, read, and was enthralled by the first book, simply titled *Mary Poppins* (1934), then the second, *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935), and then the third, *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (1943). As a student and practitioner of depth psychology, I must acknowledge my predisposition of seeing the world through a depth psychological lens. Yet, even taking into account the potential for projection, I feel confident in asserting that depth psychological elements are consistently and intrinsically woven through these stories.

Carl Gustav Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist (1875-1961) and one of the founders of depth psychology, dedicated his career to legitimizing the therapeutic value of studying the invisible influences of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Refusing to accept the prevalent assumption that “consciousness is sense and the unconscious is nonsense” (Jung, 1964, p. 102), Jung searched for creative ways to uncover, engage, and integrate the relevant

information and powerful wisdom he believed to be hidden in the depth of the psyche. While he was going through a period of struggle and stagnation in his own life and failing to find the guidance he was seeking in the external world, Jung began to listen to the voices that originated from within, actively engaging them in imagined dialogues. Jung used this process called *active imagination* to bypass the limitations of the ego's logical intelligence, critical judgment, and linear reality (Jung 1963/1989). While conversing with these psychic characters, their names and personalities became known and previously repressed insights were revealed. This technique of inviting one's internal longings, complexes, and frustrations to speak for themselves has become an accepted practice in analytic psychology (Singer, p. 403) and can be an effective strategy for those seeking self-knowledge and expression. *Active imagination* not only provided Jung deeper understanding of psychological material, but also a greater acceptance of that which remained a mystery. It occurred to me that Mary Poppins served this function for the Banks children.

Mary is as a mythic figure, a trickster, a shape-shifter, a soul guide, and a psychopomp (a mediator between the conscious and unconscious realms), who activates the children's imaginations, helps them to escape the restrictions of cultural expectations, and personifies their inner psychic content through introductions to unique characters and the experience of wondrous adventures.

The association between Jung's imaginal advisors and Mary Poppins' influence on the children stimulated my curiosity (as well as some envy). I began to wonder: If she could do all that for them, then maybe Mary Poppins could offer me insight into my psyche and direct me towards some extraordinary journey. Shortly after conceiving this idea, I dismissed it. Not only did I feel silly initiating a dialogue with a fictional character, Mary Poppins is notorious for never explaining anything. Throughout the entire series, as the children continually long to make sense of their experiences, they learn not to bother asking Mary Poppins, "It's no good asking her. She knows everything, but she never tells" (Travers, 1934/1981, p. 153). But then I remembered something that I did not need Mary Poppins to explain. Because the unconscious is completely autonomous, there is no way to know what information it will offer up, or what it will do with the material it is provided. So, relinquishing expectations for where the road of self-discovery might lead, I invited Mary Poppins to tea.

After clearing my computer from the dining room table and putting the tea kettle on the stove, I set aside the embarrassment of being a forty-something-year-old woman hosting a tea party for an imaginary guest. I then scoured the house for an appropriate snack to accompany the tea as I amusingly observed myself anxiously wanting to make a good impression for Mary Poppins.

SJZ: Hello Mary, you look very pretty in your pink ruffled top and well-pressed jacket.

MP: That is quite observant of you.

SJZ: I've also observed how you exhibit many of the best aspects of depth psychology, observations that I am turning into a scholarly article.

MP: There are already eight books, a movie, Broadway show, and numerous other writings that have attempted to analyze who I am.

SJZ: I know. I've seen and read most of them. I'm not aiming to teach people who *you* are, but rather to point out how you help others learn who *they* are.

MP: And what about you? Have I helped you discover anything about yourself?

SJZ: (laughing)

MP: What is so funny? (I receive the glare so often directed at the children.)

SJZ: I intended to ask you the questions and here you are conducting the interview.

MP: Does this surprise you?

SJZ: No, not at all. Your command of every situation is one of the many things I admire about you.

MP: One of the many, you say . . .

SJZ: Obviously you being so prim, proper, and professional is impressive, but the most remarkable quality is your ability to balance the necessary demands of daily life while engaging in an imaginative fantasy world.

MP: Exactly what are you insinuating?

SJZ: I know you are unwilling to discuss or even acknowledge your ability to communicate with animals, dance with shadows, fly on the tail of a kite, and bring statues, porcelain dolls, and storybook characters to life as they fall into the category of fantastical, even magical events, but I agree with Jung, who believed that regardless of our experiences happening in the physical or fantasy world, they still have psychological impact.

MP: And what psychological impact do these stories have for you?

SJZ: There is an uncompromising authority and confidence about you that most mere mortals do not possess—it provides a sense of security and well-being. It is not the type of reassurance offered by a depth psychologist, though. Despite all of depth psychology's theories and strategies to move towards a stronger sense of connection to other and wholeness of self, it eschews an attitude of definitive knowing. Yet, it is your apparent knowing that allows the children to freely experience the unknown.

MP: It is interesting that you would see such anarchistic, extreme, and unpredictable behavior as providing stability and security.

SJZ: Yes, that is interesting. It is also interesting that *active imagination* seems to provide the same paradoxical messages that you offer the Banks children. You encourage them to experience new things and see things in new ways, and then refuse to help them make sense of it all. Maybe that is the distinction I've been missing. I have been comparing you to a depth psychologist, but you are less like a practitioner of the psyche than psyche itself. You refuse to be bound by cultural norms, you draw attention to the absurdities of collective attitudes, and you transcend the reductive nature of causal thinking.

MP: I am not saying that I agree with your conclusions, but hypothetically speaking let us say that these unfathomable things are happening: That Jane and Michael Banks do get to attend a moonlight party at the zoo where people are in cages and the animals roam free, that they go to a constellation circus in the sky where I dance with the Sun and Michael accidentally pops the Moon, and that they get to participate in a dance in the bottom of the ocean. What would be the benefit of trying to discuss these experiences with such a limited capacity for comprehension? Excuse the name dropping, but I believe it was James Hillman who proclaimed that using the conscious mind to engage with the imaginal is a "sin against the imagination [as it contaminates] the soul's last refuge of dignity" (1975, p. 39).

SJZ: So, you aren't advocating denial of the experiences or repression of the feelings they evoke—you just want to avoid forcing them into the confines of cognitive understanding.

MP: (Picking up her bag.) Something might look ordinary and predictable—like this carpetbag, but if you are able to access its depth you might find an infinite amount of space to host countless images, symbols, and emotions.

SJZ: What do those of us with shallow bags do with all of our stuff?

MP: There is no need to do anything with it. Just be with it and just trust that whatever you need to 'get' from it, will be available to you when the time is right. And speaking of time . . .

And just like in the books, Mary Poppins gathers her belongings, and without any warning, sentimental farewells, or closure, Mary is gone. In the absence of Mary's explanations, I return to the text to excavate more meaning.

At the start of the second book, *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (Travers, 1935/1997), Mary arrives for her second of three stays with the Banks family. While unpacking she removes a thermometer from her carpetbag, not for the purpose of taking the children's temperature, but to measure their temperament. Jane is characterized as "careless, thoughtless and untidy," Michael is described as "a very noisy, mischievous, troublesome little boy," John is labeled as "peevisish and excitable," and Barbara is branded as "thoroughly spoilt" (p. 22). Even though these findings are critical and could possibly be seen as insulting, there is also truth to the evaluations. The children take comfort in the fact that Mary Poppins sees them as they are; the good and the bad, and she still cares enough about them to come back. Despite her sometimes rude and harsh words, this is an example of the authentic acceptance she offers that creates a bond of trust and affection between the children and their eccentric nanny. They go to bed that night with a sense of contentment and security knowing they are being looked after by what the thermometer declared is "a very excellent and worthy person, thoroughly reliable in every particular" (Travers, 1935/1997, p. 22).

I found the process of writing this essay similar to the experiences the Banks children had in the book. At first, the children and I were skeptical, hesitant, and passive observers, but with Mary's repeated encouragement (and bullying, along with her arbitrary dissemination of punishments and prizes, we evolved into active participants who learned to whole-heartedly embrace seemingly unreal experiences. Like the archetypal hero returning from a journey, the children and I are challenged to bring our newfound wisdom back to our *real* lives and learn to share it with others. It is this process of awareness, acceptance, and integration that bridges the divide between the external and internal, balances the material and the spiritual, and opens the lines of communication between the conscious and unconscious.

When you take an investigative look at Mary Poppins you see that she is a paradox of such epic proportions that she is impossible to fully explain or understand. Maybe that is why she has kept our attention for as long as she has. She is simultaneously the protagonist and antagonist. She is nurturing and dismissive, brings light and shadow, instigates questions yet offers no answers. She transforms what might be passed over as frivolous adventures into meaningful engagements with alternate realities. She is extremely grounded yet defies gravity and, like the psyche as defined by Jung (1963/1989), she "functions outside the spatio-temporal law of causality" (p. 304).

While being a unique character unto herself, Mary Poppins is a holistic representation of every woman at all stages of life. At times she has the qualities of a self-involved young girl demanding attention, other times she exhibits nurturing maternal qualities that care for the physical, emotional, and psychological needs of those around her, and when required, she plays the role of the authoritarian matriarch whose wisdom regarding the

nuances of life and peculiarities of human behavior have been gained through a lifetime of experience (Lawson, 1999).

Mary Poppins views the world from a holistic lens in which everyone and everything is connected. She exposes the Banks children to the possibility that if they listen carefully, people can communicate with animals, the wind might guide their next adventure, and the stories of domestic servants, balloon ladies, and match-men might contain wisdom that exceeds that of businessmen, teachers, and even parents.

Where the books aim to show the duality and complexities of life, the movie is not about challenging the audience, but about cheering them up with the picture-perfect happy ending. The books present a far more nuanced relationship between Mary Poppins and her charges. Although she is magical in their eyes, she exudes more discipline than delight. She is comforting and confusing, orderly and spontaneous, and arbitrary and exacting. Like any capable depth psychologist, Mary Poppins helps the Banks children reflect upon the multi-dimensional and paradoxical elements of life. Through experience, she shows them that reality and fantasy are not mutually exclusive.

Whether in the role of a depth psychologist or as an external projection of our internal psyche, Mary Poppins utilizes the tools of critical thinking and imagination, not to persuade the child in all of us to see the world as she does, but to encourage us to find our own authentic perspective.

“Where have you been?” they asked her.

“In Fairyland,” said Mary Poppins.

“Did you see Cinderella?” said Jane.

“Huh, Cinderella? Not me,” said Mary Poppins contemptuously. “Cinderella indeed!”

“Or Robinson Crusoe?” asked Michael.

“Robinson Crusoe—pooh!” said Mary Poppins rudely.

“Then how could you have been there? It couldn’t have been our Fairyland!”

“Don’t you know,” she said pityingly, “that everybody’s got a Fairyland of their own?” (Travers, 1934/1981, p. 28)

---

[1] Statistic from 2013. As of July 2023, Mary Poppins is listed as the 27<sup>th</sup> Top Grossing Film of All Times in the US, when box office is adjusted for inflation.

[2] The relationship between Travers and Disney is loosely depicted in the Walt Disney Pictures’ film *Saving Mr. Banks* released in December 2013.

[3] Although Jane and Michael are the only Banks children who appear in the film version, the twins, Barbara, and John are in the first book, and baby Annabel arrives in book two.

## References

Hillman, J. (1975). *Re-visioning psychology*. New York: Harper & Row.

Jung, C. G. (1964). Approaching the unconscious. In C. G. Jung & M. L. von Franz (Eds.), *Man and His Symbols* (pp. 18-104). New York, NY: Doubleday.

Jung, C. G. (1989). *Memories, dreams, reflections* (R. a. C. Winston, Trans. A. Jaffé Ed.). New York, NY: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1963)

Lawson, V. (1999). *Mary Poppins, she wrote*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Sibley, B., & Lassell, M. (2007). *Mary Poppins – anything can happen if you let it: The story behind the journey from books to Broadway*. New York, NY: Disney Editions.

Stevens, R. (Writer). (1964). *Mary Poppins*. In B. Walsh & W. Disney (Producer). Burbank, CA: Walt Disney.

Travers, P. L. (1981). *Mary Poppins*. New York, NY: Harcourt. (Original work published 1934)

Travers, P. L. (1997). *Mary Poppins comes back*. New York, NY: Harcourt. (Original work published 1935)

---

*With a background in theater, television and film and master's degrees in industrial social work, nonprofit management, and depth psychology, **Stacey Jill Zackin** blends psychology and systems theories with storytelling and imagination in her work as a Life Coach and Executive Trainer ([www.theCoach4you.com](http://www.theCoach4you.com)). This article was originally written while Stacey was pursuing her PhD in Depth Psychology which she earned from Pacifica Graduate Institute after defending her dissertation, *The Psychology of Hospitality: Creating Welcoming and Inclusive Environments*.*