



# Classics in Short No.55: Mary Poppins

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**Brian Alderson** on P L Travers' **Mary Poppins**.

**Floccinaucinihilipilification...welcome to the world of Mary Poppins** <!--break-->

## *Visitations*

are the subject for this bright New Year. Nothing too tremendous in the way of perturbed spirits or Souls of the Undead, just a small procession of personages who are ordinary enough save for some mark of a larger Eccentricity.

## *Bloomsbury Publishing are to blame.*

They advised me of an attractive little reprint which they were about to issue and which they (rightly) thought might be admissible into the Honourable Company of Backpage Classics. On reflection though it seemed to me that the thing might benefit from being placed within its own small genre so you won't meet it till May, after we have looked at a couple of its predecessors.

## *The Magical Nursemaid of Cherry Tree Lane*

is the first of these ? a person blown up the garden-path and into the annals of children's literature by a sharp East Wind some seventy years ago. She bore a carpet-bag, empty, but full of Special Effects, and it may well have been the manipulation of these by Walt Disney and Julie Andrews in 1965 that led to the ?classic? accolade.

## *Certainly in nineteen thirty-four*

the book had some novelty. **Mary Poppins** was put out by an enterprising young publisher, Gerald Howe, with illustrations by E H Shepard's daughter, Mary, and it attracted praise (and good sales) both in the USA and Britain, where several of the stories had already been broadcast on the BBC National service. A few years later **Mary Poppins Comes Back** appeared with the good lady parachuting in under an open broly, and the scene was set for establishing a modest series. (The publisher here was Peter Davies ? one of Barrie's ?lost boys? ? and tenuous connections might be made between the locale and the local citizenry in both **Mary Poppins** and **Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens** .)

## *Were it not for Disney though*

I wonder whether any of the six ?Mary Poppins? books would have any sort of life today. I don't worry much about their setting, with all the typecast park-keepers, pavement-artists, and balloon-sellers of a vanished ?Kensington village?, nor yet about the family life of the Bankses with their cook, their boot-boy, and their departed Nannie whose place Mary Poppins is blown in to fill. Such evidence of changing manners cannot be avoided in any literature and if the writing is strong enough then the reader ? child or adult ? will accept, or perhaps not even notice, it.

## *But does Mary Poppins have such strength?*

She arrives, like a latterday Earth Spirit in a silly hat, with powers upon which no authorial constraint is laid. If afternoon tea is to be taken up in the air under Uncle Albert Wigg's drawing-room ceiling then that can be done and Mary Shepard depicts the incident in detail. If Maia from the constellation of the Pleiades comes down to do her Christmas shopping at what may be Selfridge's then she may be granted a Shop Assistant who concurs in her notion that there is nothing to pay (?the whole point of Christmas is that things should be *given* away, isn't it?). But the sum total of the book's ten episodic chapters ? and indeed of all the succeeding episodes and stories ? amounts to the trivialisation of magic. Indeed, there's a telling example in the embarrassingly incompetent tale ?Bad Tuesday? where the African paragraphs of the Poppins four-stop world-tour had later to be rewritten to obliterate racial clichés (?My, but dem's very white babies. You wan? use a li'l black boot polish on dem...?).

### *Children's books of the 1930s*

were hospitable to such dealings with the fairies and **Mary Poppins** may owe its initial success less to the stories and more to P L Travers's portrayal of her heroine with her omnipresent self-assurance and her brisk ?spit, spot?s. (So far as I can see, the hall-mark moment of ?supercalifragilisticexpialidocious? belongs to the movie rather than the book.) Her unaccountable appearances and disappearances may offer neatly tailored beginnings and endings to each story collection, but after the third volume, **Mary Poppins Opens the Door** (P Davies, 1944), Travers sagely remarked that ?she cannot forever arrive and depart? and from then on we have stories that are presumed to occur within the time-frame of the earlier books. Night-lights are lit and an oil-lamp extinguished at the end of the concluding volume, **Mary Poppins and the House Next Door** (1988).

### *Correspondences between nursemaid and author*

are worth some speculation. Both were prone to cover their biographical tracks and neither suffered fools gladly, while **Mary Poppins** was surely a product, however ineffectual, of P L Travers's ?everlasting gift...of love for the fairy tale?. That is manifest in the short essay attached to her own retelling of ?The Sleeping Beauty?, accompanied by five variant versions: **About the Sleeping Beauty** (1975), and it also lies behind her novel ?for children and adults? **Friend Monkey** (1971). Although mostly set in late-Victorian London it owns up to a direct influence from the Hindu legend of the monkey-lord Hanuman and that genial spirit brings to the story a verve and a genuine comedy that are so often missing from the factitious goings-on in Cherry Tree Lane.

The illustrations by Mary Shepard are taken from the Collins Modern Classics edition (0 00 675397 3, £5.99 pbk).

**Brian Alderson** is founder of the Children's Books History Society and children's book consultant for **The Times** .

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