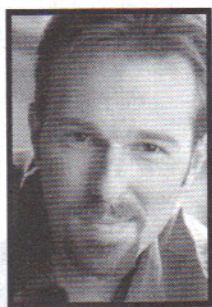


Saving Mr. Banks—and P.L. Travers

I have loved the film *Mary Poppins* all my life. For a musical child in a musical family, it was Sunday evening manna. To me, *Mary Poppins* was practically holy, born of creative genius by a soul who understood the leverage of playfulness. So, I was quite surprised to learn of a movie concerning the considerable difficulties involved in making the beloved film.

Saving Mr. Banks is about P. L. Travers (Emma Thompson), who authored a slate of popular children's books featuring her novel character Mary Poppins, and her struggle with allowing Mary Poppins to be "Disneyfied." Due to financial difficulties, Travers is compelled to fly from London to California to help administer the adaptation of her books into a full-length feature film with the ever-charming Walt Disney (Tom Hanks). The collaboration is anything but effortless, with Travers repeatedly wielding the power of her rights to the story as a guillotine threatening to end the entire proposal.



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If Mary Poppins is "practically perfect in every way," Travers is equally chronically pinched. Still, there are reasons for Travers' unrelenting sense of dis-ease, and the film sits entirely upon the well-executed development of this part of the story. In short, Travers' dysfunctional family history connects her present unhappiness with the creation of Mary Poppins, who we discover is actually something of a savior figure.

Travers is rancorous because she is wounded. This isn't news, really. After all, isn't that why most unpleasant people act the way they do? The difference is that Travers' response to her pain was to create a make-believe nanny who could fix the problems that had caused her so much suffering. And this is why, when happy, smiling, gets-what-he-wants Disney approaches her with designs to take Mary Poppins and turn her into an enchanting, spontaneous, songbird of a nanny who makes medicine taste like candy and chores a magical game, Travers staunchly resists.

Yet, there is a tremendous amount of heart in this film and a large portion of it is due to Disney's realization of just how important Mary Poppins is to Travers, and how this changes his ap-

proach to the entire matter. Ultimately, Disney perceives Travers' struggle and meets her where she is by revealing his own hidden pain. The balm he offers her—the opportunity to share Mary Poppins with the world in a way that honors Travers' psychic need for a figure that can heal a fractured family—is sufficient for her to release control just enough for something new to be born.

And there it is: *Saving Mr. Banks* whispers to my heart about the transformative power of release, of letting go. Indeed, the film hinges on Travers' ability to let go of her unfortunate past, and of her need to rigidly define Mary Poppins.

Travers illustrated how the wounds of childhood can misshape our responses to life. She believed that if she could exert control over everything, she could somehow undo the wrongs of the past or perhaps keep them from circling back to haunt her in a new form. But freedom comes through expansion, not constriction, such that old wounds can be met with new responses. Thus, Disney became a kind of God figure who could re-write the tragic parts of her life on screen to the benefit of all. But here's the lesson: this redemption was possible only after Travers released her anxieties and her pain into his care and allowed them to be transformed.

Was the story true? Not entirely. It was, in fact, "Disneyfied" to tug more heartstrings and create more harmony than there actually was. But does that matter? I don't think so. Fictional stories have taught important life lessons for millennia. Disney said it this way: "That's what storytellers do. . . . They bring hope." In this case, the hopeful message is that letting go of our fears and failings makes room for new endings through which redemption becomes imaginable.

After seeing *Saving Mr. Banks*, I re-watched *Mary Poppins*. I saw new themes, new ways of understanding why the story develops and ends the way it does. My experience of *Mary Poppins* will always be deeper now, richer. Fastidiously factual or not, *Saving Mr. Banks* has replaced my childhood enjoyment with a more mature appreciation for imagination's power to heal. **M**

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ABOUT THE MOVIE

Title: *Saving Mr. Banks*. **DVD release:** Mar. 18. **Running time:** 125 minutes. **Director:** John Lee Hancock. **Writers:** Kelly Marcel and Sue Smith. **MPAA rating:** PG-13. "I think we love this story because the redemption story it tells is one we never tire of hearing," says *Christian Post* op-ed contributor Jennifer Roback Morse. "The word 'Disney' has become synonymous with cutesy, sugarcoated escapism. But that is not what Disney studios have offered us here. We want to hear the story of how people pulled themselves together and put their families back together. And that just happens to be the cosmic Christian story of redemption and hope, writ small in each of our lives."

