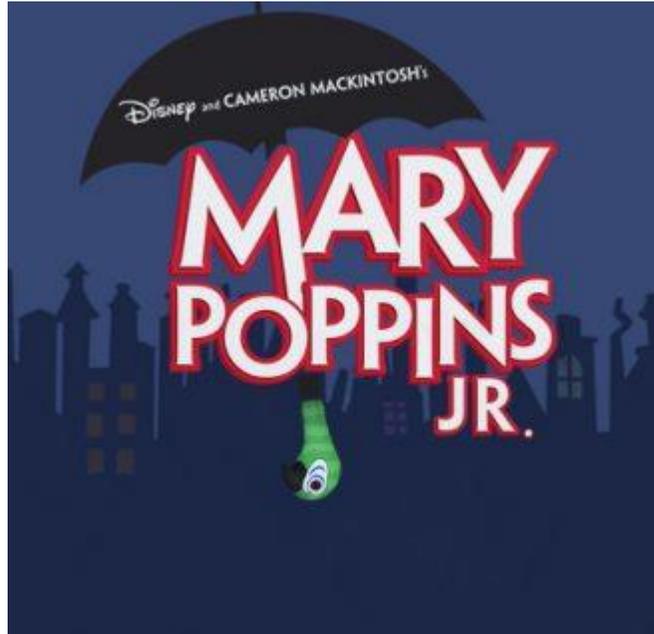


Sacramento Theatre Company

Study Guide



Mary Poppins Jr.

By Richard M. Sherman, Robert B. Sherman, and
Julian Fellowes

Based on the novel by P.L. Travers
and the Walt Disney Motion Picture

Study Guide Materials Compiled by Anna Miles

Sacramento Theatre Company

Mission Statement

The Sacramento Theatre Company (STC) strives to be the leader in integrating professional theatre with theatre arts education. STC produces engaging professional theatre, provides exceptional theatre training, and uses theatre as a tool for educational engagement.

Our History

The theatre was originally formed as the Sacramento Civic Repertory Theatre in 1942, an ad hoc troupe formed to entertain locally-stationed troops during World War II. On October 18, 1949, the Sacramento Civic Repertory Theatre acquired a space of its own with the opening of the Eaglet Theatre, named in honor of the Eagle, a Gold Rush-era theatre built largely of canvas that had stood on the city's riverfront in the 1850s. The Eaglet Theatre eventually became the Main Stage of the not-for-profit Sacramento Theatre Company, which evolved from a community theatre to professional theatre company in the 1980s. Now producing shows in three performance spaces, it is the oldest theatre company in Sacramento.

After five decades of use, the Main Stage was renovated as part of the H Street Theatre Complex Project. Features now include an expanded and modernized lobby and a Cabaret Stage for special performances. The facility also added expanded dressing rooms, laundry capabilities, and other equipment allowing the transformation of these performance spaces, used nine months of the year by STC, into backstage and administration places for three months each summer to be used by California Musical Theatre for Music Circus.

Sacramento Theatre Company can accommodate 292 patrons in the proscenium-style auditorium of its Main Stage, while the Pollock Stage offers a more intimate experience with only 87 seats in a black box-style theatre. Both provide good acoustics and sight-lines. This professional, Equity theatre presents seven professional productions per season with a reputation for excellent stage adaptations of classic literature. Three annual productions in the Cabaret Stage, which seats 100, round out the experience with high-quality Broadway musical revues.

The Young Professionals Conservatory, a training program for young theatre artists, was founded in 2003. The program, as well as the entire STC School of the Arts, is directed by Michele Hillen-Noufer.

For further information about the Sacramento Theatre Company please visit us online:

<http://www.sactheatre.org>

Mary Poppins Jr.

Sacramento Theatre Company Production Study Guide

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(www.bard.org)

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*written for the Sacramento Theatre Company by Anna Miles

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About the Writers: *Mary Poppins Jr.*

By Don Leavitt

Like *Mary Poppins*'s iconic, magical carpet bag—seemingly bottomless and containing all manner of fantastic items—the list of writers and composers credited with bringing the stage production of *Mary Poppins* to life is a varied one that, at casual glance, appears endless. It's an impressive list, with a back story as fascinating as the central figure it all revolves around: from P.L. Travers to Walt Disney; from the Sherman brothers to Julian Fellowes (yes, *Downton Abbey* fans, *that* Julian Fellowes), the people responsible for the *Mary Poppins* musical represent one of the most eclectic casts of characters ever featured in a playbill.

The path of Travers's creation from book to movie to stage musical is a long and arduous one, and can't be fully appreciated without understanding the background of the author herself. Born Helen Lyndon Goff at Queensland, Australia in 1899, Travers has been described as possessing "a dangerous brilliance," a compliment attributed to the poet George William Russell. However, when describing her temperament, the most used (and, frankly, most generous) adjective is "prickly." "She was a difficult lady," was as far as songwriter Richard Sherman was willing to go (<http://www.playbill.com/news/article/playbill-brief-encounter-with-mary-poppins-songwriter-richard-m.-sherman-329724>).

The Goffs enjoyed an affluent and prominent social position—Travers's mother was the niece of a former premier of Queensland—but lost their status when her father, Travers Robert Goff, was demoted at work from the position of bank manager for chronic alcoholism. He passed away when she was seven.

Travers began writing poetry at an early age, and was first published as a teenager. About the same time, she discovered a love of theatre and began appearing on stage under the name Pamela Lyndon Travers—she adopted the last name Travers in honor of her father. But her wealthy relatives disapproved of her acting; and Travers, who lamented Australia's "lack of humor," emigrated to England in 1925 (<http://www.biography.com/people/pl-travers-21358293>).

Travers used her journey as the source for several travel stories which appeared in Australian newspapers under the name P. L. Travers. Her first published book, *Moscow Excursion*, was released in 1934, but it was her next book that proved to be her first literary success. Also published in 1934, *Mary Poppins* was based on a series of stories Travers had told to two children she met while convalescing from an illness at a friend's country home. Seven more books featuring the magical nanny followed over more than fifty years, with the last published in 1988. *The Mary Poppins* series made Travers immensely wealthy, and, in 1977, she was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire for cultural and artistic contributions.

The success of *Mary Poppins* caught the attention of Walt Disney, who promised his daughters he would one day turn their favorite book into a movie. For nearly twenty years, Disney tried unsuccessfully to charm Travers into selling him the film rights. According to *Smithsonian Magazine*, Disney was only able to persuade Travers to visit Hollywood in 1961 when royalties on her book began to dwindle.

"She needed money, so she agreed to spend two weeks working with Disney's creative team," writes historian Amy Henderson. "She fully intended to sabotage the film, though, because she was aghast at the idea of her *Mary Poppins* being sentimentalized by the 'Disney treatment'" (www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/how-did-pl-travers-the-prickly-author-of-mary-poppins-really-fare-against-walt-disney-180949052/?no-ist).

That creative team consisted of Robert and Richard Sherman, the songwriting brothers whose previous work on movies like *The Parent Trap* (1961) and *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) had made them a powerhouse duo at Disney. Born to Russian immigrants, the Shermans learned musical composition from their father, songwriter Al Sherman. In a career that spanned nearly sixty years, the Sherman brothers wrote the scores for more than thirty-one films, seven stage productions, and even theme park rides (for good or bad, we have the Sherman brothers to thank for “It’s a Small World After All”). The pair won numerous Academy, BAFTA, Golden Globe, and Grammy awards, and in 2005 were inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame.

According to Richard Sherman, the brothers learned early on that Disney was pursuing *Mary Poppins*, and invested more than two years doing exactly what Travers feared—giving it the “Disney treatment.” This meant writing songs, but also creating a story arc that could tie the nanny’s adventures together in a single, cohesive story.

“If you read the original . . . books . . . you’ll see that there is no storyline whatsoever,” Richard Sherman told *Playbill* in 2013. “We took six chapters that we thought were really juicy and visual and exciting . . . and we actually made up a storyline to connect them” (<http://www.playbill.com/news/article/playbill-brief-encounter-with-mary-poppins-songwriter-richard-m.-sherman-329724>).

Sherman told the *New York Times* that “Disney essentially sequestered the brothers . . . with Travers in a rehearsal space with a piano and told them to win her over” (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/08/movies/songwriter-recalls-p-l-travers-mary-poppins-author.html?_r=0). But Travers was unimpressed. She hated the songs, she hated the story, and she was so incensed at the use of animation in the film, she refused to permit any sequels based on other books in her series. Despite the film’s success, which included five Academy Awards for, among other things, best music and original score, Travers could not be converted.

At some point, Travers realized Disney had never secured the rights for a stage production, which is where Cameron Mackintosh joins the story. Mackintosh is a British theatrical producer credited with the 1981 production of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Cats*. Staging *Mary Poppins* had been a dream of his from childhood, and, like Disney, he pursued Travers for years before being granted an audience in 1993. Travers, aged ninety-three then, had a condition for the rights: that only English-born writers, and absolutely no American who had anything to do with the film, would be allowed any direct involvement. This, of course, precluded the Sherman brothers from contributing new songs, although Mackintosh did successfully negotiate for the use of songs that appeared in the movie.

True to his word, Mackintosh assembled a team of strictly British talent to sweeten the stage production with fresh songs and to help capture a fresh story that would differentiate the production from the film. Composer George Stiles and lyricist Anthony Drewe were commissioned to write new songs—the two have collaborated for more than thirty years and independently wrote a new introductory song for *Mary Poppins*, titled “Practically Perfect,” as a sort of “audition.” Mackintosh was suitably impressed.

To adapt the books and the movie into a stage production, Mackintosh turned to Julian Fellowes, precisely because of his “clear understanding of the social niceties of the English class system that prevailed in the Edwardian era” (*Sibley, John; Michael Lassell, 2007, Mary Poppins: Anything Can Happen If You Let It, Disney Editions New York. pp. 348–349*). Born Julian Alexander Kitchener-Fellowes, Lord Fellowes holds the title of baron in addition to roles as actor, novelist, playwright, screenwriter and film director. He is best known for his screenplay

for the 2001 film, *Gosford Park*, for which he received the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay; and for *Downton Abbey*, the television series which he created, produces, and writes.

Mackintosh believes Travers would have appreciated his version of the story. According to theatre critic Richard Ouzounian, Mackintosh told Travers that “‘the redemption of the children’s father, Mr. Banks, was what really lay at the heart of the story’ . . . [Mackintosh] delivered on his promise . . . that the musical would dig deeper into the story of how the Banks family turns from a dysfunctional group . . . into a harmonious organism”

(http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/stage/2013/12/13/pl_travers_might_have_liked_mary_ppins_onstage.print.html).

Unfortunately, Travers did not live to see it. She passed away in 1996 at the age of ninety-six. Ouzounian writes, “It’s a shame that [she] never got to see . . . [the] stage musical version . . . because it probably would have gladdened her complex, flinty heart.”

Synopsis: *Mary Poppins*

The wind is about to change in 1910 London! Bert, a man of many trades, acquaints us to the troubled Banks family of No. 17 Cherry Tree Lane. The children, Jane and Michael, have driven off yet another nanny with their naughty behavior; their father George is absent in their lives and demands order and precision from his wife Winifred who feels inferior in her role as a wife and mother.

Mary Poppins suddenly appears on their doorstep as a new nanny at just the right moment. Confident and decisive, she knows she must use common sense and a bit of magic to teach this family to value each other again. Mary Poppins takes the children on a walk to the park where they meet Bert who encourages them to see the magic that Mary can add to everyday life.

As Mary Poppins begins to win over Jane and Michael, Winifred continues to feel she is a disappointment to her husband. Little by little, Mary Poppins begins to help her also see the joy in life.

Helping George Banks is still a challenge. He faces pressure in his job as a banker and, because of a business decision, is placed on suspension with no pay. He struggles to find a way to connect to his wife and children. They, in turn, react with anger and frustration towards each other. Mary Poppins realizes this family is not yet ready for the lessons she has to teach them and leaves for a while.

Winter comes, as does a new nanny: Miss Andrew, George's harsh and unpleasant nanny from his childhood, but Mary Poppins reappears just in time and surprises everyone with her return. The children are thrilled to see her and are soon magically whisked up the chimney where they meet Bert and his fellow chimney sweeps. They dance across the rooftops and eventually end up back in the Banks home. Shaking hands with the chimney sweep brings good luck, and all the chimney sweeps shake hands with George as they exit his house.

Luck is not far behind as George meets with the bank's board of directors and learns they are actually promoting him instead of firing him because of the results of the business decision he made. Winifred appears, and side-by-side they walk the streets of London, while Mary Poppins takes Jane and Michael on one last magical adventure into the night sky.

Characters: *Mary Poppins*

MARY POPPINS: A “practically perfect” nanny blown in by the wind. Pragmatic but caring, sensible but “tricky,” “spit spot spic and span.”

BERT: Friend of Mary Poppins, man of many trades, and narrator of the story.

GEORGE BANKS: Head of the Banks household. Banker by profession; orderly, efficient, authoritative, irritable.

WINIFRED BANKS: Wife to George, mother of Jane and Michael, former actress. In charge of all domestic responsibilities of the Banks household; expected by George to “do charity work and entertain.”

JANE BANKS: A “thoughtless, short-tempered and untidy” girl. George and Winifred’s daughter.

MICHAEL BANKS: “A noisy, mischievous, troublesome little boy.” George and Winifred’s son who longs for attention from his father, loves astronomy, and wants a “proper kite” to fly with his father.

KATIE NANNA: A nanny for the Banks family who leaves at the beginning of the show because of the naughty children.

MRS. BRILL: The cook and housekeeper at the Banks’s home.

ROBERSON AY: The Banks’s houseboy.

NELEUS: Statue of a boy in the park who comes to life during “Jolly Holiday.”

STATUES: Other statues in the park.

BIRD WOMAN: an old woman who sells crumbs to feed to the birds

HONEYBEES: bees conjured by Mary Poppins to help teach them about the benefits of a "Spoonful of Sugar"

CLERKS: George's coworkers at the bank.

BANK CHAIRMAN: George Banks’s boss.

VON HUSSLER: A dubious businessman applying for a loan from the bank (“a good idea”).

NORTHBROOK: An honest gentleman applying for a loan to construct a factory (“a good man”).

MRS. CORRY: A magical conversation shop owner.

MISS ANDREW: George Banks’s old nanny who comes to the Banks home when Mary Poppins leaves temporarily.

POLICEMAN: neighborhood patrol officer

ENSEMBLE OF LONDONERS

The Magic Visitor

By Christine Frezza

Mary Poppins' appearances in the books, the movie, and the musical have been filling our imaginations for more than eighty years, even though the manners and customs she taught are long past. Our desire to explore the times of our ancestors, our longing for happy endings (especially with magic!) and our enjoyment of the music associated with the shows all play their part in keeping this story one that audiences worldwide continue to want to experience.

Mary Poppins first came into being in 1934, through a children's book written by the Australian novelist Pamela Travers (who wrote under the penname P. L. Travers); the character was modeled after Travers's great aunt, with the antics of the rest of the fictional Banks family reflecting the actions of her own siblings.

Walt Disney got the rights to the book four years later, though it took nearly thirty years before it became the movie we know, because of arguments between Travers and Disney over the changes he wished to make. (The struggle to get the rights and Travers's opinion of the adaptation were themselves the subject of a later Disney movie, *Saving Mr. Banks*, released in 2013.)

Disney's movie was and is a huge success. "*Mary Poppins* was released on August 27, 1964, to universal acclaim, receiving a total of thirteen Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture—an unsurpassed record for any other film released by Walt Disney Studios—and won five: Best Actress for Andrews, Best Film Editing, Best Original Music Score, Best Visual Effects, and Best Original Song" ("*Mary Poppins (film)*," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Poppins_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Poppins_(film)), 2016).

Most audiences are more familiar with the movie than the series of seven novels that Travers wrote between 1934 and 1988. But there is now another version to add to the variety of Poppins adventures we can delight in. Thirty years after the Disney movie was released and two years before Pamela Travers died, Cameron Mackintosh (producer of *Les Misérables*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Oliver*, *Miss Saigon*) met the author, and received permission to create a stage musical from her books. He hired Julian Fellowes (creator of *Downton Abbey*) to write the script, and in 2004, the musical was performed in London's West End, opening two years later on Broadway.

Composer-lyricists of additional songs for the stage musical were George Stiles and Anthony Drewe, in accordance with Travers's conditions that no additional songs be written by the Shermans, who had written the songs for the Disney movie. Stiles and Drewe were worried: "we knew that to be successful, it would have to include all those songs that everybody loves from the movie" (*Tony Brown, Finding 'Mary Poppins' from book to movie to stage, In The Plain Dealer, July 11, 2009, http://www.cleveland.com/onstage/index.ssf/2009/07/finding_mary_poppins_from_book.html*). They wrote "Practically Perfect" in the Sherman style, and agreement was reached between Mackintosh and Disney that this stage musical could use a number of the movie songs, with additional ones added by the two new writers. In the past twelve years, international success has followed the musical, just like the movie and the books.

In all versions, the story is set in London in the early 1900s just before women were given the vote, when the well-off middle class had a number of servants to hand (cook, housekeeper, maids, and sometimes a butler). If they had children, as do the Banks, there was, of course, a Nanny. "Not quite part of the family and more than just an employee, idealized and

demonized, the nanny has always had a difficult role in family life”

(<http://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/index.php/updates/The-ups-and-downs-of-the-British-Nanny/#sthash.cd0UpaUj.dpuf>).

The classic British nanny was a spinster of unspecified age, who ruled her kingdom, the nursery, and its inhabitants, the children of the house, with absolute authority, which extended to any visitors who were privileged to be invited to Nanny’s dominions for tea or to see Baby. Nanny supervised all children of all ages, from their birth well into their grownup years. It is no wonder that Mr. Banks in *Mary Poppins* hires her without references, and doesn’t dare contradict her; he recognizes absolute power when he meets it. “Highlighted in this situation is the absurd ease with which English parents of that particular era were ready to hand over their children to complete strangers they hired via newspaper ads” (*Giorgia Grilli, Myth, Symbol, and Meaning in Mary Poppins [New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2007], 128*).

Hierarchically, her greatest sphere of influence came between the nursemaid (a young girl, without much training, who was permitted to warm milk and wash nappies) and the governess, whose influence was limited to the schoolroom and the daytime, and who never interfered with Nanny’s rules. Governesses did not stay with the family for long, often (at least in fiction) tending to set fire to the house or falling in love with the master. (Nanny strongly disapproved of Miss Jane Eyre!) Nursemaids graduated to chambermaids, then parlor maids. Nannies, however, ruled the nursery whether there were children in it or not, and were not “pensioned off” until they were no longer capable of doing the work, then given a small cottage and a stipend.

But *Mary Poppins* is different from the classic nanny, in that she only stays to heal the dysfunctional Banks family, then disappears after her job is done. (Her modern counterpart is Nanny McPhee, whose own physical deformities disappear as the family becomes a functional unit.) Although Miss Poppins’s activities and her ability to use magic for her own ends are similar from book to movie to stage, the woman herself and her purpose in coming to the Banks home are different.

The book’s illustrations by Mary Shepard (daughter of the illustrator of *Winnie the Pooh*) show a stiff, angular spinster with hair tight to her head, and feet in ballet’s fifth position. The movie, starring the irrepressible Julie Andrews, shows a winsome charmer, dressed in bright colors and with feet more relaxed. The book focuses on children being taught how to behave so that they can become functioning adults; the movie focuses on the fun children can have when their parents are too busy for them (Mrs. Banks with Votes for Women, Mr. Banks with his career).

The musical fleshes out the adult members of the family and makes the children more realistic than in the movie: “Jane and Michael are constantly answering back and fighting. . . . George Banks had a difficult childhood in which he was ignored by his parents and was placed under the care of a fearsome nanny. . . . Winifred Banks is no longer the suffragette of the film, but a former actress who is struggling to fulfill her husband’s expectations of her” (*Wikipedia*).

Often in comedy, the stranger who comes into the closed society is a disruptor of harmony, such as Don John in *Much Ado about Nothing*. *Mary Poppins*’s job is now a forerunner of Nanny McPhee’s: a nanny/governess who educates and brings healing to the entire household with more than a spoonful of sugar, with a message of acceptance and reconciliation. As the children begin to take on the tolerance and understanding of the adults, their parents are brought to remember the joys of childhood, and the whole family finds harmony in each other. *Mary Poppins*’s true magic is her ability to bring the lasting sunshine of happiness.

Study Guide Questions: Engage With the Play

By Anna Miles

Take charge of your theatre-going experience and make it your own by asking yourself questions before, during, and after watching a play.

Questions to ask before the play:

If you **HAVE** read the play:

How did you envision the set, or the visual world of the play, while reading?

How did you imagine the characters looked while reading the play?

What themes did you notice repeating throughout the play?

What images jumped out at you while reading the play?

How would you describe the central theme of the play in one sentence?

If you **HAVEN'T** read the play:

Do you know anything about the play? If so, what do you know?

In General:

When you think about "theatre," what impressions come to mind? What does "theatre" mean to you?

What do you expect your experience to be when you watch a play? Do you expect to be bored? Excited? Engaged? Curious? Angry? Tired?

Questions to ask after the play:

If you **READ THE PLAY BEFORE SEEING IT**:

How did the production set differ from what you had imagined while reading the play? How was it similar? How did these changes affect your understanding of the story?

Did the characters look different from how you envisioned them looking while reading the play? Did they sound different? Act differently? How did these changes affect your understanding and

opinion of each character? How did these changes affect your understanding of the overall story?

How did the themes and images you noticed while reading translate to performance? Did the same themes and images jump out at you? Did you notice new ones?

Did this particular production seem to have the same central theme, or a different central theme from the one you discovered while reading? What elements of the staging, acting, or design helped convey the theme?

Did they play gain or lose anything in performance? Did you enjoy reading it more, or watching it?

If you **DIDN'T READ THE PLAY BEFORE SEEING IT:**

How did the play live up to your expectations? Did it turn out the way you thought it would? Was your knowledge of the play correct?

Were you able to follow the story?

Which part of the story did you most respond to? What themes and images jumped out at you?

Which character did you most relate to? Why?

In General:

How did this production change or confirm your original impressions of "theatre"?

How did your experience watching the play differ from how you expected it would go?

In your own words, how would you summarize the plot of the play? How is the plot different from the story, or the thematic implications, in the play?

Did you feel the story was relevant to your life? How and why?

Did you feel the story said something about our society, or about the world at large? If so, what?

Do you feel this story is an important one to tell and keep telling? How and why?

What kind of stories do you most respond to?

Theatre Etiquette

- Arrive at the theater on time.
- Visit the restroom before the performance begins.
- Turn off your cell phone. Do not speak on the phone or text during the performance.
- Pay attention to announcements that are made prior to the show about the rules of the theater you are attending and the location of the fire exits.
- Don't speak during the performance unless you are encouraged by the performers to participate.
- Remember that the Overture (introductory music) in musical theater is part of the performance, so be quiet when it begins.
- Do not take pictures during the performance. It can be very distracting to the actors and can cause a mishap. It can also be a violation of an actor's contract.
- Remain in your seat for the entire performance. If you must leave, exit during intermission. In an emergency, wait for an appropriate break in the show. It is rude to get up in the middle of a quiet moment.
- Do not eat or drink in the theater.
- Do not put your feet up on the seats or balcony and do not kick the seat in front of you.
- Don't put or throw anything on the stage.
- Do laugh when the performance is funny.
- Do applaud when it is appropriate during the performance.
- Do applaud when the performance is over... this tells the performers and crew that you appreciate their work.
- Stand and applaud if you really thought the show was great (a standing ovation).
- Do not whistle, stomp your feet, or scream out to the performers except for a Bravo or Brava.

Additional Resources

How Did PL Travers...Really Feel...?- Smithsonian Magazine

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/how-did-pl-travers-the-prickly-author-of-mary-poppins-really-fare-against-walt-disney-180949052/>

Brief Encounter With...Richard M. Sherman- Playbill

<http://www.playbill.com/news/article/playbill-brief-encounter-with-mary-poppins-songwriter-richard-m.-sherman-329724>

A Spoonful of Sugar for A Sour Puss- New York Times

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/08/movies/songwriter-recalls-p-l-travers-mary-poppins-author.html?_r=0

PL Travers Might Have Liked Mary Poppins Onstage- The Star

http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/stage/2013/12/13/pl_travers_might_have_liked_mary_poppins_onstage.print.html

Finding 'Mary Poppins': from Book to Movie to Stage- By Tony Brown for The Plain Dealer

http://www.cleveland.com/onstage/index.ssf/2009/07/finding_mary_poppins_from_book.html

Becoming "Mary Poppins"- The New Yorker

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/12/19/becoming-mary-poppins>

Mary Poppins Was a Feminist Icon for Disney- Time Magazine

<http://time.com/3178096/mary-poppins-feminist-anniversary/>