

Three is precisely the right number for a series of fantasy or fairy-tale books, because three is the magic number in fairy tales. Pamela Travers calls it “a theme as universal as the universe” and asks, in fairy stories, “whether those three brothers are really three, or a threefold composite of one man, three stages in a single life? And whether the story is not a pattern, at once ancient and familiar, of how - if we could! - to live our own lives?” (*What the Bee Knows*, pp. 59, 63).

A fourth volume, *Mary Poppins in the Park*, consists of six episodes that the author says belong to various unspecified points in the first three volumes. This fourth volume lacks the coherence and chronology of the earlier three and so is not considered here. Two other additions to the *Mary Poppins* collection were added years later: *Mary Poppins in Cherry Tree Lane* (1982) and *Mary Poppins and the House Next Door* (1988). Two other useful, although whimsical, books are an alphabetical guide to the subjects (*Mary Poppins from A to Z*) and a cookbook (coauthored by Maurice Moore-Betty) with its recipes embodied in a story (*Mary Poppins in the Kitchen: A Cookery Book with a Story*).

A word of caution: The *Mary Poppins* movie (produced by the Walt Disney studio in 1964), through which many know the story and the character, is a very unreliable version of Travers's work. It has nice music, delightful acting, and is charming in many ways, but it is a Disneyesque version of the books. The published volumes include archetypal imagery clearly open to Theosophical interpretation, largely omitted from the movie. A London West-End musical version of 2004 was based on the movie, with significant additions from the books, and a New York Broadway production of that musical opened in 2006. The stage version is closer to the books than the film is; but any dramatization of a book has to depart in many ways from its original because of the different nature of the two forms, films and stage productions being basically visual and a book purely verbal and so visualized solely in the minds of its readers.

The overall theme of the *Mary Poppins* books can be seen in a poem Pamela Travers published in *Parabola* magazine (11.2, May 1986, p. 31):