

English nanny and French parents do a good job

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—“Mary Poppins” has become one of my favorite movies. It was not always so.

When my daughter, Molly, was little, she and I watched her favorite videos -- “The Little Mermaid,” “Alice in Wonderland,” “Bedknobs and Broomsticks,” “An American Tail,” “Cinderella,” “Mulan” and the rest of the American canon -- for hundreds of hours. I hoped she was absorbing successful plot structures as well as popcorn and carrot sticks.

Many of these stories have young people challenging parental authority and the status quo in which they find themselves. Kid heroes are the agents of both change and happy endings.

Out of nostalgia or habit, I watched a little “Mary Poppins” on Sunday afternoon. The music, dancing, singing and dialogue are still wonderful. It struck me that this was a movie for adults more than kids. It’s a tutorial on what to do and not do in raising children.

Mary Poppins is the magical nanny who gently rescues her new child charges, Jane and Michael, from their pompous and emotionally distant father, George Banks, a junior bank officer, and their mother, Winifred, a well-meaning-but-ditzy-and-equally-negligent suffragette in 1910 London. Both parents avoid parenting, occupied as they are with interests outside the home.

George who sees himself as “lord of his castle... an upholder of “tradition, discipline and rules” seeks a nanny who can “mold the breed...[since] the future [British] empire lies within her hands.” George, of course, controls nothing, either at work or home, despite having his house servants address him as “Master.”

The central struggle seems at first to be between the stiff and stuffy man of the family, George, and Mary Poppins, a strong and independent woman, who is his better at all the things he values. He is rules for rules sake; she is rules for getting things done efficiently. He finds meaning in propriety; she finds fun in it. He gives orders to children; she creates orderly children.

No struggle takes place between Mary Poppins, the super-organized free spirit, and Winifred, the flibbertygibbety reformer. In the film, they don’t even talk to each other, even though Winifred is as culpably negligent

as George. At one point, she even asks a chimney sweep to watch her children while she demonstrates for her right to vote.

There's a Flower Child v. Establishment vibe to the George-Mary conflict. It's expressed as a choice between allowing Michael to give his tuppence to the old, beggar woman to feed the pigeons at Saint Paul's Cathedral and forcing him to deposit it in the Dawes, Tomes, Mousley, Grubbs Fidelity Fiduciary Bank where George works thus allowing British business to build "railways through Africa..., majestic, self-amortizing canals [and] plantations of ripening tea."

When Michael refuses to fork over his two pennies for investments in the Empire, it leads to a run on the bank, the laughing death of the senior Mr. Dawes and a career promotion for their recently cashiered father who has lightened up Poppins-style and is last seen flying a kite with his kids and the bank's board of directors.

The deeper central issue in this story is how adults should engage with children in their care. Mary Poppins came to fix the parents, not the children.

An Australian-born writer, Helen Goff, using the penname P.L. Travers and living in England, wrote the eight Mary Poppins books, beginning in the mid-1930s.

Her own father had been a frustrated bank clerk before dying young, probably of alcoholism. Her mother had been suicidal. Both parents were largely not there for her, so giving of parental time and being charitable to one another was the message she wanted to send.

These days, American mothers and fathers struggle with trying to do many things good enough at the same time. Nannies -- full-time, child-care professionals -- are usually not in the mix of available resources.

For most of us, promoting the right balance of rules, self-discipline, spontaneity, freedom, creativity, accomplishment and resilience in our children is usually grounded in intuition, interpretation of our own childhood experiences and a handful of books that may or may not help.

My own simple approach was to spend a lot of time with Molly, talk to her, listen to her, reason with her and help her learn that there were important things that she had to do because they were important to her, not because I said so. This strategy worked a hell of a lot better when she was four than when she was 14, or 24.

I just finished Pamela Druckerman's, [Bringing Up Bébé: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting](#), which is her homage to upscale Parisian parenting and government-provided programs (pre-school, health care, higher education) compared to upper-middle-class parenting in New York City neighborhoods like Brooklyn's Park Slope.

Contemporary American parenting, she writes, produces more than its share of bratty, whiney, willful, self-centered, fat, child-kings and stressed-out, guilt-ridden, obsessive Moms.

French parents, she writes, tend to produce well-mannered, patient, pleasant children who eat sensibly and understand their subordinate roles. French Moms of her acquaintance are slim, calm, capable of juggling work and life and always put together.

American Moms are frazzled and anxious about having their children excel; French Moms rarely break a sweat.

French parents and institutions provide a framework of authority, rights and obligations. American parents and institutions, she writes, lean the other way...with bad results in the first five years.

Critics of this former Wall Street Journal reporter have attacked on two fronts.

First, some argue that France, too, produces its share of “American-style” kids as well as parents who, like George Banks, have lost control of parenting. (It’s equally true, of course, that some American parents and kids have done just fine in bringing up each other.) Citing exceptions to a generalization -- some French kids run amok -- doesn’t invalidate a generally true generalization—that most don’t seem to.

Since I know nothing about French parenting and confess to an equally deep illiteracy on the subject of American childrearing, I’m open to learning whether French parents, on the whole, are doing things in a different framework that would be useful here.

The other line of attack against Druckerman is to dismiss her because of a 2010 article she wrote for *marie claire* about agreeing to her British husband’s request for a threesome with her and a woman she recruited as his 40th birthday present. (The only threesome I had on my December 40th was me and a pair of new mittens.)

What she did once is one thing; what she observes is another. Her book should be evaluated on its merits and accuracy. It’s too funny, well-researched and well-written to trash because of how she and her husband celebrated his milestone.

And then came her twins a few years later. Three kids under the age of three was not a breeze, even if it wafted off the Seine singing “La Marseillaise.”

Mary Poppins and French parents share certain principles. Structure works with little kids better than no structure or one that changes on demand. Adults decide some things, children decide others. Kids learn to govern themselves and work with others within a framework that everyone

understands and accepts. Educating for desired behavior based on explanation works better than punishment.

Mary Poppins got a pass when it came to the scut work of raising kids. Druckerman didn't, even though she had half of the Filipina community in Paris helping her. Scut work always tests high principles.

Perhaps the secret that Mary Poppins knew was that kids benefit from time with adults doing things they both enjoy. That's what she taught Winifred and George.

Today, Mary Poppins might spend an hour after school with Michael and Jane watching their tape and singing a nonsense version of a nonsense song I once taught to Molly, "Superduperballisticextrahalitosis."

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