

# A BEAR FOR ALL SEASONS

## *The Story of Paddington*

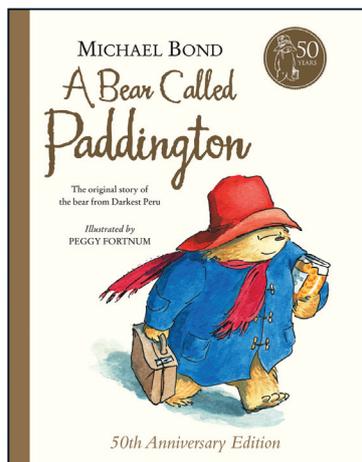
by FELICITY CARTER

IT WAS A CHILLY LONDON DAY AND BARBARA KER WILSON WAS ABOUT TO GO OUT FOR LUNCH, WHEN YET ANOTHER MANUSCRIPT ARRIVED ON HER DESK. IT DIDN'T SEEM PARTICULARLY PROMISING AND IT HAD BEEN REJECTED BY OTHER PUBLISHERS BEFORE ARRIVING AT WILLIAM COLLINS WHERE SHE WAS IN CHARGE OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS. BUT SHE PICKED IT UP AND BEGAN READING. BY THE TIME SHE FINISHED, IT WAS LONG PAST LUNCH-TIME.

EVEN BEFORE SHE TOLD HER BOSS, SIR WILLIAM COLLINS, ABOUT IT SHE "RANG UP THE AGENT AND SAID WE WOULD CERTAINLY PUBLISH IT. I JUST KNEW IT WAS A WONDERFUL STORY FOR CHILDREN".

Since it was published in 1958, **A Bear Called Paddington** — and its sequels — have sold more than 35 million copies. They've been turned into comic books, television series, and films, the latest of which is an acclaimed big-screen affair, starring Peter Capaldi, Nicole Kidman, Hugh Bonneville, plus a walk-on role by the author, Michael Bond, who is now in his late 80s.

In November 2014, the City of London created a Paddington Bear trail to coincide with the film. Fifty Paddington Bear sculptures were placed around London, each of which was created by an artist or celebrity;



Deluxe edition published to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Paddington Bear's arrival on the literary scene.

when they were finally auctioned, they raised more than £930,000 (A\$1.79 million) for the British National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Paddington has also spawned plays, a cookery book, television adaptations and even tea towels. More than a beloved children's character, he's a cultural institution.

### THE BEGINNINGS

**A Bear Called Paddington** is the story of a young bear found at Paddington Station in London by the Brown family:

*It seemed a very unusual kind of bear. It was brown in colour, a rather dirty*

*brown, and it was wearing a most odd-looking hat, with a wide brim, just as Mr Brown had said. From beneath the brim two large, round eyes stared back at her.*

*Seeing that something was expected of it the bear stood up and politely raised its hat, revealing two black ears. 'Good afternoon', it said, in a small, clear voice.*

The bear — hailing from 'darkest Peru' — has a tag around his neck: *Please take care of this bear*. The Browns take him home, name him Paddington after where he was found — and the adventures begin.

Bond could not have found a better editor for his manuscript. In 1949 Barbara Ker Wilson began her career at the children's division of Oxford University Press. Later she worked for Stanley Unwin, who owned both the Bodley Head and Allen & Unwin, and her editing credits include **The Last Battle** by C.S. Lewis. A few years later she was at William Collins & Sons whose backlist of young books included Mary Poppins.

It's astonishing, now, to think there was a time when an editor had the authority to pick up a manuscript and simply buy it, without testing the book on a focus group, or running it by the marketing department. *There were none of these silly meetings that happen today and waste everybody's time*, said Barbara Ker Wilson. *I just knew it was something we had to publish.*

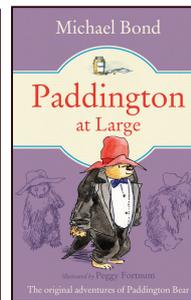
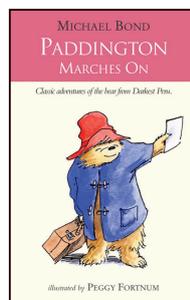
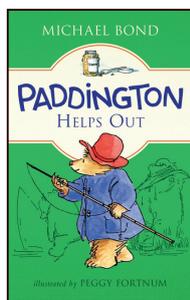
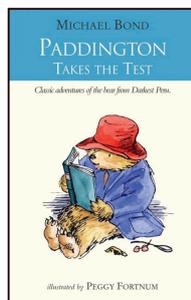


Bronze statue of Paddington, unveiled at Paddington Station in 2000. It is based on a black and white illustration by Peggy Fortnum.

She says although Bond was very anxious about the book, as it was his first, it needed little editing. Children's editor Peggy Fortnum was commissioned to create the illustrations. Working in black and white — the illustrations were later coloured by others, one of whom was her niece — Fortnum's drawings created Paddington's unmistakable look. Today, signed pen and ink Paddington illustrations by Fortnum are collectibles that sell for hundreds of pounds. *She was very dedicated to her art*, remembers Barbara Ker Wilson, who says Fortnum's illustrations played a key role in the ultimate success of Paddington.

The book was launched at Fortnum & Mason's department store in Piccadilly. *Michael was very pleased, but there weren't a lot of people there*, says Barbara Ker Wilson. *It was a small launch. Bill Collins came and we sold a few copies. The interesting thing about Paddington is that it completely sold by word of mouth, and that was how it became known.* She says it had to be reprinted *early on*. It was becoming known as a good bedtime story and both parents and children loved it. *It became clear it was going to be one of our leading children's books.*

Michael Bond was a 32-year-old BBC cameraman. In his autobiography, **Bears & Forebears**, Bond says he was fortunate to have entered television just as it became commercial. Established talent at the BBC were being offered huge sums to go and work at rival broadcasters, meaning the people left behind could expect rapid promotions. Bond not only got to work on a wide variety of television genres and see



how drama was put together, but he was also able to write both original scripts and adaptations.

Educated at Presentation College in Reading, he was so unhappy there that he left at 14; in November 2014, he told the **Guardian** that his parents had chosen the school *for the simple reason my mother liked the colour of the blazers. She didn't make many mistakes in life but that was one of them.* Bond worked in a solicitor's office for a year, and then as an engineer's assistant for the BBC.

He was still in Reading in 1943, when a building he was working in was hit by an air raid. Although he survived, 41 people were killed and many more left injured. Soon afterwards, he joined the Royal Air Force, but apparently had to leave because of airsickness, and joined the British Army instead.

Bond began writing at age 19 while stationed in Cairo during World War II. After being paid seven guineas for a short story, he decided the writing life was something he should aim for, and he went on to write short stories and articles, and even landed an agent. Today, he has more than 70 books to his credit. But **A Bear Called Paddington** was his first:

*The opening paragraph was simply an early-morning doodle brought on by the certain knowledge that if I didn't put something down on the blank sheet of paper in my typewriter nobody else would.*

*However, it caught my fancy, so I wrote a second paragraph, then a third, until by the end of the day I had completed a whole story ... Ten working days later, having completed seven more stories, I realized I had a book on my hands.<sup>1</sup>*

His inspiration was a toy bear sitting on the mantelpiece which he'd impulsively bought as a Christmas present for his wife the year before and called it Paddington, because he liked the name of Paddington Station. Today, many people believe the

station was named after the bear, rather than the other way round.

Noted British critic Amanda Craig, reviewer of children's literature for **The New Statesman**, says the central character being based on a teddy bear is part of the appeal. *For a young child between the ages of 4 and 7 just starting to read, it's the most delightful idea. A real teddy bear who comes from this exotic place and gets adopted by a family*, she says.

Paddington is a particularly beguiling bear, with his shapeless hat, his duffle coat — bought for him by Mrs Brown — and his suitcase stocked with marmalade sandwiches. It was a look that proved perfect for merchandising. Shirley Clarkson, who ran a design company in Doncaster, was so taken by the character that she made Paddington Bear toys for her children — one of whom, Jeremy, grew up to be the host of Top Gear. It was Clarkson who introduced the wellington boots to the character, to enable the toy to stand upright, and her rendering of the bear propelled her company to multi-million pounds success. Bond added the wellington boots into a later book, to suit the design strategy of the toy.

It's difficult to estimate the worth of Paddington Bear merchandise today, but it encompasses clothing, toys, and collectables. Yet many characters from children's books could have become a marketing juggernaut. Why has Paddington Bear taken such hold of the imagination?

#### THE POST-WAR IMAGINATION

Barbara Ker Wilson notes that there were many books starring bears around the time that Paddington appeared, from Winnie the Pooh onwards, all helped along by the appearance of the teddy bear. But what made Paddington stand out?

*It was such fun to find a new voice — that was what one looked for. All the other bear books had become rather old hat* says Barbara Ker Wilson *It's hard to describe*



Toy Paddington based on Peggy Fortnum's illustrations as designed by Gabrielle Designs.

*this, but they were a bit snobbish.* She says that while the world was changing rapidly in the 1950s, and those previous bear stories seemed to assume that they would be bought for middle-class children by middle-class parents.

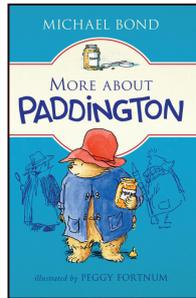
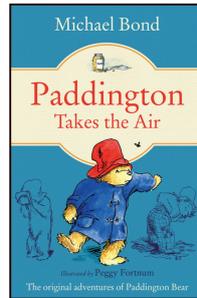
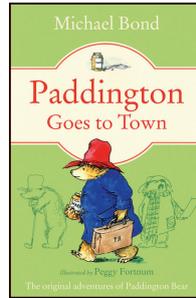
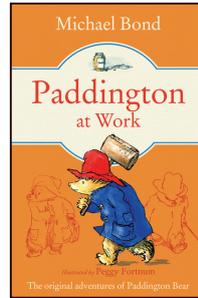
Paddington often pokes fun at elements of middle-class life and middlebrow culture; when he touches up a painting with abstract explosions of colour, it wins an art prize; when he goes to the theatre to watch a famous actor, he ends up working as the prompt, because the actor hasn't learned all his lines. But throughout, he maintains a very strong sense of right and wrong and gives *hard stares* to anyone behaving badly.

Craig says Paddington has all the elements of a perfect story, because it's about *family life and getting things wrong and them turning out right. It's also very funny. Other books of the time, like My Naughty Little Sister or The Borrowers, don't quite have that magic combination of ingredients, she says. My Naughty Little Sister is just a bit too domestic and The Borrowers a bit too wild.*

But Paddington has an even deeper layer, which resonates as profoundly today as it did in the 1950s. He's a refugee looking for a better life, as is his friend Mr Gruber, the Hungarian who runs an antique shop:

*To me, one of the saddest sights of any conflict is that of refugees, trudging along some dusty road, leaving everything they have known and loved behind them as they head into the unknown.*

*It was the memory of seeing newsreels show trainloads of evacuees leaving*



*London during the war, each child with a label round its neck and all its important possessions in a tiny suitcase, that prompted me to do the same for Paddington. 'Please look after this bear' was a message the Browns could hardly resist, and the addition of 'Thank you' said even more.<sup>2</sup>*

Craig thinks that Bond was part of a generation of writers who were *sort of processing the Second World War*, adding that the other book that's comparable to **Paddington** is Dodie Smith's 1956 novel **The 101 Dalmations**, which was inspired by the Kindertransport — the rescue mission to save children from the Nazis.

Britain was also experiencing a wave of post-war migration that was to change its character forever; Paddington embodies the best that such an experience could be — the kindness of strangers, coupled with the migrant's urge to fit in. Fifty years later, the question of migration and refugees has become a fraught one in Britain, which Bond tackled in his 2008 book **Paddington Here and Now**, which sees Paddington questioned over his residency status. While everything turns out well, Bond said it was important for authors — and, presumably, readers — to understand that life isn't easy for someone who has left their country and can't go back.

In January, Pico Iyer wrote an essay for the **New York Times** on what Paddington Bear had meant to him. Iyer, of Indian ancestry and born a year before Paddington, was also *small and brown and foreign*, and also had to grapple with the complexities of life in the British Isles. Paddington Bear became so important to him that, as soon as he left school, he worked to save money to visit Peru (only to discover that *Homes for Retired Bears were a little thin on the ground*).

Craig makes another intriguing point — that authors like Michael Bond and Dodie Smith were writing for children at the perfect time, because Britain was in the middle of a baby boom. *It was very easy to*

*make money out of children's books, she points out. In the 1950s, there was this great post-war baby bulge and you had a lot more books for children. Reading a book was one of the ways parents could spend time with their children.*

Given that Britain is experiencing a mini baby boom right now, it's conceivable that there will be another golden age for children's literature in the next decade. But for now, children can be content with Paddington, a bear with a very special quality that gives him his enduring appeal.

*It is something I recognised when I first read it, said Barbara Ker Wilson. It's got heart.*

1. Postscript, **A Bear Called Paddington** (1958) Michael Bond
2. p.145 **Bears and Forebears: A Life So Far** (1996) Michael Bond

#### A SELECTION OF PADDINGTON BEAR BOOKS

All published by Harper Collins Publishers

**A Bear Called Paddington** (1958)

978 0 00 752862 2 Hb

**More About Paddington** (1958)

978 0 00 675343 8 Pb

**Paddington Helps Out** (1960)

978 0 00 675344 5 Pb

**Paddington Abroad** (1961)

978 0 00 675345 2 Pb

**Paddington at Large** (1962)

978 0 00 675363 6 Pb

**Paddington Marches On** (1964)

978 0 00 675362 9 Pb

**Paddington at Work** (1998)

978 0 00 675367 4 Pb

**Paddington on Top** (1998)

978 0 00 675377 3 Pb

**Paddington Goes to Town** (1998)

978 0 00 675366 7 Pb

**Paddington Takes the Air** (1999)

978 0 00 675379 7 Pb

**Paddington Takes the Test** (1999)

978 0 00 675378 0 Pb

**Paddington Here and Now** (2008)

978 0 00 726941 9 Pb