

# A Bear's Tale

Nick Smurthwaite chats to Michael Bond - creator of

A bear called Paddington

feature

It is nearly half a century since Michael Bond bought a little toy bear for his wife's Christmas stocking.



Only much later did Michael, a wannabe writer then working as a television cameraman, sit down at his Remington typewriter, stare at a blank piece of paper, and look around his study for inspiration. He found himself staring at the bear and a story began to take shape.

Michael idly tapped out the words 'Mr and Mrs Brown first met Paddington on a railway platform. In fact that was how he came to have such an unusual name for a bear.' The story took him ten days to complete, and it was the first of 160 Paddington Bear stories.

'I was writing to please myself,' says the author with hindsight. 'It wasn't exactly earth shattering prose but it was to change my life forever. Without intending to, I had become a children's author.'

Now in his 80th year, Michael Bond is the most unassuming of men, softly spoken, with a discernible Berkshire accent, soberly dressed in dark suit and tie, and a look of mild astonishment that anyone should consider him interesting enough to merit a magazine article.

But there is no denying the phenomenon that is Paddington Bear. Thirty million copies sold worldwide, the tales of the English-speaking, marmalade-loving bear from Peru have been translated into 30 languages. While he has clearly worked hard over the years to keep the Paddington train on track, Michael says he sometimes goes into bookshops where they have a big promotion and feels as if it's happening to someone else. 'The books have a life of their own,' is his only explanation.

There have been several attempts to animate Paddington in cartoon form, including an ill-fated one by the American makers of Tom and Jerry, and of course there have also been stage adaptations with varying degrees of

success. The latest takes its title from the original book, *A Bear Called Paddington*, and is presently playing at the Polka Children's Theatre in Wimbledon.

When we meet at the Polka during rehearsals, Michael says he has high hopes for Annie Wood's new adaptation, which uses a 1m puppet Paddington rather than the usual actor-in-a-bear-suit. Michael himself features in the show, played by an actor.

Says Director Annie Wood, 'The story has a contemporary resonance because it is about someone arriving in London as a refugee from another country and not knowing anyone. I think Paddington is a good role model for how you can adapt to new situations. Despite his misadventures he is eager to get on with people and fit in.'

Keeping up with Paddington's meteoric rise to stardom inevitably took its toll on Michael who was slow to recognise that a successful commercial enterprise needed more than one person to administer and sustain it. 'I had an office in the West End and I used to run everywhere because I didn't have time to walk. As well as the books and the TV series, I did all my own paper work and personally answered an enormous number of letters. There are a lot of lonely people out there. It wasn't the underlying cause of the break-up of my first marriage, but it certainly didn't help because I spent so little time at home.'

Eventually he took on an assistant, Nicholas Durbridge, son of the thriller writer Francis, and since 1983 his daughter, Karen Jankel, has looked after the rights and merchandising side of things for Paddington & Co. Karen is also a trustee of the charity Action Research which funds projects related to problems with mobility. Paddington has been the charity's official mascot since 1976, making personal appearances at fund-raising events.

As well as English literature's second best known bear, Michael also invented the world's only crime-solving food inspector, Monsieur Pamplemousse, in a series of humorous adventures set in France. A lifelong Francophile and Georges Simenon fan, Michael set out to create a detective who, unlike the great Maigret, solved his cases by accident and serendipity. One reviewer described the books as 'light, fluffy, skillfully made, like a soufflé, with no aftertaste or afterthoughts to disturb the reader.'

Still working as hard as ever, Michael is currently concocting the 16th Pamplemousse story, thinking about a special Paddington volume to commemorate his 50th anniversary in 2008, as well as a picture book series for very young children coming out in the spring.

'One of the nice things about being an author is that you are never alone. Your characters keep you company. Even now, if I'm sawing a piece of wood or something, I wonder what would go wrong if Paddington was doing it. People often ask me if Paddington is me, and I usually reply that he is not because I'm quite a practical chap. He is more like my father who only had to put a shelf up for it to fall down five minutes later.'

'I think the reason Paddington remains popular is that he has an unchanging quality. The world has changed around him, but he remains the same. I was brought up on *The Magnet* comics, and it was the same with Billy Bunter. He

was waiting for that postal order to arrive for about 30 years. I used to read it under the bedcovers, rolling about with laughter.

'I don't have to work now but it is a kind of compulsion. I still work every day so I suppose I must still enjoy it. I have mixed feelings about being a well-known author because it does tend to take over your life, but the big plus is that so many people have derived so much enjoyment from your work.'

"ONE OF THE NICE THINGS ABOUT BEING AN AUTHOR IS THAT YOU ARE NEVER ALONE."