

This is a repository copy of *Paddington Bear and the View from Outside the Hostile Environment: A Legal Analysis of Refugee Stories in the UK*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/231440/>

Version: Published Version

---

**Article:**

Shah, Amber Asmeena (2025) *Paddington Bear and the View from Outside the Hostile Environment: A Legal Analysis of Refugee Stories in the UK*. York Law Review, 6.

<https://doi.org/10.15124/yao-3xp3-9j57>

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

# **Paddington Bear and the View from Outside the Hostile Environment: A Legal Analysis of Refugee Stories in the UK**

**Amber Asmeena Shah**

---

## **Abstract**

Paddington Bear is a beloved children's book character, created by Michael Bond in 1958. Heralded as a symbol of British culture, he is known for his polite manners and love of orange marmalade. But Paddington's story also cannot be separated from the history of migrants and refugees who have made a life for themselves in the UK.

Originally inspired by Bond's memories of British evacuees moving to the countryside during the Second World War, and Jewish refugee children arriving to the UK through the Kindertransport, Paddington is the embodiment of the UK's own narrative on its stance towards child refugees: that it has always been on the right side of history, welcoming them with open arms.

But when one views this character, within his books or highly successful film franchise, against the UK's overt attempts to create a hostile environment to deter refugees and migrants, Paddington begins to feel hypocritical, and even anachronistic. This bear cannot symbolise a country which is proud to have been deeply influenced and shaped by immigrants. Instead, he tells a story of a country that has never welcomed young refugees, despite the stories it tells itself.

This essay will therefore reflect on the legal background that underpins Paddington's well-known story of arriving irregularly in London, having fled an environmental disaster in "darkest Peru" – and highlight the deep tension between one of Britain's most beloved characters, and the reality he would have faced in the UK's hostile environment.

---

# 1 Introduction

Paddington Bear is a beloved children's character, created by Michael Bond in 1958.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Bond's memories of British children being evacuated to the countryside and Jewish children arriving on the Kindertransport during the Second World War, Paddington cannot be separated from UK immigration history and politics.<sup>2</sup> Yet in light of the current and purposeful hostile environment towards migrants and refugees in Britain, Paddington's story no longer stands out as an example of historical welcoming of others; but as an anachronistic and unrealistic fiction.

There have been multiple contributions from varying social science fields regarding Paddington's place in British culture – such as the use of Paddington as a symbol to protest against child migrant detention,<sup>3</sup> or a critique of the imperialist undertones of Bond's work.<sup>4</sup> However, beyond a light-hearted application of UK immigration law to Paddington's case,<sup>5</sup> there has been little attempt to analyse Paddington's story from a legal perspective. As such, the idea that Paddington's story was ever realistic within the UK's legal framework remains unchallenged.

This essay will therefore reflect on the legal background that underpins Paddington's story, in order to highlight the deep tension between one of Britain's most beloved characters and the reality he would face in the hostile environment. Namely, this essay will analyse Paddington's arrival in the UK, his whimsical life in London, and his acquisition of British citizenship. It will subsequently conclude that, when approached through a legal lens, Paddington's story is not just anachronistic due to the current political climate towards refugees and migrants – rather, it always has been.

It is naturally an unserious exercise to attempt to legally analyse the background of a fictional bear. However, it is important to confront long-lasting myths around Britain's historical stance towards refugees, and to recognise the vital role the law has always played in the tolerance and acceptance – or, more prominently, the lack thereof – of migrants in Britain.

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Bond, *A Bear Called Paddington* (New Edition, HarperCollins Children's Books 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Susanne Reichl, 'From Darkest Peru to Contemporary Politics: The Timelessness of Paddington's Search for a Home' (2022) 56-57 *Fachzeitschrift für Kinder – und Jugendliteraturforschung* 37, 44.

<sup>3</sup> David K. Seitz, "'Migration Is Not a Crime': Migrant Justice and the Creative Uses of Paddington Bear' (2022) 112(3) *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 859.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Smith, 'Paddington bear and the erasure of difference' (2020) 45(1) *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 25.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Yeo, 'An immigration lawyer reviews Paddington' (Free Movement, 29 June 2017)

<<https://freemovement.org.uk/an-immigration-lawyer-reviews-paddington/>> accessed 26 February 2025.

## 2 A Bear Called Paddington

“They will not have forgotten how to treat a stranger.”<sup>6</sup>

Paddington arrived in London with a label around his neck reading “please look after this bear”.<sup>7</sup> In creating this origin story for Paddington, Bond was inspired by the image of children in London train stations during the Second World War – both British children evacuating to the countryside, and Jewish children arriving on the Kindertransport, often wore labels stating their name and address.<sup>8</sup> The Kindertransport is regularly cited as the prime example of UK generosity and heroism in choosing to rescue refugee children; including calls for the UK to be more welcoming of refugees now, as it was in the past.<sup>9</sup> But so-called memories of the Kindertransport are in fact myths, as such a scheme to rescue selected Jewish refugee children was only needed due to the UK’s increasingly restrictive immigration rules.<sup>10</sup>

When Paddington arrived on UK shelves in 1958, the Aliens Restriction (Amendment) Act 1919 was in place. This amended the Aliens Act 1905 in order to make UK immigration law more restrictive, in particular to limit the number of “undesirable” immigrants arriving in the UK. Whilst the 1905 Act stated that those fleeing religious or political persecution should not be automatically refused entry if deemed to be “undesirable”,<sup>11</sup> the 1919 Act contained no such exemption.<sup>12</sup> Instead of repealing these restrictive immigration laws, the Kindertransport – a visa waiver scheme – was used to only allow for a limited number of unaccompanied minors fleeing Nazism to arrive.<sup>13</sup> This was in direct response to growing anti-migrant rhetoric in the UK, and a desire to limit the number of European refugees who were able to arrive in Britain.<sup>14</sup> As such, memories of the Kindertransport also serve as memories of the UK’s intentionally inadequate response to people fleeing persecution during the Second World War.<sup>15</sup> Many children with physical disabilities or mental health concerns, and all parents of the children

---

<sup>6</sup> Paul King, *Paddington* (United Kingdom, StudioCanal 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Bond (n 1), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Michaelle Pauli, ‘Michael Bond: ‘Paddington stands up for things, he’s not afraid of going to the top and giving them a hard stare’ *The Guardian* (London, 28 November 2014)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/28/michael-bond-author-paddington-bear-interview-books-television-film>> accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Andrea Hammel, *The Kindertransport: What Really Happened* (1st edn, Polity Press 2024), 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Aliens Act 1905, s.1(3).

<sup>12</sup> Hammel (n 9), 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Amy Williams and Bill Niven, ‘Memory of the Kindertransport in Britain and Germany, and the current refugee crisis’ (2020) 36 *Négociier l’accueil* 109, 109.

accepted on the scheme, were unable to seek sanctuary.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, whilst the Kindertransport has often been interpreted as a kindness, a more critical approach reveals its cruelty.

Increasingly restrictive immigration laws in response to migration flows and refugee crises is a story repeated throughout British history. The Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968 subjected people from former colonies to immigration control, in a direct response to the increase of South Asians leaving newly independent East African states for the UK.<sup>17</sup> The Immigration Act 1971 privileged Commonwealth citizens with British ancestry, such as those from Australia and Canada, in order to reduce the number of Black and Asian people able to claim a right to abode in Britain.<sup>18</sup> Had the UK government known in 1958 that bears from ‘darkest Peru’ would attempt to arrive and settle in the UK, it is likely that new immigration legislation would have been drafted to restrict such movement.

Paddington is of course a fictional bear, but it is not difficult to interpret him as a metaphor for a racialised migrant.<sup>19</sup> Bond originally conceived as the bear being from “darkest Africa”, before moving him to Peru where bears can actually be found.<sup>20</sup> Paddington is given his name by the white family who take him in, after Paddington informs them that no one can understand his actual name.<sup>21</sup> The recent film franchise also uses music to make the connection between Paddington and UK immigration history clear: as Paddington is driven through London in the 2014 film for the first time, he is followed by a cover of the song “London is the Place for Me” – written and performed by Lord Kitchener for his arrival on the Empire Windrush in 1948.<sup>22</sup> This suggests that Paddington’s story, originally echoing false memories of the Kindertransport, now takes place in a less romanticised context – that of the Windrush scandal, Brexit, and growing anti-migrant rhetoric in the UK.<sup>23</sup> In other words, Paddington is no longer arriving in a postwar Britain which finds use in refugees, but into a hostile environment which uses the law to reject him.

### 3 Paddington Here and Now

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Gresham College, ‘The Immigration Act 1971: Celebrated or Flawed?’ *Race, Colonialism and Power in the Legal System* (2021) <<https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/immigration-act>> accessed 2 March 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Smith (n 4), 28.

<sup>20</sup> Seitz (n 3), 861.

<sup>21</sup> Smith (n 4), 29.

<sup>22</sup> Reichl (n 2), 43.

<sup>23</sup> Reichl (n 2), 48.

“[A]lthough I don’t look like anyone else, I really do feel at home. I’ll never be like other people, but that’s alright, because I’m a bear.”<sup>24</sup>

The hostile environment was announced in 2012 by Theresa May, then the UK’s Home Secretary, as a plan to create a “really hostile environment” for undocumented migrants and their families.<sup>25</sup> But it is not just a Home Office policy or politician’s phrase. Rather, the hostile environment is an intricate legal framework which demonstrates the UK’s “specific intention of making life as difficult as possible, for racialised migrants ... to remain in the UK”.<sup>26</sup> As proud as Britain may be of its myths around the Kindertransport, its government is even prouder to announce and publish its plans to deter more refugees and migrants from entering the UK, regardless of the moral costs.<sup>27</sup> From paying social media influencers to create content aimed at dissuading young men from crossing the channel,<sup>28</sup> to spending an estimated £715 million on the failed scheme to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda,<sup>29</sup> the UK government has made no attempts to hide that refugees are not welcome here. Whilst some claim that Paddington should be deported back to the realm of apolitical children’s fiction,<sup>30</sup> others acknowledge that Paddington’s recent film franchise, arriving in the context of the hostile environment, is an important challenge to anti-immigrant sentiment.<sup>31</sup> But whilst the Paddington films have been well-received, Paddington himself would have faced a much harsher reception were he really to have smuggled himself out of Peru and into a London train station.

Although Paddington’s exact age is unknown, he is widely understood to be a child when he arrives in London. Unfortunately for him, however, “UK immigration policy responds to

---

<sup>24</sup> King (n 6).

<sup>25</sup> Frances Webber, ‘On the creation of the UK’s ‘hostile environment’ (2019) 60(4) Institute of Race Relations 76, 77.

<sup>26</sup> Maggie O’Neill, Tracey Reynolds and Umut Erel, ‘Editorial introduction: Racialised migrants navigating the UK’s hostile environment policies’ (2024) 44(2) Critical Social Policy 165, 167.

<sup>27</sup> Ayesha Riaz, ‘The New EU-UK Land Border: Legal Issues over Asylum and Migration in the Light of the Nationality and Borders Bill 2022’ in Ivan Mifsud and Ivan Sammut (eds), *Human Rights Issues in Migration and Border Management: Challenges and Perspectives* (Eleven 2024) 121.

<sup>28</sup> Kieran Kelly, ‘Albanian TikTok influencers to be paid thousands to warn migrants against crossing Channel in small boats’ *LBC* (London, 14 February 2024) <<https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/home-office-pay-tiktok-influencers-urge-migrants-avoid-crossing-channel/>> accessed 1 March 2025.

<sup>29</sup> Madeleine Sumption and Peter William Walsh, ‘The uncertain financial implications of the UK’s Rwanda policy’ (*The Migration Observatory*, 26 April 2024) <<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/the-uncertain-financial-implications-of-the-uks-rwanda-policy/>> accessed 2 March 2025.

<sup>30</sup> Gareth Roberts, ‘Paddington shouldn’t have been given a passport’ *The Spectator* (London, 22 October 2024) <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/paddington-shouldnt-have-been-given-a-passport/>> accessed 10 March 2025.

<sup>31</sup> Smith (n 4), 26.

children as asylum seekers first, and as children secondarily (if at all)”.<sup>32</sup> For example, despite local authorities in the United Kingdom having clear legal duties to accommodate unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in safe and suitable accommodation,<sup>33</sup> official Home Office policy enabled such children to be housed in hotels between 2021 and 2024.<sup>34</sup> A clear lack of safeguarding and measures and support for these children, including staff not being subject to DBS checks and a lack of formal education provision,<sup>35</sup> culminated in 440 of these children going missing – likely subject to criminal and other exploitation.<sup>36</sup> This scandal highlights the clear disparity in the treatment of British national children and children who are asylum seekers.

This is especially true for children whose physical appearance and presentation does not align with a Western understanding of childhood, thereby casting increased suspicion on their age and deservingness of protection.<sup>37</sup> In 2022 alone, more than 1,300 children were wrongly assessed to be adults by the Home Office on the basis of their appearance and demeanour.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, whilst charges for illegal entry into the UK under the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 are not officially being brought against child asylum seekers, this does not apply to children who are wrongly assessed to be adults by the Home Office, and detained in adult men’s prison without safeguards as a result.<sup>39</sup> Much like these children, Paddington arrived in the UK without any documents confirming his age, and without the outer-appearance of minority expected by Home Office officials.<sup>40</sup> It is therefore very likely that Paddington would become another age-disputed statistic.

---

<sup>32</sup> Tracey Anne Maegusuku-Hewett, ‘UK Immigration Policy and the Welfare of Children Seeking Asylum’ (DPhil thesis, University of Glamorgan 2008) 5.

<sup>33</sup> The Children Act 1989, s.20(1)(a).

<sup>34</sup> David Neil, ‘A re-inspection of the use of hotels for housing unaccompanied asylum-seeking children’ (Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration report, 2024), 2.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ella Cockbain, Lucia Durán, Sonja Ayeb-Karlsson and Thais Valiquette, ‘Behind Closed Doors: A Storytelling Legal and Empirical Analysis of Human Trafficking Risks in Home Office Hotels Compared to Other Accommodation for Unaccompanied Children and Young People Seeking Asylum in the UK’ (ECPAT UK and University College London 2024) 7

<sup>37</sup> Angeliki Manta et al, ‘Problematising Separated Children: A Policy Analysis of the UK “Safeguarding Strategy: Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking and Refugee Children”’ (2021) 47(3) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 501, 504

<sup>38</sup> Helen Bamber Foundation, Humans for Rights Network and Refugee Council, ‘Forced Adulthood: The Home Office’s Incorrect Determination of Age and How This Leaves Child Refugees at Risk’ (2024) <https://www.helenbamber.org/resources/reportsbriefings/forced-adulthood-home-offices-incorrect-determination-age-and-how-leaves> accessed 20 June 2025

<sup>39</sup> Vicky Taylor, “‘No Such Thing as Justice Here’: The Criminalisation of People Arriving to the UK on “Small Boats”’ (Border Criminologies, Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford 2024) [https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/No%20such%20thing%20as%20justice%20here\\_for%20publication.pdf](https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/No%20such%20thing%20as%20justice%20here_for%20publication.pdf) accessed 20 June 2025

<sup>40</sup> Yeo (n 5).

Even if Paddington were able to avoid prosecution for his illegal arrival in the UK, he would still carry the label of an “unaccompanied asylum-seeking child” – and the suspicion of illegality that comes with this.<sup>41</sup> Within the hostile environment, legal arrival in the UK is conflated with safety, whilst illegal arrival is conflated with risk and irrationality.<sup>42</sup> The 2014 film makes this clear. Paddington’s journey to London is clandestine, with the audience watching him hide in a boat and van until he makes it to his namesake station – and even after his arrival, Paddington is treated with suspicion by strangers and neighbours alike.<sup>43</sup> In this way, it appears the hostile environment permeates the screen, as it is no longer possible to tell the story of a fictional bear coming to London without connotations of illegality. Indeed, Paddington’s story is now deeply associated with criminality. Beyond his illegal arrival, Paddington has illegally worked as a barber, been wrongfully convicted of theft, and acted as an accomplice in a prison escape.<sup>44</sup> At surface level, this is simply a humorous and fictional story for children. In the hostile environment, this is the dual label Paddington carries: immigrant and illegal.

## 4 Paddington Takes the Test

“I have mixed feelings about who I am but that is okay. I’m a little bit of everything.”<sup>45</sup>

Whether Paddington falls under the definition of a refugee, as per the 1951 Refugee Convention,<sup>46</sup> is beyond the scope of this essay. However, it has been argued that it would be difficult for Paddington to establish a valid asylum claim due to him fleeing from a natural disaster, rather than from persecution.<sup>47</sup> Being recognised as an “environmental refugee” is exceptionally difficult due to the need to establish a causal nexus between a natural disaster, such as the earthquake in Paddington’s home country, and persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.<sup>48</sup> As such, the concept of “environmental refugee” is contested, with many interpreting this group as a subset of economic migrants rather than genuine refugees.<sup>49</sup> However, despite the weaknesses

---

<sup>41</sup> Manta et al. (n 37), 508.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> King (n 6).

<sup>44</sup> Paul King, *Paddington 2* (United Kingdom, StudioCanal 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Dougal Wilson, *Paddington in Peru* (United Kingdom, Studio Canal 2024).

<sup>46</sup> Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954) 189 UNTS 137 (Refugee Convention) Art 1(A)(2).

<sup>47</sup> Yeo (n 5).

<sup>48</sup> Refugee Convention (n 46).

<sup>49</sup> Matthew Scott, *Climate Change, Disasters, and the Refugee Convention* (Cambridge University Press 2020), 49.



of anthropomorphising a natural disaster into an actor of persecution, it has been recognised that where a state intentionally causes environmental damage to harm a particular group, this could give rise to refugee status.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps Paddington would be able to make the case that his species of bear is increasingly exposed to natural disasters in Peru, with little being done by the state to protect them due to species discrimination – or perhaps he makes a successful claim for humanitarian protection. However, this would first require Paddington to approach the Home Office, and for the Home Office to believe his story in the first place.<sup>51</sup>

Regardless of the likelihood of Paddington being granted refugee status in the UK, the third instalment of his recent film franchise makes it very clear that Paddington, in brandishing his new passport, is officially British.<sup>52</sup> This means that, at some point between his irregular arrival in London and return to Peru to visit his family, Paddington became a naturalised British citizen. Naturalisation is a crucial aspect of security for migrant families, as it removes the possibility of the revocation of settled status and deportation.<sup>53</sup> As such, the process has been used by the UK government to control migrant communities, forcing them to integrate or naturalise into British society in order to earn the privilege of nationality and the entitlements that come with this.<sup>54</sup> But Paddington becoming British is surprising not because he has a weak asylum claim, or because he is a bear – but because UK citizenship laws are increasingly restrictive.

As part of the UK's desire to exclude the eligibility of certain migrants for naturalisation, the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 introduced the “good character requirement” for acquiring British citizenship.<sup>55</sup> Under this provision, an applicant will not be granted British citizenship “unless the Secretary of State is satisfied that the adult or young person is of good character”.<sup>56</sup> Home Office guidance on what constitutes a “good character” was updated in February 2025 to confirm that someone “who has previously arrived without a required valid entry clearance or electronic travel authorisation, having made a dangerous journey will

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>51</sup> Yeo (n 5).

<sup>52</sup> Colin Yeo, ‘An immigration lawyer reviews Paddington in Peru: A very british bear’ (Free Movement, 11 November 2024) <<https://freemovement.org.uk/an-immigration-lawyer-reviews-paddington-in-peru-a-very-british-bear/>> accessed 26 February 2025.

<sup>53</sup> Catherine Puzzo, ‘UK Citizenship in the Early 21st Century: Earning and Losing the Right to Stay’ (2016) XXI-1 French Journal of British Studies 1, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 s 47(1).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

normally be refused citizenship”.<sup>57</sup> In clarifying that a dangerous journey includes “travelling by small boat or concealed in a vehicle”,<sup>58</sup> it is explicitly clear that this updated guidance aims to exclude refugees, who having fled persecution were forced to arrive illegally in the UK due to the lack of safe and legal passages, from ever obtaining the privilege of nationality. This is despite the absence of evidence that restrictive citizenship laws and long-term exclusion from settlement and security will deter irregular migration to the UK.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, reducing the ability of refugees to become British citizens is further legislative reinforcement of the hostile environment’s aim of making life as difficult as possible for refugees and migrants.<sup>60</sup>

It has been questioned how Paddington met the “good character” requirement given his criminal history, including his means of arriving in the UK.<sup>61</sup> But regardless of such questions, it has been made clear that Paddington is now British – and this reveals a darker truth behind this character. Beyond Paddington’s connections to British immigration history, his story is also linked to the afterlives of British imperialism and colonisation.<sup>62</sup> Paddington, a racialised migrant, is taken in by the wealthy and white Browns, who rename Paddington and teach him how to live according to their civilised British standards.<sup>63</sup> This is plainly an asymmetrical power dynamic, emphasising Paddington’s vulnerability and mirroring an imperial narrative.<sup>64</sup> Yet before Paddington’s Britishness became legally official, it was widely accepted that Paddington was already an icon of British culture.<sup>65</sup> This is not because his story resonates as a heartwarming tale of migration and acceptance – but because his story avoids the ‘problem of difference’ entirely.<sup>66</sup> Paddington is not British because he now has a passport; rather, he always has been. He idolised London before his arrival, speaks English with a perfect accent, and one of his defining characteristics is his polite “British” manners.<sup>67</sup> In other words:

---

<sup>57</sup> UK Visas and Immigration, ‘Guidance: Good character requirement’ (13 February 2025) <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/good-character-nationality-policy-guidance/good-character-requirement-accessible#criminality>> accessed 4 March 2025.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Lucy Mort, ‘Citizenship: A race to the bottom?’ (*IPPR*, 10 March 2025) <[https://www.ippr.org/articles/citizenship-a-race-to-the-bottom?mc\\_cid=dc2c0b2fe&mc\\_eid=3b85c2035b](https://www.ippr.org/articles/citizenship-a-race-to-the-bottom?mc_cid=dc2c0b2fe&mc_eid=3b85c2035b)> accessed 11 March 2025.

<sup>60</sup> Webber (n 25), 77.

<sup>61</sup> Yeo (n 52).

<sup>62</sup> Seitz (n 3), 859.

<sup>63</sup> Reichl (n 2), 39.

<sup>64</sup> Smith (n 4), 27.

<sup>65</sup> Smith (n 4), 34.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Reichl (n 2), 39; Smith (n 4), 31.

“Paddington himself elicits uncomplicated sympathy from the implicitly white English reader/viewer not because he is a migrant, but because he presents no threat to the cultural praxis”.<sup>68</sup>

The question therefore should not be how Paddington managed to successfully navigate the UK’s legal framework, which seeks to make life unbearable for refugees and migrants. Instead, we should consider the implications of Paddington being an exception to the rule. The Paddington books and films have been interpreted as a story of a racialised migrant arriving in the UK and, much like the children on the Kindertransport, or the Windrush generation, finding a family and making a home for himself despite the difficulties he faces.<sup>69</sup> Instead, perhaps Paddington has been enthusiastically welcomed into British culture because he in fact tells a story about the kind of migrants that can find acceptance in the UK – those who admire and adhere to traditionally “British” customs, and never threaten the status quo. After all, he is a bear – so whilst his story may depict the experiences of migrants and refugees in the UK, this is told primarily through a white author, accompanying white human characters, and the white actors who depict them.<sup>70</sup> Paddington has survived the hostile environment, but this does not make him an exemplary success story. Instead, he is a cautionary tale to migrants and refugees about the need to be as loveable and acquiescent as possible in order to gain acceptance in the UK.

## 5 Conclusion

UK immigration history and law is the reason Paddington exists – and the reason he is fictional. In 1958, Paddington was a fictionalised retelling of the UK accepting Jewish refugee children who arrived on the Kindertransport; fictional, because such memories of the Kindertransport are far from the historical and legal truth and consequences of this scheme.<sup>71</sup> In 2025, Paddington is a fictionalised representation of how a refugee or migrant ought to be treated in the UK; fictional, because UK immigration laws and systems ensure this cannot occur.

Yet even within an awareness of how the hostile environment would interact with Paddington’s story, he remains an icon of British culture. Whilst this essay has highlighted deep tensions in Paddington’s story, and its lack of alignment with the legal reality of migrants and refugees in

---

<sup>68</sup> Smith (n 4), 27.

<sup>69</sup> Smith (n 4), 44.

<sup>70</sup> Smith (n 4), 36.

<sup>71</sup> Hammel (n 9).

the UK, it cannot be argued that this should render his story obsolete. Paddington's world, where someone can arrive in London and be treated with kindness, rather than legal obstacles and punishments, is a world that appeals to many.<sup>72</sup> His endurance across decades of changes to the factual and legal immigration landscape in the UK shows that Paddington's story is one we still want to tell children and ourselves. A real Paddington would not survive the UK's hostile environment; but the fictional one persists. Paddington's bright, funny, whimsical story of life in London could not exist without migrants and refugees – and amidst increasing anti-migrant rhetoric and hostility in the UK, it is important that we remember this.

---

<sup>72</sup> Seitz (n 3), 864.