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Marmalade, Manners, and Mediation: A Sociocultural Reading of Belonging in *More About Paddington* and *Paddington Abroad*

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ABSTRACT

Michael Bond's Paddington stories are usually read as gentle comedies of manners, with the bear from "darkest Peru" at their centre. This article argues that *More About Paddington* (1959) and *Paddington Abroad* (1961) also work as sustained, if understated, studies of how belonging is made through social interaction. Drawing on sociocultural theory, namely Vygotsky's account of mediated action, Lave and Wenger's concept of legitimate peripheral participation, Rogoff's idea of guided participation, and Wertsch's work on cultural tools, the article shows that Paddington's belonging is neither granted nor earned once and for all. It is negotiated through everyday practices, and the objects and rituals he carries (marmalade, the hat, the suitcase, the "hard stare") serve as mediating tools. The Brown household, Mr Gruber, and the wider neighbourhood act as more capable others who scaffold his participation, while Paddington's mistakes expose the unwritten rules of the community he is joining. The article also takes seriously the reciprocal side of this process, in which the host community is itself changed by the newcomer. It concludes that the books offer a model of belonging as a shared, ongoing accomplishment rather than a one-way process of assimilation.

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1. Introduction: A Bear at the Station

The opening of the Paddington sequence is one of the best-known arrival scenes in English children's literature. A small bear sits on a suitcase at Paddington Station with a label round his neck asking someone to look after him. The first book, *A Bear Called Paddington* (Bond, 1958), settles the question of whether he will be taken in. The two books considered here ask something harder, which is how a bear who has been taken in comes to live in a place, and how he learns what living there requires. *More About Paddington* (Bond, 1959) and *Paddington Abroad* (Bond, 1961) are the sequel and the first travel volume of the series. Together they trace a movement from settling to testing, in which a newcomer who is now nominally "at home" meets situations that show how much he still has to learn, and how much the people around him have to learn as well.

Critical attention to Paddington has grown considerably since the 2014 film adaptation renewed public conversation about the bear as a figure of migration. Readings tend to fall into two camps. The first treats the stories as a benign national myth in which the polite foreigner is welcomed by a tolerant Britain. The second, more sceptical, notes that Paddington's acceptance depends on his willingness to be polite, grateful and charmingly incompetent, and so reads the series as a quiet lesson in conditional hospitality (see Ahmed, 2000, on the conditions attached to welcoming "strangers"). Both readings have merit. Both, however, tend to treat belonging as a state that a character either has or lacks, and they say less about how belonging is produced from one scene to the next.

Sociocultural theory is well placed to fill that gap. Its central insight, traceable to Vygotsky (1978), is that human thinking and action are not purely individual but are shaped by social interaction and by the cultural tools that mediate it. Learning, on this view, is a process of participation in shared activity and is not simply the acquisition of facts. It follows that belonging can be read as a developmental achievement, built up through repeated participation in the practices of a community, and not as an inherent quality or a legal status. The Paddington stories are in effect a long series of small episodes about participation: shopping, travelling, decorating, queuing, bargaining, apologising. My argument is that these episodes show belonging as something that is mediated, scaffold and mutual.

2. Theoretical Framework: Belonging as Mediated Participation

2.1 Mediation and cultural tools

Vygotsky's (1978) proposition that higher mental functions are mediated by tools and signs is the starting point. A tool, in this sense, stands between a person and the world and changes what the person can

do. Language is the paradigmatic example, but so are artefacts, routines and conventions. Wertsch (1991, 1998) develops this into a theory of "mediated action," arguing that the proper unit of analysis is neither the individual nor the environment alone but the individual acting *with* cultural tools. Importantly, Wertsch observes that tools both enable and constrain: they make some actions easy and others awkward, and they carry the history of the community that produced them.

This matters for a literary reading because fiction, too, assigns its characters tools. A character's characteristic objects and phrases are not decoration. They are the means by which the character acts on the fictional world, and they carry cultural meanings that the character may or may not fully grasp. A bear who carries a marmalade sandwich in his hat is acting through a tool that is simultaneously personal (it comes from his Aunt Lucy), practical (it is food), and cultural (it is, in a very British way, a preserve).

2.2 Legitimate peripheral participation and guided participation

Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed that learning takes place through "legitimate peripheral participation," in which newcomers begin at the edges of a community's practice, doing small but real tasks, and move gradually towards fuller membership as their competence and recognition grow. Two features of this account are relevant here. First, the periphery is not a waiting room. It is a genuine position from which a person contributes. Second, movement toward the centre depends on others, who grant access to practices and, by doing so, define what counts as competent membership.

Rogoff (1990, 2003) complements this with the concept of guided participation, in which more experienced members of a community arrange, support and gradually hand over responsibility for shared activity, often tacitly and through everyday routines rather than explicit teaching. Bruner's (1983, 1990) related notion of scaffolding adds that such support is contingent: it is offered when needed and withdrawn as the learner becomes capable. Taken together, these ideas shift the question we ask of a text. Instead of asking whether a character is accepted, we can ask who is supporting whom, through what activities, with what tools, and how responsibility moves.

2.3 A note on reciprocity and cultural contact

A potential weakness of applying these frameworks to a migration narrative is that they can be read as describing a one-way route from outsider to insider, which would sit uneasily with critiques of assimilationist thinking. Berry's (1997) work on acculturation is a useful corrective, since it distinguishes assimilation from integration and stresses that the receiving society's attitudes shape what is possible. Bhabha's (1994) notion of cultural hybridity, in which meaning emerges in the "in-between" spaces where

cultures meet, points the same way. I therefore read the sociocultural frame as bidirectional: communities are transformed by the participation of newcomers as much as newcomers are shaped by communities. As Lave and Wenger (1991) themselves note, a community of practice is continually reproduced and changed by the people who take part in it.

2.4 Children's literature sociocultural Reading

Two methodological points follow. First, children's literature is an apt object for sociocultural analysis because the genre itself is concerned with development and socialisation. Nodelman (2008) has argued that texts for children tend to carry adult assumptions about what childhood is and what children need to learn, which makes them a rich site for observing how a culture imagines its own transmission. Second, the analysis proceeds through close reading of recurring scenes and objects, understood as representations of mediated action. I do not claim that Bond consciously wrote with these theories in mind, nor that the stories document real developmental processes. The claim is that the stories dramatise processes of cultural learning in ways that sociocultural theory helps us describe precisely.

3. The Bear and His Tools: Marmalade, Hat, Stare

3.1 Marmalade as cultural mediator

Marmalade is the series' most famous motif, and it deserves to be taken seriously as more than a running joke. In the stories, marmalade operates as a link between two worlds. It connects Paddington to Aunt Lucy and Peru, since it was she who taught him to make it and who sent him off with a supply, and it connects him to his English home, where the preserve is a standard breakfast item. The object is thus doubly mediating. It lets Paddington act on his new environment, for instance by offering food, making a mess or seeking comfort, while also holding his past in his present.

What is striking is how often marmalade functions as a social instrument. It is offered, shared, hidden, or misapplied, and each of these acts produces a different kind of social outcome. When Paddington brings a sandwich to a public occasion, he is following one cultural script (carry food for emergencies) and colliding with another (do not eat sandwiches in a theatre, or on a bus). The humour arises from the friction between the tool's meaning in his history and its meaning in his surroundings. Wertsch (1998) calls this kind of tension "appropriation," in which a person uses a tool that belongs to a community without fully mastering its conventions. Paddington's marmalade is appropriated again and again, and each attempt teaches him something and teaches those around him something too.

3.2 The hat and the suitcase

Paddington's battered hat and his suitcase operate similarly. The suitcase is at once the symbol of his arrival and a repository of belongings; it also changes function over time, serving as a seat, a storage chest and a vehicle for the bear's improvisations. In *Paddington Abroad*, the suitcase returns to prominence in the travel narrative, which reasserts its original meaning as the mark of someone between places. The hat is a more domestic tool, a hiding-place for emergency marmalade and a visible badge of his identity. Neither is a mere prop. Both are objects through which the bear presents himself to the community and through which the community recognises him.

3.3 The Hard Stare

The "hard stare," a fixed look Paddington deploys when he is displeased or trying to make a point, is a distinctive case because it is a semiotic tool rather than a material one. In sociocultural terms it is a communicative resource, a way of making meaning when words fall short. It is also a borrowed one. Aunt Lucy's teaching is cited as its source, which ties it to Paddington's heritage, and yet it works in London because British politeness has its own repertoire of disapproving looks. The stare is intelligible across cultures not because the cultures are the same but because both have conventions for expressing quiet censure.

I would suggest that this is one of the series' subtler insights about belonging. Some of Paddington's cultural resources translate more readily than others, and part of the work of settling in is finding out which. The stare translates well and the marmalade sandwich in the theatre does not. Belonging, then, is partly a matter of discovering, by trial, which of one's tools are recognised in the new setting.

4. The More Capable Others: Scaffolding in the Brown Household and Beyond

4.1 The Browns as guides

The Brown family, and especially Mr and Mrs Brown, are the principal guides in Paddington's guided participation. Their support is characteristically tacit. Mrs Brown reassures, redirects and tidies up; Mr Brown is more prone to bluster, but also more prone to being won over. Neither lectures. Instead, they structure the situations Paddington encounters (a bath, a shopping trip, a day out) and respond to his mistakes in ways that allow him to continue. This is what Rogoff (1990) means by guidance: the adults do not hand over a rule book but arrange activities so that learning happens within them.

It is notable, too, that the Browns' scaffolding is contingent in Bruner's (1983) sense. They intervene when Paddington's improvisations threaten real harm and step back when the consequences are only comic. Over the course of the two books, the balance shifts, and Paddington is given more freedom to manage situations himself, even when the outcomes are unpredictable. The children, Jonathan and Judy, act as peer mediators, translating the adult world into terms Paddington can use and often joining him as co-participants in his schemes.

4.2 Mr Gruber and the community of practice

If the Browns represent the domestic sphere, Mr Gruber, the antiques dealer on the Portobello Road, represents the wider community. His relationship with Paddington is built around a shared ritual, the daily elevenses of cocoa and buns, which functions as a small, repeatable practice that confers recognition. Mr Gruber is also himself a migrant, a Hungarian who has made his life in London, and the text lets the reader notice, without making a speech of it, that the two share an experience of arrival. His treatment of Paddington is a case of what Lave and Wenger (1991) would call giving access to practice: he treats the bear as a real participant in the life of the market and not as a curiosity.

The significance of this pairing is that belonging is shown to be mediated not only by the host majority but also by others who know what it is to be a newcomer. Mr Gruber does not instruct Paddington in English manners so much as offer him a place from which to observe them. Here the book anticipates a point later made by Ahmed (2000), that encounters with strangers are shaped by who is positioned as host and who as guest, and that those positions are not always as fixed as they first appear.

4.3 Mr Curry and the limits of the community

A sociocultural reading must also account for the community's resistances. Mr Curry, the Browns' irascible neighbour, repeatedly attempts to exploit, blame or exclude Paddington. He is the figure through whom the series acknowledges that communities are not uniformly welcoming and that legitimate peripheral participation can be obstructed by gatekeepers. In Lave and Wenger's terms, Mr Curry polices the boundary of the practice. What is instructive is that the books rarely let him succeed. Paddington's persistence, combined with the support of the Browns and others, tends to turn Mr Curry's schemes against him. This pattern suggests a modest optimism: that belonging, while contested, can be defended by a community willing to stand behind a newcomer.

5. Mistakes as Cultural Learning

A hallmark of the Paddington stories is that things go wrong. Paddington floods the bathroom, gets stuck in a shop window, or turns a polite request into a catastrophe. These episodes are comic, but they are also the primary mechanism through which cultural knowledge is made visible. Rules that are normally invisible become noticeable only when they are broken. The sociologist's insight that norms are most apparent at moments of breach finds a gentle illustration in each chapter.

From a sociocultural standpoint, errors serve a double function. For Paddington, they are occasions of learning, since each mishap leads to some adjustment in his understanding of how things are done. For the Browns and others, they are occasions of reflection, because the bear's literal-minded or differently grounded interpretation of a custom forces them to articulate what they ordinarily take for granted. Why *shouldn't* one take a sandwich to the theatre? The answer is that it is simply what is done, and the difficulty of defending that answer is part of the comedy.

This reciprocity is central to my argument. Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development is usually imagined as the space between what a learner can do alone and what they can do with help, but a thicker version of the idea, such as that developed by Cole (1996), sees the zone as a jointly constructed space in which all participants are changed. In the Paddington books, the Browns are not static teachers. They become more tolerant, more inventive, and more attentive to their own habits as a result of living with the bear. By *More About Paddington*, the household has been quietly rearranged around him, and the arrangement is presented as an enrichment and not as a loss.

It is worth acknowledging a possible objection. One might argue that the comedic frame trivialises the stakes and that the stories ask the newcomer to carry the emotional labour of being forgivable. This is a fair point, and it is why the sceptical readings mentioned in the introduction deserve attention. Yet the texts also repeatedly place the burden of adjustment on the hosts. Where Paddington's behaviour is disruptive, it is often the Browns' or the neighbours' rigid expectations that are shown to be absurd. The stories invite readers to laugh with the bear as well as at him, and that choice of comic alignment is itself a cultural position.

6. *Paddington Abroad*: Inverting the Frame

Paddington Abroad takes the Browns and their bear on holiday to France. This premise inverts the usual relationship between host and guest. For once, it is the English family who are the foreigners, and Paddington, who has by now acquired a recognised place in London life, finds himself in a position of relative expertise. The book therefore offers a useful test of the sociocultural reading, since if belonging is

truly a matter of acquired participation, we should see Paddington drawing on what he has learned in a new context.

Paddington approaches French customs with a mixture of confidence and bewilderment, but he now has a repertoire of strategies built from his earlier experiences: he knows to ask, to observe and to appeal to the goodwill of those around him. At the same time, the trip reveals the limits of this repertoire. Tools that worked at home (the stare, the marmalade, the polite manner) are met with varying recognition abroad, and the family's collective competence is stretched. The episodes of travel, with their encounters with officials, hotels and local custom, restage the logic of peripheral participation, only this time the whole family are newcomers.

Two features are worth noting. First, the journey shows that belonging is *situated* (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Paddington's acceptance in London does not travel automatically with him; it has to be rebuilt in each new setting. Second, the trip gives Paddington an occasion to reflect, in his own way, on what home means. His attachment to the Browns and to 32 Windsor Gardens is expressed not through declarations but through small acts of reference and return. The book draws on what attachment theory would call a secure base (Bowlby, 1969), a place and a set of relationships from which exploration becomes possible. Paddington can be adventurous abroad precisely because he is anchored at home, and this is surely one of the reasons the series ends its holiday episodes by turning back toward London.

The inversion also complicates any simple reading of the series as a migration allegory. If the same family can be hosts in one volume and guests in the next, then the categories of insider and outsider appear provisional and relational and not fixed. This is consistent with Bhabha's (1994) emphasis on the instability of cultural boundaries, and it lends the books a quiet generosity: nobody is permanently a stranger, and nobody is permanently at home.

7. Discussion: What the Sociocultural Lens Reveals

Reading the two books through sociocultural theory yields three observations.

First, belonging is *processual*. The stories do not present acceptance as an event but as a continuing practice, renewed in each shared meal, outing or crisis. This is a quietly demanding picture, since it implies that belonging has to be maintained by everyone involved, and it avoids the sentimental implication that one act of kindness settles the matter.

Second, belonging is *mediated*. It runs through objects, rituals and shared symbols (marmalade, cocoa, hats, stares), which carry cultural meanings that can be taught, borrowed or misread. A reading attentive to mediation can explain why the stories place so much weight on apparently trivial things. In a sociocultural account these are the very means by which community is constituted.

Third, belonging is *reciprocal*. The community changes as it receives its newcomer. This is the point on which the sociocultural reading most clearly departs from assimilationist interpretations of the series, and it is also where it aligns best with Berry's (1997) integration model, in which both groups adapt. The Browns' household is not simply a fixed host culture into which Paddington is absorbed; it is a living practice that Paddington helps to reshape.

There are, of course, limits to this reading. The books were written in a particular moment of post-war British life, and their vision of hospitality is bound up with period assumptions about class, politeness and national character. Nikolajeva (2010) reminds us that children's fiction often distributes power unevenly between child and adult characters, and the same may be said of the distribution between native and newcomer here. A bear is, after all, a convenient figure for the migrant, one who can be adorable in ways that real people are not always permitted to be. Future work might usefully set these texts beside later and more explicitly political migration narratives for children, to see how the balance between charm and critique shifts.

8. Conclusion

The title of this article names three terms, marmalade, manners and mediation, and each has turned out to carry some weight. Marmalade stands for the cultural tools through which a newcomer acts and is recognised. Manners stand for the unwritten rules that are learned through participation and exposed through error. Mediation names the process that joins them, by which people, objects and routines stand between the individual and the community and make belonging possible.

More About Paddington and *Paddington Abroad* are often loved for their warmth and humour, and rightly so. What a sociocultural reading adds is an appreciation of how carefully those qualities are built, and how much the stories understand about the everyday work of making a place one's own. They suggest, with characteristic lightness, that belonging is something people do together, and that the doing is never finished. A small bear with a label round his neck turns out to have a good deal to say about how communities are made, and about how much they depend on who is willing to look after whom.

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