I am excited to start writing this series with perhaps the most quintessentially British film of recent years. Paddington 2 may look like a kids movie about a talking bear, but there is so much more to it than that and if you want to better understand the UK.

For those of you who don’t know, Paddington Bear is a much-loved literary character created by author Michael Bond in 1958. Paddington is a bear that has left Peru and is adopted by a British family who discover him alone in London’s Paddington Station, which he is then named after. His origin story is covered in the first Paddington (2014) movie, although it is not necessary to have seen this before watching the new film.

His is an immigrant’s tale. The original book came out in the late 1950s as London was becoming the diverse multicultural city it is today after the British government began to encourage mass immigration from the countries of the British Empire and Commonwealth to fill shortages in the labour market after World War II.

Today’s Paddington films come as Britain is coming to terms with its new status in the world, less powerful on the global stage and with a much more globalised population. Where Paddington lives, in inner London, more than 40 per cent of residents are born outside of the UK and more than two-thirds of babies born in London in 2015 had at least one parent who was born overseas. Korea has comparatively very little immigration, while a country like the USA has been a nation of immigrants since its founding. The UK falls somewhere in between and so the idea of what it is to be British has gone beyond ethnicity.

Paddington deftly articulates a sense of idealised Britishness for now that has more or less united people across the political spectrum. Paddington himself prizes decency, generosity, good manners, and the notion of ‘fair play’ at a time when many people feel these values are being eroded.

At one point in the film Paddington says: “Aunt Lucy said, if we’re kind and polite the world will be right.” This naïve yet hopeful message can be very comforting for a British person and Paddington’s harmonious multicultural neighbourhood in west London shows the best side of modern Britain.

But the film also harks back to a past Britain as well, particularly through comedy. There is plenty of slapstick humour that has fallen out of fashion in recent years. Some of Paddington’s costumes reference silent-era movie star Charlie Chaplin and there is plenty of physical slapstick humour. At one point Paddington ends up in prison, but it is not like a modern penitentiary and instead resembles a Victorian jail. The film exists in its own time warp in a London where there glistening skyscrapers yet no one has a mobile phone.
The British pantomime – a type of old-fashioned musical comedy stage production that remains popular in the UK – is also invoked through actor Hugh Grant’s performance as villain Phoenix Buchanan with broad humour played out in front of an audience one scene. In another scene Grant is dressed as a female nun and there is a long tradition of men cross-dressing in British theatre that dates back to William Shakespeare plays such as Twelfth Night and As You Like It.

Grant’s performance has won him a nomination for best supporting actor at BAFTAs – the UK’s most prestigious film awards ceremony – where he is up against actors who were in serious drama films. Paddington 2 has also been nominated for Outstanding British Film at the BAFTAs, a rarity for a family movie in the UK but a reflection of its popularity at the box office and universal critical acclaim. In January Paddington 2 became the best reviewed film in the history of movie review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes overtaking Toy Story 2.

The growing popularity of Paddington has also been credited with an uptick in the sales of marmalade, the bittersweet fruit preserve made with oranges and fruit peel that fills Paddington’s sandwiches. Foreign viewers can be forgiven for thinking that British people, like Paddington, eat marmalade in sandwiches. In fact Brits almost exclusively spread marmalade over brown bread toast accompanied with butter.

However, if you would like to make a marmalade sandwich you will need: Two slices of brown bread; marmalade; and butter.

Spread a thin layer of butter on one slice of bread and liberally spread marmalade on the other slice. Bring the two slices together and then cut the sandwich diagonally and enjoy.

Guy James