

## For the Love of Paddington: A Movie Review by Suzanne Ross

I loved *Paddington*, the new movie based on the Michael Bonds books about an immigrant bear who arrives in London from darkest Peru. Paddington has no resources other than his faith that he will be welcomed with open arms. Sadly, his experience begins like that of most illegal immigrants to the European or American shores – he is rejected and ignored. But this is a playful movie with a happy ending that celebrates what wonderful things happen to the Brown family when they allow Paddington into their hearts and home. Admittedly, Paddington is a handful – a wild animal unfamiliar with modern conveniences whose commitment to being polite does not prevent unfortunate accidents that fulfill the nervous Mr. Brown's worst fears. As the family learns to love this accident prone bear, however, their love for each other is renewed. The villain (yes, of course, there's a villain!) is defeated, Paddington finds a home and the Brown's problems are cured by loving the alien in their midst.

Does this fictional account of immigration with a happy ending have any bearing (pun intended!) on our real world immigration crisis? This movie invites us to wonder whether our fears of the changes that immigration brings are unfounded. After all, many European and American citizens fear the waves of legal and illegal immigration in Europe and the United States. We know all too well that these uninvited guests are radically changing racial, religious and cultural demographics. Immigrants disrupt labor patterns, burden welfare systems and tax the criminal justice system. And unlike the movie's cartoon explosions, floods and fires, the violence in our world that seems fomented in and among immigrant communities is all too real a threat.

Or so the story goes that stokes our fears. But is the story true? Paddington asks us to consider if our fears are legitimate or whether we are frightened of a cuddly bear who will open our shut-up hearts and change our lives for the better? We may never know which it is. But not because we can't know – because we don't want to know. It's safer to live with our fears, to calculate risks and live smaller and smaller lives as Mr. Brown does to such humorous effect in the movie. Fear may imprison us but it's a prison we know and learn to love. Letting go of that world, no matter how limiting and self-defeating it has become, feels like dying and so we hang on for dear life.

To put it another way, we can structure our lives around love or hate. Both work equally well to give our lives a center of gravity. But hate gradually sucks the life out of us and our communities while love injects life into us. As I write this I am reminded of the novel *Jayber Crow* by Wendell Berry. It is a beautifully written chronicle of change and resistance to change, of faith and loss, of love and hate. The central character, Jayber, is a fallen preacher who is driven to be a better man, a more loving neighbor, a more faithful follower of the one who taught that we should love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us. Allow me to offer these passages from the novel as meditations on our resistance to abandoning hate for love.

“If we are to understand the Bible as literally true, why are we permitted to hate our enemies? If Jesus meant what he said when He said we should love our enemies, how can Christians go to war?” (50)

Jayber is not afraid to ask the hard questions. In the next excerpt he dares to hold love to account for its apparent failure to redeem our world. Let’s join Jayber in his fearless questioning:

“What did love have to say to its own repeated failure to transform the world that it might yet redeem? What did it say to our failures to love one another and our enemies? What did it say to hate? What did it say to time? Why doesn’t love succeed?” (247)

In the next passage, Jayber seems to answer his own questions by reflecting on his inability to stop hating Troy Chatham, the husband of the woman Jayber loves from afar. His disappointment in his inability to transform his hate, despite knowing that is the right thing, and the best thing to do, reminds me of the secret shame we all feel when we are consumed by hatred of the alien in our midst.

“...of all the trials I have experienced, he [Troy] was the hardest. He was the trial that convinced me over and over again. I did not like him. I could not like him. Maybe I didn’t need to like him, but I needed at least not to dislike him, and I did thoroughly dislike him. I also enjoyed disliking him. In his presence I was in the perfect absence, the night shadow, of the charity that I sought for and longed for. I had got far enough that I could see how, in this hard and sorrowful and sometimes terrible world, charity could light and ease the way, if a person could be capable of it. I could see how it could show an opening that a man like me might, after all, squeeze through. And in the presence of Troy Chatham, which was getting to be about the only place where I needed that charity and really suffered for the want of it, I didn’t have it.” (337)

“I also enjoyed disliking him,” Jayber admits. Are we similarly afflicted? Whom do we enjoy disliking so much that we lose sight of our better selves? In the presence of fictional characters like Troy Chatham and Paddington Bear, we might discover how to structure our lives around love instead of hate. Like Jayber and Mr. Brown, we might discover how to embrace the "other" in our lives. Indeed, by following these examples, we might just discover the truth of the Letter to the Hebrews, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without know it."