

*Oration presenting Michael Bond, OBE for the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters
at a Degree Congregation, 6th July 2007*

My Lord and Chancellor, Mr Michael Bond, OBE, is the author of that great work *Ursus Nomine Paddington* which is the Latin title of his most well known book. But, I am spoilt for choice; so universal is his books' appeal and so widespread his readership, that his work has been translated into over forty languages.

Michael Bond came to live in Reading in 1926 aged six weeks and here he grew up. He was born into a strong family from whom he learned much that shapes his writing. His grandfather taught him the resilient optimism that persists until success. His mother passed on a love of books, and his father exemplified both the virtue of always doing the right thing whatever the circumstances and the absolute necessity of politeness. So determined to be polite was the elder Mr Bond that he wore his hat when sea bathing; to be always ready to doff it should a lady chance by, paddling in the opposite direction.

Michael Bond's boyhood hobbies combined a mechanical bent with an enduring fascination for behind the scenes of show business - he built both radios and a marionette theatre - and a year or so after leaving school during the second world war, solely on the strength of being able to recite Ohm's law at interview, he obtained a job in radio engineering with the BBC team building a transmitter near the old town hall. First, the war came to him - he was in the building when the transmitter was bombed - then on reaching 17 he volunteered to go to it, serving in both the RAF and the Army. And it was while in the army, in Egypt in 1945, on a service issue typewriter that he wrote his first creative work and published his first short story in the *London Opinion*.

On demobilisation, he returned to engineering work with the BBC at Caversham Park, but later transferred to London and the up and coming thing - television, where he could combine his technical expertise with love of theatrical mechanics - living in Notting Hill, going off, in his duffle coat and sporting an army surplus bush hat, to his work as a senior cameraman.

Fortunately for us, he persisted in writing: succeeding in selling radio plays, contributing to the Manchester Guardian and publishing short stories, until on Christmas Eve in 1956, he rescued as a stocking-filler for his wife, a toy bear he spotted alone on a shelf in need of someone, please, to look after this bear. The inevitable followed. One day looking around for inspiration, Michael Bond began a paragraph about the bear. The paragraph became a chapter, then another until he found he had a whole book - *A Bear Called Paddington*. It was published in 1958, the year his daughter was born, and so began his other life as a children's author, which eventually displaced his day job and led to the award of the OBE for services to children's literature in 1997.

Michael Bond went on to write over 150 books and TV series about Paddington and the other characters who came later: for example, Olga da Polga, the delightfully mischievous, permanently hungry and loudly squeaking guinea pig - although, having met Olga, I can assure you that those books owe as much to observation as to invention.

But it all began with the marmalade addicted bear, who emigrated from darkest Peru to be found by the Brown Family on Paddington Station with, like the evacuees Michael Bond had seen in Reading during the war, a luggage label politely requesting help. The bush hat he already had, the duffle coat he acquired here against the English weather.

Paddington Bear is a well motivated optimist and if things do not always go exactly to plan – in fact nothing works out quite as Paddington expects – he perseveres as politely as he can with what he thinks is right until, in spite of the mayhem on the way, it all comes out well in the end. Adults will recognise the familiar in these books. Every parent knows that the most dreaded words in English are “Daddy, Mummy, can I help?”, and they can appreciate from simply the title what is about to be unleashed in a book called *Paddington Helps Out*. It is little wonder he appeals to children all over the world – how they must wish their innocently unintended chaos will always be forgiven.

This is no simple message of the end justifying the means; if it were the books would lose their heart and Paddington the moral force he brings to his real life charity work as mascot and fundraiser for Action Medical Research. The clue to why the plots succeed can be found in another of Michael Bond’s series, the adult books about the French detective Monsieur Pamplemousse. This hero is attached to the food fraud squad of the Paris police. Now, I do not know if the Sûreté has a food fraud squad, but I can suppress my academic instincts to research the truth; because the greater truth is that a food fraud squad is precisely what a French police force ought to have. And that is the point: Life as lived by the child-like Paddington is, to the child and to the child in us all, life as it should be. If you set out with good intentions and politely persevere when things go wrong, good will come to those who deserve it. It may not be the good intended, but good will follow.

At this Congregation we have seen the latest cohort of those studying for Bachelor of Arts Education graduate on their way to become primary teachers when they will work that everyday miracle of teaching children to read – one of the greatest services one person can do for another. To Michael Bond has fallen the lot of giving children a reason to learn to read and the enjoyment which makes the effort worthwhile.

Next time you are on Paddington station, pause just by the escalators at Marcus Cornish’s bronze of Michael Bond’s bear. The statue is based on Peggy Fortnum’s original illustrations, and shows him with suitcase, luggage label and hat - ready to doff politely should a she-bear chance by padding in the opposite direction.

I echo its inscription when I say: to acknowledge the enormous pleasure which he has given to millions of children and adults throughout the world, My Lord and Chancellor, I present to you Mr Michael Bond, OBE, for the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters of this University.

Professor David Malvern
Head of the Institute of Education