

## ‘Paddington’: Can the ‘other bear’ crack the Japanese market?

‘I can’t pinpoint the exact reason, but Paddington remains a somewhat distant character for me.’ So wrote teddy bear aficionado Satomi Terakawa in an email interview. Terakawa harbors a lifelong love for stuffed toy bears, and spent 15 years designing and making teddy bears for a toy boutique in Ginza.

“My favorite bear is Pooh-san,” she says. “For me, Paddington is the ‘other bear.’”

Terakawa is not alone — for many Japanese, Paddington lacks the ubiquitous familiarity of A.A. Milne’s creation, and he has never merited the “san” at the end of its name like Winnie-the-Pooh. It’s rare for Japanese people to be introduced to Paddington books at an early age or surround themselves with Paddington merchandise goodies. Which is a bit of a head scratcher, since the Japanese have warmly embraced the Snoopy and Peanuts cartoons, and Pooh souvenirs at Tokyo Disneyland continue to fly off the shelves. Figure skater extraordinaire Yuzuru Hanyu is a famed Pooh-lover, who carries his own “Pooh-san” wherever he goes.

“Perhaps Paddington is too British for me,” concludes Terakawa. “I get the feeling that people who like Paddington are people who speak excellent English and have been to London.”

Still, all that could change this weekend, as “Paddington” opens nationwide on Jan. 16. The “other bear” has his own live-action movie now, and that’s a score over Pooh-san, whose cinematic appearances are almost exclusively limited to Disney animation.

So far, things are looking good for the “other bear.” Tori Matsuzaka, who’s among the top 10 heartthrob actors working in Japan today, is doing the local voice-over for the titular bear, and veteran performer Arata Furuta takes on Henry Brown, Paddington’s adoptive dad. Pia, the giant entertainment and promotion company, has come out with the definitive Paddington magazine book (or “mook” as we call them) to inform and instruct newcomers to the Paddington fan forum. The publication (selling in bookstores nationwide for ¥1,500 a copy) comes with a Paddington tote bag.

“We have high hopes for Paddington’s success,” says a staff member at “Paddington” distributor Kino Films, who wishes to remain anonymous. Kino Films have built their reputation on quality movies like “Still Alice” and “The Captive,” and Cannes Jury Prize winner “Mia Madre” is coming soon. According to this staff member, “We didn’t want to promote Paddington as something purely for children. It’s a high-

caliber work for moviegoers of all ages, best enjoyed at the theater, on a large screen.”

Indeed, “Paddington” holds enormous appeal for discerning adults, in particular Anglophiles. The English star wattage alone could light up Harrod’s: Hugh Bonneville (“Downton Abbey”) in the role of Henry Brown; Sally Hawkins (“Blue Jasmine”) as his wife, Mary; Ben Whishaw giving his all as Paddington’s voice; and Nicole Kidman (who’s Australian but, you know, she has that accent) as the villain taxidermist, Millicent. Michael Gambon and Imelda Staunton man the wings as Paddington’s uncle and aunt.

Written and directed by Paul King, “Paddington” shares the same textural feel as the “Harry Potter” series — that is, the production design is sheer British fairyland, redolent of brick buildings, wood fires and hot scones with Paddington’s favorite marmalade. But then, perhaps all this is only to be expected: “Paddington’s” producer is Briton David Heyman, the man behind the “Harry Potter” series. If anyone knows how to make quality, Anglo-style children’s entertainment accessible to everyone, Heyman is the man.

As far as “Paddington” goes, the producer assembled the entire staff and cast out of his London office, which probably accounts for the closely knit, home-and-hearth feel that permeates every frame. This isn’t a lavish production, but lovingly crafted and excellently performed, as if everyone involved in the project has fond memories of the titular bear and has a soft spot for teddies in general. Heyman himself has said, in an interview with *The Telegraph*, that he still has his teddy bear from when he was 4 years old.

The movie met with whopping box office success in both the U.K. and U.S., beating the record set by “Frozen” on opening weekend in both countries. “Paddington’s” arrival on our shores is 12 months late, but as Terakawa pointed out, he does seem just a little lofty, artsy and unapproachable for a furry animal. If only Hanyu had carried Paddington in his blue duffle coat. That might have turned things around twice as fast.

But my bet is that the bear can make it all on his own. After all, he’s made of strong stuff, an immigrant from “darkest Peru” who hopped over to England without a passport. Unlike “Pooh-san,” Paddington was never a genuine Briton with his own 100 Acre Wood, but a homeless creature, standing on the platform at a London train station with a sign around his neck: “Please look after this bear. Thank you.” It helped, of course, that he could talk — and with a slight “Oxbridge” accent, no less. He has slightly fancy manners too, which is why the Brown family takes him home and offers him the use of their attic.

His name, of course, comes from the train station (bestowed on him by Mary Brown), and though he has a run of bad luck getting used to life in a quintessential English flat, he soon finds his way. By the end of the movie he can even converse for minutes about the weather like a true British gentleman. How's that for a dream immigration/Airbnb situation?

The takeaway message for Japanese audiences is probably this: Hone your English conversation skills and keep an open mind. These two factors were invaluable to Paddington, who manages to beat the odds (and the taxidermist) and remain his adorable, optimistic self until the sweet end. It worked for a bear from a Peruvian jungle, so surely it would work for us too. As Henry Brown succinctly puts it: "It doesn't matter if he's a different species."