

Rating: ***«««« out of «««««***

Running Time: 103 min.

A couple of years ago, I was completely taken aback by the family film *Paddington*. The movie won me over instantaneously as a charming and funny tale of a Peruvian bear immigrating to England after a terrible disaster in his home country. It was easy to empathize with the character and his struggles in transitioning to his new life. In the end, the movie was a critical and financial success, leading to an inevitable sequel. While one might approach such a follow-up with trepidation, this reviewer can report that
Paddington 2
is another winner. As sequels go, this is as exceptional as it gets.

Now officially living with the Browns and having adjusted to his new home, the good-natured Paddington (voiced by Ben Whishaw) sets his sights on finding a perfect birthday gift for his Peruvian aunt. He settles on saving up to buy a unique London pop-up book from antiques dealer Mr. Gruber (Jim Broadbent). After mentioning it to actor Phoenix Buchanan (Hugh Grant) the bear is framed for a crime he didn't commit. Locked away, he worries about clearing his name and whether or not his adopted family will forget about him. Problems also arise within the neighborhood, as Paddington's politeness served as a calming and uniting influence within the community.

It's much of the same cast and crew for this follow-up and they pick up right where they left off, maintaining the same tone. Much like the original, there's a lot of physical comedy on display early on. It takes a few scenes to really find its rhythm, but soon there are some great jokes as

Paddington tries his hand at various forms of employment (his problems with using an electric razor in a barber shop and an unusual method of cleaning windows being the highlights).

However, the movie hits high gear by effectively taking the gentle bear and placing him in a completely contrasting environment. In this case, it's a prison filled with people like Knuckles McGinty (Brendan Gleeson) and other hardened ruffians (or as close as a family film will get to tough-guy behavior). It provides an endless supply of comedic material, and the film takes full advantage. The interplay between Paddington and the convicts is hilarious, with the lead attempting to open up their horizons and add a dash of color and variety into their lives and the prison itself. It's all great stuff.

Grant also has a great deal of fun in his role, playing an egotistical cad with a penchant for disguising himself in exaggerated costumes. The adult Browns (Hugh Bonneville and Sally Hawkins) get a little more to do this time out as they attempt to find some sort of evidence that can free Paddington. Along the way, they come into contact with characters from the previous installment, adding laughs with amusing callbacks. Even Mrs. Bird (Julie Walters) earns a big chuckle while expressing her distaste for the acting profession.

Credit must also go to the screenplay (by director Paul King and actor Simon Farnaby) for the way they write much of the humor. The witty jokes are set up and left just long enough that you begin to forget about the reference by the time the payoff arrives (a Yoga gag being one such example). And on a technical level, the photography and production design is equally gorgeous, with the bright costumes and sets popping off of the screen like a children's book. The carnivals, circus trains, the Brown home and even a visit into the pop-up book are remarkable.

While it doesn't deal with as much heavy thematic material this time out, there's a subtle plea for community, with distinctive and diverse characters from varied backgrounds all working together in the neighborhood. It's a warm and winning family movie that will delight viewers of all ages. As strange as it sounds, in an era of sequels and franchises, this series may prove to be at the top of heap. *Paddington 2* and its marmalade-loving lead are delicious all around.

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By Glenn Kay

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