This paper seeks to explore issues of immigration and Otherness through a study of the first of Michael Bond’s Paddington books. I will argue that this book and those which follow in the series, intended for a readership of young children, deal with the issue of immigration at a more subtle level than more recent books which are largely aimed at older children who, it is assumed, are better able to cope with the complex political and psychological issues involved. Paddington, as a series of books begun in the late 1950s, presents issues of anti-racism and ‘Otherness’ which can be revealed through a close textual analysis of the introductory chapters of the first book in series, A Bear Called Paddington (1958), whilst also showing how the dominant culture retains its superior status.

KEY WORDS: anti-racism; immigration; Otherness; critical discourse analysis.

Although multiculturalism is integral to the day-to-day life of most parts of the world, Van Dijk et al. (1997, p. 144) have observed that ‘cultural misunderstanding, ethnic conflict, prejudice, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism and racism frequently characterise relations between groups that are somehow “different” from each other.’ The groups of individuals which do not exhibit the characteristics of the dominant group or culture are often subject to misrepresentation or misunderstanding, leading to them being marked as out-group members through complex strategies of Othering (Smith, 1991). Despite the fact that everyone has an ethnic identity, it tends to be emphasised mainly for minority groups who are treated largely as outsiders to the majority norm. The effect of this is that the distinctive nature of minority groups is constantly flagged. This representation in turn reinforces the perception of these groups as different or Other and,
sometimes, as threateningly distinct to the norm. In terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’, the majority stance can be expressed as ‘they’ [the minority] live in ‘our’ land and should be part of ‘our’ culture, learning ‘our’ language and social norms. In such situations, the majority’s ethnic identity becomes invisible (because it is ‘normal’) and that of Others, marked.

In the past half century the Western European press has been concerned with matters of immigration, especially ‘illegal immigration’. This has been particularly noticeable in the last 10 years. In Britain, as in other countries, there are frequent scare-mongering headlines highlighting a perceived threat to the purity of the nation from the supposed taint of immigration as well as concerns about immigrants taking ‘our’ jobs and (paradoxically) state benefits, thus conflating it with racism. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall has pointed out that, although instances of overt racism occasionally arise, the restraining influence of the norms of political correctness has led to the more widespread use of covert or inferential racism. Hall defines this form of less overt racism as consisting of

those apparently naturalised representations of events and situations relating to race, whether ‘factual’ or ‘fictional’, which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions. These enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded (Hall, 1990, p13).

He goes on to point out that ‘inferential racism is more widespread [than overt racism] – and in many ways more insidious, because it is largely invisible even to those who formulate the world in its terms’ (ibid), through common sense assumptions about what is ‘normal’ in the dominant culture. ‘Race’ as a social construct is used as ‘a legitimising ideological tool to oppress and exploit specific social groups’ (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 2) by which means certain minority groups are denied access to material, cultural and political resources.

In the 1970s, inferential and overt racism were highlighted in children’s books in Britain by many critics, perhaps most famously by Bob Dixon (1976). This led to widely-reported instances of well-meaning librarians and teachers withdrawing some Enid Blyton books such as the Noddy series from the shelves of classrooms and children’s libraries. As Sutherland has discussed in detail elsewhere (1985), at the same time ‘classics’ such as PL Travers’ Mary Poppins were edited to remove racial stereotypes (by replacing human racial stereotypes with animals in Travers’ case). Notably, from this period onwards, writers of children’s books sought to promote anti-racist discourses. There are several books which offer tales in the realist mode dealing with