



Words of the wise

As one of the UK's best-selling children's authors, Julia Donaldson has a place in our hearts, but her upbeat stories belie a tragedy close to her own

Photos Emma Croman Words Tim Saunders

T

hink of Julia Donaldson and one image springs to mind: the Gruffalo, with his "terrible tusks and terrible claws". Following the picture book's publication, she has been loved by all generations in just about every home in the country. Now in 84 languages, and with worldwide sales topping 13.5 million copies, it's hard to escape her best-loved character's popularity.

"I can't believe it's over 20 years," says Julia. "In that time he's been brought to life on stage and screen, featured in nature trails, library cards and book tokens, turned into a soft toy and now he even has his own 50p!"

Julia's contribution to literature put her on The Queen's 2019 Birthday Honours list, making her a CBE. When the honour was presented by Prince William at Buckingham Palace in May, she bumped into another fan: Prince William himself. He told Julia he reads her stories to all his children and Charlotte especially loved *The Gruffalo*.

It's all enough to turn anyone's head but, refreshingly, fame and fortune haven't gone to Julia's - she remains incredibly down to earth and grounded. According to her husband, Malcolm, a retired consultant paediatrician, she is far more careful with money than he is - her vice being Glasgow Film Theatre visits with him to watch slow-moving French films, not fast cars.

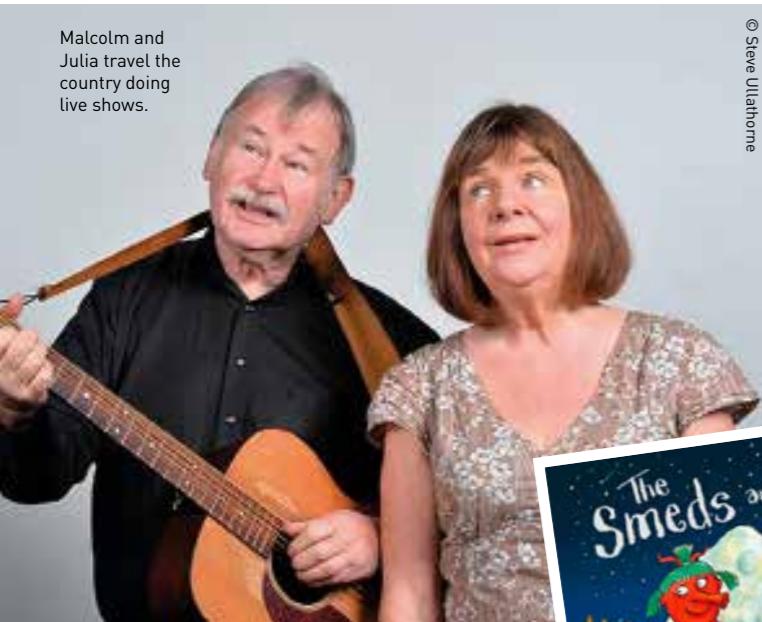
Scotland has been home to Julia Donaldson for more than 30 years. The multi-award-winning children's author spends much time here. She and Malcolm now own a flat in New Town, Edinburgh, amongst its many elegant Georgian properties. But before that, Glasgow was home and for 25 years Julia and Malcolm lived in Bearsden, bringing up their sons Hamish, Jerry and Ally.

"Malcolm worked at the hospital for sick children in Glasgow," recalls Julia. "There is now a mural of my books there," she smiles contentedly. While in Glasgow,



"life wasn't all terrible. You develop the ability to compartmentalise"

Malcolm and
Julia travel the
country doing
live shows.



Julia pitched song and story ideas for the BBC. Between 1990 and 1994 she wrote for programmes including *Thinkabout Science* and *Playdays*, composing songs for presenters and puppets to sing. By the 90s, Julia was visiting school and libraries to encourage children to act and sing with her - making funny rhyme is in her bones.

A family tragedy could well have ended her career before it really began. Her eldest son, Hamish, struggled with periods of mental ill health all of his life. In fact, Hamish's own hospital experiences inspired a sympathetic and inclusive portrait of a character in one of Julia's novels for teens. Mary, in *Running on the Cracks*,

descends into a severe relapse of a bipolar condition, a sensitive portrayal which won Julie the Nasen (National Association for Special Educational Needs) award.

The family struggled to cope with Hamish's episodes and, in a 2009 interview with *The Guardian*, Julia said they "lurched from crisis to crisis". Anyone who cares for someone with enduring mental ill health will know how debilitating that is for the

individual and all around them. However, Julia also said in her *Guardian* interview that "life wasn't all terrible. Malcolm had a rewarding job and I was writing songs and books. You develop the ability to compartmentalise."

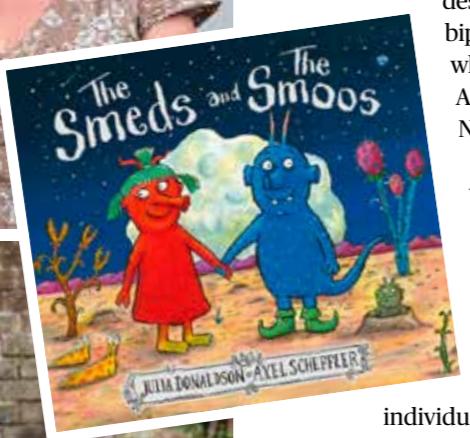
Hamish took his own life at 25. A terrible shock for Julia, Malcolm and the boys.

A period of writing followed, with Julia mainly penning light-hearted stories, shielding the pain. Now over 200 books bear her name, she was named children's laureate from 2011-2013 and has been the UK's bestselling author for four consecutive years in the past decade. That all adds up to national treasure.

It was in 1993 when one of her songs, *A Squash and a Squeeze*, was turned into a book that her career really took off as a children's author. "Before that I just wrote songs for children's television," recalls Julia. And Scotland is always close to her heart, with her creation Tabby McTat, the cat with the loudest of mee-ews, celebrating Scottish surnames.

"If I'm trying to see where a plot's going, it will come to me if I wallow in the bath," she says of her writing technique. "I don't have a routine but if I have an idea for a new book, I slave away for hours and bore everyone, talking about it."

Talking, sharing and live performance is a huge part of Julia's life, too. Since 1999 she has participated in the Edinburgh International Book Festival every year, enjoying a sell-out season at Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2018. This inspired her to tour *The Gruffalo*, *The Witch and The Warthog* around the UK. Its cast of five, including guitar-playing Malcolm and her younger sister Mary, bring Julia's stories to life with songs, puppetry and a touch of magic.



"I don't want anyone to discover my ignorance of all things"

Life on the road is hectic enough, but now that Jerry and Ally have children of their own - in Broughty Ferry and the Cotswolds - their grandparenthood has grown arms and legs. There are seven grandchildren and Julia reads to all of them. But instead of forcing them to listen to her books, she shies away from it, fearing they won't be interested.

In this technology-obsessed world, Julia is saddened by parents whose attention is taken away from their children by digital devices, calling it "depressing". She believes ebooks will never replace paper books as they can't replicate their touch and feel, and that illustrations are a first introduction to art.

Her stories, brought to life by German-born illustrator by Axel Scheffler, have often been adapted for TV and it's then the magic takes on a new power and reaches an even wider audience. The pair's latest, *The Snail and The Whale*, heads up BBC1's output on Christmas Day in the coveted afternoon spot.

That TV fame is enough for Julia, though - you'll never find her on TV as a 'celebrity'. She's been invited, of course, but declines each time "because I don't want anyone to discover my ignorance about most things".

Family time, children's literacy and wellbeing are all, unsurprisingly, high on Julia's radar. In Scotland she is a patron of Artlink Central, a leading participatory arts charity supporting equalities and wellbeing. As patron of Storybook Dads, she works to help maintain family connections with some of the 200,000 youngsters with a parent in prison. The charity enables prisoners to send recordings of themselves reading bedtime stories to their children. It's a neat fit for the author.

Outside work Julia spends time with family, walking and mooching for mushrooms. It was Malcolm who introduced her to fungi hunting more than 50 years ago and now she says, "we always look forward to it. I enjoy fungi hunting in Aberfoyle, Stirling and Arthur's Seat - we've found some wonderful fungi here".

If they're in luck, they go home and enjoy rustling up a tasty treat. Life is good. And while not being drawn on future projects, Julia calls her current release, *The Smeds and The Smoos* "a glorious love story about alien folk", adding, "Despite sadness, I feel very fulfilled."

The Snail and The Whale is on BB1 on Christmas Day - check schedules for timings. Julia's latest book, *The Smeds and The Smoos*, is out now, priced £12.99.

UPCOMING TV TREATS

The Snail and The Whale

Christmas Day, BBC One



The Snail and The Whale follows the amazing journey of a tiny snail who longs to see the world and manages to hitch a ride on the tail of a huge humpback whale. Voiced by Sally Hawkins as Snail, Rob Brydon as Whale and Dame Diana Rigg as the narrator.

Call The Midwife Christmas Special

Christmas Day, BBC One

It's sunny, it's Poplar and there are babies about! That's all we need to know!



Glass Houses

2020, ITV

This new six-part series sees *The Vicar of Dibley*'s Dawn French play a dangerous village gossip alongside Julie Hesmondhalgh (ex-Corrie). ITV says it's a new drama in the tradition of *Doc Martin* and *The Darling Buds Of May*.



A Suitable Boy

2020, BBC One

Andrew Davies (who adapted *War and Peace*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Sanditon*) is taking on Vikram Seth's classic novel, *A Suitable Boy*. The period drama will be an epic family saga set in the 1950s in India and is the first South-Asian epic on mainstream BBC TV.



Alan Partridge's travelogue series

2020, BBC1

A follow-up to *This Time With Alan Partridge*, the much-loved comedy character's next (as-yet untitled) series is described as a motor travelogue series, and will follow Partridge as he drives around Britain and meets new characters.



Belgravia

2020, ITV

Downton Abbey creator Julian Fellowes is adapting his novel into a six-parter starring Tamsin Greig and Harriet Walter. The drama revolves around the Trenchard family during the 19th century as they attend a ball hosted by the Duchess of Richmond on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo. We can't wait!

