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 Julia Donaldson is a household name most of us know and love, yet this renowned author resides here in Sussex, in historic Steyning. Tim Saunders caught up with her for a chat after taking his family to one of her live performances

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE ULATHORNE

A good Read

Julia Donaldson is very much associated with Steyning, the historic and rural market town in the Horsham district of West Sussex. Its notable residents have included Academy Award winning actor Sir Laurence Olivier and more recently Olympic gold medal winner Sally Gunnell; both drawn by its old world charm. Irish poet WB Yeats also lived here for a time with his mistress. And of course there is another acclaimed inhabitant, an award winning world renowned children's author.

Since 2014 Julia Donaldson CBE has made her home here with her husband Malcolm, a retired consultant paediatrician. The Queen awarded

Julia with a CBE in her 2019 Birthday Honours for services to literature. Prince William presented Julia with the honour at Buckingham Palace in May.

Extremely down to earth and approachable, Julia is hugely supportive of the local community, she is

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involved in a local reading group. Signed editions of all her books are available through the local bookshop, which is one of many independent retailers in the town. Julia also visits schools within a 20 mile radius of Steyning.

As patron of the Horsham District Year of Culture 2019, Julia helped to raise the profile of the area by highlighting its culture and heritage. She likes to get involved in local life although admits that "being a bit deaf" does prevent her from going to the theatre because she can't always hear. Eating out in local restaurants with





friends is a favourite pastime.

One sign of Julia's support for Steyning is her purchase of the town's Post Office. "The reason I am doing this is because I want to save it from closure and want to be able to post my letters and parcels in the town," she says during a book signing after one of her live performances of *The Gruffalo*, *The Witch and The Warthog*. "We really want to be here for the community and to continue to support the High Street with all its wonderful independent shops and businesses." Julia's enthusiasm for her local High Street, thriving local community and the beautiful downland scenery is clearly obvious.

Last year was the 20th anniversary since *The Gruffalo* was first published and it was particularly busy for Julia, who has now written more than 200 books. But it is *The Gruffalo* that sets the benchmark. So far it has sold over 13.5m copies and been translated into 84 languages. The former children's laureate has been the UK's bestselling author in four consecutive years during the past decade.

It was when one of her songs, *A Squash and a Squeeze* was turned into a book in 1993 that her career took off as a children's author. "Before that I just wrote songs for children's television." Julia enjoys performing and performs

popular stage-shows in theatres and at festivals, often with her sister Mary and talented guitar-playing husband Malcolm.

Earlier this year, in celebration of *The Gruffalo's* anniversary, The Royal Mint launched a commemorative coin. Available in different finishes including Gold Proof, Silver Proof and Brilliant



"We love going for walks on the Downs and especially Cissbury Ring"

Uncirculated, the coin is expected to be highly collectable with a limited edition presentation of some formats.

"I can't believe it has been 20 years since *The Gruffalo* was first published," admits Julia. "In that time, he's been brought to life on stage and screen, featured in nature trails, library cards

and book tokens and turned into a soft toy; and now he's got his own 50p coin."

Illustrator Axel Scheffler, adds, "When I first envisaged him, over 20 years ago, I never anticipated that my artwork would be used on a coin. The Gruffalo was born of an Anglo-German creative collaboration and

it's amazing to see how his universal appeal continues to connect with families across the world."

The Gruffalo joins the ranks of other celebrated popular children's characters that have appeared on coins in recent times including the sell-out Beatrix Potter character collection, Paddington, the friendly Peruvian bear and The Snowman.

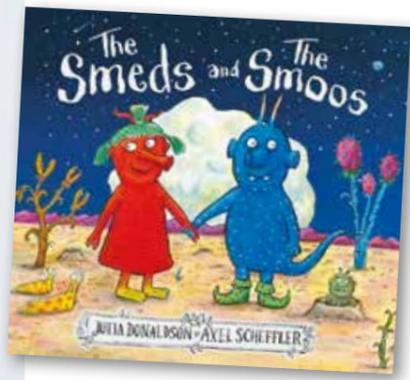
Nicola Howell, consumer director

at The Royal Mint says that the commemorative coin is a great way of recognising that The Gruffalo has become one of the most famous children's characters in the world.

The celebrations haven't stopped there; in October Royal Mail launched a set of commemorative stamps of Julia's beloved creation.

When she isn't writing or performing, for the past 50 years she has enjoyed fungi hunting. "Malcolm introduced me to it," she says. "It's been a very wet summer here so good for it





this year.” And when they do find edible fungi they enjoy going home and cooking them.

“We also love going for walks on the Downs and especially Cissbury Ring, the Site of Special Scientific Interest, north of Worthing.”

She adds that living at the foot of the South Downs inspires her to go for a walk everyday.

The couple relocated to West Sussex after living in Glasgow for 25 years and have two sons. One lives in Broughty Ferry, Dundee while the other is in the Cotswolds. They have retained a flat in Edinburgh and have seven grandchildren, who Julia enjoys reading to.

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Julia laments the demise of book reading on public transport and cannot see the joy of reading a book on a small screen. The illustrations in a children’s book are like their first introduction to art and a wonderful thing to behold, she says. She is saddened at how some parents seem to focus their attentions on social media instead of their children.

You won’t find her on celebrity television programmes even though she has been invited, “because I don’t want anyone to discover my ignorance about most things”.

Her latest creation is *The Smeds and The Smoos*, a book that has seen her once again collaborate with illustrator Axel Scheffler; “It’s a glorious love story about alien folk.”

Julia and Axel’s most recent adaption was *The Snail and the Whale* about a snail who hitches a lift on the tail of a whale. It was a highlight of BBC One’s recent Christmas schedule.

One thing is sure, regardless of Snails, Whales, Gruffalo’s, and walking on the glorious Downs, Julia’s literary legacy and love of Steyning is sure to continue for a long time to come. ●
www.juliadonaldson.co.uk