

Aha! Oho! A Gruffalo show!

Bedtime would not be the same without Julia Donaldson, whose lyrical tales of dragons, trolls, giants and fairies bewitch both parents and children. Here the Children's Laureate talks to Tamzin Lewis about busking, school assembly and losing notebooks

As the nation's best-loved children's author, it's unsurprising that Julia Donaldson can whittle her own life story down to a few lines. "Busking led to performing, performing led to writing songs, which led to a career writing songs for television," she says. "And that led to my first book – which was a song initially. That has led to more performing again so it has gone full circle."

There's the short version but she is willing to elaborate as she chats on the phone from her Glasgow home, telling me that, "Paris was where it all started."

Julia spent a year at the Sorbonne as part of her degree course in French and Drama at Bristol University. And this is where she fell in love with medical student Malcolm, who showed up wearing a straw hat and carrying a guitar.

Julia, 61, says: "We both liked performing and I would write special busking songs including one in Italian about pasta. In Paris, we went busking around the cafes on the Champs-Élysées and we made enough. There was an entourage of our friends and they would sit in cafes drinking coffee with our busking proceeds. There would be a little bit left for ourselves and for many years we paid for our holidays purely from the proceeds."

Julia, who married Malcolm, adds: "We would also look for gigs and I would write songs depending on where we had engagements. If we went to sing to dentists, I would write a song about teeth."

She ended up writing songs for children's TV and one day, out of the blue, a publisher asked if her song A Squash and a Squeeze could be adapted into a book. It was a stroke of genius and since Squash came out in 1993 Julia has published dozens of picture books, poems,

plays, songs and children's fiction. Now she is allowing her fans a peek into the workings of her mind by lending her notebooks to Seven Stories for a stunning new exhibition.

The show will also feature original artwork by illustrators such as Nick Sharratt, Emily Gravett, Lydia Monks and, most famously, Axel Scheffler, who illustrated The Gruffalo, which recently topped a survey of favourite children's books.

Julia, who had three children and is now a grandmother, says: "It was quite a lot of work preparing this exhibition; digging all the original notebooks out and finding the best pages. I keep most notebooks apart from when I lose them on the train. I left my notebook on the train when I was writing The Highway Rat."

She calls the notebooks curiosities and they do make fascinating viewing



A page from Julia's Gruffalo notebook



From top, Julia and Malcom busking in Bristol, Julia at Seven Stories, and A Squash and a Squeeze book cover

due to the detailed thought-processes they show. So how long did it take to write The Gruffalo?

"For The Gruffalo I harboured the idea for about a year," she replies. "On the whole you harbour an idea for many months or even a year. Then when the time is right and you know how it is going to be, it probably takes a couple of weeks."

"Today, if I had an idea for a book I wouldn't be able to sit down tomorrow and write it. I would have to carry the idea around. The idea doesn't come fully formed, you have to put flesh on it before you even start to write. Developing the story and the ins and outs of the plot are the hardest things."

So does she think that often we underestimate how much work goes into children's books?

Julia responds: "People write to me and say: 'I woke up in the middle of the night and had a story in my head. I wrote it in the kitchen in 20 minutes but I can't see why no one wants to publish it.' People don't realise it isn't quite as easy as that."

And what about the process of working with an illustrator such as Axl? "Most authors and illustrators won't work that closely," Julia replies. "I write the story, the editor sends it to Axl and he works with the designer so it is teamwork."

"I do see a rough version and can make some comments, but I try not to be too manipulative. He doesn't tell me what to write!"

Julia attributes her love of poems to a classic collection of 1000 Poems which her dad gave her for her fifth birthday.

She says: "My generation grew up with lots of rhyming. We heard Listen with Mother on the radio which had nursery rhymes. There was always assembly each day in school so we sang two hymns. It all just sank in."

She adds: "Pop songs aren't the same as the lyrics don't necessarily scan well – they are not meant to. My generation was exposed to well crafted rhyming poetry."

Rhymes and songs will feature heavily in the Seven Stories exhibition, and there will also be signed stories for children with hearing impairments.

Julia, who has minor hearing difficulties and wears a hearing aid, said: "I'm very sympathetic to children who are hard of hearing and it is nice when books show a picture of a child with a hearing aid."

As the current Children's Laureate, Julia is already making an impact with her emphasis on drama and song. She combines her love of performance with her campaign to support libraries across Britain in the face of cuts and closures.

She says: "I'm visiting as many libraries as I can to celebrate them and draw attention to them as many are under threat and a lot have closed unfortunately. I ask children to act out stories or perform music in libraries. It is so natural that children act out things. Play refers to what children do in the playground and a play on a stage."

Another long-lasting contribution may well be a series of 36 plays she is working on, written by different authors.

"I think children learn to read more quickly through doing plays than reading stories," she says. "They can put expression and character in. Acting out stories is fun and entertaining, but also for some children it is a way into books. It's also really good for children's self confidence."

"But I didn't go about it that way round – I liked doing drama and then I thought of some reasons why it is a good thing."

A Squash and a Squeeze: Sharing Stories with Julia Donaldson is at Seven Stories, Lime Street, Newcastle, from March 17 to March 2013. Julia is running two events on April 12 and 13. For more information visit www.sevenstories.org.uk