

From Romeo and Juliet to the Smeds and the Smoos...

The BBC's Julia Donaldson adaptation has become a Christmas Day must-watch for millions and her tenth outing, inspired by Shakespeare, is another triumph. Hurrah for reading, says the Gruffalo author as she backs the Express fundraising appeal for Give A Book

SHE'S the superstar children's author whose books have sold millions of copies and united generations in their love for the annual festive television adaptations. Now Gruffalo creator Julia Donaldson – whose latest BBC tie-in is inspired by Romeo and Juliet but set in space and featuring rival red and blue aliens – has backed the Daily Express Christmas fundraising campaign in partnership with Give A Book.

"To me, reading is one of life's great pleasures and I'm very keen for all children to be introduced to it," explains Julia. "I'm not saying every child is going to have reading as their favourite, number one thing, just as not every child has sport as their favourite thing, but to have the opportunity is very important."

"So I'm delighted to support the Express campaign on behalf of Give A Book."

"Growing up, I was lucky that not just my parents but my granny always gave me books for Christmas and we lived very near a library and bookshop and second-hand bookshops. My friends and I would buy books second-hand and swap them."

As a youngster, her favourites were the Just William stories by Richmal Crompton.

Featuring the incorrigible William Brown, whose inscrutable stare in the face of typically self-caused adversity has endeared him to generations of readers, and brilliantly recorded for the radio by Martin Jarvis, she admits the books remain a lifeline.

"I've still got my old copies. If I'm feeling a bit gloomy or it's pouring with rain, they're a comfort read for me now."

Having grown up in Hampstead, north London, Julia, now 74, studied drama and French at university, and began her career writing amusing songs. She has released two albums but now sees herself solely as an author. As Children's Laureate from 2011 to 2013 she concentrated on the benefits of libraries, undertaking a "libraries tour" from

EXCLUSIVE By Matt Nixon

John O'Groats to Land's End, and the performance aspect of reading. She is deeply concerned, unsurprisingly, at the closure of libraries across the country as cash-strapped local authorities seek ways of saving money, a measure she brands self-defeating.

"It just seems so short sighted to me," she fumes.

"On the one hand, people are moaning about literacy levels, and on the other we're closing these wonderful resources we actually have. The buildings are there, the books are there and the staff are there. Why neglect them

and make literacy levels even lower?"

It feels like a false economy, I suggest, to expect every child to be able to learn at home or school or through the internet?

"It is," she continues. "If children don't become literate and enjoy all the benefits of reading, they're going to grow up more at risk of posing a burden on other social services and it probably will cost more in the end. We know the literacy rate among

FORMER Children's Laureates Sir Michael Morpurgo and Cressida Cowell have joined forces with Julia Donaldson in throwing their weight behind the Daily Express Christmas fundraising campaign in partnership with Give A Book.

War Horse author Sir Michael, 79, the third Children's Laureate, who served from 2003 to 2005, and one of the founders of the position along with the late Ted Hughes, said: "A book brings comfort, joy, adventure and fun, opens eyes and hearts and minds, is the pathway to other books, each one a pathway to learning and understanding. One book can begin the



WORDS OF WISDOM:
Best-selling children's author Julia Donaldson's still turning to her childhood favourite Just William books, inset, for comfort

HOW EVEN A SINGLE BOOK CAN BEGIN THE MAGICAL

journey of a lifetime, it can change a life. That's why I'm happy to support the Daily Express Christmas campaign on behalf of Give A Book."

Cressida, creator of the bestselling How To Train Your Dragon series, and laureate from 2019 to 2022, said: "I'm delighted to support the Express's Christmas appeal in aid of Give A Book."

"Reading for the joy of it was the number one point on my Children's Laureate Charter, inspired by my belief that every

child should have the opportunity of becoming a reader for pleasure and have access to the life-changing benefit of books.

"Decades of research shows that reading for pleasure has a huge impact on a child's academic and future economic success. They are more likely to be happier, healthier, do better at school and to vote – all irrespective of background."

"Reading for pleasure develops three magical powers in children: intelligence, the more words a child has, the more





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HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT OUR CHRISTMAS CAUSE

GIVE A Book puts books into the hands of those who need them most.

A £5 donation will provide one book; £10 will add a book bag; while £25 will give a whole book bundle. To support the Daily Express Christmas Campaign, please send donations (cheques only, payable to Give A Book) to:

**DX Give A Book Campaign,
112-114 Holland Park Avenue,
London W11 4UA**

**Or you can donate online via:
giveabook.org.uk**

UK registered charity no 1149664

GETTING ANIMATED: The Smeds And The Smoos by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler, inset below, with their best-known character, The Gruffalo, will be screened by the BBC at Christmas

prisoners is something like 50 per cent but almost more important is the fact that, if children's imaginations aren't stimulated, and they don't learn through stories to empathise, you're going to get more blinkered adults."

Julia lives in Sussex with her husband Malcolm, a consultant paediatrician.

The couple know all about protecting vital infrastructure, having bought their local post office three years ago to save it from closure.

She also has a "bee in her bonnet" about the neglect of children's books, especially by broadcast media. Reviews are hard to find and coverage, such as it is, commonly relates to the fact children are not reading.

"The book sales are very good. Something like a third of all books sold are children's books," she explains.

"And I think people are interested in children's books because everyone's been a child and half the population are parents or grandparents.

"I remember one radio producer said to me, 'This new survey has found out hardly any children can name an author, why is that?' I replied, 'When was the last time you mentioned a children's author on the radio other than JK Rowling?'"

"On the one hand, they're very keen to say, 'Isn't it terri-

ble no one knows about children's books and authors?' but, on the other hand, they're not keen to do anything about it themselves.

"It's frustrating that young adult and children's authors only tend to get picked up when someone dies or there's another survey saying kids don't read."

On a happier subject, Julia's latest TV adaptation is *The Smeds And The Smoos*, first published in 2019 with her long-time collaborator, illustrator Axel Scheffler.

The pair are Britain's number one best-selling words and pictures partnership, having begun working together in 1993 when a song Julia had written for the BBC – *A Squash And A Squeeze* – was turned into a book illustrated by Axel.

Since then, their titles have included *Room On The Broom*, *Stick Man*, *The Highway Rat*, *Zog*, *The Snail and The Whale* and, of course, their 17 million copy-selling *The Gruffalo*.

Although not confirmed, *The Smeds* is likely to follow the previous nine, half-hour adap-

tations of their work – which began in 2009 with *The Gruffalo*, starring the voices of Rob Brydon and James Corden among others – in premiering on BBC One on Christmas Day. Last year's *Superworm*, produced, as they all are, by Magic Light Pictures, was watched by more than 8.5million viewers – only half a million or so less than watched the Queen's Christmas message.

"They never tell us, we have to wait until the Radio Times comes out to find out if it'll be on Christmas Day," smiles Julia.

"But we are hopeful. The previous nine have all been. It's a great privilege to have become a tradition like that."

Her new adaptation, whose plot is very loosely inspired by Shakespeare, is proof children's stories have massive cross-generational interest. As Julia says: "It's a *Romeo And Juliet* story but with a happy ending and set in outer space. The Smeds and Smoos are different aliens and they're prejudiced against each other."

Echoing Shakespeare's iconic Montagues and Capulets, the rival families simply don't get on. Until,

that is, two young aliens, Janet (voiced by Ashna Rabheru) and Bill (Daniel Ezra), meet in Wurpular Wood and become friends.

Their families, the red Smeds and the blue Smoos, are dismayed at the match. "Never, never play with a Smed!" exclaims Grandmother Smoo (Adjoa Andoh), while Janet's Grandfather Smed (Bill Bailey) brands the Smoos "a beastly bunch".

The two clans have to overcome their differences when Janet and Bill disappear, sparking a charming tale as Smeds and Smoos travel through space together and learn to overcome their differences while searching for the runaways.

FEATURING is his 10th Donaldson Christmas Day adventure, Rob Brydon says of the adaptations: "They're beautifully animated and the stories always feel so relevant. This one, in particular, about the importance of togetherness and overcoming differences, is really pertinent right now. The film deals with those themes in a way children can understand."

Co-star Adjoa adds: "What Julia and Axel have completely nailed with this story is its intergenerational appeal. We can sit together as a family to watch and get the same things from the story but also richly different things. And there is, of course, the timeless message around the sort of ignorant prejudice we may harbour about one another until we get to know each other."

Asked which is her favourite of her books with Axel, Julia might be expected to cite *The Gruffalo*, the tale that took her to the top of the bestseller charts.

Instead, she picks *The Scarecrows' Wedding*. "It's quite Hollywoodish," she chuckles. "With a love triangle." And attempted murder, I note!

"Children's stories can be challenging but they need to have a hopeful ending," Julia adds with a smile. "But you don't want them to be bland. You don't want any story to be happy and jolly all the way through because that wouldn't be interesting – for anyone."

JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

interesting and intelligent their thought processes can be; creativity, often through illustration as the jumping off point for children to create their own worlds; and

ON THE SAME PAGE:
Ex-Children's Laureates
Sir Michael Morpurgo
and Cressida Cowell



empathy. Books are like opening doors into other worlds, allowing readers to walk around in somebody else's skin.

"As a child, I read a wide variety of books but my favourite was *The Ogre Downstairs* by Diana Wynne Jones. I loved this so much I read it to anyone who would listen! It has

a wicked stepfather and chemicals that make you fly, and turn you invisible and bring your toys to life. My own children loved it as much as I did 38 years ago.

"*Middlemarch* by George Eliot is the book I go back to for comfort and in times of trial because of the admirable wisdom and intelligence of her world. Like *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*, it should be printed with a sign on the back cover saying 'Don't Panic' in large friendly letters."

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