

2004/Mar AXEL SCHEFFLER - Publishing News

There is no reason, or rhyme, why the public chooses to take one character to its heart over another, and the system has yet to be invented which can second guess which of the thousands of picture books published every year will achieve fame and fortune. Axel Scheffler had been illustrating for about 14 years when he and author Julia Donaldson hit paydirt with *The Gruffalo*, and he was as surprised at the character's success as anyone.

"I had been working with Julia since 1991 - we'd been introduced by Elke Lacey, an editor at Methuen, and the first book we did together was called *A Squash and a Squeeze*," explains Scheffler. "I just kept on getting sent texts and then Julia sent me the manuscript of *The Gruffalo* and I showed it to Kate [Wison, MD of Macmillan Children's Books] who immediately said she wanted it; it is a text which didn't need *any* editing, more or less what you read now is what I read then."

On the other hand what you see now is not quite how the Gruffalo started life. "The character came very quickly - and, although it's sometimes mentioned, I honestly didn't consciously think of Sendak; I originally drew [the Gruffalo] much more scary, but that wasn't how the publishers wanted him...although now, whenever I show the early sketches to children, *they* always choose the scary version!" Did he know, right from the start, that it was special? "It obviously is special, but when I was working on it I didn't see it's potential, and it was some time before it took off," says Scheffler.

He had, he continues, a really hard time with the book because his preferred style of illustration is small vignettes on white backgrounds and *The Gruffalo* consists of large double-page spreads "...and there were far too many trees". But, over two million copies later, with the book now in some 25 languages, he admits the struggle was worth it. "If I could do exactly what I wanted I'd do smaller, wackier drawings, but the market wants picture books, and they are still me; children love them, which is the most important thing."

Scheffler is, in many ways the quintessential illustrator. Quiet - you could, if you missed the darts of humour, call him reserved - and given to

contemplative deliberation, he is someone obviously more used to letting his work speak for him, rather than the other way around. He admits to always having liked drawing, but hadn't really considered it as a career until he came to the UK to get away from his home town of Hamburg. After visiting a friend who was at the Bath Academy of Arts, he ended up on a course there himself and living in Corsham.

When his course finished he made the rounds of publishers and magazines in both the UK and Germany and got work from everyone. Did he see himself as a cartoonist or an illustrator? "Both. There are two sides to my drawing and I always try to do both..." he smiles, "for a long time Macmillan wouldn't let me put big noses on people."

Scheffler creates using a metal-nibbed dip pen and waterproof ink - a medium he describes as being "much more alive" - colouring his drawings with a mixture of liquid watercolour, white gouache and crayons. The results are vivid, delicate works which are full of character - and characters - and the perfect match for Donaldson's texts.

For an artist who makes such memorable images for children he has, he claims, no particular favourites, no great influences from his own childhood "...they must be there," he says, "but I don't remember them; as a teen it was Tomi Ungerer, and then later I discovered Sempé, Edward Gorey and Saul Steinberg." With such an eclectically graphic family tree, children's books would not, at first glance, seem the most likely place for Scheffler to be working, but he thinks his work lends itself to this world and he likes the business.

And a large part of the business, depending on how you play it, can be taken up with school visits, but Scheffler doesn't do very many, five or six a year, he says, because Macmillan keep him very busy. "I do like the occasional visit, it's nice to meet the readers...they're always really excited, and although I'm rarely pleased with what I draw, they think it's wonderful."

The ultimate package for a publisher is an artist who writes - one less ego to deal with - so did he harbour any plans to do the whole thing himself? "Everyone dreams of writing their own text, but I'm not a storyteller...I have

ideas for images, but not for a succession of events, and anyway, I have Julia's texts, which are so good." Does he send her ideas for images ever? "We don't communicate like that, she does the story and I do the pictures and it's worked very well so far."

What he has done as a solo project is produce a series of illustrations for this year's World Book Day. "We put him forward, and he was selected to be the official illustrator last autumn," says Alyx Price, Macmillan Children's Books Publicity Director. "It's a real achievement and only what he deserves; he's produced around ten illustrations of animals reading books which will be used in the schools pack going to every single school in the country, as well as on the website at worldbookday.com."

Scheffler didn't meet Donaldson until two years after they began working together and their relationship continues to be one that is defined by the physical distance between them. "We hardly have any contact at all, we meet at parties, awards and festivals - most recently at the Edinburgh Festival last year...we went for a walk on the Isle of Bute," he says. "We're very different people, and I don't know if we would have been friends if we hadn't been put together. But it works." That it most certainly does.