



Julia and puppet at last year's Children's Laureate ceremony.

Children's Laureate *Gruffalo* creator and bestselling author **Julia Donaldson** took time out of her UK libraries tour to chat to Elyssa Campbell-Barr about local libraries, phonics, Reading 4 Pleasure and more....

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www.childrenslaureate.org.uk
www.juliadonaldson.co.uk
www.teachers.org.uk/reading

What's the best thing about being Children's Laureate?

It's an opportunity to do things you believe are important, that otherwise you might not have a chance to do. I've always felt that playlets – little sketches with six or so characters – are a good way of helping children learn to read or improve their reading. I mentioned this in my Laureate's speech and I've now got a series of 36 short plays about to be published by Pearson.

I've also just created a website called PictureBookPlays (www.picturebookplays.co.uk), where I'm drawing together ideas and expertise on dramatising stories. I'm dying for teachers to log on and pool their experiences.

You've visited countless schools over the years. What, from an author's point of view, makes a good school visit?

Firstly, the school must really want the author's visit. I also think the school should pay for it. For lots of authors, that's how they earn their money, not from royalties.

It's important to read the writer's books beforehand, especially with a novelist. I love it when the teacher and children prepare something, perhaps a little five-minute performance. And plan some follow-up work as well.

You really want the teacher's full attention and not just the children's. There's nothing worse than when a teacher thinks 'pew, I can hand them over to this author' and then sits at the back chatting or marking books or stapling. It's so distracting, as well as being disrespectful and not setting a good example for the children.

Do you have a message of support for the NUT's Reading for Pleasure campaign? And

can you offer any ideas for bringing reading for pleasure into the classroom?

I'm definitely pro reading for pleasure. I'm with you all the way!

I think reading aloud to the class, even if just for a few minutes each day, is a brilliant way of inspiring children to love books. It happens a lot with younger classes, but I think it should continue right through primary school.

Children love sharing their own stories and favourite books with one another. If your school doesn't have a library create one, with second-hand books if necessary and pupils as librarians. Have sessions where the children tell one another about the books they've been reading and stories they like. Get authors in as well.

And acting out stories of course – maybe going to picturebookplays.co.uk!

If you had a week as Education Secretary, what would you change?

How has it come to be that someone who's never been a teacher or worked in education can become Secretary of State for Education and, just because of their own personal experience or whim, they're allowed to change everything?

I think it would be better if education policy-making was taken out of the Government's hands and put into the hands of a politically independent body of people who are actually teachers or have worked in education. The Government, aside from setting the education budget, would have to abide by what these experts said.

So if I was Education Secretary first I'd give a big box of chocolates to every teacher then I'd do myself out of a job. I'd create this body and demote myself, leaving policy-making to people who actually know what they're talking about.

“I'm with you all the way!”

Tell us a bit about your current libraries tour?

When I became Children's Laureate one of my priorities was libraries, with all the closures, and one was performance and drama. I hit on the idea of a John O'Groats to Lands End library tour, inviting children to act out stories for me as well as having them participate in my own stories.

Obviously it attracts media interest, which means I get to speak out against the cuts and closures. Some local authorities seem proud of their library service and are managing, despite the squeeze, to keep libraries open. Others are slashing the number of libraries. The tour has reinforced my awareness that the cuts are piecemeal and some authorities could learn valuable lessons from others.

How can teachers support your campaign to save Britain's libraries?

The main thing is to use libraries. If you're near a library take the children regularly, especially when they start school. Also encourage children to take part in the Summer Reading Challenge (summerreadingchallenge.org.uk).

Like the NUT, you've called on the Government to scrap its Year 1 phonics screening checks. Why are you against these tests?

I know, as do all the teachers I've ever met, that different children learn to read in different ways. Some respond well to phonics, for others 'look and say' works, and others kind of learn by osmosis. Some children might not do well in a phonics check but are learning to read perfectly well some other way.

I don't think we need more tests. Apparently we're already the most tested country in Europe, and have the highest stress levels and most mental illness among our children. It's insulting to teachers too. Every teacher is aware of where 'little Jimmy' is with his reading. They don't need this test.

The Government keeps using the word 'little' – this is just a 'little' check – but schools are still going to be teaching to the test and not doing other things they should be doing. And lots of children who would have learnt to read in their own good time are made to feel like failures. That inferiority complex can follow a child right through primary school.

Win Julia's two new picturebooks!



The Teacher has 15 sets of Julia's two latest picturebooks to give away. *Superworm* reunites Julia with her *Gruffalo* collaborator Axel Scheffler and tells the story of a worm and his enemy the Lizard Wizard. *Paper Dolls* is about five paper dolls who go on an adventure, with illustrations by Rebecca Cobb. Both books feature Julia's trademark rhythmical rhyming verse and retail at £10.99 (hardback).

For a chance to win a copy of each book, send your name and address on a postcard marked 'Julia Donaldson competition' to *The Teacher* at NUT HQ, or email your details, with 'Julia Donaldson competition' in the subject line, to teacher@nut.org.uk. Closing date 3 December.

