



Authorgraph No.149: Axel Scheffler

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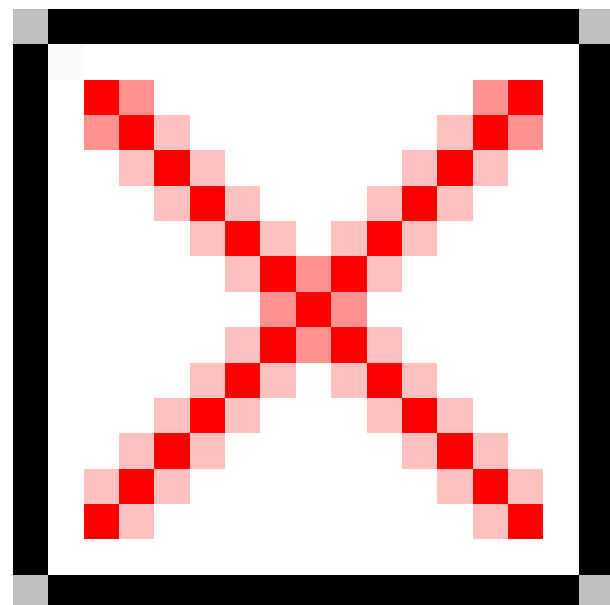
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Byline:

Axel Scheffler interviewed by **Martin Salisbury**.

Axel Scheffler interviewed by Martin Salisbury <!--break-->

The Edwardian villas of this leafy part of South London were sparkling in the September sun as I strolled up the hill to call on one of our best-loved illustrators. Axel Scheffler's satisfyingly chunky pictures are amongst the most instantly recognisable in children's publishing today and, with the recent appearance of **The Gruffalo's Child**, are likely to become even more familiar. At the time of my visit, an exhibition of his work was opening at Waterstone's in Piccadilly, presenting one of those rare opportunities to see not only original illustration artwork but those all important roughs and doodles too. An even rarer chance to nosily nose around Axel's studio was too good an opportunity for me to miss. Stepping into his light and airy first floor workspace is rather like opening a familiar book. All around there is evidence of his work; piles of books, posters, odd bits of artwork and layout-pads with rough compositions. The first few minutes of our meeting are absorbed by general note swapping on the everyday practicalities of the working environment. An inevitable topic of conversation among illustrators is back problems. All those hours hunched over a drawing board can lead to serious trouble in the lower lumbar region, so Axel has invested in one of those cunningly designed chairs that force the occupant to sit in the right way. It's evidently taking a bit of getting used to, the rotating mechanism displaying something of a mind of its own. In view of the ever-increasing popularity of the work of its occupant, the chair will no doubt be a sensible investment.



Axel Scheffler was born and grew up in Hamburg , Germany . The family was not particularly artistic but he himself

always drew. 'I spent a lot of time in museums. I also had a very good art teacher at school.' He came to England specifically to study illustration, graduating from Bath Academy (now part of Bath Spa University) in 1985. 'I had been studying art history in Hamburg but that didn't seem to be going anywhere,' he told me. Initially Axel had been surprised at the nature of the experience of being a student at an English art school, expecting more in the way of formal instruction in technique. He had not intended to stay in the UK after graduation but found that in his final year he was starting to pick up professional commissions. 'My tutor, Mike McInnery encouraged me to take my portfolio around and I managed to get work for various magazines including **The Listener** .' Illustration was enjoying something of a boom period at this time and Axel thought of himself very much as an all-rounder, tackling editorial illustration, design commissions and advertising work. 'I always felt that illustration for children's books was something special though,' he says. The first book to come his way in this field was Helen Cresswell's **The Piemakers**, reissued by Faber in 1988. Pulling it from the bookshelf, Axel grimaces at the technique in this earlier work. The black and white line work is certainly cruder, the crosshatching perhaps a little uncertain, but the trademark personality of the drawing is all there. His characters tend to look anxious and worried, even when they are smiling or scowling, rather as Axel himself does throughout our meeting. Most of these characters are animals, and the portrayal of people is another cause for worry. He doesn't feel happy with his human figures at the moment. Anxiety is, it seems, an essential quality in the best children's book artists, so often inveterate worriers. It is perhaps this struggle that keeps the work fresh, and free of flashiness or mannerism.

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Certainly, in Axel's case, there is nothing easy about the process of illustrating. 'I really don't like doing big full-bleed pictures' (images where the colour fills the spread to the edge of the page). 'I found **The Gruffalo** a real struggle to do. **Room on the Broom** was tricky too.' In these pictures, the attention to detail is uniform across the whole composition. Base layers of concentrated liquid watercolour are laid down and then the surface is further developed and built up with colour pencil. The technique gives a muscular finish to the work that is highly child-friendly, striking an elegant balance between the darkly threatening and the cuddly.

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The Gruffalo was, of course, a publishing sensation and Axel Scheffler's illustrations are inevitably closely associated with the writing of Julia Donaldson in public perception. The two have become a highly successful partnership since teaming up for **A Squash and a Squeeze** in the early 1990s. As with all such creative partnerships, everyone wants to know more about the nature of the working relationship. 'It works very well. We don't have a great deal of contact. Julia respects my freedom to interpret visually and rarely interferes.' In general, it's probably true to say that publishers do not encourage close contact between their authors and artists. If one is a more forceful character than the other it can upset the creative balance. I know of at least one story of a well-known picture book writer who is forever on the telephone to the artists with 'good ideas' and advice as to how they might approach the illustrations. Both Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler had pretty much ruled out the idea of any sequel to **The Gruffalo**, the book seeming to be perfectly rounded and complete. 'I really couldn't imagine a follow-up' he says. 'The chemistry between the two original characters was a sort of end in itself. But when I saw the text for **The Gruffalo's Child** I realised that it worked beautifully. And of course the gruffalo is so universally loved that it felt like a kind of public duty to do it.'

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The Gruffalo's Child is indeed a superb sequel being, in my view at least, one of those rare Godfather 2 'better than the original' events. Donaldson introduces a fearless new generation of gruffalo who puts the ingenuity of the mouse to further tests and Scheffler's snowy landscapes demonstrate a more subtle command of colour and characterisation. Jokingly, he laments 'Julia was very mean to put in the moon shadow scene' which he found particularly taxing. Needless to say, the book is flying off the shelves.

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Many illustrators battle to develop a visual language that is both artistically satisfying and commercially viable, and I chat to Axel about these tensions. He shows me some of his sketchbooks. This is the place where ideas are conceived on the page, characters grow and evolve without conscious concern for public response. The books are alive with weird and wonderful beings, visual musings, meanderings and experiments. For most artists this process is vital as a way of nourishing the 'finished' work and allowing it to continue to grow. Axel sometimes feels that he would like to incorporate this kind of experiment more into his published work, but he says, 'I have this method of working now and it is well recognised and works well for its purpose.'

As one of the judges on the important Macmillan Prize for Children's Picture Book Illustration, he is able to regularly view the range and standard of work being produced by students at art colleges around the country. Many of our best-known illustrators are former prizewinners and the competition allows Macmillan to get first look at the budding artists in the field. 'The best of the work is excellent, but it is surprising how much weak work is sent in every year' Axel says. He doesn't do any teaching in art schools himself apart from the occasional presentation of his own work. 'I never feel I have anything to say. I dread looking at bad work, I get embarrassed.' But inspiration is found at the Bologna Children's Book Fair which he attends every year. This vast trade fair invariably induces a mixture of despair and excitement: 'On the one hand you come away feeling that the world doesn't need another picture book, but on the other there's always something new and inspiring to see.'

Axel Scheffler enjoys being an illustrator. 'It's easy to forget how privileged a life it is I suppose,' he reflects as the sun streams in from the broad bay window of the studio, and he prepares to set off for a meeting with Macmillan, his publishers. Gazing out at the gardens below he mentions that he sometimes catches a glimpse of an urban fox in the morning. I find myself picturing one of those splendidly goggle-eyed Scheffler foxes peering anxiously up at us from the bushes.

Martin Salisbury is Course Director for MA Children's Book Illustration at APU Cambridge. Photograph by Martin Salisbury.

The Books (*published by Macmillan unless otherwise stated*)



Jingle Jangle Jungle , Campbell Books, 1 405 02044 X, £9.99 novelty board

Muddle Farm , Campbell Books, 1 405 02014 8, £9.99 novelty board

Proverbs from Far and Wide , 0 333 96128 5, £4.99 pbk

Elephants Don't Sit on Cars , David Henry Wilson, 0 330 34573 7, £3.99 pbk

Never Say Moo to a Bull , David Henry Wilson, 0 330 34575 3, £3.99 pbk



Never Steal Wheels from a Dog , David Henry Wilson, 0 330 48488 5, £3.99 pbk

The Dog Ate My Bus Pass , Nick Toczec and Andrew Fusek Peters, 0 330 41800 9, £3.99 pbk

The Bedtime Bear , Ian Whybrow, 1 405 04993 6, £6.99 novelty board

The Tickle Book , Ian Whybrow, 0 333 78151 1, £9.99 hbk

Juice the Pig , Martine Osborne, 0 333 66663 1, £3.99 pbk

One Gorgeous Baby , Martine Osborne, 0 333 96038 6, £4.99 pbk

You're a Hero, Daley B! , Jon Blake, Walker , 0 7445 3158 6, £4.99 pbk

With Julia Donaldson:

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The Gruffalo's Child , 1 405 02045 8, £10.99 hbk

Hide and Seek Pig , 0 333 96625 2, £4.99 novelty pbk



Monkey Puzzle , 0 333 72000 8, £10.99 hbk, 0 333 72001 6, £5.99 pbk, 1 405 00912 8, £14.99 big book, Campbell Books, 0 333 96219 2, £4.99 board

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