

A children's favourite

Bestselling author Julia Donaldson tells us how she creates her famous stories

Cats Protection is launching a brand-new kids' membership called Little Paws Club. Created for children aged five to seven, the club allows little ones to make a big difference in the lives of our feline friends, while inspiring them to learn more about moggies and the joy of helping animals in need.

Little Paws Club has also teamed up with Magic Light Pictures, the creators of the new *Tabby McTat* film – based on the beautiful picture book about a magnificent moggy by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler. The best-selling creative pair are behind many classic picture books including *The Gruffalo*, *Stick Man*, and *Room on the Broom*. This Christmas, *Tabby McTat* will be brought to life on BBC One, and we caught up with Julia to find out more about how she became a writer, and what it takes to create such memorable characters.



Did you always want to be a writer, and is it what you imagined it would be?

For my fifth birthday, my father gave me a very fat book called *The Book of a Thousand Poems*. I loved it. I read the poems, recited them, learnt them, and then started making up some of my own. Although I wanted to be a poet all those years ago, I later decided I would rather go on the stage. That didn't quite work out, so I did other jobs – teaching and publishing. But somehow I've ended up doing what I wanted to do when I was five years old. I have a theory that this happens to quite a lot of people.



Tabby McTat, on BBC One this Christmas

You're so well-known for your children's books, like *Tabby McTat*, do you also write for adults and do you see the process as being distinct for each audience? If so, how?

When I was a songwriter I used to write lots of adults' songs and sing them in folk clubs, but it was the children's ones that there was a market for, on radio and TV. I was probably drawn to picture-book writing because I had so much experience of writing short things in rhyme (the songs). The books weren't intended for my own children but were probably influenced by the happy hours I'd spent reading to them when they were smaller.



Julia's cats Tabitha and McTat

What do you think you would do for a living if you weren't a writer?

I always used to want to be an actress, which is why I did drama at university. Although I do now get to act parts in my own stories I still wouldn't turn down the chance to act a Shakespearian or an Ayckbourn character.

Can you describe your writing process, from initial idea to finished book?

Occasionally a fully-developed plot arrives unheralded in my mind, but much more often I will have a vague idea which will then lie dormant for quite a while – sometimes even for years. That's because it's very difficult, I find, to develop an idea into a proper story with twists and turns and a satisfying ending. A lot of this plot-development goes on in my head (especially when I'm in the bath or out for a walk), and it's only when I've worked out exactly what is to happen that I sit down to write. Even then it's not easy. A lot of crafting goes on, and sometimes I despair of saying what I want to say neatly in the rhythm which I've set myself. Lots of good bits get discarded if they won't fit into a pattern. But I beaver away until I get there.

How long does it take you to write one of your books?

It's very variable. My teenage novel, *Running on the Cracks*, grew in my head for about eight years before I sat down to write and then took six months to write. Picture books are usually a lot quicker than that but still can have a long gestation period.

Lots of your books contain songs, is music important to you?

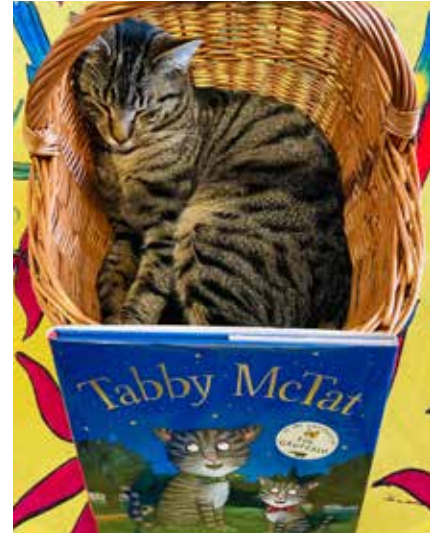
My parents were both musical. My father played the cello and my mother sang in a choir so the music I grew up with was mainly classical until I was in my teens and keen on The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. My sister, Mary, and I both learnt the piano (I still enjoy playing and sometimes have lessons) and we joined the Children's Opera Group, acting and singing in the shows they put on. My husband and I used to go busking in our twenties and wrote lots of songs together. *Tabby McTat*, of course, is about a busker and his cat.

How do you work with Axel, the illustrator of many of your books?

We were paired up by Methuen for our first book, *A Squash and a Squeeze*. Actually, Axel was the third illustrator to be approached: Susan Hellard and Mairi Hedderwick were both too busy! We only met (at a publisher's party) after the book had been published. We have since become friends and often meet up at book festivals, appearing in shows and signing together. We've also several times toured Germany, acting out the stories in German. We still work quite separately: he usually has no idea what I'm writing about until the publisher sends him the text, and then I more-or-less let him get on with the illustrations according to how he sees the characters.

How does it feel seeing your stories come to life as TV animations?

Seeing the films at the different stages of development is really interesting, and Magic Light (the production company) keep me involved in the process and listen to my feedback and thoughts on the story. I like seeing what happens in between the pages, they add characterisation and funny little moments that work so well in a film.



Julia's moggy McTat with a favourite read, *Tabby McTat*

Join Little Paws Club

Members of Little Paws Club will receive a welcome pack containing stickers, a membership certificate, collectable Cat Snaps cards, an engaging colouring sheet, and an exclusive poster. They'll then get a monthly mini-magazine packed full of interesting, short articles, puzzles, activities and crafts, as well as new Cat Snaps cards featuring cats that Cats Protection has helped. Every edition of the Little Paws Club mini-magazine will feature *Tabby McTat's* Amazing Cat Facts and there will be four special edition *Tabby McTat*-themed packs, starting with the launch pack in December 2023.

If you know someone who would love to join us on this extraordinary journey visit our website at cats.org.uk/littlepawsclub to join today! Together, we can inspire a lifelong love for animals and ensure the wellbeing of countless cats. Your child's adventure in Little Paws Club begins here!

