

THE CONVERSATION

How to write a children's classic: the Gruffalo formula

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Outsmarted by a mouse: the scariest creature in the woods. Toon a Ville, CC BY-SA

Showing my class of children's literature students around the child's section of a large bookshop recently, the kindly bookseller showed us where they displayed the classics. "You know," he said. "Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl, The Gruffalo".

First published only 16 years ago, The Gruffalo might seem young to be in this company, yet its success is indisputable. It has been translated into more than 50 languages, there is an animated version, a stage version and its author, Julia Donaldson, is incorporating the tale into a new show at this month's Edinburgh Fringe festival.

My students learn to be sceptical about the relationship between literary merit and labels like "classic" that can be valuable for marketing purposes. A quick glance at the plush toys, stationery and dinnerware featuring characters from The Gruffalo does nothing to dispel such doubts. Donaldson is the prolific author of over 60 books and this one isn't even her best – that's probably her less upbeat work, *The Paper Dolls*. So is the stir that surrounds this story merely the cynical prodding of publishers?



Old favourites reimagined

I would suggest that the success of *The Gruffalo* has much in common with its near-contemporary, the **Harry Potter series**. Both Donaldson and J K Rowling excel at breathing fresh life into older, familiar material. Where Rowling transplants the traditional school story into a contemporary magical setting, *The Gruffalo* derives in large part from a **traditional Chinese story** about a fox and tiger.

Kid-friendly unit shifter
Andreas Photography, CC BY-SA

Donaldson complicates this story by creating narrative symmetries. In the process, she introduces new ideas and depths. During the first half of her tale, a cunning mouse outwits three would-be predators – a fox, an owl and a snake – by invoking a fearsome imaginary creature called the Gruffalo to scare them off.

In the second half, the mouse actually meets a Gruffalo and the story then follows the Chinese tale. When the Gruffalo threatens to eat him, the mouse insists that he, not the Gruffalo, is the “scariest creature in this wood”. He invites the Gruffalo to walk behind him to see for himself. As the two encounter the fox, owl and snake again, these predators' fearful reactions convince the Gruffalo that the mouse was telling the truth and he runs away.

Apart from the Chinese story, the source materials for this deceptively simple story are varied: the cast of animals folds **Aesop's creature fables** into the mix; the mouse's ruses evoke trickster animals, such as Brer Rabbit, from North American and African folktales; and the comically patrician dialogue (“that's frightfully nice of you”) recalls the anthropomorphic animals of **Beatrix Potter**. The resulting feeling of familiarity is important in helping to make bearable a story which concerns at its heart fear and predation.

Rhythm and illustration

Donaldson's ability with language is also important, and clearly stems from her background in drama and performance. She uses repeating rhythms and rhyme to structure each section and subsection. Like any poet, she creates expectations in the reader and then confounds them.

In the middle of the story the mouse is just about to express his glee at deceiving another would-be predator (“Silly old snake doesn't he know? / There's no such thing as a Gruffalo”), when Donaldson breaks the rhyme word. The final syllable becomes “oh!” – expressing his shock and dismay at meeting the biggest predator of all. For a brief moment, the story seems to invite children to face what happens when the worst thing you could imagine comes true – even if you had only been joking. When the mouse outwits the Gruffalo too, it reveals a possible moral to the book: brains can trump brawn in any situation.

Another factor in the success of *The Gruffalo* is Donaldson's knack of finding exactly the right illustrator to match her projects. Indeed the text of *The Gruffalo* languished with her publishers until the German artist, Axel Scheffler, sent in some rough sketches. Drawing on the forests of Hamburg, he brings the “deep dark wood” and its denizens into rich life.

The combination of heavy ink outline and dense layered colours produces animal characters that are poised carefully between realism and cartoonish simplification. Donaldson had apparently conceived of “an alien-like creature”, but Scheffler took his cue from her writing, where “Gruffalo” is similar to the kind of blended words Lewis Carroll created. Like “slithy” and “jabberwocky”, it is what Humpty Dumpty calls a “**portmanteau word**” in the Alice books. There's a lot of the gruff buffalo about Scheffler's creation, down to a pair of bovine horns which are not mentioned in Donaldson's text. Scheffler achieves a combination of cuddly and fearful, in tune with the story as a whole.

The fit between pictures and words extends beyond the characters and scenes to include the rhythm of the book's layout, which follows visually the repetitions in the text. The mouse's surprise at encountering the "Gruffal-oh" occurs at the physical centre of the book, a double-page spread, revealing the monster in full. It is a splendid, comically immersive moment.



Sky's the limit: Scheffler and Donaldson Wikimedia



'Anyone for Tetley? Wikimedia

Donaldson has worked with many other illustrators and these days she is more keen to promote her writing for teenagers than *The Gruffalo*. Yet her association with Scheffler has attained the status of similar collaborations between A A Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* and the illustrations of E H Shepard or Roald Dahl and Quentin Blake.

The success of Scheffler and Donaldson in combining brilliant visual storytelling with the enlivening of familiar materials is, I think, something that will outlast the plush toys and paraphernalia. It is still early days, but parents will be reading this classic to children for some time.

Gruffaloes, Ladybirds and Other Beasts – With Julia Donaldson is featuring at the Edinburgh Fringe between August 6 and 31.



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