



## **The story behind Sam & Julia – The Mouse Mansion**

What began as a labour of love for Karina Schaapman has transformed into a global phenomenon, with *Sam & Julia* captivating audiences throughout the world. *Sam & Julia – The Mouse Mansion* is now a beloved children's book series with over 21 original titles, more than 1 million copies sold in 27 languages, and an animated TV series set to launch worldwide this year. At the heart of this growing success is an inspiring story of resilience, boundless creativity, and personal challenges that deserves to be shared.

The centre of everything is *The Mouse Mansion*, a charming miniature world crafted by author Karina Schaapman, using nothing but cardboard boxes, scrap materials and vintage fabrics. The original structure, which took years to make, features hundreds of intricately designed rooms — each filled with life and personality. From cosy apartments to lively shops, bustling factories, theatres, and even a circus, *The Mouse Mansion* is a place where every corner and inhabitant tells a story.

### **The challenging early years**

With *The Mouse Mansion*, Schaapman set out to create the kind of world she wished every child could experience — one that is warm, loving, exciting, and safe. A place where differences are embraced and neighbours support each other. This vision was deeply influenced by Schaapman's own childhood, which was marked by hardship and poverty.



Karina Schaapman was the daughter of a single mother, who migrated from Indonesia to The Netherlands in the sixties. They lived together in a tiny one-room apartment, with only enough space for a single bed, which they shared. Here Karina's mum told Karina many stories about her home country, filled with exotic animals and foods, creating a warm and loving atmosphere amidst the challenges they faced.

And there were plenty of challenges. Due to her foreign background, appearance, and status as a single parent, Karina and her mum were subject to discrimination and exclusion. Neighbours uttered racist insults, criticised them for their looks and the smell of their Indonesian food. Despite these challenges, Karina's mother instilled in her a deep sense of resilience and creativity, values that would later shape the world of *The Mouse Mansion*.

### **Circus Life**

Life took an unexpected and joyful turn when the circus came to town. Karina's mother fell in love with the circus director, and for a few precious years, they found a sense of belonging within the vibrant circus community. Surrounded by performers from all walks of life, they experienced an acceptance and warmth that had eluded them elsewhere.

However, this newfound happiness was short-lived, and soon Karina faced one of the most difficult times of her life. The circus went bankrupt, and her mother fell gravely ill. At just 11 years old, Karina was left to fend for herself for months while her mother was in the hospital, with no one to care for her. Eventually, Karina's mother passed away, leaving her to navigate the overwhelming loss entirely on her own, without support from the community.

## **Karina Schaapman's drive**

Schaapman's early years, shaped by both the deep love she shared with her mother and the hardships they endured, became the foundation for *The Mouse Mansion*. These experiences sparked in her a powerful drive to create a world where children can feel safe, free to explore, and embark on adventures in a warm, caring community — everything she longed for as a child.

In 2008 Schaapman finally pursued her long-cherished dream of creating a children's book. She opted for a three-dimensional approach and using fruit boxes as the framework, she began building a miniature house. She hand-sewed a tiny patchwork blanket, then crafted a bed, followed by more furniture, and finally the characters, which she decided would be mice. Everyday items were creatively repurposed — bottle caps became lamps, bicycle lights turned into bottles, paper was used to craft enamel jugs and buckets, and popsicle sticks were transformed into wooden floors. What started with a single room soon expanded into four, and so on. And after two years of tireless work, the first Mouse Mansion was complete.

## **Sam & Julia**

The main characters in *The Mouse Mansion* are Sam and Julia, two eight-year-old mice who are best friends despite being complete opposites. Julia, like Karina in her youth, lives with her loving mother in a small, one-room apartment. She is curious, bold, and a little stubborn — qualities that mirror Karina's own spirit as a child growing up in modest circumstances.

Sam, on the other hand, represents everything Julia — and young Karina — did not have: a large family, with siblings and relatives filling a spacious home that sits in a prominent location in *The Mouse Mansion*. While Julia is adventurous and outspoken, Sam is shy, reserved, and well-behaved, offering a balance to her daring nature.

Together, Sam and Julia navigate the rich and diverse world of *The Mouse Mansion*, meeting its many unique inhabitants. Their adventures reflect the sense of belonging and discovery that Karina longed for as a child, making *The Mouse Mansion* a place where differences are embraced.

## **A publishing success**

Karina's stories come to life through the detailed scenes she creates within *The Mouse Mansion*. Photographs of these scenes serve as the illustrations in the books, making her

approach truly unique. The first book, *Sam & Julia*, was published in 2011 and has since been translated into 27 languages. To date, 22 original titles have been published, and the rights are fully owned and managed by *The Mouse Mansion Company* (TMMC).

### **A real family business**

At first, Karina wasn't thinking about *The Mouse Mansion* as a business. Her focus was entirely on creating the stories and building the world she had envisioned. However, as the books began to gain international success, it became clear that a strong foundation was needed to manage both the creative and business sides effectively.

In 2017, Karina's daughter Manita Schaapman and son Ian Schaapman joined the venture. This marked the transition of *The Mouse Mansion* from a personal project into a growing family business. Their involvement allowed Karina to return to what she loved most — crafting new stories and creating new structures — while Manita and Ian took on the operational leadership.



Together with their siblings, Tom and Lili Schaapman, they developed a strategic business model for *Sam & Julia*, which became the overarching name for *The Mouse Mansion* brand when the business started to develop internationally. This 360-degree approach covers every aspect of the brand, including product development, distribution, licensing, e-commerce, marketing, and retail. Their mission — to inspire families around the world to be creative, welcoming, and kind — has become the guiding force behind the company's growth, ensuring that *Sam & Julia* remains true to its core values while expanding globally.

### **Our Mission:**

**With the Sam & Julia brand we want to inspire families around the world to be creative, welcoming, and kind**

## Expanding the brand through product development

When the first book was published, Karina started receiving photos from fans who were building their own rooms and mansions inspired by *The Mouse Mansion*. Many of them asked for advice on how to improve their creations, which sparked an idea for the family. Seeing the potential to deepen fan engagement, they began developing a range of products that would allow people to craft their own Mouse Mansion.

With eight buildable cardboard rooms, each one designed for easy assembly and endless customization, kids are encouraged to tap into their creative potential. They can furnish the rooms with matching sets and mini accessories — tiny lamps, kitchenware, and more — allowing them to design and personalise every detail of their Mouse Mansion.

But the true magic comes when over 10 plush characters, including Sam and Julia, are added to the mix. These soft, expressive figures invite children to step into the stories, using the rooms they've built as backdrops for imaginative adventures.

Karina Schaapman: *"My personal experiences shaped my vision for The Mouse Mansion as more than just a creative project. It became a way to offer children the sense of warmth, safety, and belonging that I longed for in my own childhood. Crafting a Mouse Mansion fosters creativity but also inspires kids to become storytellers in their own right, building a world that is entirely their own and filled with endless possibilities."*

In June 2024 the Sam & Julia creative toy range was nominated for the prestigious TOP10 Toy (SpielzeugTop10) Award 2024 in Germany. The German Federal Association of the Toy and Game Retailers (BVS) selects the final ten best new products together with the "TOP10 Toys" jury in November.

The product range is currently sold through TMMC's own web stores in The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Spain, UK, US and by the end of 2024 also Italy. Outside of the Netherlands, the products are brought to retailers via distributors in Belgium, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, US, Canada, Australia, New-Zealand and Costa Rica.

## The Mouse Mansion Brand Store

To further connect with their audience, the family opened *The Mouse Mansion* Brand Store on Amsterdam's bustling main shopping street. Inside, visitors can explore the original, intricately detailed structures from the books, offering both fans and newcomers a chance to fully immerse themselves in the delightful world of *The Mouse Mansion*. The store is a creative haven, perfect for sparking DIY inspiration. With *The Mouse Mansion* books

available in multiple languages, the store has become a must-visit destination for all who come to the city.

### **Brand-new award-winning international animated series**

The world of *The Mouse Mansion* expanded in a whole new way with the launch of the animated series *Sam & Julia*, bringing the beloved characters and their adventures to life on screens worldwide. The first season, featuring 78 episodes (7 minutes each), is a co-production by ZDF and France Télévisions. It has already won the hearts of audiences in France (France Télévisions & Okoo) and The Netherlands (AVROTROS / Zappelin), with upcoming premieres set for later this year in Germany (ZDF / Kika). Sweden and Slovenia are also confirmed, and more countries are set to follow.

*Karina: "It is a dream come true to see Sam, Julia, and the other characters from the books come to life. Allowing a studio to adapt my work was a real leap of faith, but they exceeded my expectations. When I first watched the episodes, I was moved to tears. They not only captured the heart of the stories and the core values that matter so much to me, but also brought my world to life with an artistic integrity that stayed true to the original vision. It was as if the essence of the universe I built had been perfectly translated into animation."*

Although the series was only delivered very recently, it has already won 2 prestigious awards:

- BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Award 2024
- Cartoons on the Bay / Pulcinella Award 2024

It was also included in the Official Selection 2024 of the Annecy Animation Festival.



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