

BORBÁLA SZABÓ

# ADVENTURES IN THE HORSE GROUP



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Books about life in preschool and school are always of great interest. Children need to be able to process their daily lives both intellectually and emotionally. Borbála Szabó's book also helps children view familiar situations from a different perspective. With the help of humor, jokes, and the absurd, *Adventures in the Horse Group* presents the most typical elements of everyday life in preschool but with surprising playful twists. For example, the preschoolers in Ms. Woodson's class are known as the kids in the "Horse Group," since animals names are given to the children in the different classes in Hungarian preschools. The children want to change the name of their group to "Ladybug," but in order to do this, they have to go to the government office and file their request. That doesn't solve the problem, though, since they also have to visit a riding association and a ladybird society. When they want to do away with the obligatory afternoon naps in school, they head to parliament to take action and bring about change in their daily lives. Their problems are all basic situations, well-known by anyone who has ever attended preschool or who has children who are still in school. The familiar situation is amusing in and of itself, but there are entertaining twists as we turn the pages! Borbála Szabó's tales of the life of preschoolers turned upside down offer a captivating read both for school-age children and parents and teachers, who are sometimes weary at the end of the day because of their hopeless attempts to keep up with school children.

The stories are refreshing and new specifically because they are not didactic. They do not fall into the trap, all too common in tales supposedly written for children, or trying to explain what is allowed and what is not allowed, what is right and what is wrong. The preschooler children still do the right thing instinctively. For example, though the school nurse separates them into two groups (those who have lice and those who don't), by the time the parents arrive, the kids are already playing together, side by side. This is where the strength of the Horse group lies: they plan everything together and then carry it out together. And if readers are looking for a lesson to be learned, they get it, for at the end of the book, the children come to the realization that the group is not the same as its individual members separately.

Borbála Szabó has a profound understanding of how young children think. Her richly illustrated book of eight short stories shows, with humor and cheerfulness, that the imaginary world and the real world go together well and that children's daily lives and the visions they weave with their imaginations are naturally intertwined.

## CHRISTIE'S FATHER

"I've had enough of these tantrums every morning!" Christie's father suddenly said in a burst of anger. "If you hate going to preschool so much, I'll go instead!"

"Fine," Christie shrugged, "go. But you're not going to have much fun. It's a pretty boring place."

"I think I'll like it," her father replied. "It's been a long time since I was able to spend all day playing in the playground!"

Christie obviously had assumed her father was joking, so she had been all the more shocked when Ms. Woodson, her preschool teacher, had given her consent and agreed to allow Christie's father to come to school one day instead of Christie.

"Christie," Ms. Woodson had said, "your father and I have agreed that today he will be the preschool child instead of you. Perhaps it will be better for everyone, since you are always complaining about how boring school is. I've already asked your mom to come pick you up and take you home. Wait here in the changing area, please."

Christie's dad started jumping for joy, making the shelves in the changing area shake. Christie was mortified.

"Really Ms. Woodson? My dad going to school instead of me?"

"Why not!" Ms. Woodson exclaimed, politely ushering her new student into the classroom.

Christie's father was a bit shy at first and spent most of his time just standing in the corner. Ms. Woodson kindly approached him.



“Well, young man, what would you like to do? We have lots of toys here in the Horse Group.”

“Oh look!” Christie’s father exclaimed, “a backhoe!”

His eyes lit up.

Ms. Woodson then decided it was time to introduce Christie’s father to Vince, the strongest boy in the class.

“Vince,” she said, “I would like you to meet our new kindergartener. The two of you can play together with the backhoe.”

Vince looked up suspiciously at this strange grownup.

“Isn’t that Christie’s dad?”

“Indeed it is,” Ms. Woodson replied. “Let’s make sure he has some fun while he’s here!”

Christie’s father and Vince had a wonderful time playing with the backhoe. Soon, some of the other children joined them. Dani, one of the really popular kids in the class, Marci, who told the best jokes, and even Abel, who usually cried all day about how much he

missed his mother but now seemed to have forgotten all about her. And Christie’s father, they discovered, could even reach the toys on the top shelf. He could even reach the light switch!

“Now, now, young man,” Ms. Woodson said in a reproachful tone, “only the teachers can turn the lights on and off. Don’t go getting into mischief just because you’re tall!”

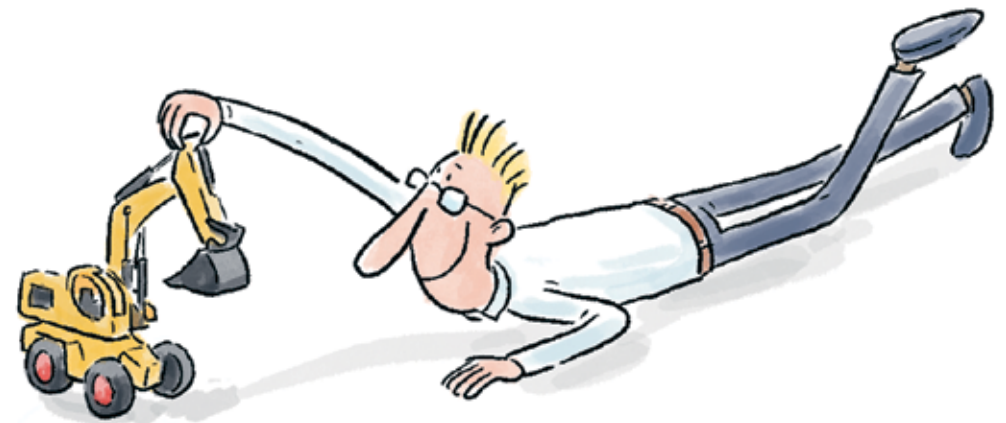
But otherwise everything went smoothly that morning. At lunch, however, a problem arose. Christie’s father felt that the portions were too small. He hadn’t been given enough vegetable stew, and he was still hungry.

“Take small bites and it will last longer,” Ms. Jones said, the cafeteria woman. She had been saying that for some forty years now. Christie’s father, however, did not take kindly to the suggestion. He dipped his spoon into the bowl next to Janka, who happened to be Christie’s best friend, and threw the spoonful of stew on Ms. Jones’ apron. The boys around him, inspired by his example, immediately followed suit.

“Christie’s father is a genius!” they shouted with excitement.

“My goodness!” Ms. Woodson shouted. “Young man, I am shocked! I had thought you were a trustworthy engineer. Now I find out you are a mischievous little boy!”

Christie’s father had to stand in the corner until afternoon nap time, and of course he had to apologize to Ms. Jones. When the





children lined up to go outside to the playground, he was a good boy and followed Ms. Woodson's instructions to the word, and he was very well behaved when he washed his hands in the bathroom too, though the sinks were way too low for him. But when naptime finally came, he had a hard time fitting in the cot. He fell out several times, and once or twice he even uttered a bad word.

"What does that mean, Ms. Woodson?" Janka asked in a whisper.

"Never you mind!" Ms. Woodson whispered back. "It doesn't mean a thing!"

"But my dad sometimes says that word too," Janka replied.

"So does my mom," Vince chimed in.

"Mine too!" Abel said.

Then Ms. Pritchard, who was the assistant teacher and who was a bit stricter than the others, told the children in the Horse Group to stop talking, put their heads on their pillows, and take their afternoon naps, and in the meantime, she would tell the old folktale about the adventures of the ball of yarn.

Christie's father ended up having a very good nap. Indeed, it wasn't easy to wake him up. Ms. Woodson, Ms. Pritchard, and Ms. Jones could not budge him from his little bed, so while the other children played, he continued to snooze in the middle of the classroom.

When he finally did wake up, he started turning the knob on the radiator in the changing area.

"Now, now, young man, don't play with that! You might break it."

"I'm a heating engineer," Christie's father replied.

"Don't be silly! You're a child in preschool. Tomorrow, we'll call old Julius, the maintenance man, and he'll give it a look!"





**BORBÁLA SZABÓ** is a playwright, writer, dramaturg, and literary translator. She graduated with a major in Hungarian and English from ELTE and then studied theater at the University of Theater and Film Arts, where she obtained her doctorate. She writes plays for several theaters and works as a dramaturg for both children's and adult productions.



**ANDRÁS BARANYAI (B)** graduated from the Hungarian University of Applied Arts in 2004 and began a career as a versatile illustrator and graphic designer. He has done illustrations and visual materials for textbooks, storybooks, advertisements, steampunk comics for adults, and posters in Hungary and abroad. With his distinctive vector computer drawings, he made a dramatic contribution to the renewal of Hungarian illustration in the 1920s. With a few lines and scribbles, he can capture the essence of the society and people of our time in a humorous and penetrating way.

