





**“How do we handle our fears?”**

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# **Gábor Schein**

## **When Dad Shifted**



**illustrations by**  
**Alexandra Grela**

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The new book by Alexandra Grela and Gábor Schein is a milestone in contemporary Hungarian children's literature. The tale is inveigling, the images captivating, and the combination of the two will turn understandings of what has traditionally been thought of as the "children's book" on their head.

The plot, set against the backdrop of the everyday life of a family of four, culminates in a serious family trauma. The father undergoes a metamorphosis. The resolution is delayed, and since the chain of events is precisely about the temptation to break boundaries and barriers, it is not entirely reassuring.

The narrator, Gregory, is the older child, and we see the story from his point of view.

The father in the tale imitates animals as part of the games he plays with his children, Gregory and Rose. These everyday games, which include pretending to be animals like squirrels, monkeys, an even rodeo bulls, create a fun backdrop for family life, and we see shared moments of laughter and, of course, the natural joys of play. The story becomes more intense, however, as the questions of fear and suspense turn into something of a horror tale resembling the Grimm tales of old. Dad turns into a wolf. First he is taken to the mountains of Hungary, both to rescue him but also to keep his family safe from him. A new system takes form. The family members continue to keep in touch with their wolf father, and they are amazed by his transformation. But alas, despite warnings and even a legal prohibition, he is shot by hunters. At this point in the tale, the images, which until now have been highly expressive and colorful, become shocking evocations of horror. For instance, we see an image of the wolf-father fighting for his life in a deserted operating room. The backdrop is captured with strong, thickly drawn black lines. And soon we see the poor father again, now a large, helpless lump, surrounded by IVs and other tubes.

The mother and children get together to form a crisis team, and they decide that, as soon as father is strong enough, he should be taken to a higher mountain range. But that doesn't happen. Dad turns back into a human, with only one ear left as a wolf's ear.

The story and its climax, the metamorphosis, are just close enough to the fairytale genre to allow the reader to absorb the traumas in the tale and reflect on the traumas of his or her life. These traumas include, for instance, the behavior of an abusive, addicted, or mentally ill parent, the sense of panic and shame felt by a child, the workings of a dysfunctional or atypical family, the everyday life of a child living in fear, and the challenges faced by children of divorced parents. We see the ebb and flow of trauma and recovery in hospital settings, as well as the challenges of replanning and family bonding in moments of emergency.

The illustrations by Alexandra Grela draw their atmosphere and style from Gábor Schein's story and his gift for storytelling, and one might well end up remembering the tale primarily as a picture book.



On the third Sunday, we asked dad to turn himself into a dog. He was really good at barking, you see. He was in a good mood, so we didn't have to pressure him for long. He barked like one of those little dogs old women carry around in their purses but that always seem to think that they are fearsome guard dogs who have been entrusted with the task of defending an estate. He kept trying to nip at Rose, and little Rosie just kept shooing him away. "Shoo, shoo," she'd say, "you're frightening me," but then she'd stretch out her arm and give him a chance to nip at her again, and dad would nip and nip, though of course he never actually bit her.

On the fourth Sunday, however, we skipped the game, because we had grandma over. We never played games like that in front of her. Dad's always a little odd when she's at our place. He asks grandma if she'd like a cup of coffee or a slice of cake, and even he feels like the whole thing is a kind of strange. And then he's quiet, and we're all quiet, and grandma starts telling stories about life in the village when she was a child, and she talks about all these relatives that none of us have ever met, but even she's not quite certain about which one was which, but she talks about them all afternoon, and evening.







Gábor Schein was born in Budapest in 1969 and teaches modern Hungarian literature at ELTE in Budapest. One of the most exciting and incisive authors to emerge in post-Communist Hungary, Schein is the author of ten books of poetry, ten novels, and four children's books, as well as dramas and many literary historical studies.

Schein's two novellas *The Book of Mordechai and Lazarus* were published in 2017 by Seagull Books (trans. Otilie Mulzet and Adam Z. Levy). His novel *Autobiographies of an Angel* is forthcoming from Yale University Press in 2022 in Otilie Mulzet's translation.



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