

Dr. Eman Bikai

Woodina

**Translated by: Fatima Shamdeen
Songs translated by: Mariam Antar
Illustrated by: Ahmad Haj Ahmad**





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1

A wooden dress!

Two problems were standing in the way of our sixteen-year-old friend Woodina, which, of course, was not her real name. But then, undoubtedly, my dear, you wouldn't be able to find her a name more appropriate than this one.



The two problems were important: clothing and food. Let's think together: aren't these two significant problems? Of course, there are a lot of problems that can face people as shelter and education, but Woodina used to own a small room at the far end of the town. She had inherited that room from her parents, who had died in a tragic car accident.

The room was built of thick white clay, and its roof was made of solid wooden logs. Despite needing regular maintenance, especially before the arrival of the long cold season, the room was warm in winter and cool in summer. Next to it was a small bathroom, a kitchen and a garden full of weeds that had started to invade its grounds and climb its walls all the way up to the ceiling.

As to the problem of education, as a matter of fact, Woodina did not lack much of it. Up until her parents passed away nearly one year ago, she had been in school and she used to be a hardworking student. On the few shelves in her room stood a lot of different books which her father, who was an avid reader, had left her. There were many stories, travel books, and books that talked about God and Earth and Man. These were good friends who used to keep her company during her long winter nights and hot summer evenings.

But shelter and education do not make a good substitute for clothing. Actually, Woodina's clothes were now so tight and short, and a lot of them had worn out due to frequent washing. She even had to hide at home a lot of the times for fear of being seen wearing her small, torn clothes.

Once, while she was in bed reading, an idea crossed her mind:

"I have to get clothes that won't wear out!"

Now that she liked the idea itself, she put the book aside and sat straight.

"I'd want durable clothes, clothes made of iron!"



She smiled to herself and then frowned:

“Oh, no. Iron would rust, it is too heavy and is a good conductor of heat in summer and cold in winter.”

She grabbed the book once again trying to read, but the problem kept nagging, so she put the book aside again and sat straight:

“I need to get clothes that won’t wear out!” she thought.

But the right idea surprised her the minute she put off the light of the oil lamp as she prepared to go to bed. She jumped to her feet joyfully and relit the lamp.

“A wooden dress...wooden...wooden...I know! Uncle Adam, the carpenter!”

2

A Dress that will not wear out!

The next day she was at the carpenter’s asking him for a wooden dress.

At the beginning he felt the idea was rather odd, for he had not made any clothes for anyone before then. He thought it was rather crazy, but then when he looked at the girl’s face, he could see hope in her eyes and a charming smile on her face. So he thought about the idea before he started to draw a sketch of the dress on a white sheet of paper. He showed it to the girl, who shook her head in agreement.

“Yes, yes, yes!”

His eyes shone and he stroked his long white Santa Claus moustache and said:

“A wooden dress, a wooden dress.”

“That comes with a lock uncle.” She implored.

“A lock at the waist,” he responded.

When Uncle Adam finished fastening the hinges at the shoulders, the elbows and the waist, he polished the dress with wax which he rubbed on its surface. The dress glowed with an attractive light, which made the girl announce that she loved what the old man had created. She held the dress and carried it to her house to wear it as an outfit that would not wear out.

Food is seasonal

When she slipped into the dress, Woodina felt more like a turtle wearing its shell. At the beginning she moved rather slowly just as a turtle. But very soon she got used to it and felt it was a second skin to her. She started to move around gracefully, but it wasn't the grace of somebody wearing a dress made of fabric, of course.

Alright then, our friend solved her first problem: clothing. But what about food? For an entire year she had got used to eating whatever seasonal food the earth provided, whatever her hands could reach, or whatever fruits the river washed off the broken branches and threw her way.

But food is seasonal. The grass may not grow, fruits may not be available, or the weather might not be very helpful, which could prevent her from going out. Woodina had always suffered hunger in the bad days when the sound of thunder and rain filled her ears. When the snow covered the doorstep of her room, she had to shovel her way to the bathroom or the kitchen.

“I have to get food on a regular basis!”

One spring day when the daisies started to fill her garden and the glass vase in her room, she was prepared to go for a round to collect edible plants.

For most people the weather is not a problem when it comes to finding food. They eat during the summer and winter, during the spring and the fall. I should be like most people. But how?

I'll be back!

How?...How?...

Spring is an excellent season for looking for solutions. It gives birth to life, and it might as well give birth to ideas. Woodina lowered the curtains and locked the door to her room. She carried in her little bag a small comb, a toothbrush, a picture of her mom and a yellow dress which used to belong to her mother. She touched the gate of her garden and the worn walls that made up the fence. She addressed them as if she were talking to her parents, who were awaiting her comeback to the home where she had grown up and where she had sweet and bitter memories.

“I'll be back!”

She said goodbye to Uncle Adam and his wife and to the baker and his assistant. She passed by her friends Nora, Samia and Leila and announced that she was leaving, but that she would be back. The shaggy cottages fell in sadness when everybody stood to say goodbye to the nice girl who disappeared into the trees to where she was uncertain. Hiding her tears behind a sweet voice, she started to hum a song composed by separation:

*I'll be back sweet sweet home,
I'll be back pretty pretty soon,
I'll be back in full attire
Strolling down the path
With what I desire
I'll dream away the impossible,
I'll defy all the unstoppable,
Slack and sluggish? Not me
Forth I stride, with hope I forage,
I'll be back with what I desire,
Dear home, triumph I aspire.*



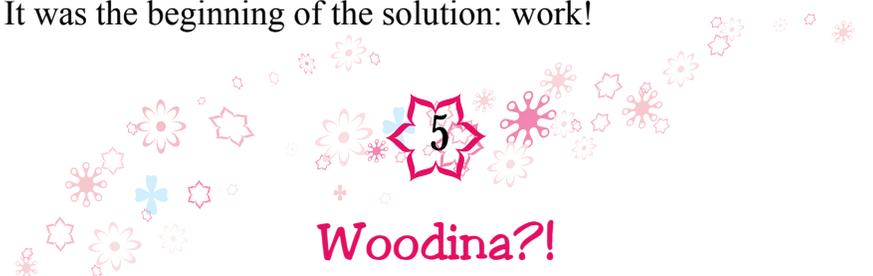
Like happiness, sadness makes us sing sweetly, and our young friend turned her grief into a song that all trees, birds, bees, spiders, the turtles Woodina now looked like and even the dogs in the wood listened to. So did the stray and pregnant cats which were about to give birth.

Woodina walked a long way. She ate the bread the baker had given her, the cheese that Nora had offered her and the biscuits Samia and Leila had made. She also picked orange from the trees on her way, but by the evening she had eaten all the food.

Now, this was the problem for which she was looking for a solution. She said to herself:

“Everything that comes free is sure to come to an end quickly, and we never have the right to ask for more. I cannot accept all that comes free. I have to work. I have to find a job.”

It was the beginning of the solution: work!



5

Woodina?!

“Night is quick to fall and there’s a light in the distance, a lot of lights that I have to get to, actually,” she said to herself, and she walked steadily until she reached a big castle, in front of which she stood amazed.

“Dear God! This is the size of a hundred cottages, even bigger!”

She approached the huge black iron gate. A dog barked, so she stepped back with her heart pounding violently before a guard came over pointing a gun at her. He shot such a strong light in her face she had to close her black eyes. He saw that she was unarmed, so he laid the gun back on his shoulder and asked her about what she wanted. She answered that she was sleepy and hungry.

He said: “The Prince would not allow strangers to stay over here.”

“Not even in the garden?”

“Not even in the garden. But, you can eat...”

She followed the guard, who pointed to some grains of rice in the grass for her to eat, which she did. Yum yum, yummy! It was rice cooked with ghee, cold but delicious. But why was it there? Does rice grow in the prince’s garden? She wondered. But before long, she realized the reason. Very quickly more rice

grains fell on her head in addition to bread crumbs and biscuits. She stood up and stepped back to find the servants throwing away the leftovers of the prince's meal. She looked at the guard disapprovingly and asked:

“Was I eating leftovers?”

The guard answered in a strong voice: “The Prince's leftovers!”

“But They're still leftovers!”

She was speaking in a loud voice, so the maid heard her. She called out for the prince, who came to the porch to see what was happening. He looked at the girl before calling her:

“A wooden girl! A wooden girl? It's the first time I get to see a wooden girl!”

He laughed out loud and asked her:

“Are you a girl or a doll?”

She did not answer him. She did not speak for a second, after which the prince said:

“Come up here!”

The prince was the first one to call her that name. She was upset in the beginning, but then she embraced it, especially that the prince insisted that she enter the palace and stay in there. He circled around her several times laughing and repeating:

“What an idea! A wooden girl!”

The prince was a handsome young man, but he was used to having fun and wasting time. And when he asked her the next day about what she exactly wanted, she said:

“I want to earn my own bread.”

“Yes, yes, you can have it all here; we throw away a lot of food.”

She held her head high saying:

“I don’t want leftovers. I want to pick the food I like, and I want to earn it, too!”

The prince thought seriously about what she had just said, especially that he had never heard that kind of talk before. He pointed a finger at her saying:

“Listen, you look interesting, and my friends are sure to like what they see at the balls that we throw at the palace.”

She stepped away from the prince.

“I’m not a clown.”

The prince was surprised at the young woman’s response and he apologized to her. Then he suggested that she pick a job



at the palace, so she chose to work in the kitchen, drying the dishes and putting them back in place. The prince agreed and he whispered in the ear of the chef to take care of that strange girl and not to overwork her.

6

At the palace

All the workers in the palace liked Woodina. She was a smart girl who laughed at the right time, who sympathized with everyone, who told everybody the stories she had read and who listened to everybody's problems and solved them with the wisdom of someone who had read a lot. She also used to hear strange news about the prince, the king and the queen. And she knew a little by little that the prince was an only child but that he never realized his parent's ambitions. The prince, who was twenty years old, was more like a five-year-old boy with his recklessness, adventurous and fun-loving spirit. But he was undeniably good hearted and very smart.



Off to the ball!

One morning, the head chef woke Woodina up from her deep sleep in her room next to the kitchen, so she took off her sleeping gown and put on her wooden dress. She hurried to catch up with the palace team, who were preparing the horses and the carriages in response to the invitation that pretty Princess Nora of the neighboring village was throwing. Princess Nora was nominated to be the prince's fiancée, or so Woodina had heard. Everybody in the palace had been busy all day. A lot of the workers were invited to go with the prince to the ball: the library keeper, the secretary, the clown and the queen's maids of honor, in addition to the prince's relatives. All of them were busy preparing the suitable outfits for the occasion and choosing the carriages that would take them to the palace. But Woodina was occupied with the news of the princess, and she asked not about her beauty or her wealth, but about whether she was playful and reckless like the prince. Everybody agreed that she was, but then she was the princess!

Woodina turned down the prince who went up to invite her personally to accompany him to the party. She smiled apologetically:

“Is it because of my wooden dress that you are inviting me?”

The prince chuckled and then answered seriously:

“It is because of the owner of the dress that I'm inviting you. You can attend the party in a regular dress. Would you like to wear one of the old dresses of the Queen? My mother has a lot of long-forgotten gowns.”

“I don’t wear borrowed dresses!” She said with her head held high, so the prince circled around her with surprise:

“You won’t eat my leftovers. You won’t wear my mother’s dresses. Who are you?”

She laughed. The prince was asking who she was, seriously asking about who she was. She answered by just wishing him a great time at the party. As soon as the prince left, Woodina hurried to her room to take out her mother’s yellow dress and prepare to wear it for the party. There were two horses pulling a carriage that was waiting the orders of those who had stayed behind to be driven to the ball. With her yellow dress and black hair braided and decorated with white flowers, she rode the carriage that flew to the ball. She suggested to the driver that he wait until she was back, and then she raised her finger in warning:

“Don’t even dare to take anybody home except for me, not even the Prince himself!”

8

Not beautiful; attractive!

Woodina’s dress was nothing like the dresses of the other young women at the ball. It looked very modest, especially in comparison to the dress of Princess Nora, who was laughing at the prince’s jokes and almost jumping, if not for her maids of honor around her reminding her that she should keep her serious in order to be able to gain the approval of the Queen, who was watching her every move disapprovingly.

She stood there, amazed at the lavishness around her until the prince took her out of her trance when he invited her to dance. She blushed, fearing that he had recognized her, but he whispered in her ear:

“I’ve danced with all the girls until I got exhausted. There’s still you. Come here, Miss, I want to be over with this!”

The prince was extending his hand, but she took one step back as she noticed the signs of complaint on his face and said:



“If you feel obliged to dance with me, then consider yourself exempted.”

The complaints turned into something like a sarcastic smile, and the prince said:

“But they won’t let me off the hook.”

“You do what you want, not what they want.”

He sensed that the answer of the girl was smart and challenging, so he extended his arm this time with a sincere desire, inviting her to dance as he said:

“Ok, I’d like to dance with you... I’d like to.”

The sweet music of the accordion went high, and the number of dancers increased. Unusually, the prince was dancing quietly and contemplating the young woman who had charmed him. He announced:

“You’re not exactly pretty, but you are...you are...attractive.”

“Proud to be so.”

“You’re not rich, but you are...very proud of yourself.”

“You’ll find inside everyone a great secret.”

“Your dress is rather modest.”

Her smile grew wider, and she sang to the music in a low soft voice:

*As untainted as my spirit
I choose my gown not of silk,
Not out to dazzle a prince or his ilk.
By curiosity to fathom I am drawn
A world I’ve never known,
Of lavished living and boastful swagger
Not visited by scarcity nor indeed hunger
Unlike where people rummage around
For something to wear and rags is all they find.*

Her song captivated him, and he asked her again:

“You were not born in a palace.”

“I was born in the whole life.”

“Who’s your father?”

“My father was a poor man who died in a car accident.”

The prince smiled:

“It’s good you weren’t with him...how else would I have met you?”

“Are you glad you’ve met me?”

“Actually, I am surprised...and I think I’m in love with you.”

He said that so abruptly that she took one step back and shook her head in disapproval:

“Beware of striking love. You won’t be able to do any composed action with striking surprises. You have to make wise decisions.”

The prince thought about the girl’s words:

“Thoughtfulness, composure, vision, choice...is it Aristotle or Plato I’m dancing with?”

“Just a common girl of the people, your people.”

“I don’t know of any girl in my people who is so thoughtful.”

“Nor do you know of the painters, singers, musicians, poets, writers or thinkers who need a little attention and care in order to be creative. You don’t know about the people who live in cottages, people who wear old, worn out clothes, people who are hungry, needy, without shelter or love or dignity, or all three combined.”

The prince interrupted her:

“You’re such a weird girl”

She smiled and said in an honest, imploring voice:

“Think of those waiting for chances that would enrich the country’s culture. Think of the degraded, the despised and the deserted women. Think of the revolting youth, of the crowds that no one has ever loved.”

The prince was listening to these words for the first time, and he was finding them difficult to understand. He sensed that they were deep words, words that were worthy of considering. He was so actively listening that he failed to stop dancing when the music ceased to play. His feet were moving automatically, which aroused everybody’s surprise. The prince was dancing to no particular rhythm, which made the band play the tune again. The prince whispered in the girl’s ear:

“And then?”

“You fix what needs to be fixed. Get out of your palace and parties and go down into the real, harsh life.”

“What a strange girl! Shall I see you in next week’s ball?”

“Only if you think about me.”

“I will.”

“I’ll find out.”

“How?”

“In my own way.”

9

From a boy to a man

Woodina left the palace quickly and retreated to her room, where she put on her sleeping gown and slept soundly like she hadn't for a long while.

For a whole week, Woodina heard the servants' comments about the girl who had changed the prince. She heard that the Queen demanded to know the name of the girl who was able to turn the prince from a boy into a man. She also heard that the prince was sitting with the jeweler of the palace and watching him make a ring with a purple stone which the prince had designed himself so he could offer it to the girl the following week. It took him a lot of effort and care.

10

The purple ring

The next week the prince offered the girl the ring saying:
"I designed it myself. I drew the sketch ten times and tore it out ten times. I watched it made. So it's one of a kind, made for a girl who is one of kind, too.

The girl thanked the prince for the gift and proudly wore it in

her finger. She watched it as he said:

“Marry me!”

She smiled and said calmly:

“Marriage is one of the biggest burdens. You can’t take it lightly.”

The prince got angry:

“If I weren’t taking you seriously, I would have chosen the more beautiful and richer girl.”



Noticing that she felt insulted, he added:

“But I’ve chosen the smarter and more attractive girl.”

“Let me think.”

The prince stamped his feet angrily and his eyes sparked. He said:

“Cinderella, Snow White and all the beauties of the fairytales accepted to marry the prince without thinking.”

“I’m not a fairytale beauty.”

“All the girls wish, actually dream, that I ask them something like this.”

“I’m certainly not one of those girls.”

“I’m offering you the reign of my country, the title of a princess, what do you have to give me?”

“When I am convinced to have you, I’ll give you something more important than the title or the reign. I’ll give you my existence!”

She said so proudly and confidently. She sang with a soft voice an apologetic tune:

But you’re not my knight in shining armour

She finished the song on the balcony to where the prince followed her.

I may sway and dance with you,

I may sing, chat and chat with you,

But you’ll never my pain cure or soothe

You won’t be my knight in shining armour.

The prince listened to the song anxiously, following the meaning that the rhythm and the sweet voice could not downplay. Unhappiness dwelled in his eyes and his face went pale. He was about to go back to his former life and forget about the girl forever, when she approached him singing beautifully:

*If you truly want me back
Then true to my people be
Your money to the needy grant
Be sympathetic to all those who're sad,
Spread love with no boundary
And justice rather than tyranny
Then your ring you'll get back
And for your wife you shall have me.*

The prince's face lit and he held the hand of the girl enthusiastically saying:

“I'll think of the people that nobody has ever loved...I'll think of my people.”

The girls' eyes sparked:

“Think about them with your actions, not with your words.”

“I will.”

“When you do you'll find me.”

“Where?”

“With them...among them...I'm one of them...they're me... I'm them...if you love them ... you'll love me...and if you love me you'll love them.

She left him exhaling, standing in the middle of that mysterious riddle!

Woodina's pie

In the early morning the cooks were preparing the sandwiches, the fruits, and the sweets for the long trip of the prince who decided to take care of his people. Woodina heard the news and almost flew of happiness. She begged the cooks who prepared the cheese sandwiches to allow her to make only one sandwich to share the prince his great humanitarian mission, with made all the servants and the employees as well as the queen and king happy. But it wasn't her intention to make a cheese sandwich. In fact, she wanted to hide inside the dough her ring which had the purple stone, expecting that the prince would think of eating her pie last since it wasn't professionally made like the others.

And so it was. The prince toured the country, visited the cottages and met the poor and those in need of bread, shelter, love, and dignity. He was sure to meet the degraded and the despised, the deserted women, the homeless children and the revolting youth. He listened to their complaints and discovered their world. He listened to the poets and the singers, to the musicians and the authors, and to the researchers who lacked the opportunity and finally came to love everyone, indeed. In effect, the palace gave orders to build schools to embrace the poor, factories to employ them, hospitals to treat them, and shelters to be home for them. He announced prizes for the creative in every field who were unknown and ordered their work to be published, which transformed the kingdom into something like a beehive, working hard and wasting no effort or time.

The last pie, the last house!

The prince reached the last of the houses in his kingdom. Exhausted, he knocked on its old gate. He had to wait a long time before the door was opened. He sat on the porch to eat the last of his sandwiches. And there was the purple ring shining, so he jumped to his feet, happily shouting:

“The ring has returned to me!”

He circled around the house calling out loud:

“Where are you? Where are you?” Where is the mystery girl in the yellow dress that has invaded my life and changed it forever?”

Her voice resonated in his ears:

“With them...among them...I’m one of them...they’re me... I’m them...If you love them, you’ll love, me and if you love me, you’ll love them.”

Was he dreaming? He was listening to her voice, her words. Suddenly, the door was opened and a girl came out holding a light that put out the darkness. She was wearing a wooden dress. He stood there, mesmerized.

“Woodina?!”

The young lady excused herself, and then she returned holding her light and wearing her mother’s yellow dress. The prince contemplated the young girl and hit his forehead with his fist saying.

“Oh, Woodin! You? You are the girl in the yellow dress who’s

changed my life upside down? How could I not discover this before?”

The girl smiled and her eyes shone with love and tenderness as she made room for the prince to enter. She asked him:

“Is it the only thing you haven’t discovered yet?”

The prince nodded.

“I have discovered a lot during my tour and I’ve become aware of a lot of things and my awareness renewed me...it’s like I’m a new person...it’s like I’m reborn. Thank you, Woodina.”

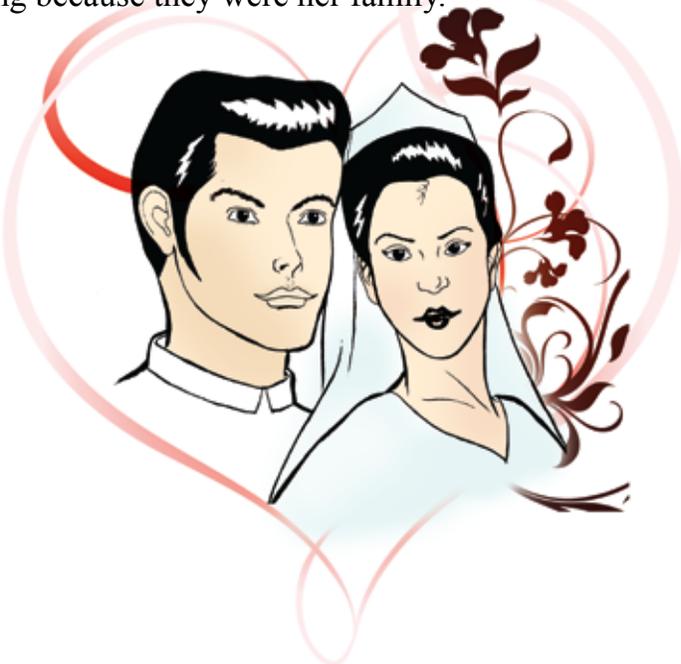
The prince held the lady’s hand to his lips and kissed it gratefully before he asked her:

“Will you marry me?”

“Well, you’ve got your ring back.”

“Let’s celebrate at the palace,” he shouted happily.

But the girl had a single request: that the bride’s escort start from her modest room and that the poor people share in the wedding because they were her family.



About the author

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Eman Bikai(1960) is a Lebanese author, novelist and university instructor. She is a member of the Lebanese Writers' Association. Over the last twenty years Bikai has published sixty stories for children and the youth in books written in Arabic, in addition to about one hundred stories published in children's magazines like the Lebanese magazine Ahmed and the Kuwaiti magazine Al Arabi Assaghir. Among her publications are twenty books on children's and young adults' education and two ready-to-print dictionaries in Arabic as well as three stories and a novel for the youth in English.

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Bikai's Children's Books:

A Glossary of Reading and Writing Techniques and Research for Students (A Critical Study, Dar Al Rateb Al Jame3y, Beirut).

Behavior: (Twelve educational books for children and young people, Dar Al Rateb Al jame3y, Beirut).

Children's and Youth Literature (A Critical Study, Dar Al Rateb Al Jame3y, Beirut).

Children's Stories: Definition, Types and Narration (A study of literature, Dar Al Feker Al Lubnany, Beirut).

Dictionary of Toys (Children's Education, Dar Aladdin, Damascus).

Friends of the Environment (A collection of twelve stories for children, Dar Al Rateb Al Jame3y, Beirut).

History of Arabic literature for High School Students (A Critical Study, Dar Al Rateb Al Jame3y, Beirut).

I am Growing Up (A series of stories that deal with social issues for children aged 8 to 12 years, Dar Al Rateb Al Jame3y, Beirut).

The Art of children's Stories (A Critical Study, Dar Al Hadi, Beirut).

The Memoirs of Miss Adiba (Manners) (A collection of twelve stories for children, Little moon Publishing House, Damascus).

Wherever You Are I'll Come (A collection of short stories, Dar Al Noukhba, Beirut).

Woodina (A story for children and young people translated into English).

Young Women (A collection of short stories for children and young people).

Your Guide to Text Analysis and Construction (A Critical Study, Dar Al Rateb Al Jame3y, Beirut).

New:

A Dictionary of Children's Literature Terms, Unpublished (work took about 10 years).

Adyokh, unpublished (A story for children and young people translated into English).

An Arabic-Arabic Dictionary, unpublished (for students aged 15 to 22, (a fifteen-year-work).

How to Write a Story for Children, unpublished (A critical study).

Mr. Quick Arrives Late, unpublished (A story that teaches children about the traffic signs translated into English).



The Adventures of the Green Army in Spring Vacation, unpublished
(A newly completed novel for young people about the environment
translated into English).

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