



Carsten Henn (Author), Annelie Schulze (Illustrator)

Schascha und der Buchspazierer

Schascha and the Book Walker

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Nine-year-old Schascha loves books above all else and one day meets the quiet bookseller Carl Kollhoff, who brings books to the people of the city. Fascinated, she accompanies him on his daily rounds and becomes part of his special mission. Together they bring stories and hope to others – until Schascha herself must show how much courage, heart and strength lie within her and within books.

- The worldwide bestseller by Carsten Henn – retold from a child's perspective, with a great love of reading and a strong heroine at its heart.

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Chapter 1

Pizza Margherita

They say books find their readers – but sometimes they need someone to show them the way.

From her second-floor window, Schascha was about to watch a person who possessed this special gift – though Schascha didn't know it yet. She placed her anchor-patterned cushion on the windowsill and rested her arms comfortably upon it. It was a bit scratchy, but her mother had sewn it especially for her, so it was Schascha's favorite. She tucked her dark curls behind her ears and fixed her gaze on the Cathedral Square. Her eyes were bright blue – like the sky, not the sea.

The man with the bulging backpack walked across the square every day – except weekends – at exactly the same time: shortly after seven in the evening. He wore an old bucket hat and round glasses, and on his feet were thick, sturdy shoes that could surely carry him all the way to the coast or the mountains. Schascha didn't know why, but she liked him. She glanced at her wristwatch. Any moment now, he would emerge from the alley leading to The City Gate bookshop. The evening market was in full swing; he would weave his way through the stalls, always following the same path. "Schascha? Are you coming to eat? Your margherita is ready!"

"Be right there, Papa!" Schascha liked the word "right there," because it was as stretchable as chewing gum.

"Should I slice it?"

Now it was time for him step out onto the Cathedral Square. Schascha kept checking the hands of her watch. And when she looked up, there he was!

She called him the "Book Walker." But she had never told anyone about that. The name was her secret.

"Schascha?"

"Yes? What?"

His green backpack looked a little different today. And he had his thumbs tucked under the shoulder straps, the way elementary school kids sometimes did when their bags were fully loaded.

"The pizza!"

"What about the pizza?"

Now she could make it out: a book that was so big, it was sticking out of the top. She wondered what kind of book it was.

"How should I cut it?"

"One half into strips and the other into wedges. And on the half with the wedges, add a few cherry tomatoes, please."

"Cherry tomatoes – consider it done!"

The man greeted a woman at the bakery stand with a friendly nod, even briefly tipping his weather-worn hat.

Where did he go once he left the Cathedral Square? What kind of people were they – the ones he brought his books to? And what kind of books were they, all wrapped up so beautifully? Every single one in thick brown paper and tied with string, just like a gift. Once, he stumbled, and the books scattered across the cobblestones of the Cathedral Square; a few had even torn open. He gathered them up with great care, his shoulders slumping sadly.

"I'm starting to eat now," a voice called from the kitchen. "Your pizza, that is!"

"Nooooooooo!"

But Schascha couldn't leave the window just yet. Not until the old man left the Cathedral Square. That was the rule she had made for herself. The man's steps seemed to grow heavier week by week, even though his backpack looked less and less full.

"It's so delicious, your margherita. The best margherita in the world!"

He made loud lip-smacking sounds on purpose.

"You are so mean, daddy! You are the meanest daddy in the entire world!" But Schascha said it in a way that let him know she didn't really mean it.

The old bookseller disappeared around the corner.

Schascha quickly grabbed the cushion from the windowsill and tossed it onto the bed.

On her way to the hallway, she passed her own books – there weren't many, because, as her father always emphasized, he had to fill the fridge and pay the rent every month first. Only then might Schascha get a book. They could only afford delivery pizza once a month; it was always a special occasion. The only luxury was piano lessons with Mrs. Akdemir, for which her father set aside money because it was so important to Schascha's mother that her daughter learn the instrument she herself had loved so much.

Schascha made dust jackets for each of her books, sometimes with matching drawings, to protect them. They were her greatest treasures, her treasures of stories. That's why they stood between two bookends that looked like Scrooge McDuck's legendary vault.

Her father was holding a slice of Schascha's pizza, laughing, and holding it up to his mouth when she came into the small kitchen.

"Take that stolen food out right now!"

Schascha took it from his hand and immediately bit into it to make the ownership clear. "And *Bon appetit*," she said with her mouth full.

"You too, Princess." He took a slice of his tuna fish with extra onions.

"Hey, Dad?"

"I'm here!"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Anything, that's what I'm here for." He took another slice. Schascha's father could eat incredibly fast.

"If you wanted to talk to someone you didn't know. Well, not really, just from a distance. What's the best way to do that?"

Her father was so surprised that he actually stopped eating – and instead grinned broadly. "Is there a boy you have a crush on?"

"Oh, Daddy! You're so stupid. I'm totally serious."

"Okay, totally serious. Just say hi." And maybe say who you are." "Like, my name and stuff?"

"Exactly."

"And then?"

"Then what?"

"Then what do I say?"

"Think of a question beforehand. To get the conversation going. Something where the boy – "

"Daddy, please! It's not about a boy!"

"So something where the... non-boy," he made air quotes, "has to answer with more than just yes or no. So not something like: Are you Nickolas from 8b?"

"It's not about a boy."

Her father nodded. "Of course not."

"This pizza is really good," Schascha said, to change the subject.

"Yeah, right? And if you invite the boy over, I'll order it again!"

Schascha was so fast that he didn't see the cherry tomato coming in time.

Schascha had already experienced that her feet sometimes had a life of their own and took her to places her head hadn't even considered.

Which was because, in this case, her heart had made the decision.

And so it happened that the next evening, instead of going home after piano lessons, Schascha suddenly found herself standing in front of the display window of *The City Gate* bookshop.

She glanced down at her feet, but they looked completely innocent.

"Who would have thought?" a voice suddenly rang out behind her – a voice Schascha really didn't like hearing. Should she pretend not to notice? No, then the voice's owner would just claim Schascha was hard of hearing.

So, she turned around and saw Svenja with her friends, Isa and Michaela. "Are you actually planning on buying a book?" Svenja stepped closer. "Haven't you got enough already?"

"You can never have enough books. Something you'd know if you actually read."

"I can certainly afford as many books as I want. You can't even afford sneakers."
Isa and Michaela laughed.

Schascha looked down at her feet again; suddenly, they seemed unhappy to be stuck in shoes that didn't

belong to any well-known brand. The light-brown ankle boots weren't big – but then again, neither was she. At least the shoes matched the color of the bright yellow winter jacket she loved so much – partly because of its big wooden buttons – and her leather aviator cap, which featured a pair of goggles – a purely fashion-oriented accessory that didn't actually qualify the wearer to fly a propeller plane. It was the last gift Schascha ever received from her mother. "And something I've always wanted to say to you..." Svenja began, but at that moment, an elderly lady stepped up to the bookshop door.

"Hello, girls – could one of you open the door for me? I don't have a free hand right now." She was holding an umbrella in one hand and a shopping bag in the other.

Svenja and her friends quickly hurried away, leaving only Schascha behind to hold the door open – which suited her just fine. Rescued by an old lady! Because, once again, there was no superhero nearby when one was needed.

"Thank you, dear." The lady smiled. "In return, I'll give you a piece of good advice: never buy books with green covers. They're useless!"

Schascha didn't have an answer to that, so she simply nodded slowly.

Through the shop window, she could see that the saleswoman assisting the old lady began to look just as baffled as Schascha had felt moments earlier. Although she couldn't hear the conversation, Schascha was so captivated by it that she didn't notice the shop door opening again beside her, the little bell above it chimed brightly as someone entered.

It was the Book Walker!

Now he was speaking to the old lady; a smile instantly lit up her face, as if someone had flipped on a 100-watt light bulb. He pressed a book into her hand as if it were a gift – the cover wasn't green, but red.

Schascha's gaze fell on the large clock hanging inside the bookshop. It was already so late! She really needed to get home.

As she walked away, Schascha glanced back and saw a three-legged cat sitting in front of the bookshop, waiting for someone, just like an obedient dog. Was it looking at the old man? No, that was surely just her imagination. Schascha shook her head to shake off the strange thought.

Then the old man stepped out of the bookshop.

Schascha glanced at the clock again, though the hands hadn't moved back. But perhaps she could follow him for a few steps? For a few brief minutes?

She followed him, keeping some distance. Now he stepped onto the Cathedral Square and turned around, looking about as if he felt he was being watched.

Schascha quickly ducked out of sight, so that all he could see was a rolling clothing rack in front of the women's fashion shop, *Biggi's Boutique*.

She tried to breathe very shallowly, just in case he had exceptionally keen hearing and could detect her despite the city noise.

When she finally dared to peek around the corner, he had already moved on.

His footsteps took him steadily across the same cobblestones of the Cathedral Square – slow and even. If someone stood in his way, he would wait and then quicken his pace, likely to make up for lost time.

The big hand of the cathedral clock clicked heavily into place, signaling that Schascha really needed to get home now.

She glanced back a few more times at the old man – whose companion she would love to have been today. But he walked across the Cathedral Square without her and disappeared into a side street.

Accompanied by the three-legged cat.

Chapter 2

Fiddle sticks and a biscuit

A bookshop was a dangerous place.

You never knew what world you might be drawn into. Or whether you would ever get out again – or even want to. Sometimes, just a few sentences were enough.

Schascha knew this. Yet, the following evening, she bravely entered the City Gate bookshop.

The shop was very old, having been built and expanded over several decades. It also sold board games, stationery, tea, and – more recently – even chocolate. A heavy, dark wooden counter dominated the labyrinthine room. Carved into its front was a scene:

A hunting party on magnificent steeds, accompanied by a pack of brawny dogs, galloped in pursuit of a sounder of wild boars.

As the old man was nowhere to be seen, Schascha climbed the cast-iron spiral staircase to the first floor, where there stood a large purple reading chair, and on it – oddly enough – the three-legged cat was stretched contentedly. It must have snuck in through the large round window, which was ajar.

But no old man here, either.

So Schascha pet the cat's head and went back downstairs.

"Can I help you?"

A boy had just appeared beside Schascha; he looked like a High School student. "I... I just want to look around a bit."

"Sure, no problem. But if you do need help: I'm Leon."

"I'm Schascha?"

"If you say so, it must be true." He laughed. In a nice way.

Schascha couldn't help but run her hand over the books – the way one might brush against the stalks in a wheat field, enjoying the ticklish sensation. The cover art promised long journeys to distant lands and times long past.

"Don't go touching everything without buying anything," a harsh voice suddenly said. The woman it belonged to had entrenched herself behind the counter.

"I just wanted to..."

"Only touch if you're genuinely interested in a book. You wouldn't want to buy a book that's been pawed all over, would you? So, how can I help you?"

One of the things Schascha was very bad at was guessing the age of... old people. The woman wasn't exactly old – somewhere in the middle – yet she walked with a stoop, as if she had been working for decades. Her name tag read "Sabine Gruber – Owner & Manager."

"I'm looking for the man."

"Do you mean something by Thomas Mann? Are you studying him in school already?"

"No, *the* man. The one with the books. In the backpack. The old man."

The woman furrowed her brows so deeply that they looked like two hairy lightning bolts. "Why are you looking for him, anyway?"

"Just because."

"As a rule, I don't give out information about my staff. Besides, he just left."

"Fiddle sticks and a biscuit" cursed Schascha.

"What?"

"Goodbye! And try petting a book sometime – it's really nice."

Schascha ran across the uneven cobblestones to catch up with the Book Walker. She hadn't managed to follow him yesterday, but that wasn't going to happen today!

There he was, up ahead! He had almost crossed the entire Cathedral Square!

It was an autumn day that dreamed of summer. The Cathedral Square was bathed in deep sunlight; the old masonry looked young again, the old city like something newly built.

Schascha followed him at a brisk pace...

...and then...

...she took a deep breath...

"Hello, I'm Schascha. I'm nine years old."

At first, the old man didn't react. Presumably because he had never been spoken to by a Schascha before. Then he glanced at her, looking puzzled – and increasingly so, as she refused to leave his side.

"Aren't you afraid of me?"

"Nope."

"You're surely not allowed to walk with a stranger."

"You aren't a stranger; I know you."

"No, you don't."

"I always see you walking across the Cathedral Square. From my window. Ever since I can remember, really. And I started remembering pretty early on, my dad says. I haven't stopped since. You've been there the whole time. Just like the ringing of the cathedral bells. So, I do know you." The words bubbled out of her as if she were a fountain. Perhaps because the old man wasn't as friendly as she had hoped – and Schascha always talked twice as much as usual when she was nervous.

"If you know me, then what's my name?"

"I don't know the names of the cathedral bells, either. But I'd pick them out from all the others, even if a hundred thousand million more were ringing. Just the way I can spot you in a crowd of so many people."

"So you don't really know me; that makes me a stranger."

"You're the Book Walker. That's what I call you. So you do have a name, and I know it."

The Book Walker sighed. "If you've been watching me for a long time, then you surely know that I always walk alone."

"That's perfectly fine; you walk alone, and I'll walk alone beside you."

"No," said the Book Walker. "That won't work."

And he walked away, leaving her standing there.

Schascha considered running after him, but she knew the look adults gave when they were being very serious. They would scrunch up their faces like a leather glove, causing wrinkles to appear everywhere and making them look even older. Presumably, they thought that the older they looked, the more weight their words carried.

Perhaps that was true, too.

But it was certainly also true that Schascha wouldn't let herself be intimidated so easily. After all, it was quite possible that the Book Walker wouldn't scrunch up his face quite so much tomorrow.

[...]

Carsten Sebastian Henn was born in Cologne in 1973 and still lives next to a lake in the Rhineland today – with his wife, two children and two cats. In addition to ethnology, he also studied viticulture. In 2010, he bought vineyards in the St. Aldegunder Himmelreich with friends. He is the author of numerous successful crime novels and romantic comedies. His novel "Der Buchspazierer" was on the SPIEGEL bestseller list for over two years. "The Golden Typewriter" is his first book for children.

Annelie Schulze (born 1998 in Münster) discovered her passion for drawing at an early age. Her creative journey took her across Europe. Today she illustrates children's books that spark curiosity.