

*Norbert Nogginthick*  
*or*  
*The Ruthless Rhinoceros*

Written by:  
Michael Ende

## Translator's Preface

Michael Ende (1929-1995) was one of the most beloved German writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although best known as an author of children's literature and fantasy, he often proclaimed that he did not write just for children, but rather for the "eternal youthfulness" – *das Ewig-Kindliche* – present within every human. With delightful stories such as *Momo*, *Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver*, and his most famous work, *The Neverending Story*, Ende demonstrated his talent for fantastical story-telling and his knack for creating bizarre worlds, all while simultaneously exploring dark and complex themes. *Momo*, for example, tells the story of the Men in Grey – sinister creatures that convince people that they should deposit their time into a Timesavings Bank – and the attempts of a young girl to save the city from the terrible consequences of being afraid to do anything considered time-wasting.

Although cloaked as a children's story, adults will easily recognize *Momo* as a criticism of modern society's preoccupation with consumerism and efficiency and its tendency to dismiss so-called "unproductive" things such as relationships, recreation, art, and imagination. Despite the often profound themes in his stories, Ende's surreal style of writing, combined with his colorful imagination, manages to entertain both children and adults alike. His skillful ability to purposely craft stories for several audiences at once through his use of symbolism and word choice undeniably marks him as a master of literature. It's no wonder that his works have been translated into over 30 languages and that his stories continue to be enjoyed today, including *Norbert Nackendick oder das nackte Nashorn* (1984), the short story before you.

At first glance, this text may seem like a simple, unusual story about a very nasty rhino named Norbert who drives away the rest of the animals in the savanna, but, as with most of Ende's stories, there is much more to the story than that. Through the use of situational irony and satirical humor, Ende illustrates how Norbert's narcissism, tyrannical nature, and disregard for society ultimately lead to his downfall. In this German-to-English translation of this story, I sought to stick closely to the source text in order to best preserve several of Michael Ende's signature style elements.

One of the most important things to translate was Ende's ability to cater to both younger and older audiences through his style and tone. His descriptions, such as that of a stork's "moldy" head, as well as his choice of onomatopoeias, are original, colorful, and playful, and they are delightful for children to read aloud. Because I wanted to preserve Ende's whimsicality as much as possible, I chose to use a more literal approach rather than a dynamic approach to translating. For example, one of the characters in the story is an old professor who talks in a highly scientific manner. Ende conveys the professor's pretentiousness by making up nonsense phrases such as "*kathaklytische Aciphoplasis debrophiler Skleptotomien.*" Since these are not real words, there is no real English translation, and a translator has the freedom to stray from the

source text and make up new English words. However, I wanted to retain the specific sounds that Ende created, so I instead opted to anglicize his nonsense words in order to ensure that the professor's dialogue was as nonsensical as it was in German. Ende plays with language and his linguistic creativity is part of what makes his books so alluring for children, so it was important that my translation be equally alluring.

Adults too can appreciate Ende's imaginative writing style, but they can also pick up on the dark humor woven into the text. Ende exaggerates aspects of his characters in order to satirize them. This humor is subtle, however. It is as if there are inside jokes hidden inside his stories that only adults will notice, and it was a challenge to not only pick up on this humor, but also to make sure I translated it in a way that was subtle as well.

Thematically, adults can recognize that this story is not one about animals, but one about people. Beyond that, the story is open to interpretation. Some readers may see it as a story about courage and human weakness. Others may see it as a political commentary about military strength and how the countries that misuse this strength and terrorize others end up ostracized. Unlike many books that have happy endings, this story does not. The lesson is unclear, and this allows readers to actively determine what the story personally means to them. While translating this text, I did not translate with an overt theme in mind because, like the author, I wanted readers to come up with their own interpretation. As Ende once said, "any good interpretation is a correct one."

Overall, I worked to maintain Ende's vivid style and tone, as well as his humor and the thematic ambiguity. However, the biggest challenges were in the small details. Particular attention was given to translating the animals' names because Ende himself put a lot of thought into creating his characters' names. The names function to automatically describe the personalities and physical traits of the animals. For example, simply from the name Aida Tendertrunk ("*Aida Rüsselzart*"), one can glean that this animal is a lady elephant with a gentle demeanor. Similarly, the name Dolores Evershy ("*Dolores Immerscheu*") hints at Dolores' timid nature. The literary technique of creating compound names not only adds to the story's playful tone and vibrant style, but is also used to effectively introduce and develop all nine characters in the span of 17 short pages.

Further compounding the challenge of creating names as creative and descriptive as Michael Ende's was the fact that many of the names were alliterative. His use of alliteration creates memorable names that are fun to read aloud. In *The Neverending Story*, for example, he names the main character Bastian Balthasar Bux and another character Karl Konrad Koreander. The absurd amount of alliteration is not a coincidence, and it is the translator's duty to preserve such obvious and distinct qualities of the author's style.

Unfortunately, translators are at the mercy of the target language's lexicon when it comes to translating alliteration and other phonetic characteristics. The title in particular posed a great challenge. In the German title, *Norbert Nackendick oder das nackte Nashorn*, the "n" is alliterated four times. In English, it is impossible to do this because there is only one direct translation for "*Nashorn*": rhino or rhinoceros; there are no words in the English language that mean rhino and also start with an "n." After looking through Michael Ende's official website ([michaelende.de](http://michaelende.de)) for information on the story, I learned that the text had never been translated into English, but that the title had been translated as *Norbert Fatnoggin: or the Naked Rhinoceros* on the website. I did not like this translation, as it completely missed the alliteration, which I wanted to preserve. I decided that "rhinoceros" would have to stay in the title, and I would have to change the other words. However, once again, there were no English words that meant naked or bare ("*nackte*") and started with an "r," so I decided I would find an adjective that started with "r" and described this vicious, mean rhinoceros. I eventually settled on "ruthless," which perfectly portrays Norbert's aggressive and stubborn nature, while also having the added effect that it both starts with "r" and ends with "s," just like "rhinoceros."

The last part of the title that needed to be considered was Norbert's name. Since I had already determined that the latter part of the title would start with "r," there was pressure to also change his name to start with "r," such as "Robert." However, I felt this would deviate too much from the text. Ende was an author who chose his names carefully. In fact, in *Jim Button and Luke the Engine Driver*, he purposely named the main character Jim Button in order to allude to Jeremy Button, a character in Charles Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle*. Because the novel was partly about how Darwin's theory of evolution was misused by the Nazis, this was an appropriate name – and an obscure reference. I decided to keep "Norbert" as part of the title, not only because completely changing a work's title is risky, but also because Ende was known for hiding references in his works.

Norbert's last name still posed some problems, however. "*Nackendick*" translated directly to "neck thick," which sounded extremely awkward. Eventually, while browsing Amazon reviews of this story, I read a review describing Norbert as "*dickköpfig*," which both literally and figuratively translates to "thick-headed." I realized that the "*dick*" in "*Nackendick*" was potentially a play on "*dickköpfig*" and that I should preserve this clever word play if possible. I eventually settled on "Nogginthick" not only because it sounded very similar to the German, but also because it was a pun on the word "thick-headed." Although I consulted the website's translation of the title, I felt their translation was inadequate and neither captured the subtlety of Ende's word choice nor his affinity for alliteration. My translation of the title – *Norbert Nogginthick or the Ruthless Rhino* – sacrifices some of the alliteration in the German title, but nevertheless encapsulates the other important elements.

The title exemplifies the two biggest challenges I encountered: translating alliteration and translating puns. The pun in the title could have safely been omitted with only a minor loss of meaning if I hadn't been able to find an English pun. There was another instance, however, where preserving the pun was almost mandatory because it was vital to the plot of the story. In the second half of the story, an oxpecker comes up with a clever plan that involves using deliberately bewildering logic in order to confuse Norbert, and one of the ways the oxpecker achieves this is by exploiting the fact that there are two meanings to the word "*stürzen*." "*Stürzen*" is a verb that can mean "to fall" and also "to overthrow" when used in the context of government regimes. The oxpecker makes his plan purposely confusing by using the same word several times to refer to both meanings. Recognizing this, I sought to find a word or phrase in English that held both meanings of "to fall" and "to overthrow" because the plan's cleverness hinged on preserving the plan's ambiguity, and it would be a mistake to not come up with a clever solution. I had to search for a long time to find the perfect word, but I eventually found that "bring down" could be used in both contexts.

Although *Norbert Nackendick* seems like a simple text to translate, it is in fact full of linguistic hurdles, ranging from crafting the overall style and tone so that it accommodated two audiences simultaneously, to the smaller details, such as finding the right words for the puns and alliteration. In my more literal approach to translating the text, I hope that I have successfully captured the youthful essence that distinguishes Michael Ende as an author and that English audiences, young and old, will finally be able to enjoy this charming story about a rhino who proves to be his own downfall – in more ways than one.