Transcript for *"The Hedgehog's Dilemma"*

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:00:00] Reach Out and Read where books build better brains. This is the Reach Out and Read podcast. I'm your host doctor Dipesh Navsaria, a practicing pediatrician with degrees in public health and children's librarianship. I'm a clinical professor of human development and family studies at the School of Human Ecology, and a professor of pediatrics at the School of Medicine and Public Health, both at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At Reach Out and Read, we dream of a world in which every child is read to every day. Our show explores how children and families flourish and thrive through a combination of individual well-being, confident parents, supportive communities, strong public health, and good policy. Join us here for thought provoking conversations on these issues with expert guests, authors and leaders in the field of early childhood health and literacy. Research shows that reading physical books together brings the strongest benefits to children. That's why we're happy to have Boise Paper, a responsible paper manufacturer, as the founding sponsor of this podcast. Through their paper with Purpose Promise, Boise Paper looks for ways to make a difference in local communities. Thank you to Boise Paper for investing in our Reach Out and Read community. We talk a lot on this show about relational health, the health of our relationships with one another.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:01:21] Despite the many benefits relationships bring to us. One of the challenges is that forming and maintaining relationships comes with some emotional risk. We may wish to set aside our cautious behaviors, but we're afraid of being hurt. The hedgehog's dilemma is, as a Psychology Today review tells us, a metaphor for the dilemma humans are faced with in their intimate relationships with others. A new book based on the original parable tackles social exclusion, anxiety, paranoia, human intimacy, affection, and our need to form bonds. As that commentary asks, why is it that we pull back from our loved ones? Why are we so afraid of being hurt? Why is it so hard for those suffering from anxiety and depression to seek out the help of others? This newly translated book that's by Dutch author Toon Tellegen and translated into English by David Colmer, explores all these questions in a way that is accessible for adults and children. Our guest today is indeed David Kolmar. He's translated more than 60 book length works of Dutch language literature and won many prizes for his translations, including the Impac Dublin Literary Award and the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, precursor to the International Booker Prize, both with novelist Gerbrand Bakker. David, welcome to the show.

David Colmer: [00:02:46] Thank you.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:02:47] So the book The Hedgehog's Dilemma comes from a parable from the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. In 1851, and I wanted to read a translation of it briefly to help our audience understand where this came from. A number of porcupines huddled together for warmth on a cold day in winter. But as they began to prick one another with their quills, they were obliged to disperse. However, the cold drove them together again when just the same thing happened. At last, after many turns of huddling and dispersing, they discovered they would be best off by remaining at a little distance from one another. In the same way, the needs of society drives the human porcupines together, only to be mutually repelled by the many prickly and disagreeable qualities of their nature. The moderate distance which they at last discovered to be the only tolerable condition of intercourse is the code of politeness and fine manners, and those who transgress it are roughly told in the English phrase to keep their distance. By this arrangement, the mutual need of warmth is only very moderately satisfied. But then people do not get pricked. A man who has some heat in himself prefers to remain outside, where he will neither prick other people nor get pricked himself. So how does this Schopenhauer quote end up in this book? The hedgehog's dilemma.

David Colmer: [00:04:17] Well, the hedgehog's dilemma is is is an animal parable from by, as you say, the Dutch author. And he has been writing these stories about animals for a good 40 years now. And he has a complete world with different animals and they all have particular characters. So, I'm sure he's aware of the Schopenhauer story. It's not actually included in the book, but his character of the Hedgehog is a fairly solitary character who actually longs for company, but he's a bit concerned about it. So, it does reflect. I mean, it's in the nature of the prequels that the hedgehog has to ward off others. And it's in the nature of the hedgehog, intones Animal World, to be to be lonely and to be doubting, to be vacillating between wanting company and being afraid of being afraid of the disruption or the, the, the things that you have to do. If he does seek out company or invite visitors, as in the book.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:25] Mhm mhm. Sure. Yeah. As you mentioned, he has created this world. I've actually had on my shelf for a long time two of his previous books. The Squirrel's Birthday and other parties and letters to anyone and everyone, many of our listeners may not be familiar with his work. Is there anything else you can share about him with us?

David Colmer: [00:05:47] Well, he's actually trained as a doctor, and he used to work as a general practitioner here in Amsterdam, where I'm based. And so I think that's reflected in a lot of his insights he has about characters, about people's character. And when he was always very interested in writing and very prolific. So he once told me that he started out writing

stories, which he used to just write for himself and then post through people's letterboxes, strangers letterboxes on nighttime walks. But anyway, as I said, about 40 years ago, he began as a poet. But then about 40 years ago, he started writing these animal stories for children. They always had a lot of crossover appeal. So here in the Netherlands, they were very popular with adults as well as children. And then about, I guess, 25 years ago, he started writing and stories from coming from that world, but with more adult themes. So as, for instance, the hedgehog's dilemma with this theme of loneliness and doubt and they're more aimed for adults, but children can enjoy them too. And it's reflecting his public in the Netherlands. You know, the children's books are so loved by adults who enjoy reading them, too.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:07:12] Sure. The maturity of this book is sort of inside the hedgehog's thoughts at all. And the words themselves are not that complicated. Right? But the concepts can really get into deep levels of complexity. And some of the scenes, arguably, are falling almost into magic. Magical realism. Right? In different ways. And so as the translator, how did you tackle these complex emotions and scenarios?

David Colmer: [00:07:47] Well, as you say, the events in the book are in most of the events are in the hedgehog's fantasies. As he imagines, he thinks of sending a letter out, inviting the other animals to come and visit. And then he imagines the consequences if the animals did come to visit him. And some of those can be quite dramatic, you know, his whole house gets destroyed by the rhinoceros, or it gets eaten up by the boar or things like that. So I think for me the task as a translator was to try to maintain the clarity through sometimes these dramatic events and then to keep this clear that it's in his imagination. Lots of things are happening. It's a long, long thought processes as he lies there in his bed or under his bed.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:08:37] Sometimes some of them were so extensive that I found myself turning back pages to say, wait, did this really happen or is this are we still inside his head?

David Colmer: [00:08:49] Yeah, I can imagine, I mean, he does have a vivid imagination.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:08:54] Very. Were there any feelings or expressions in Dutch that you struggled to find a translation for in English?

David Colmer: [00:09:03] Well, Tony likes to he likes wordplay. And that's not always translatable. For instance, I think one of the most difficult chapters to translate at least was the second chapter where he imagines these words coming into his room and he sees the words dancing together. So words like not yet. And then other words come in and join. He gets a tangle in his thoughts as these different words perform little dance steps and move, change their order. And of course, as you can imagine, those words don't coincide perfectly

literally to the Dutch words in those simple sentences. So for instance, in Dutch, there was the word long in there and that was recognizable because it was wearing a long coat. So but I mean, that didn't fit into those phrases in English. So then I had to find other things, other ways of saying the same thing. So slightly tweaking it here.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:10:05] Adjusting to the word play since that was the point there.

David Colmer: [00:10:07] Yeah, yeah. So you so you lose some things and then hopefully you can pick them up somewhere else.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:10:13] So, we'd love to have you do a reading from the book. Could you set the scene and then share that reading with us?

David Colmer: [00:10:22] So as, as I said, the hedgehog's thinking about inviting the other animals to come to visit, and then he's imagining the consequences. So this is chapter ten. It goes like this. I'll have to do up my house if I want visitors. He thought he was in bed. He'd forgotten the toad and was imagining furnishing a special room for visitors in case they didn't come separately, but all at once, because they all thought they were the only one who'd been invited. A reception room, everyone could walk around it and sit down in it. It put a pond in one corner for the animals who liked to visit underwater, like the pike and the carp and the stickleback at the back of the reception room. He'd make a room for himself, somewhere off limits to visitors. He'd hang a little sign on the door saying, this room is only for me. No entry, no knocking. The hedgehog, a place he could withdraw to. He would drill a little hole in the wall so he could look through it at his visitors. Maybe they'd all be standing in the reception room and asking each other, where is the hedgehog, anyway? We're visiting him, aren't we? Doesn't he live here? Don't ask me.

David Colmer: [00:11:40] Then he'd call out. I'll be there in a second. But then he'd stay where he was. And if they knocked, he'd call. Just a minute. At the end of the day, his visitors would go away, maybe without having seen him, and he'd whirl around the big reception room by himself. That was actually what he wanted most of all, to whirl around by himself. Visitors were incidental and intermezzo. The aunt had once told him. Maybe he needed to write that in his letter, too. You are an intermezzo in my existence. But maybe they didn't know what an intermezzo was and thought it was a kind of hullabaloo. And then they'd bring horns with them and enormous drums and start yelling and screaming before they'd even come close to his house. He decided not to add it to his letter, and on second thoughts, he decided not to do up his house either. They have to take me as I am. He thought prickles and all.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:12:44] Thank you, I have to admit that I feel seen, given how my attitude is towards parties in my own home. So. This this book has sold over a million copies in the Netherlands. Why do you think it's so popular?

David Colmer: [00:13:04] I think it's actually the series of adult books of animal stories for, for adults that have sold that many. But it, it did sell a tremendous amount of copies in Japan. So we could perhaps speculate about why it would be so incredibly popular there. But, in the Netherlands, where it has been a bestseller, maybe not quite to that level, given it's not such a large country. I think people just Although it's some, you know, people, some people do have a lot of sympathy for this, this, this way of feeling about solitude and company. But I think just people love tones stories because they're so humane and so funny and so gentle. Warm. So I think all those things have, have made him kind of a feature of, of many people's lives that, you know, also with the, with the animal stories for children that that adults like to read them to each other, you know, one a day or something. And so I think he's rightly something of an institution here in the Netherlands and, and in other countries, too.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:14:20] So do you think there's something about the feelings that are being expressed that that connects for people? Because I think there's often this almost like, oh, you're supposed to like being around people and socializing and going to events. And for some people, I mean, the hedgehog is really rather worried about all this to a great extent and is finding this all very challenging to even contemplate.

David Colmer: [00:14:48] Well, perhaps you know, it's a social anxiety that a lot of people are ashamed to admit. So that deep down, we all have our own hedgehog. And maybe that strikes a chord with people, and I think the other animal stories are also about other things that people experience in their everyday life. I mean, I'm just translating one now for it's going to be published, I guess, next year. And it's about mainly about depression. So, but so that that's something that a lot of people, even if they haven't felt it themselves. They've seen other people suffer from it. So that's also a big theme. And that is also quite an amusing book, surprisingly so. There's such a such a heavy subject.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:15:42] I look forward to it. Yeah.

David Colmer: [00:15:44] Yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:15:44] There's some illustrations that are interspersed throughout this, this book. And they're relatively simple line drawings, but they still convey so much. Do you have any insight as to the illustrations? And did you see these before or after you started working on the translation? So there's some illustrations that are interspersed throughout this

book. They're relatively simple line drawings, but yet they convey so much. Had you seen these when you translated the book, or did they come later?

David Colmer: [00:16:20] I hadn't actually seen them because they those illustrations were commissioned by Querido, the Dutch publisher for a new edition of the book, which was published in 2021, and I had already translated the book by then, so I worked from a previous edition that didn't have them, so I first saw them when the box of books arrived from Pushkin and I got to open them. Wow, it looks great.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:16:43] Excellent. So if we could spend a few minutes talking about the Art of translation, you know, language, of course, as you well know, is continually evolving. There's lots of different ways to convey even English. Right? There's more formal styles. More casual styles. How do you make that choice?

David Colmer: [00:17:02] Well, I mean, I'm Australian, so I have a particular kind of English that I grew up with certain expressions that aren't that familiar to people in other English speaking countries. So quite often the first factor for me is which publisher is commissioning the translation? Is it an American publisher or is it a British publisher? So that influences some of the choices I make. And then I apart from that, I try to replicate the style of the original. So if I'm looking at the register or the, the tone, then I, then I look at the original and think, okay, so if this book was had been written in English, it would sound like this. So that's my chief goal. Yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:17:53] Can you tell us a bit about your workflow? Do you read the whole book and then translate? Do you translate as you go along?

David Colmer: [00:18:01] I almost always read the book first. If only to decide whether I want to translate it or not.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:18:10] Sure. Before you take the job.

David Colmer: [00:18:11] Yeah. And sometimes, sometimes I also, you know, the publisher also wants to know what I think of the book before. Before I ask me to translate it or something. So, I've read the book and then I when I've been commissioned to translate it, then I just work through it from the start to the finish. And then I just do that again and again and again, maybe 4 or 5 times and, and then I and then it goes to the publisher, the, to the editor, and we discuss it. And usually I will send it to the author as well. Most Dutch authors have very good English, so they're interested to read the translation. And sometimes they have some questions or suggestions or they notice mistakes. Sometimes they just say, oh, this is great. Thank you.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:19:03] So I want to I want to clarify you. It sounds like you actually do a complete fresh translation multiple times.

David Colmer: [00:19:12] No no no I do a first draft and then I go through the book from again, go through the draft, second draft and, and usually maybe 2 or 3, two drafts, maybe looking at the Dutch and then, then after that I'm just polishing the English, maybe referring occasionally to the original to to see if I think, well, why did I say that? Oh, yeah. I better have a look.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:19:37] And so this book is roughly at least in English. It came out to about 160 something pages. How long did this take you from starting that process? Till you said, okay, here, editor. Here's my final, final draft.

David Colmer: [00:19:53] Well, I think I don't like to work full time on one project. So I, you know, I'd like to have different projects at the same time so that I can maybe work on a book on one book, 2 or 3 hours a day. So I stay fresh for that project. So working like that maybe four months or something like that. So, obviously if I was working full time on one book this length, then I wouldn't be working on it for four months full time. But I like to spread it out. And that's also if tthe time is available to allow some draw time between the drafts so that you forget why you made that strange decision and then come back to it with fresh eyes and go, oh, that's not actually that great. I think I should do that a little bit differently. Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:20:49] So indeed, when I write opinion pieces,which are much shorter, obviously, I always try to give myself at least one overnight so I can reread it for exactly that reason.

David Colmer: [00:21:00] Yeah. And I like to, I like to, to go through it on paper as well, at least once, maybe twice. So I find that I just see things more clearly on the page than on the screen.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:21:12] You mentioned the challenges of the chapter about the words and the the wordplay inherent in that. Were there other things you found particularly challenging in this book? Was there emotions or scenes or just particular words that you found? You just weren't finding the right match for this?

David Colmer: [00:21:31] There's one thing which is basically untranslatable and which is a shame, and that's that. There's a character in the book called the Longhorn beetle. And the longhorn beetle is kind of the physician of the forest. So. So other animals go to the longhorn beetle for his opinion about their ailments or their problems. And he's usually quite rude to

them. And the longhorn beetle in, in Dutch is called the bok ter, which sounds very much like doctor that it just basically means the buck bug. So and there's just no way around that, especially sometimes the the the book tour is in the illustration and it's clearly a long horned beetle, so you can't give it some other name. And that's a shame. And you just have to rely on the fact that through the stories it becomes apparent what this character is like. Sure. Another problem with tone stories is the gender problem because in Dutch they don't they don't say it when talking about animals. You say he so, so all the all the animals in Dutch are he.

David Colmer: [00:22:57] But when you transfer that literally to English, then the animal suddenly all become male. Sure. So and I think that has a particular effect in English that it doesn't have in Dutch. It's just very strange to have a whole world where there's only men. So I mean, I once I translated a picture book of tones that also animal stories and that book was actually a French edition. So I was translating the Dutch stories, but the illustrations were from a French edition. And so I struck on the solution of following the French lead, because they have IL and L, which is also a grammatical gender in France. But it's not all masculine. Right, right. So I when I did that picture book, I followed that lead and made the animals that were l in French. I made them XI in English. So that that gave a mix of genders, which I think is necessary in English really, if you have personification of characters. So that was, that's, that's something that requires some thought and.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:24:07] Yeah.

David Colmer: [00:24:07] Yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:24:08] Huh. Yeah. that would not have occurred to me. Wow.

David Colmer: [00:24:11] Yeah. Yeah. I mean, how would you find it if you were looking at the book and everyone was he. Would you notice that as something odd? Or would you think it's a classical story like Aesop's Fables or something?

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:24:20] Yeah, I might, but knowing when this was written, I would say, gosh, that's an interesting choice. I would have assumed there was intention behind it. Yeah, yeah. You mentioned children's books. You know, children's books are often written in a particular style. Right. And how does translating conversational language differ from literary language? And thinking about how we might talk about these things in a book intended for children.

David Colmer: [00:24:49] Well, I think there are certain literary conventions about how to render conversation. Of course, you know, as you know, especially as people who do a

podcast, if you if you get a transcription of the way people actually talk, it's almost unreadable, full of ums and ahs and, and repetitions and, and all kinds of things. But then we have the literary convention that when you're writing dialogue. You you have a nod to the rhythms of normal dialogue, but it's cleaned up so that it flows more easily and it's more enjoyable to read. But I think that it still has a lot of you still have to make it have, have those rhythms. So it still reflects the way that people talk in real life, but at a distance. And I think that applies to translation, just as it does to writing and with children's books. Yeah. Maybe, it depends on the book, really, how difficult you're allowed to be, what kind of vocabulary you're allowed to use. I've done a, you know, a massive range of children's books. So. And I think it should always be easy to read, but we've, we've dialogue. It should have the impression that people could have said it as well. Sure, sure.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:26:08] Are there other ways you approach children's books in general in terms of translation versus adult books, or are they all different?

David Colmer: [00:26:19] Well, I think it depends on what kind of children's books you're talking about. So if I've, I've done quite a bit of children's poetry and, and sometimes that has a particular form with a rhyme or meter, and then you have the constraints of the form which have to be met. And sometimes they're even more important than the content. So then to meet that form you sometimes have to take some liberties with the content. Mhm. And if it's an illustrated book then you have to balance that with the illustrations. Because if there's not a picture then you can change the elephant into a rhinoceros. But if there's a picture of an elephant, you're stuck. And picture books also are a particular form, like picture books without very much text. So there sometimes you have to, especially going from Dutch picture books to English picture books. We have like our expectations in the English speaking world from what a picture book is like. And it's there's not very much text usually. So in the Dutch they might be a bit more expansive. And sometimes you need to bring that back to, to suit the English idea of what a picture book was like. So trim it down a little bit.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:27:33] Indeed, indeed. You mentioned earlier that these books sort of span like the adult world and the children's world. Would you call this a children's book or not?

David Colmer: [00:27:47] Well, I guess, you know, it depends how old a child I think is. When does young adults start and when does children's literature end? I mean, I don't think it's a book that would suit a six year old or a seven year old. But maybe a precocious 10 or 12 year old might enjoy it. And I think Tony himself sees them more as stories for adults. But, you know, of course, that doesn't preclude children from reading them, just as his children's stories aren't off limits to adults. So, yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:28:28] So if your child has shown an interest in Schopenhauer, then tis they would be the ideal market for this is what I'm hearing.

David Colmer: [00:28:34] It might be. It might be a gateway book for Schopenhauer.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:28:37] There you go. Last question here is what's a common misconception people have about translating and the act of translation that you'd love to clear up?

David Colmer: [00:28:49] Well, I think there are many misconceptions. I think, if we're talking about English speaking people and people who don't have a lot of who don't have a multilingual background, then they have people often have the misconception that if you have the language skills, then you can translate. But it's I mean, the language skills is just the beginning, really. And, and you need to have the writing skills as well to be able to write in a range of genres, really. So in a range of styles, a range of genres. So if you're writing your own stories, you can just write in your own voice. But a translator needs to be able to write. It needs to use the ventriloquist amongst the writers needs to be able to do lots of different voices.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:29:38] And indeed indeed, that's a great way of thinking about it.

David Colmer: [00:29:41] I'm not sure if that's a good image, because ventriloquist usually sound a bit funny and we don't want our translations to sound funny, but I think you got the idea.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:29:50] High fidelity ventriloquists. There we go. So. Yeah. Excellent. Well, thank you so much for this conversation. It was great to be able to discuss the book with you. And also just to dig in to the world, the art of translation in so many ways.

David Colmer: [00:30:06] Yeah. Thank you.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:30:10] Welcome to today's 33rd page or something extra for you, our listeners. One of Tony Callahan's earlier books is called Letters to Anyone and Everyone, and I thought I'd share a passage from it. It, too, is consisting of short stories that are snippets into the lives of different animals that show up again in the hedgehog's dilemma. This one is called balance deer. Squirrel. If you don't mind, then I'd like to make a short speech at your birthday party. You see, I've discovered something called balance. Have you ever heard of it? Balance. That's what it's called. I'm convinced that everyone will find it very interesting. I would like to make my speech from the top of the beech tree. With everyone below me on the ground. I won't make it too long. The elephant. Deer, elephant. Of course you can make a

speech, but I'd rather that you make it from the special chair I made for you. A chair that will stand at the head of the table. Otherwise, some animals won't be able to hear you. And that would be a pity. The squirrel. Deer. Squirrel? No, no, it has to be from the top of the beech tree. I want to illustrate my words. And you can't illustrate while sitting in a chair.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:31:28] I'll shout loudly and lean forward as far as I can. If you make sure people are standing right underneath me, then everyone will hear. Oh, squirrel, this balance thing is fascinating. The elephant. And that's today's 33rd page. You've been listening to the Reach Out and Read podcast. Reach Out and Read is a non-profit organization that is the authoritative national voice for the positive effects of reading daily and supports, coaches and celebrates engaging in those language rich activities with young children. We're continually inspired by stories that encourage language literacy and early relational health. Visit us at reachoutandread.org to find out more. And don't forget to subscribe to our show wherever you listen to your podcasts. If you like what you hear, please leave us a review. Your feedback helps grow our podcast community and tells others that this podcast is worth listening to. Our producer is Jill Ruby. Lorie Brooks is our chief external affairs officer. Special thanks to our communications Manager, Nils Del Mar Torres and Digital content Coordinator Aarthi Varshini. Thank you to our founding sponsor, Boise Paper, for making a difference in local communities like ours. I'm your host, Doctor Dipesh Navsaria. I look forward to spending time with you soon. And remember, books build better brains.