

**MOMO**  
(by Michael Ende)  
Summary

A little homeless girl of an undetermined age arrives in an unnamed city. She has escaped from a home for children who have lost their parents, an orphanage. She's small, thin and usually barefoot, with big beautiful eyes as black as her hair and feet of almost the same colour. She moves into the ruins of an ancient amphitheatre on the outskirts of the city and she convinces the neighbours that she'd much rather live on her own there than go back to the orphanage or even live with them. She tells them her name is Momo. So the neighbours decide to help Momo to make her home in a small room under the stage of the amphitheatre and they make sure she has enough food and clothing.

Momo knows the art of listening – she has a talent for listening to dogs, cats, wind, rain, and especially to the words of her new friends. What's more, she listens for the words behind the words until her friends find themselves listening to themselves and to each other. This has magical effects: people think of solutions to their problems, enemies discover the roots of their conflict, and Momo hears beauty even in the little sounds of the amphitheatre at night. Momo's friends are of all ages, but children especially flock to Momo every day. It seems that her mere presence can put interesting ideas into their heads. They invent new games every day and turn their make-believe worlds into fantastical and amusing realities. In this way, Momo becomes one of the most beloved members of the community.

But one day the REAL WORLD comes to intrude in the world of this little mysterious girl, of her friendly neighbours and of their happy children. It comes in the form of the MEN IN GREY. They are men in grey suits who live off stolen time and who exhale an icy chill with the smoke of their cigars, the chill of practical reason. In order to perpetuate themselves, these Grey Men visit people with free time and encourage them to become timesavers in the "Timesaving Bank", which means working longer hours and more quickly and cutting out time wasted in talking to friends or relaxing at the end of the day. Daydreaming is regarded as almost a criminal offence in this new world, and silence is terrifying because it threatens the inhabitants with the realization of the emptiness that is taking over their lives.

Soon all the adults in the city become obsessed with saving time, because the Grey Men have convinced them that this will pay back in a wonderful tomorrow. In this way, the city becomes transformed into a busy metropolis full of overworked, unhappy people who cannot remember how they came to live this way.

For the time being, however, the Grey Men have spared the children. Their orders are to leave the children for last. So more and more children come to the amphitheatre

with all kinds of toys that they can't really play with: remote-controlled tanks that go back and forth but little else, robots that waddle along with flashing eyes and turning heads and little else... Their parents give them such toys, but not their time, and the children are unimaginative, unhappy and bad-tempered.

As timesaving becomes the most important thing in their lives, Momo's friends also have no time for her. Even her closest friends, Guido the Storyteller and Beppo the Road sweeper are caught in this trap.

So, as all the children are sent every day to "child depots", Momo alone remains immune to the ideas of the Men in Grey. They try to catch Momo as well, but they can offer her nothing and she knows that. So Momo is alone, one small child of an undetermined age, and she is the only hope for saving the city and its people from losing all of their humanness. Help finally appears in the form of a turtle called Cassiopeia, who guides Momo to see Professor Hora in the Nowhere House.

In this way, Momo succeeds in getting rid of the Time-thieves, the Grey Men, and:

All of a sudden, people found they had plenty of time to spare. They were delighted, naturally, but they never realized it was their own time that had miraculously been restored to them... Children played in the middle of the street, getting in the way of cars whose drivers not only watched and waited, smiling broadly, but sometimes got out and joined in their games.

And while I, Francesca, pause in this story to each and every one of you, I want to take a minute, an hour, a day, a lifetime, to imagine living in Momo's city, where people learnt to take all the time they needed and wanted because from that moment onwards there was enough time for everyone.

---

*This summary is a free adaptation by Francesca Brotto of the synopsis found on the site of the "Women's Cancer Forum", under the heading "Taking time for living". The site account has expired and so the site is no longer visible.*