Summary

Les Murray grew up on a dairy farm near the village of Nabiac, New South Wales, Australia. Out of his affinity for rural Australia, Murray has written a body of work that speaks to the natural and mythic elements that make up the island continent. As has been the preoccupation of other leading Australian authors, he has fashioned a poetry that attempts to shed light on what it means to be an Australian. Murray grew up poor, and so he has made it a point to stay close to those who have had to struggle to survive, especially the Aboriginal and rural populations. It has been his belief that he can only truly communicate with ordinary people by expressing himself in the “language really spoken by men.” His first volume of poetry, The Ilex Tree, was published in 1965. Throughout his writing career, Murray has emphasized the glory of nature and the sanctity of life. Never willing to pander to the lowest common denominator, he employs wit, lush imagery, and stinging satire to forward his message. While Murray is at home with many poetic forms—including structured as well as free verse—he is especially a master of the lyric form. Although he seems to be always willing to tackle big ideas in his poetry, his poems are never inaccessible, inarticulate, or incoherent. Murray is one of the rare Australian poets to have gained worldwide prominence. Since the 1960’s, his stature as one of best poets writing in English has only become more evident. His connection to rural Australia has remained strong. Many of his most important poetry volumes stand as testaments to his love of the natural world and the people who inhabit it, including such powerful collections as The Weatherboard Cathedral (1969), The Boys Who Stole the Funeral (1980), The People’s Otherworld (1983), The Daylight Moon (1987), and Subhuman Redneck Poems (1996). For Conscious and Verbal, Murray employs the statement issued to the public after he had been in a coma for three weeks as not only the title of his collection but also as the jumping-off point for a rejuvenated look at the world around him. As he has done in his previous collections, Murray has dedicated Conscious and Verbal to “the glory of God.” In the mid-1990’s, Murray suffered from diabetes and a deep depression that he called the “Black Dog.” In
1996, he collapsed; he had to be hospitalized and was treated for a serious liver infection. There were concerns that he might not live, and he was administered the last rites of the Catholic Church. Murray had converted to Catholicism while attending college at the University of Sydney in the late 1950's. Murray had to undergo two liver operations and was in a coma for three weeks. Miraculously, he recovered from the life-threatening ordeal and was deemed “conscious and verbal” by the press. He also was relieved to find that not only had he survived medically, but that the depression that had gripped him previous to entering the hospital was now gone. Murray surmised that the surgeons must have cut the depression out along with part of his liver. After taking time to recuperate from his brush with death, he felt rejuvenated and ready to carry on with his calling as a poet. Murray’s religious beliefs have long been at the centre of his poetry. Murray has stated that his poems are “bathed” in his faith. In addition to his religious concerns, he always has seen himself as someone who identifies with the common man. Murray recoils at anything that smacks of snobbery or elitism. He learned at an early age to distrust those who valued being gentrified. As an overweight child who was constantly harassed, Murray was made well aware of how intolerant people could be. He also came down on the side of nature in the face of an ever-expanding urban avalanche. For him, there is more beauty to be found in the outback than in steel edifices. The poet is a strong supporter of the Aboriginal culture of Australia, which he calls the “senior culture.” Out of his medical and psychological ordeal, Murray constructed sixty-four gritty and confident poems for Conscious and Verbal. In one of the early works of the collection, the eight-stanza poem “The Instrument,” Murray asks the question “Who reads poetry?” He is sure that it is “Not our intellectuals” because “they want to control it.” Poetry is also not read by “lovers, not the combative, not examinees.” These groups only “skim” poetry for “bouquets and magic trump cards.” The people who read poetry are those who love poetry, love the form. Murray states that “Lovers of poetry may total a million people/ on the whole planet. Fewer than the players of skat.” In the sixth stanza, the poet asks “Why write poetry?” Some of the answers that Murray gives are “For the weird unemployment,” “For working always beyond/ your own intelligence,” and “For a non-devouring fame.” As evidenced by this poem, Murray has not lost his ability to successfully employ structured verse or his ability to interject humorous observations. As he has made clear so many times before in his most poignant verse, he speaks as an Australian who loves the land and loves those who call it home. For Murray, the Australian bush has a
very strong spiritual power. He is at his best as a poet when he describes the natural environment around him. In “At the Falls,” Murray opens with High mountain plateau edged/ with vertical basalt cliffs/ like black hung chain, like sprokets/ conveying a continual footage/ of water. With this vivid image established, the poet introduces a married couple in the second stanza. A “young wife twists her ankle” and her husband panics as “A cloud like steam rises out of the gorge.” What happens at the falls between this husband and wife cannot be discounted, cannot be buried. In addition to making use of the Australian wilderness as a backdrop for his very human stories, Murray is adept at employing a sly wit in order to poke fun not only at his natural targets, such as pompous politicians and intellectuals, but also himself. In the poem “More than an Obiter Dichter,” Murray gives thanks to fellow poet Peter Porter for being a good friend. The first stanza opens with Peter, you’re in the dictionary! It doesn’t say what you mean/ but you’re noted for urbane wit in/ the Macquarie, second edition. The second stanza finds a “friend’s daughter” locating Murray’s name included with “the year I died/ already past.” He has fun with the concept of outliving a reference work entry. Murray proclaims “With that behind me,/ hey, I’m invincible, I cried.” For the touching “A Dog’s Elegy,” the poet points to the relationship between dog and human, and between dog and other animals on the farm. The cattle “suspect the Dog lives,” but “three kangaroos” were able to stand in “our pasture/ this daybreak, for the first time in memory.” Although Murray has not been shy to express his strong opinions in the past, he seems to have decided for this volume to throw caution to the wind. With a second chance at life, at continuing to chisel images into recognizable art, he gives full vent to all that is dear to him without hesitation. He questions the need for the northern industrialized countries to throw their weight around by shoving their views and their exports onto the rest of the world. Murray would rather find a way to nurture the earth, to bask in all of its beauty. In “The Great Hall of Chlorine,” Murray speaks to the issue of “Race.” At the “Aquatic Centre” a “non-white family comes in, and glances vaguely,/ aware some may still notice.” The poet makes the searing point that “Many/ of the white people, so called, are darker, from the sun,/ but this is Race. This carries accusation.” On a lighter note, Murray introduces some rather odd characters for his poem “The Harleys.” The leader of a “black squall of Harleys” is a “Sveinn Forkbeard.” The other mates of the “squall” include “Moe Snow-Whitebeard and/ Possum Brushbeard and their ladies.” They are described as “Santas from Hell,” and “forty years on from Marlon.” The “Marlon” of the
poem is Marlon Brando, who early in his acting career played a leader of a motorcycle gang in the film The Wild One (1954). Some readers may become frustrated by Murray’s use of Australian dialect, but those who are attentive will come away the richer for their efforts. It probably would not hurt, though, for even the most diligent reader to keep an Australian slang dictionary close at hand just in case. In “The Day I Slept Like a Dolphin,” the poet bemoans on how much long plane flights can take out him. He opens the poem with “The day I slept like a dolphin/ I’d flown the Atlantic twice over/ and come down in snow rimmed Denver.” Upon arrival, he was obliged to fill out what seemed like an avalanche of forms. After enduring the gruelling paperwork, he finds himself “Under an Atlantic of fatigue/ one half of my brain had been sleeping/ as the other kept watch and rose to breathe.” Murray hopes that in the future he can “peep,/ and get/ a second, waking view of my dreams.” Since he lives on an island continent a half a world away from where he has to go in order to reach an ever-expanding reading public, the poet cannot be faulted for wanting to change the rules of any sojourn away from the home that holds his heart. Since his terrifying brush with death, Murray has produced some of his most vibrant and transcendent poetry, including the poems of Subhuman Redneck Poems and the verse novel Fredy Neptune (1998). He also has produced the splendid nonfiction volume The Quality of Sprawl: Thoughts About Australia (1999). While Murray can be favourably compared to such great American poets as Walt Whitman and Robert Frost, he is first and foremost an Australian poet. With the publication of the current poetry collection, Murray has shown himself to be both very conscious and very verbal.

Sources for Further Study

