Fredy Neptune

Born in 1938 in New South Wales, Australia, Les Murray has become one of the leading poets writing in the English language. The winner of numerous awards, he has published such noteworthy poetry collections as THE VERNACULAR REPUBLIC (1976, 1982, 1988), TRANSLATIONS FROM THE NATURAL WORLD (1994), and SUBHUMAN REDNECK POEMS (1997). For FREDY NEPTUNE, Murray has chosen to write in the little used form of the verse novel. Never one to shy away from poetic challenges, Murray has taken on the daunting task of constructing a verse novel and come up with a bold and unique creation. Written in eight-line free verse stanzas, FREDY NEPTUNE consists of five books, including “The Middle Sea,” “Barking at the Thunder,” “Prop Sabres,” “The Police Revolution,” and “Lazarus Unstruck.” The main character, Friedrich Boettcher, is an Australian sailor of German descent. Known as “Fredy,” he is forced to serve aboard a German battleship at the start of World War I. Exposed to the horrors of Armenian women being burned to death in Turkey, he is so emotionally and psychologically torn apart by this that he loses his sense of touch. While treated for leprosy, Fredy builds up his physical strength, but his sense of touch does not return. For the next three decades, he bounces around from one location to another. Fredy travels to such places as Egypt, Hollywood, Kentucky, Paris, and New Guinea. Told in the first person, Murray delivers emotional impact through colloquial speech. At one point in time, Fredy works as “Fredy Neptune” in a circus. Like a mythical “Everyman,” Fredy grapples with the world and its failings. By the end of FREDY NEPTUNE, he is able to find comfort living with his wife and their children. Murray has written a harrowing saga that will stay with the reader long after he or she has put it down.

Fredy Neptune Fredy Neptune is a strange and powerful novel, divided into five segments and related in eight-line stanzas of unrhymed verse. Fredy Neptune does not contain an easy-to-follow story with a classic plot, like the popular romantic novel in sonnets of the
1980’s, Vikram Seth’s The Golden Gate (1986; reissued 1991). Rather, the poetry of this narrative adds another layer of complexity to a gnarled and knotted symbolic story with political and theological dimensions. For the reader willing to engage with the main character in his strange odyssey and in his struggle to make sense of a cataclysmic world, the novel offers rich rewards. Les Murray, an Australian poet, is the author of numerous other works including The Rabbiter’s Bounty: Collected Poems (1991), Translations from the Natural World (1992), and Subhuman Redneck Poems (1997). Murray’s poems, which often use formalist verse to explore social and theological issues, have won international acclaim, and he won the T. S. Eliot Prize in 1996. His poems frequently examine the line between the comprehensible and the inexplicable, finding ways to define his theology and explore its possibilities. Murray presents a sophisticated understanding of religion to a world which appears to be determinedly post-Christian. His work has a maverick metaphysics that speaks to those who do not share it and compels anyone who reads Murray’s poems and stories to at least consider it. Murray’s work is “postmodern” only in that it challenges divisions between genres and the conventions of the novel, merging poetry and fiction in a verse narrative and violating all expectations readers have of unity of time and place. The expansive, inclusive feel of this novel is both original and postmodern. Time and space seem to open and contract easily, and the reader soon accommodates the shifting landscapes, rapid sequence of events, and endless flow of characters. In other respects, Fredy Neptune is a straightforward tale of suffering and redemption in a world that seems dominated by hatred and violence. The narrator of this story is Fredy Boettcher, an Australian-German sailor who is forced to work on a German battleship at the beginning of World War I. The novel begins with pictures of Fredy’s distant and rustic childhood, from which he is abruptly yanked. That was sausage day on our farm outside Dungog. There’s my father Reinhard Boettcher, my mother Agnes. There is brother Frank who died of the brain-burn, meningitis. Working on a freighter at the beginning of the war, he is more or less forced into service on a warship. Once away from the relative peace of his home in Australia, where the only disasters were natural ones, he is exposed to horrors beyond comprehension. One of the first scenes he witnesses is the burning of women in Turkey as they beg for mercy. This sight, described very briefly in a single eight-line stanza, so shocks Fredy that he loses his sense of touch. He cannot feel anything, and this strange aberration is the cause of the rest of his adventures. At first he is thought to have leprosy and is treated accordingly. However,
it seems that his illness is not leprosy but a kind of shell-shock whereby, because of the incredible destruction of life he has witnessed and has been able to do nothing to stop, he has become numb. He can feel nothing physically, and his main emotion seems to be guilt, which spurs him to attempt to rescue others and prevent mayhem whenever he possibly can. Because he cannot feel pain, he often injures himself in his attempts to help others. Moreover, these attempts bring him to the attention of various authorities, and so he is always on the run. Because he is German-Australian, everyone is immediately suspicious of him, and people exploit his vulnerability as well as his great strength.
her. Because he is still on the run from authorities, this complicates his life even further, for he now must make money to send back to Laura and his son Joseph as well as support himself and stay out of jail. The tale follows his adventures as he attempts to do this, showing in vivid detail the lessons he learns about the human capacity for both good and evil. He saves more people, including the young Hans, who, because of mental disability, has been marked by the Nazis for castration. Hans then becomes his responsibility, too, and remains with him for the rest of his trip. Historically, the time period runs from bad to worse, from the massacres of World War I to the Holocaust. With disaster piled on disaster without interruption, the effect is similar to that of Voltaire’s Candide (1759), which also relies on a telescoping of events that actually happened into a phantasmagoria of disaster, and which also ends with a formula for living in the world as it is. The lesson Fredy learns, ultimately, is that there are three possible outcomes for a person of his sensitivity and generous nature. He can allow the ultimate horror of the world to kill him, as it does Sam; he can live a numb, half-life of anxiety, flight, and frantic service, as he does through much of the novel; or he can forgive the world for being as it is, and live in it. The third option is actually a great deal more complicated than simple forgiveness and involves a theological perspective that must be arrived at by reading the book; the verse novel earns its hard-won but uplifting conclusion. At the story’s end, Fredy has achieved his epiphany and can live a normal life again with his wife Laura and their children—Joe, who fought in World War II, and Louise—and also with Hans, now reclaimed a second time from institutions bent on destroying him and made a permanent part of Fredy’s family. The action is that of a novel so fast-paced that it defies plot summary. Everything happens; the main character’s experiences encompass four decades of history and most of the continents. The poetry, however, slows the reading enough to make the story followable and provides odd lessons, strange bits of wisdom along the way. The verse is in an open form, a very flexible blank verse that allows for many extra syllables per line. The tale begins with shorter lines that quickly fill out as the events both pick up speed and are told in more detail. The narrative loops are interspersed with brisk dialogue and philosophical reflection. Fredy Neptune is indeed of a new form, different from previous verse novels in its multiplicity. The verse novel is many-tongued: Its dominant voice, of course, is Fredy’s plebeian worker’s accents, but it contains believable shifts into other tones, even containing snatches of other languages that may be translated by Fredy or may communicate by their context. Fredy’s
return to the normal world is accompanied by a kind of wonder as well as relief. He has won the insight that will allow him to live in a world where such things as the Holocaust happen, even when his good friend Sam could not survive because he felt too keenly. Now I was sore and heavy and bogged in chairs. I lifted nothing but my long frame, with my wrists; I walked hard stomps, I extended all the way in itch and muscle-twist and cloth-rub from the head I’d lived in to the feet that had been my far limits, and from the first I knew no counter-prayer, no horror, nothing would bring my null-body back. It was gone forever. The limelight goes off me with it. We went on living: Joe got married next year, which filled his dimples with grins. Later on we travelled—I paid to sleep!—and people died of old age. But there’s too much in life: you can’t describe it. The pleasure of this book, and its originality, is that it does make an attempt to describe the multiplicity of life. The story dips into such a great variety of issues and events that it becomes a phantasmagoria. It would be easy to become lost in this welter of history, but Fredy Neptune keeps its hold on the reader through the thread of its plot and the central consciousness of its intriguing main character. The reader experiences the feelings to which Fredy is numb. At the story’s end, when Fredy’s sense of touch is restored, there is a general sense of healing.

Sources for Further Study


New Statesman 127 (July 31, 1998): 46


The Times Literary Supplement, October 2, 1998, p. 28