

## CHAPTER 4

# ‘If You’re Different Are You the Same?’

## The Nazi Genocide of Disabled People and Les Murray’s *Fredy Neptune*

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Before returning to academia I worked as an Education and Training Manager, organising events, reviewing disability action plans and conducting disability awareness training. The sessions I facilitated were for staff at any level of an arts organisation who wanted to increase the involvement of disabled people in the arts as artists, audience members and arts workers. Three years into my job I was at a point where I could still deliver an authentic performance, and participants’ evaluations of my style and content remained consistently high, but I was becoming disheartened about the possibility for my training to achieve nuances in others’ conceptions of disabled people that would last beyond our four hours together. Then, at the end of a session that seemed no different from any other, one of the participants came up to me after everyone else had left the room and said: ‘I just want you to know that you have changed my life. For ten years I thought I was suffering from chronic pain, and now I know I’m not suffering, I’m living with it’, and she began to cry. For the three years that I had been training people in the use of language, and all the years prior that I had been talking about it, it was not until that moment that I understood that words do not just affect us, they *are* us.

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In turn, her telling me her story also changed my life: it renewed my faith in my work, and was one of the factors that led me to return to academia to research the influence of impairment and disability on Australian disabled writers and, consequently, to Les Murray. I was attracted to Murray's work not only because of his evident love of and care for words, but also because, like me, he was a disabled person who was continually and profoundly influenced by the Nazi genocide of disabled people.

Until recently, on the infrequent occasions when the genocide of disabled people by the Nazis is acknowledged in public discourse, it has been framed as a sidenote to the Holocaust. This suggests that little was done, for a short time, to few people. In fact, from July 1933 to the end of World War Two, 400,000 disabled people were forcibly sterilised as a result of Nazi policy.<sup>238</sup> Furthermore, as soon as Adolf Hitler had war to co-opt as a justification, the Nazis' euthanasia policies were rapidly implemented and regularly expanded. Since Nazi records of the murders of disabled people were often haphazardly kept and meticulously destroyed, the most conclusive thing that can be said about any estimate of the number of victims is that it is likely to be too low. In Suzanne Evans' thorough survey of the six Nazi euthanasia programmes targeting disabled people, she estimates the total number of disabled people murdered to be 750,000.<sup>239</sup>

I was born in Australia thirty years after the Nazi genocide ended, and therefore do not claim to know the terror experienced by my people in Germany, and around the world, at that time. However, I remain continually conscious that, as someone who was born totally blind, if I had been born in Germany or a Nazi-occupied country thirty years earlier I would at the very least have been sterilised, and my older autistic brother would have been murdered.

Les Murray was born in 1938 and thus was not distanced from the Nazi genocide by time, only by the much more precarious factor of country of birth. Though he did not explicitly identify as autistic until he was in his fifties, had he been born in Germany or a Nazi-occupied country, he too may have been murdered.<sup>240</sup> Someone close to Murray who probably would have been a victim of Nazi genocide if he had been born in Germany or a Nazi-occupied country before the end of World War Two, is Murray's fourth child, who was diagnosed as autistic when he was three.<sup>241</sup>

This consciousness drives a two-part commitment: one of those is to resist the sidelining of the Nazi genocide of disabled people, its victims and its

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<sup>238</sup> Carol Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 78.

<sup>239</sup> Suzanne E. Evans, *Forgotten Crimes: The Holocaust and People with Disabilities* (Chicago: Ivan R Dee, 2004), 18.

<sup>240</sup> Peter F Alexander, *Les Murray: A Life in Progress* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), 25.

<sup>241</sup> Alexander, *Les Murray*, 215.

consequences. The other is to draw attention to the fact that the Nazi genocide of disabled people did not begin on 14 July 1933. As with all genocides, its roots are in language, and language around disability remains resolutely dehumanising even today. This, contrary to the popular belief that genocide is an event rather than an ongoing threat, raises questions about where the line between the genocide and non-genocide of disabled people is, and which side of the line our society is on. For example, when you say 'never again' do you have disabled people in mind?

Both of these commitments featured throughout Murray's 60-year writing career. He explicitly centred the victims and consequences of the Nazi genocide of disabled people in his poem 'Dog Fox Field,' which he chose as the title poem for his book published in 1990.

### 'Dog Fox Field'

The test for feeble-mindedness was, they had to make up a sentence using  
the words dog, fox and field.  
Judgement at Nuremberg

These were no leaders, but they were first  
into the dark on Dog Fox Field:

Anna who rocked her head, and Paul  
who grew big and yet giggled small,

Irma who looked Chinese, and Hans  
who knew his world as a fox knows a field.

Hunted with needles, exposed, unfed,  
this time in their thousands they bore sad cuts

for having gaped, and shuffled, and failed  
to field the lore of prey and hound

they then had to thump and cry in the vans  
that ran while stopped in Dog Fox Field.

Our sentries, whose holocaust does not end,  
they show us when we cross into Dog Fox Field.<sup>242</sup>

Although Murray is known for creating unusual and complex metaphors in his poetry, on this important topic he chooses to speak plainly: He lays bare the

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<sup>242</sup> Les Murray, *Collected Poems* (Carlton: Black Inc, 2018), 325.

arbitrary and simplistic ways in which the Nazis determined who was ‘feeble-minded’. He highlights the fact that disabled children were the first victims of the Nazi genocide, that eugenics, for all its theory, contains no complexity or humanity, and the variety of ways in which the children who failed the dog fox field test were murdered. Significantly, he emphasises that the Nazi genocide of disabled people was and is not an isolated incident—it is ‘this time’, implying that there were previous and successive times, and that crossing into dog fox field remains a matter of ‘when’ not if.

Murray explicitly centred his thesis on the roots of genocide in his second verse novel *Fredy Neptune*, which he wrote between 1993 and 1997. The book is the first person narrative of Fredy Boettcher, beginning in 1914 when he is 19-years-old, and covering the next 35 years of his life. Fredy is an autistic Australian man with German parents, who acquires a physical impairment when he is 20 as a result of witnessing mass murder during the Armenian Genocide. The novel also features a significant minor character called Hans, an intellectually impaired young man whom Fredy kidnaps in 1933 from Germany and brings back to Australia, so that Hans will not be forcibly sterilised by the Nazis. This paper identifies and explores the arguments advocated in *Fredy Neptune* with respect to the genocide of disabled people.

### Impairment and disability

It is important to note that throughout this paper, the terms impairment and disability represent a social model of disability position, and not a traditional medical model of disability position.

While eugenics by name may have declined as a result of the Nazi genocide, eugenics by practice continues in the ways disabled people are segregated from and by society. One of the legacies of eugenics is the labelling of differences in human biology as ‘defects’ rather than ‘variations’, fostering the idea that a single measurement can sum up all that a whole human is or will be. According to eugenic thinking, disabled people never measure up, therefore their primary goal should be to do all they can to become ‘normal’. Of course, this deliberately sets disabled people up to fail, because eugenics is predicated on the idea that a certain percentage of people are not ‘normal’.

In 1975, the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) outlined ‘The Fundamental Principles of Disability’.<sup>243</sup> Instead of continuing the eugenic tradition of labelling medical conditions as disability, the Union labelled them as impairment. Disability, it stated, is what happens to people with impairments when they are prevented from participating in society as

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<sup>243</sup> Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, *Fundamental Principles of Disability* (1975) [www.disability.co.uk/fundamental-principles-disability](http://www.disability.co.uk/fundamental-principles-disability).

equal citizens. This is now known as the 'social model of disability'.<sup>244</sup> Similar to other social movements of the time, UPIAS members recognised that it was not their biology preventing them from participating in society; rather, it was the attitudes of people who judged themselves to have better biology than someone with an impairment.

### Silence and silencing

Before exploring the claims that Murray makes in *Fredy Neptune*, I want to consider the significant work this novel does in interrupting the silence and silencing on the Nazi genocide of disabled people. This silence began with how disabled victims of the Nazis were treated after World War Two. The victims of the forced sterilisation law, which was not declared unconstitutional until 2007, endured decades of negative treatment and lack of recognition. As Carol Poore describes:

Having been told repeatedly that they were inferior and having been warned by Nazi authorities not to talk about sterilization, many of these victims remained silent for the rest of their lives. Forty years after the end of the war, for example, a West German organization of blind people issued a statement that read, 'Most of the blind who were sterilized at that time and who are still alive today met their fate in their youth. They were usually not at home but in an institution for the blind, where no one supported them and where they often had to endure the scorn and contempt of others. That affected them so deeply that they are still ashamed to talk about their sterilization today.'<sup>245</sup>

It was argued that since disabled people were not persecuted on racial grounds, they were ineligible for the compensation offered to other victims of Nazi genocides in 1953 (the Federal Law for the Compensation of the Victims of National Socialist Persecution).<sup>246</sup> As Evans notes: 'One reparations court declared that disabled victims were 'people below the level of ciphers.' Another court refused to punish those who acted in the euthanasia programme because euthanasia had its supporters before the Nazi era, therefore the act was not punishable as a specifically Nazi crime.'<sup>247</sup> In 2011, the German Government finally recognised

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<sup>244</sup> Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* (London: Macmillan Education, 1990), 115.

<sup>245</sup> Poore, *Disability in*, 115.

<sup>246</sup> Susanne C. Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (New York: Fordham University, 2015), 14.

<sup>247</sup> Evans, *Forgotten Crimes*, 159.

disabled people equally with other victims of the Nazis, but this has not yet led to compensation.

Similarly, disabled people are marginalised in public remembrance of Nazi genocides. A memorial to the victims of the T4 programme was not opened until 2014 and was the last of the four Berlin memorials of the victims of Nazi genocides to be constructed. Access for disabled visitors to other memorials is not uniformly available, and has not even been a priority at the sites specifically commemorating disabled victims. At Grafeneck, for example, Susanne C. Knittel points out that:

[i]t is surprising and puzzling to note that there are currently no special measures being taken to accommodate visitors with disabilities, beyond whatever structural features the site already has due to its function as a care facility. On average, 10 percent of all groups that visit Grafeneck include people with disabilities, and of the 400 groups, 20 to 30 consist entirely of people with disabilities or learning difficulties. The documentation center is wheelchair accessible and there are plans to create supplementary texts in simple language to accommodate visitors with mental disabilities and learning difficulties, but so far only a leaflet in simple language has been produced.<sup>248</sup>

Moreover, since Grafeneck is both a Holocaust memorial and a residential care centre for disabled people, the residents are limited in their own access to the memorial while playing a central role in nondisabled peoples' public remembering.<sup>249</sup>

Continuing this silence and silencing are researchers, journalists, critics, novelists and publishers who have rarely sought out the experiences of either the disabled victims of the Nazi genocide or, in the case of victims who were murdered, their families, friends or colleagues. Similarly, it is rare that accounts or discussions of the Holocaust mention disabled victims. There are, of course, exceptions but too often these mention the Nazi genocide of disabled people only to diminish its significance or excuse the perpetrators of their crimes. Giorgio Agamben, for example, says that there was a 'humanitarian' basis for the euthanasia programme.<sup>250</sup> As Knittel observes: 'it would be outrageous for anyone to make a similar claim regarding the "Humanitarian" motivations for the "final solution"'.<sup>251</sup>

Given the persistence of the silence and silencing on the Nazi genocide of disabled people, the existence of *Fredy Neptune* is significant in three equally

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<sup>248</sup> Knittel, *Historical Uncanny*, 56.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>250</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 140.

<sup>251</sup> Knittel, *Historical Uncanny*, 133.

important ways. The first is that it locates the genocide of disabled people in the context of Nazi genocide more broadly, as well as the Armenian and Greek cases. Second, it highlights their relationships, while not subordinating nor devaluing the experiences of any of the victim groups. In addition, the main character, Fredy, and a significant minor character, Hans, are both disabled. So far as I have been able to find, prominent disabled characters have not been featured before in novels set during the Nazi era. Finally, the author is also a disabled person. This is rare but not unheard of in German literature on Nazi genocides but, as far as I can tell, had not occurred in English literature on Nazi genocides before *Fredy Neptune*. There are also four ways in which the text comments on the Nazi genocide of disabled people, which I now explore.

### Dehumanising language

Critics often link, or, as Murray labels it, 'hogtie' *Fredy Neptune* to the epic tradition. However, classifying the novel in this way foregrounds Fredy's travels and diminishes the importance of his embodied experience. As Murray says about the novel: 'There is quite simply no other story that could be called *The Man Who Lost His Sense of Touch. Or The Man Who Gave Up His Body Out of Shame*'.<sup>252</sup>

Fredy's lack of sensation begins early in the novel when he witnesses, as part of the Armenian Genocide, a group of men pouring kerosene over a group of women and setting them on fire, burning them to death. His inability to mentally assimilate that one group of humans could be so cruel to another group of humans, coupled with his inability to prevent or halt this particular mass murder, cause in him trauma that manifests as physical numbness. To one degree or another, many critics have suggested that Murray employs Fredy's physical impairment throughout this novel purely for metaphorical purposes. Charles Lock, for example, in '*Fredy Neptune: Metonymy and the Incarnate Preposition*', emphatically states that the numbness 'is a poetic device, not a medical condition'. However, in '*How Fred and I wrote Fredy Neptune*', Murray explains that Fredy's numbness is an impairment based in part on discussions with psychiatrists, but mostly on his personal experience: 'For most of the dissociative dimension, I could draw on things I knew from within myself. And because dissociation goes back in me to times before my conscious memory, I could put it into Fred's mouth in stumbling baby talk free from all analysis, the semi-articulate speech of innermost things'.<sup>253</sup> In other words, the character of Fredy both draws on and represents embodied experience.

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<sup>252</sup> Les Murray, 'How Fred and I Wrote *Fredy Neptune*', in *The Best Australian Essays 1999*, ed. Peter Craven (Melbourne: Bookman Press, 1999), 365.

<sup>253</sup> Murray, 'How Fred', 369.

Furthermore, foundational to this text is objection to equating humans with anything other than humanness, since this practice is one of the places where mass murders, such as those witnessed by Fredy, originate. As Murray explains:

I know a poet who is careful to flag his every image with 'like' or 'resembles' or some such. The surf doesn't fold its long green notes and cash them in foam-change on the beach, with him; rather, the waves of the surf are like long green folded notes cashed in foam on the beach. By the same strict token, no prime minister was ever a drover's dog. My colleague doesn't go beyond simile into the farther ranges of metaphor because to telescope statements overmuch is to lie. He is scrupulous not to let metaphor collapse into identity. This is very Protestant of him, though he is not Christian. It is also very responsible, because metaphor is dangerous stuff, the more so, perhaps, as it becomes worn and baggy with overuse and we forget it is metaphor.<sup>254</sup>

In summary, metaphorising humans and using human embodied experience as metaphor can both be dehumanising; a group that is frequently dehumanised in these ways is disabled people. The metaphorisation of the embodied experience of disabled people might be extremely common but its commonness does not make the practice ethical, and there is plenty of evidence, including the treatment of disabled people by the Nazis featured in 'Book IV' of *Fredy Neptune*, to demonstrate that the real world consequences of this practice for disabled people are devastating and ongoing.

One does not have to read far into *Fredy Neptune* to encounter careless metaphorisation of embodied experience. In the third verse Fredy says: 'That's how we came to be cooking alive that August, [1914] in Messina, plummy undertakers' city'. Here he is simply referring to the ship's crew's experience of the weather, but very soon, in Trabzon, as part of the Armenian Genocide, he witnesses people literally being burned to death:

Their big loose dresses were sopping. Kerosene, you could smell it.  
The men were prancing, feeling them, poking at them to dance –  
then pouf! they were alight, the women, dark wicks to great orange flames,  
whooping and shrieking.<sup>255</sup>

Witnessing this atrocity and being unable to intervene causes in Fredy a condition that he first experiences as burning: 'I just curled up in my hammock, like a burnt thing myself, and turned my back. The POs couldn't scream me to work.'<sup>256</sup>

<sup>254</sup> Les Murray, *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (Potts Point: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997), 74.

<sup>255</sup> Les Murray, *Fredy Neptune* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1998), 15.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

Fredy's description of himself as 'like a burnt thing myself', although he does not realise it yet, connects his condition to the mass murder he has recently witnessed. Both echo his earlier careless 'cooking alive' metaphor, and together are the first of many instances that demonstrate the significant ways in which metaphor and embodied experience affect each other. There are a number of times throughout the novel when Fredy travels through or lives in high-temperature climates similar to Messina but, after witnessing the mass murder in Trabzon, this is the last time he uses the metaphor 'cooking alive' or anything similar.

Throughout the novel Fredy continues to encounter situations where the metaphorisation of a group of humans indicates that that group will soon be targeted for genocide. For example, four years later, when Fredy is travelling with a Turkish Colonel and they arrive in the town that the Turkish call Izmir and the Greeks call Smyrna, the Colonel refers to the Greeks as 'the dogs': 'The dogs, he said, call this Smyrna. They say it is part of Greece'. Fredy, pointing out the Colonel's dehumanisation of the Greeks asks 'what do the humans say?'<sup>257</sup> But the Colonel does not answer. Later that day Fredy meets Takis, a Greek man who assists Fredy to find work on a ship home to Australia. In return, Fredy gives Takis his suits, and later learns that Takis was wearing one of them when he was shot and killed two years later during attacks against the Greek community.

The Nazi genocides, too, are foreshadowed by the Nazis' deliberate use of dehumanising words to describe future victims. In early 1933, when Fredy is in Kassel, Germany, he sees SA (*Sturmabteilung*) officers chasing a man into a side alley and then hears a gunshot. The SA officers notice Fredy watching them and encourage him to 'Go and look! See how we treat trash.'<sup>258</sup> When he does, he realises they murdered the man for the specific purpose of indicating to the public how some of the disabled victims of Nazi genocide would be labelled:

There was a cardboard placard  
hung round his neck, as he sat there dead in his blood:  
Congenital Criminal, it read. They must have been carrying it  
from where they'd meant to shoot him. They'd had no time  
to letter it there in the alley.<sup>259</sup>

Demonstrating that the line between target of genocide and free citizen is often blurred for disabled people, Hans, the intellectually impaired young man whom Fredy rescues from being forcibly sterilised by the Nazis, is routinely described using dehumanising labels. These include: 'cretin', 'dough-cock', 'zany', 'mad baby man', 'idiot', 'mental defective' and 'imbecile'. The people choosing to use

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<sup>257</sup> Murray, *Fredy Neptune*, 54.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

these labels to refer to Hans are not Nazi officers but members of the public whom Hans encounters everywhere he goes.

The influence of metaphor is also demonstrated by the ways in which Fredy refers to his physical impairment. Initially he refers to it using a simile ('shedding like a gum tree'), but this becomes a metaphor three years later when he is mistaken for a spy, captured and tortured. Torture is traditionally a reliable method for dominating a person, but both Fredy and his torturers soon realise that Fredy has the upper hand. This is due to Fredy's numbness: 'They drew their truncheons, they started chopping a new me/ out of my trunk, not knowing it was dead timber.'<sup>260</sup> Ironically, this is a situation that frightens both of them: the torturers because it is unprecedented and gives them a story they want to tell, but that nobody else will believe; and Fredy because he knows the torturers would rather kill him than have to try to tell their story about him. However, Fredy soon becomes aware that the torturers have a second option of entertaining themselves by exhorting other prisoners to try to kill him. It is this fear that results in his first realisation about the advantages of his acquired impairment. He has already experienced one advantage—when he was able to save someone from burning to death, but not sense that his own skin was burning—but it has not yet occurred to him that this is an advantage.

Fredy's lack of sensation means he can not only endure but escape the torturers and their guards:

I walked straight out of there  
 past a sergeant blinded by his cap-peak who screamed HEY!  
 I sat him flat on his bum, so fierce did I scream back!  
 I was the wilder ape, and tottered like one out the door  
 because this horse I rode inside of had started  
 to float, and yaw.<sup>261</sup>

His metaphorical descriptions of his body change from being a tree, something with life, but not much agency in comparison with humans, to a Trojan horse, something that appears to others to have no life, but in fact has all the skills it needs to win the war. From then on, however, Fredy mostly refers to his physical impairment as 'the null', or 'the nothing'. It is not until he tells his best friend Sam about his impairment that this changes, due to Sam's response:

If you told that to one of your moderns  
 who think any name they can give to a phenomenon  
 is its social superior, he finally told me, they'd snub it  
 into line with a term like Shock or Reaction

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<sup>260</sup> Murray, *Fredy Neptune*, 28.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

or Flight from Reality. To contain it and make it barren.  
I think myself it's a story of law that you're carrying  
for all places. You're wrong to call it the Nothing.  
You should never accept any name for it, even from you.  
Names don't last. When it ends, you'll have to tell it.<sup>262</sup>

Fredy takes Sam's advice, which creates the conditions for Fredy to be able to pray with a whole heart, and hence to be cured: 'I brooded, and the Nothing no-named inside me/ started to thin away. I had patches of feeling'

### Eugenic thinking and acting

The evidence for Murray's thesis that dehumanising language leads to dehumanising action is also demonstrated throughout the novel. In the case of the Nazi genocide of disabled people, the belief system used to justify it was eugenics. One of Murray's claims in *Fredy Neptune* is that eugenic thinking is pervasive, and in the case of disabled people, acting on that thinking is both common and limited only by what a person believes they can get away with. Fredy, as a disabled man, already knows this but the circumstances of his impairments mean that he does not have to engage deeply with some of the more frightening consequences of eugenic thinking. However, once Hans is part of Fredy's life, they are regularly confronted with the full reality of eugenic thinking and Fredy can no longer avoid acknowledging it.

As soon as Fredy's numbness develops, he quickly becomes aware of the need to hide it from other people due to their reactions. At work in particular, he learns that as soon as his colleagues are aware of his condition, they become suspicious of him:

a hatch-coaming dropped on my boot  
was supposed to hurt. The blokes were looking at me.  
Good, these steel toecaps, I thought to say, feeling nothing,  
but hearing bones. I would have to learn quick, and practice  
cracking normal, as I call it.<sup>263</sup>

He also soon learns that his impairment means he is the only one with the ability to avert many dangerous situations. On a ship he saves a boy from burning to death when the boy's clothes catch fire; after a car accident he lifts the car off the two people who are trapped under it; he stops a falling pole from crushing a work mate; and he rescues a child playing in water from being electrocuted by fallen electricity wires. In all these cases, even as the people involved are

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<sup>262</sup> Murray, *Fredy Neptune*, 235.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

grateful, they nevertheless react negatively to their awareness of Fredy's impairment. Consequently, they either throw Fredy out of where he is living or fire him from his job. There are also dozens of lower stake situations where people discover Fredy's impairment, either because he forgets to pretend to be non-disabled or because he sacrifices appearing nondisabled to help them. In almost all cases he is rejected by them afterwards.

The constant rejection Fredy experiences is a consequence of eugenic thinking—the idea that there is one correct way for humans to be, and that humans who do not measure up must be limited in all possible ways. Since most of the people Fredy encounters are not authorities in the eugenics system, and they discover he is a disabled person through a display of his strength, they feel frightened by him. Thus, the best they can do in limiting him is to remove him from his job or his house. Unsurprisingly though, there is one group of people who are not afraid of Fredy—those who have authority in the eugenics system, medical staff. For example, when Fredy visits Hans in the institution to which he has been committed in Australia and witnesses a nurse forcing another patient to cry, Fredy threatens the nurse, but the nurse is unconcerned:

I was up and holding the window bars. That was a mongrel act,  
I said to the nurse fellow. He looked me up and down.  
Fuck you, squire, he said. I snapped the fastenings of the bars  
and dropped them out beside him. Now, care to say that again?  
But he was no coward. Come inside here and you'll be detained.  
As a patient, he said. We often see that strong-man stuff from them.  
We just sedate them; the padded cells soak up their flash.<sup>264</sup>

Unlike Fredy, Hans does not have superhuman strength. Hans also has an intellectual impairment, making him the epitome of everything eugenics stands against. Consequently, not only are people unafraid of him but they feel entitled, even justified, in victimising him. The frequency and degree to which other humans are willing to victimise Hans is something that Fredy tries to come to terms with from the moment they meet. For example, while Fredy and Hans are at the zoo, where Fredy has taken Hans while he considers how to prevent the forced sterilisation, Fredy thinks:

What will I do with him? I'm asking myself. Next week  
He'll get another letter with maybe a cop to ensure  
he keeps his appointment this time. I'd have to keep him,  
kidnap him, get him out of Germany  
to where? No country would want him, they'd send him back  
to Germany and the doctors. Who were only doing what others  
didn't do, but agreed with.<sup>265</sup>

<sup>264</sup> Murray, *Fredy Neptune*, 248.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

On the issue of compulsory sterilisation, Fredy's conclusion is incorrect. Other countries would certainly have sent Hans back to Germany, but other countries were also already sterilising their disabled citizens. Sterilisation policies and the resulting practices against disabled people had begun much earlier in the century and were becoming common around the world. Indiana, the first of the 29 US states to pass a law making the sterilisation of disabled people compulsory, did so in 1907. Over the next 20 years, many European countries followed suit. Adolf Hitler, in fact, based his 1933 law on a Swiss law passed in 1928.<sup>266</sup>

Fredy's incorrect conclusion is not an historical error, but a reflection of just how much Fredy is struggling with the knowledge that humans will willingly be cruel to other humans. It is the same type of reaction that Fredy experienced when he saw the Armenian women being burned alive, and it is Fredy's resistance to this knowledge that caused his physical impairment.

Fredy learns that his conclusion that no other country would sterilise Hans is incorrect eight years later, while still expressing his inability to accept just how far people who believe in eugenic thinking will go:

I told their official what I'd rescued Hans from, and showed him what a Yank paper had reported: the T4 Programme, Tiergartenstrasse 4, for killing off cretins and incurables. We'd heard of the sterilization, of course, but this! You'd been in Berlin, Mr Beecher. Recently? Since you abducted Hans there? No? Castrating a defective guilty of sexual misconduct can be ordered here in some States. Let your Hans beware the Tasmanian Chief Secretary!<sup>267</sup>

Most of the time however, in the company of Hans, Fredy's conclusions about the limits or lack thereof to eugenic thinking are quickly corrected. Putting the specific policy of sterilisation aside, the idea that people born with an impairment do not have the right to be in public space, or otherwise lead the kinds of lives that nondisabled people lead, is seen everywhere Hans goes. Hans is not just rejected, but harassed: at the castle where Fredy and Hans land while trying to escape by boat from Germany, one of the castle's servants torments Hans with a whip and then, later that day, a group of the servants convince Hans to masturbate in front of them; then, on the ship travelling to Australia, the cook tries to talk Hans into something similarly sexual and exploitative. In Australia, Hans cannot be anywhere in public without someone objecting to his presence, to the extent that Fredy and his wife Laura decide their family must move out to the bush for his safety. As soon as anyone feels they have the opportunity to push beyond harassment, they do. On the ship, the cook, who Fredy beats up for his behaviour towards Hans, then threatens to throw Hans overboard. Laura's mother takes advantage of Fredy serving in World War Two to have

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<sup>266</sup> Evans, *Forgotten Crimes*, 107.

<sup>267</sup> Murray, *Fredy Neptune*, 130.

Hans committed to an institution. Then, at the institution, Hans is repeatedly raped by the staff.

### Irreducible impairment

Another important point *Fredy Neptune* makes as a direct challenge to eugenic thinking is that impairment is dynamic and complex. A foundational principle of eugenic thinking is that all a person can or will be is a result of their heredity. This fallacy leads eugenicists to deduce two more principles: that a person who has an impairment has always had it; and that the capacities a person with an impairment has at the time when they are assessed by a medical professional is all they will ever have. Their consequent conclusion is that genocide of disabled people is justified.

In contrast to these ideas, Hans' and Fredy's experiences of impairment are complex and dynamic, and are primarily determined by their environment. Hans is declared by the Nazis to have a hereditary impairment. Although there is a possibility that this is true, there is no evidence of it for Hans, or indeed any disabled person targeted by the Nazis, because there was no way to prove heredity at that time. Also, there is no mention of Hans having any family members with the same condition, or even of Hans having had his impairment when he was born. While Hans does clearly and consistently have an intellectual impairment of some kind, this, true to reality, and in opposition to eugenic thinking, does not in any way limit his ability to learn, and thus increase his capacities. While Hans is living with his family who clearly have a limited conception of his capacities and future—including that Hans does not have the capacity to have a romantic relationship or have children—he is still able to travel independently and to ask strangers for assistance. Once Hans is living with Fredy and Laura, who have a much broader understanding of Hans' capacities and future, he acquires skills at an impressive rate. These include learning to swim, fish, speak English and shoot birds away from the vegetables the family are growing; as well as the tasks involved in a number of jobs including working on a ship, working on a truck, and fetching and carrying. By the end of the novel Hans is in a romantic relationship and there is nothing to suggest that he will not be successful at that relationship, or another relationship, or having children.

Fredy has a different experience of impairment, but one that is equally dynamic and complex. Many of the people who reject Fredy because of his acquired impairment do so with words such as 'unnatural' or 'freak', suggesting that they believe his impairment is something he was born with. However, Fredy's physical impairment developed when he was 20, and since he remembers his life without it and feels that he is missing out on opportunities because of it, he is constantly searching for a cure. Or thinks he is. In fact, soon after his numbness develops he also learns exactly what he needs to do to cure it, but he chooses not to until the very end of the novel. He knows that in giving up

the numbness, he will also be giving up strengths and abilities that will not be available to him as a nondisabled person:

I was coming home to my suspicion  
that the null had more strength in it, greatly more than I'd get  
just by not hurting. That it was the disguise of huge strength.<sup>268</sup>

Here the novel is making the point that not only do disabled people continue to develop capacities, but they also have capacities nondisabled people do not have. The other reason Fredy chooses not to cure his impairment until the end is that his impairment is the direct result of becoming aware of knowledge that he does not feel equipped to handle. Repeated exposure to that knowledge through how Hans is treated by other people, develops Fredy's capacity to cope. It also develops because Hans, as someone who constantly experiences this treatment while learning to live in a country that is completely unknown to him, represents for Fredy an example of incredible endurance.

### Futures of worth

Another important point *Fredy Neptune* makes is that disabled people can have futures that are valuable and add value, challenging those who justified the Nazi genocide of disabled people at the time or have justified it since, on the basis that their own future is more valuable. Of course, eugenicists do not express their beliefs this way. They do not say their future is the future with the most value. They say the future of a particular category of people has the most value, and it just so happens that they belong to that category of people. Not belonging to that category is then justification for sterilising or murdering a person. At least 750,000 lives were taken, and at least 400,000 lives were severely damaged due to these beliefs. Hans would certainly have been sterilised, and may well have been murdered also, if Fredy had not kidnapped him. Therefore, Hans' life is an example of a life that any of the disabled victims of the Nazi genocide could have had. While Hans' life is still negatively affected by eugenic thinking, he has a job, a romantic relationship, the possibility of having children, and a life he enjoys, just as the other members of his Australian family do.

### Consequential lines

Another important point that *Fredy Neptune* makes, in contexts that sometimes involve impairment and disability and sometimes do not, is that humans are always drawing lines between themselves and other humans. Given this, the

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<sup>268</sup> Murray, *Fredy Neptune*, 102.

novel continually asks the reader to consider who they would or would not put on the opposite side of the line to them, and what consequences that decision has for both the reader and the other person.

The divisions that humans create and the consequences of those divisions, is raised directly in the text in discussions that Fredy (who has German parents) has with Sam, who has an Aboriginal father and a Jewish mother. Both men grow up in Australia and travel around the world. Fredy begins this exchange:

How do you know so much, Sam? — We are studious people. —  
 We Jews, or we blackfellows?—Both.—First you're one, then the other. —  
 And I always will be. Surely you would know about division? —  
 No. The world's divided. Not me. I won't shoot my left hand, nor my right. —  
 True: both are white. Is a Jew white? Tell me, Fred. —<sup>269</sup>

This conversation continues when Fredy and Hans stay with Sam in France on their way to Australia. Beginning with Sam:

You getting Hansel away equipped for Gretel is a start.  
 Millions more need to go. Then he added I've also got some to leave  
 your parents' Fatherland. Mad, though. Most Jews won't listen.  
 Run, from that corporal? We're Germans too. It'll return to normal. —  
 Aren't they really Germans, though? I asked. Are blackfellers Australian?  
 Sam asked me. If you're different are you the same?<sup>270</sup>

Throughout the novel, as the characters continually draw lines between themselves and other people, the novel is asking the reader, 'Who would you put on the other side of the line to you?' Would that person be someone who saves another person from burning to death but does not notice that they themselves are burning, or someone who is half Jewish and half Aboriginal, or someone who is German or someone with an intellectual impairment? And once you have put them on the other side of the line to you, what is it that you would have happen to them? Would you take their job, take their house, make them move to another country, remove their testicles or murder them? Would you be willing to implement this yourself or would you have the government do it on your behalf? Would you do it on the government's behalf?

*Fredy Neptune* does not ask the reader to unthinkingly take a particular position but instead to consider that being on the other side of the line is continually difficult and often life threatening. As I have described, Fredy has either his job or his house taken from him every time a person discovers his physical impairment. This also happens to Fredy's parents in Australia during World War One because they are German. Further, being kidnapped by Fredy saves

<sup>269</sup> Murray, *Fredy Neptune*, 37.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

Hans from sterilisation and probably murder, but even in Australia he is held in an institution for five years for no reason other than his intellectual impairment. Sam, after living abroad for the whole novel and helping many Jewish people escape Germany, travels by ship from China back to Australia, but kills himself just before he arrives. The novel is deliberately unclear about the specific reason for the suicide beyond the general toll on a person of the divisions between humans. The last time Sam and Fredy meet, Sam says:

I feel like Noah, he said  
safe on the Ark while all his fellow humans were drowning.  
I've always felt that about my Dad's people. Now it's my mother's  
people too. Both my worlds.<sup>271</sup>

When Fredy is told that Sam has killed himself, he is also given a message from Sam:

'Tell Fred that Noah couldn't bear  
to look at the ground' or maybe 'to look at the drowned'.  
The sailor wasn't sure which, exactly.<sup>272</sup>

## Conclusion

Given that the Nazi genocide of disabled people is often excused, minimised or completely unacknowledged, Murray's contribution to Holocaust literature is both vital and momentous. It can of course never be a substitute for the writing of disabled victims of the Nazis. However, as a novel on this topic written by a disabled author and featuring two significant disabled characters, *Fredy Neptune* is writing generated from lived experience that cannot be replaced by theory or research.

*Fredy Neptune* is an account of how words influence embodied experience, particularly for disabled people, since medicalised descriptions of us create 'suffering', and metaphors effect our lives, and deaths. It demonstrates how dehumanising language can lead to eugenic thinking, the influence of eugenic thinking on Nazi ideology and genocide more generally, and how eugenic thinking is still active in the minds of so many. Arguing against eugenic thinking, the novel presents impairment as continually changing and influenced by many factors, and people with impairments as capable, enduring and above all, human.

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<sup>271</sup> Murray, *Fredy Neptune*, 235.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.