

Stephen Orr, *Time's Long Ruin* (Wakefield, 2010)

'What happens when children disappear?' is the question that frames Stephen Orr's latest novel, *Time's Long Ruin*, published by Wakefield Press. The cover depicts a pre-school age boy, wrapped in a towel, standing on a beach. He looks toward the blurred image of an abandoned bike only a few steps away, but seemingly beyond reach. The young boy is the cover's focal point; the blurring of the bike and what appears to be a building in the near distance, along with sepia tones, creates the combined effect of heat haze, time shift, and nostalgia.

As an Adelaidean reviewer, the first things I notice about this novel are that it is set in Adelaide, and that it is 'loosely' based on the continuing mystery of the Beaumont children's disappearance from Glenelg Beach in 1966. The allure of a local setting is both appealing and problematic. Reading a novel set in a familiar location tends, on the one hand, to involve a reader more deeply and offer another dimension based on recognition and resonance. On the other hand it jars when there is uncertainty about some aspect or detail of description, and can send the reader off on a search for factual confirmation, in the same way that references to a real life event can. For the most part, this novel does ring true in its descriptions of place and childhood activities such as selling homemade lemonade from the driveway. However, the altered details of the Beaumont children's disappearance continually jar.

Orr's novel is divided into two parts – *before* and *after* the disappearance of three children. The three children in *Time's Long Ruin* have similar first names to the Beaumont children. Jane becomes Janice, Arnna becomes Anna, and Grant becomes Gavin, but they are given the surname of Riley and, instead of living at Somerton Park, they live at Croydon. They catch a train to Semaphore Beach, rather than a bus to Glenelg; they disappear in 1960, instead of 1966, and Janice is outspoken and aggressive, rather than shy as Jane reportedly was. In Croydon, the focus is on a few streets near the railway crossing, and if you consult a street directory you will soon realise that several characters in the novel are named after neighbouring streets. For example, the central character is named after Henry Street, his mother after Ellen Street, his father is named Bob, after Robert Street, and neighbours Bill and Liz Riley are named after William Street and Elizabeth Street.

The first part of the novel establishes the background story and builds scene upon scene to develop relationships and depict the location. Apart from the echoes of the Beaumont children's names there is very little to connect the story with their unfortunate and tragic disappearance, although there are several references that foreshadow such an incident.

The second part of the novel focuses on the search for the missing children, the mysteries, the accusations, the grief; retracing their footsteps and uncovering witnesses. The sub-plot of Henry's molestation by the local chiropractor, Doctor Gunn, creates a parallel tension. Will Henry tell his father? Does Doctor Gunn have something to do with the Rileys' disappearance? The narrative is built around the investigations of Henry's detective father, Bob, and his partner, and the dynamics of edgy relationships made sometimes more explosive and sometimes more tender by grief.

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The point of view always seems a little odd in this novel. To begin with, there is the voice of the adult Henry, who has lived all his life in the same house, looking back at himself and his neighbourhood. There is a consciousness of ‘story’ –

My story – the story of the Pages and the Rileys, of Con and Rosa Pedavoli and Mr Hessian the widower, of Adolf Eichmann and the rag and bone man – begins on New Year’s day, 1960. This is the first fragment of the story I remember. (7)

The adult Henry morphs into the child Henry at some point but the adult narrator never seems very far away and the effect is an unusual un-childlike perspective permeating scenes and sometimes dialogue which ought to be narrated by Henry the child. There are also times when Henry seems to speak from knowledge he couldn’t or shouldn’t have, such as narrating the experience of another character in a scene in which he wasn’t present.

Point of view seems better handled in the second part of the novel when the characters seem to speak for themselves more and Henry holds back as though he gradually realises he is not omnipresent.

Time’s Long Ruin is very textured in its descriptive detail, its sense of place, and its quirky but everyday characters. It could do without the frequent time markers, such as ‘Now’, ‘By the mid 1950s’, ‘In 1956 and ‘57’, and ‘Back then’, which tend to delay the reader from becoming immersed in the story. Also, the fact of Henry and his mother each having a club foot, while *different*, if not unique, in Australian fiction, is distracting and not crucial to the story. Ellen’s frustrations and moods could just as easily be attributed to suburban entrapment and relationship issues, while Henry’s ‘outsider’ status could just as easily arise from his personality.

The pace is slow at first, but the slowness is necessary I think. It echoes the pace of place and time, and allows the author to create depth through descriptive detail and complex relationships. There is also no resolution, which can make for a tricky ending, but Orr brings the story neatly, if crankily, to a finish without losing the sense of forever waiting for the Rileys to be found.

Debra Zott