This is the author’s radio script of this article.
Ann Whitehead won the inaugural *Australian Women’s Weekly* short story competition, and *Australia Street* is her second novel.

It’s 1948, and Hannah Gordon, with two teenage daughters and a younger foster son, loses her job because the government has passed a law forbidding women to drive taxis. At the same time, her husband Tom leaves her and moves in with the widow of his old friend who has been killed in a freak accident. This move causes a certain amount of friction in the family, though Tom and Hannah haven’t got on for years. The daughters are going through the usual adolescent troubles. The young boy, Hal, is worried about being reclaimed by his vengeful birth-mother. There is an elderly grandmother, a herbalist and strict disciplinarian, and a kindly great-aunt, who live together, with Colin, a disturbed war veteran, who is also somehow related to everyone. All together, they are part of “the kin”, a large, amorphous mob under Grandma’s wing.

*Australia Street* is a melodrama, but rather a drab one. The narrative is diffuse and cluttered: while a few well-chosen facts can bring an historical novel to life, the accumulation of detail in *Australia Street* – cricket played in the street, wood chopped for the copper, chops and sausages with three veg for tea, and so on – has a suffocating effect. But worse than the narrative is the dialogue. The working-class characters, especially the men, are always coming out with sentences like, “Gorn. If yer gunner ignore me, ya can take yerself outside,” and their free indirect speech is peppered with clichés – taking a shine, gettin’ on like a house on fire, and the like.
Even more painful is the way the posh characters talk: “He offered to gift me with furniture he said his mother no longer needs, but I have no doubt he intended purchasing it.” I never understand why some writers think that educated people always use stilted formal language, when it is more commonly the resort of the half-educated official. And the sense of period flies out of the window when Hannah’s rich lover tells her, “There’s all sorts of loyalty issues. Family issues … Habit issues.” The worst thing about the dialogue is the need Whitehead seems to feel to offer a complete transcript, as if this were a court report rather than a novel.

The novel works itself up into a lather, with sudden death striking with improbable frequency, plenty of illicit sex, and frequent arguments and confrontations, rehashing the same old grievances. It’s Neighbours in period dress, with ice chests and bread delivered by horse and cart. There’s nothing wrong with the material, and it’s sometimes handled with perception and honesty. But there’s too much padding: this story could have been better told in 200 pages, rather than sprawling across 369.