Stephen Orr draws on the potent mixture of fascination and horror exerted by the phenomenon of lost children in his new novel. Jane, Arna and Grant Beaumont of Somerton Park become Janice, Anna and Gavin Riley of Croydon, who catch a train to Semaphore in 1960 rather than a bus to Glenelg in 1966. But the lineaments of the story are the same – the mysterious stranger, their complete disappearance, the community effort to find them, the clairvoyants and the hoaxes.

This is a difficult subject for fiction, because for much of the time the characters are waiting and hoping for something to happen, or busying themselves with searches and detective work which prove fruitless. But Orr has judged his narrative nicely. His narrator is Henry, the nine-year-old boy next door, a kid with a club foot whose dad is a detective. The first half of the book is occupied with setting the scene: an Adelaide summer, listless school holidays spent avoiding the bickering of discontented parents, playing cricket in the street, going camping at Goolwa with the Rileys. The tone is laconic: the book’s even quite funny at times: frustrated by the behaviour of some of the adults in his life, Henry wonders whether he shouldn’t aim to become prime minister, ‘to make some laws, to sort people out: no promises you can’t keep, no moods, no taking things out on other people, no grog. Make sense.’ But after the disappearance of his only friends, he finds it hard to start again: ‘I was a junior version of doesn’t-suffer-fools-glady … so I was left with my books, and my too-adult view of the world.’ Henry ends up staying in the house next door all his life, making a stand ‘against time, against progress’, living with mysteries he’ll never solve.