

Wakefield Press

The Hands

Stephen Orr is the author of five previous novels. He contributes essays and features to several publications. A fascination with the dynamics of families and small communities pervades his fiction and non-fiction. Stephen Orr lives in Adelaide.

Praise for Stephen Orr's *One Boy Missing*

'In *One Boy Missing*, [Orr] realises the slow rhythms of country Australia, its language and landscape ... skilfully ... It is great holiday reading, whether at home or abroad.' – *Australian Bookseller & Publisher*

'Orr creates an evocative landscape, the characterisations are truly wonderful, and because of that, the resolution of the crime at the heart of the novel is less important than seeing how these three can find some kind of peace with who they are and what life has done to them.' – *Hoopla*

'[Stephen Orr] is adept at partnering highly charged associations with emotionally arid landscapes.' – *Advertiser*

'The novel is not so much a typical crime novel but a more contemplative exploration of the relationship between fathers and sons.' – *Sun Herald*

'Two of Orr's novels are complex variations on the themes of loss, isolation, the difficulties of putting a self back together. His prose is measured and eloquent, his imaginative reach considerable, and his next novel worth the wait.' – *Sydney Morning Herald*

'Stephen Orr's detective is sunnier than Kurt Wallander, but his talkative characters and bitter realism stands comparison with Henning Mankell. He's a sincere storyteller with a flinty eye for the landscape and the sadness that drives good stories forward.' – *Weekend Press*

'Stephen Orr spends time drawing out his characters' foibles and the novel is all the better for his attentions.' – *Sunday Examiner*

Praise for Stephen Orr's *Dissonance*

'Orr's portrait of the controlling mother is the main attraction. He keeps the character in magnetic equipoise, attracting as much as she repels.' – *Age*

‘Stephen Orr writes a story with great tension and momentum. The emotional and psychological layers of *Dissonance* prompt us to ponder the deep nature of familial relationships and their hold over one’s life.’ – *Good Reading*

‘Orr brings us a cast of characters that are wholly believable. The first hundred pages alone would make a fine novella. As it stands, the entire novel is an accomplished work.’ – *InDaily*

‘This is an intelligent, beautifully-wrought novel. Its finely nuanced characters intrigue and move because of the complexity of their motivations and identities.’ – *Australian Book Review*

‘Orr is a no-nonsense, vivid storyteller. He punches out exchanges between his characters in a pragmatic way that transmits jealousy and heartbreak without sentiment.’ – *Australian*

Praise for Stephen Orr’s *Time’s Long Ruin*

‘*Time’s Long Ruin* is Orr’s eloquent, unusual, bold but responsible retelling of a veritable urban nightmare that still haunts the Australian imagination.’ – *Sydney Morning Herald*

‘The writing is accomplished, the imagery beautifully evocative ... despite the distressing subject matter at its core, this is a deeply affectionate novel.’ – *Age*

‘It is Orr’s cleaving of the ordinary to the unspeakable that gives the novel its potency and brings it within the margins of the Australian Gothic.’ – *Big Issue*

‘Every now and again, you open a book that is so richly evocative, so poignant and haunting that the characters leach into your subconscious and you are caught in an intricately spun web of emotion, scent and feeling.’ – *Sunday Tasmanian*

‘*Time’s Long Ruin* is a fine novel, thoughtful and unsentimental, convincing without being predictable.’ – *Australian Book Review*

By the same author

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Hill of Grace

Time's Long Ruin

Dissonance

One Boy Missing

The Hands

An Australian pastoral

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Part One

2004

I

Trevor Wilkie knelt in front of the fence. He pressed and released the top wire and it vibrated before settling. A sea of haze faded in the offing, and if he dropped his head the wire settled on the horizon. He looked up at a boy in the distance and called, 'You okay?'

His son waved back. 'What is it?'

'Nothing.' He stood, gathered a roll of wire and a strainer and headed back to his ute.

The fence line was straight, diminishing towards a distant corner where it spread out to form yards. Posts, perfectly spaced every twenty metres, single box, four wires and the spacers he trusted his son, Harry, to insert. As a fence, it was a marvel, but he guessed it didn't help him make money. It didn't put protein in the grass; it didn't find water, and if it did, it didn't pump it up; it didn't make it rain; it didn't make the price of beef any higher.

'All done?' he asked his son.

'Yep,' the eleven-year-old replied, wiping his hands on his trousers.

'We better get you home. What time's your lesson?'

'Mr Anderson said it didn't matter.'

He looked at him suspiciously. 'Yeah?'

'It's just history. Egypt. I don't care about Egypt.'

'So he said: You, young Harry Wilkie, don't bother about tomorrow's lesson?'

They stood and looked out across their farm. A light breeze moved through the grass. Trevor could sing its song through his cracked lips, feel it in his ears, his nostrils, on his face. He pushed

his dog-chewed hat onto his head. Looked at his son, his expression full of an understanding that this was a place to be tamed, made to yield, more than his own intuition that it was nothing more than a sensation, the feel of sand in his boot.

He pointed to the canola meal on the ground. 'They're gonna trample that,' he said. 'You should've put it in a straight line.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'At two hundred dollars a tonne, it matters.' He noticed two of his big steers trampling meal into the soil-sand that made up most of Bundeena. 'Did you sweep out the ute?'

'Yep.'

'Well ... we better get you back to King Tut, eh?'

'Dad.'

'Yer mother will be waiting.' He noticed his son's pants were too big, worn on the knees, ragged around the cuffs. He looked at his boots. 'When was the last time you polished them?'

They returned to the ute. Bundeena was marginal country. It could carry cattle, sparsely. To Trevor, this was where Australia became desert, where man – following the east-west railway, before it seriously set its sights on the Nullarbor – had given up on agriculture. Most men, at least. Except for them: sixth-generation Beef Shorthorn producers who'd wrestled with the land for 130 years. This was country that hadn't asked for farmers but had got them anyway. On the southern edge, the railway line, and to the north, nothing. They had neighbours to the east and west, but they might as well have been living in New Zealand.

They drove along the fence line. 'Did you notice that animal's eye?' he asked.

'What?'

'Pardon. That cow, eating the canola?'

Harry stopped to think. 'She looked okay.'

'Yeah?' He slowed through a gate. 'Cancer eye.'

Harry's teeth were bone-white and there was a space between the top incisors, just big enough for a toothpick. 'I didn't look.'

'There are too many old girls out there.'

'What'll happen to her?'

'What happens when you get cancer?'

'You die?'

'Not always.'

They drove, silently.

'But she will.'

Harry wiped dust from his lips and cheeks.

'Too many old girls,' Trevor repeated. 'I can't afford to waste any more feed.'

He screwed the knob onto the stick and changed gears. Slowed around a clump of acacia. 'What I don't get,' he said, taking off his hat, letting his hair fall down over his forehead, 'is why they'd teach a kid, living on a station, six hundred kilometres from the nearest town, about Egypt.' He looked at Harry, and he shrugged.

'What about something relevant?'

'Like what?'

'You know, explorers. Sturt, Stuart ... even Burke and Wills. But Nefer-bloody-titi.'

'We've learnt about them too.'

'Yeah?'

'And how they only survived because of the black fellas.'

He looked surprised. 'What about the white fellas?'

'Most of them didn't know what they were doing. They got sand blindness. They followed their compasses, not the creeks, the birds, the songlines.'

'The songlines?'

'The way the black fellas went.'

Trevor was tired of songlines, and explorers. They weren't real – anymore, at least. An afternoon of welding in the sun: that

was real. Numbers, too. Solid and reliable. Maths didn't lie. No one was teaching his son anywhere near enough of that. Liabilities, post spacings, humidity, days since last rain, protein percentage in feed – all real, knowable, helpful. Not like Ramesses II, rooting his sister.

Real: the fact that he'd worked out he was carrying 1800 less cattle since the drought had started; that their mortgage was taking on water, and sinking; the price of diesel; groceries; labour. As the voice on the radio droned about Howard Carter.

As they drove the broken clock rattled in its too-big receptacle. His eyes settled on a pocket of ground peeling away from the earth in the mid-distance. He felt himself falling, until he wasn't in his ute. This place – the fences, the cattle, their hunger, their thirst – seemed to have nothing to do with him. All he had to do was keep his foot on the accelerator. That would lead to arrival, eating, sleeping, vaccinating, ranting about government and stock agents driving Jaguars. But beyond all this, he felt smaller than a spider. 'You need a haircut.'

Harry ran his hand through his dusty blond hair. 'The snippers again?'

'I'll do it. Don't let your mother.'

'I'd rather just have it shaved.'

'I don't think so.'

Trevor turned onto the road that led to the house. He drove up a gentle incline, lined on both sides with native pines. On long, hot evenings the shade provided an escape from the house, sitting proudly on the hilltop, soaking up the last of the day's sun. He'd come down with Harry, and when he was home from boarding school, Aiden. They would spread out on a rug to read, or talk.

Then Carelyn would come down from the house, asking him to unblock the toilet or speak to his dad, Murray, who lived with

but apart from them in his east-facing sleep-out. He'd complain, but go back in and tell his father to stop playing his Bing Crosby so loud it shook the walls.

He stopped in front of the house. Their old dog, Yanga, lifted her head, but didn't think it worth getting up.

'You better clean up for lunch,' he said, and Harry went inside. He could hear Carelyn calling him, something about lessons and helping Chris with his sudoku. Sitting in his ute, he tried to lift himself out of his seat. Took a deep breath, held it, and let go.

It didn't help. He had to convince himself to go in, to face the dozen details that would have accumulated since his departure. There would be technical tasks – things involving wires and gap-filler and two-inch nails – but there would also be matters of words, something Fay (Murray's older sister, who shared a room with her disabled son, Chris) had said to Murray; or a look she'd given Carelyn; or the way Carelyn had crossed her arms as she watched Chris walk, naked, to the back line to fetch his singlet.

He looked across to the machinery shed: a trailer with portable yards; the boys' trail bikes; the brick walls, burnt black, from when he'd left a pile of greasy rags on the bench. A hot day, and night, waking up to Yanga barking and an orange flicker through the bedroom window. 'Fuck.'

As Carelyn stirred, and managed, 'What?'

As he pulled on his shorts and ran from the room, followed down the hallway by his two young sons. 'Aiden, get the hose.'

'Where?'

'Christ, I dunno.'

Now, Carelyn stood at the back door of their old bluestone villa. 'You comin' in?' she said. 'Lunch is on the table.'

He stepped out of his ute. 'Just puttin' me gear away.' Took his roll of wire and strainer and walked across the compound in front of the house. Went into another, smaller, shed. It was built from

leftover stone from the house, its roof supported by old wooden beams. It was his favourite spot, dark when he closed the door, musty, away from the business of the house and its various dramas. It had its own bench, three inches deep with wood shavings and tools and almond husks left behind by his great- and great-great-grandfather. He pulled a string and yellow light splashed across the bench. Hanging his wire from a hook, he added his strainer to the mess of tools and looked at a photo of the boys (Harry still in his nappy) above the bench.

‘Trevor,’ he heard his wife call. ‘Come on.’ Some job, some piece of bad news he was missing. He looked out of a small, ill-fitting window above the bench. Could see the yards in the distance and the crush, waiting for his welder.

A rack held tools which reflected light back into the shed. Polished chisels waited for pine blocks sitting in a basket on the bench. He heard the shuffle of feet and his dad, standing in the doorway. ‘You comin’ in?’

‘Yeah, just cleaning up,’ he replied, noticing what looked like dried jam on his father’s whiskers. ‘There was a whole fence down,’ he continued, referring to the north paddock, stretching from the house to distant, desert reaches. ‘It’s a miracle none of them wandered off.’

‘All fixed?’

‘Yes.’ He smelt his father’s breath, heavy with coffee and the cheap tobacco he kept in his pocket.

Murray came further into the shed, grasping the bench, trying to straighten his back. ‘Aiden rang.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Says he wants to come home on the weekend.’

He took a moment. ‘Why?’

‘That’s what I said. Why? Stick to the exeats.’

He wiped his hands on a rag that only made them dirtier.

‘Probably in trouble again. Does he want me to call back?’

‘Didn’t say.’

Murray Wilkie – the seventy-four-year-old patriarch of Bundeena, the old fella who could calm a bull just by looking him in the eyes, by singing to him (... *drifting down to dreamland, underneath the mellow moon* ...) approached his son’s carving bench and picked up the beginnings of a hand. ‘Who’s this?’

‘Harry.’

He held the length of pine, turned it over, smelt it, and felt each of the four still-unformed fingers and a thumb. ‘You pick the hardest bloody thing.’

‘Why?’

‘Well ... y’ got bones and nails and wrinkles.’ He studied his own hand. ‘And no one can agree on which finger’s the longest, or how they bend.’ He looked at his son. ‘You should stick to fruit.’

‘Trev ... Murray,’ Carelyn called again. ‘Come on.’

Trevor pulled the string and the shed darkened. They went out and he closed the door. ‘I can’t get him this weekend,’ he said.

‘Of course not. He can just stop there and do some study. It won’t kill him.’

They walked across the compound. Trevor avoided looking at the salt damp and stone crumbling around the foundations of his house. Avoided thinking about how long he could put off repairs. Imagined Bundeena’s walls collapsing, the roof falling in, Harry crushed, Carelyn dead, a dust-caked Murray crawling from the ruins. Then, as if telling him to stop, Yanga started sniffing and licking his pants. He scratched her head.

‘You getting deaf?’ Carelyn asked, standing at the door.

‘Among other things,’ he replied, as he went into the laundry, kicking off his shoes and washing his hands in the concrete trough. ‘Aiden rang?’

‘Don’t worry, I told him ... we haven’t got the time or money.’

‘What was the problem?’

‘Nothing. Just thought he’d try it on.’

‘Probably got someone pregnant.’

Carelyn used her foot to push his boots into the mountain of RMs, sandals and thongs under the trough. She stood looking at him, her arms crossed. ‘All fixed?’

‘Yep ... tight as a ...’

Harry, sitting inside listening, already knew his dad’s catalogue of sayings. Life in simple snatches. And probably the way it really was, he often guessed.

Carelyn smiled. ‘Good.’

Trevor grabbed her hair and gave it a tug. She had it in her stay-wet, slicked-back, I’ve-got-work-to-do mode. The style highlighted her forehead, cut by a single wrinkle; a nose that was always red, and peeling, despite the fact she never went out in the sun. And her eyes, black-rimmed and tired; always tired. Full of expectations. For renovations. Forty days and nights of rain.

He looked at Chris’s yellow bed-sheets, soaking in antiseptic. ‘I told him to hang them out,’ he said.

‘They’re stained.’

‘Disgusting,’ he muttered, but Carelyn just waited.

They went into the main living-dining area of the house – a room with twelve-foot ceilings and mortar walls, cracked in a dozen places from top to bottom. He’d managed to repair and paint one wall before losing interest in renovations. Before he’d really thought about whether he, and his family, would be here much longer. Murray, of course, was always on at him to keep up the work – the wiring he risked his life repairing, new floorboards – but enthusiasm, harder to muster every day, was the real problem.

Fay George, Murray’s older sister, was already sitting at the table pouring tea. Still wearing her nightie and dressing gown. He wanted to say something, but didn’t. Never did. Murray would

just start in on him: *Unless it needs to be said, don't say it ...* or, *Who made you the model of perfection?*

'Morning, Fay,' he said.

'Trevor ...' She looked up, and spilt the tea. 'You were off early this morning.'

'Thought I'd beat the heat.' Although it was more about beating the early morning dramas of Bundeena. 'Morning, Chris,' he continued, looking at the forty-six-year-old man-boy, buried in a rug on the couch eating spaghetti.

'Good morning, Trevor,' Chris replied, spelling out each word. 'Have you been mustering?'

'No. It's too early for that. You should know that, Chris.'

'I do.'

'So when do we have calves?'

Chris stopped to think, still watching a threadbare tape of *The Battle of Britain*. 'Spring.'

'Yes. You gonna help with the muster this year?'

But Chris was caught up in a dog fight, his mouth open, spaghetti hanging from his fork.

'Careful, Chris,' Fay called, as she placed the tea cups in front of the plates.

They all sat down to cold ham, lettuce and pickled onions; Murray's bread thrown across the table.

'How are you feeling today, Fay?' Trevor asked, and she looked up, managing to pull her shoulders back.

'So so ...'

'You seem better.' He realised this was probably not what she wanted to hear. 'Maybe I can help you with some gardening this arvo,' he continued, but her shoulders and head had dropped. 'Didn't you want some weeds sprayed?'

After a while she said, 'Yes, they need doing.'

He noticed his son's seat was empty. 'Harry!'

He waited.

‘Harry!’ He looked at Carelyn.

‘I don’t know,’ she replied, slicing the last of the boiled eggs.

‘Harry!’

‘He’s probably in his room with his headphones on,’ Murray said, stuffing his mouth with bread.

He stood, walked from the room, down the semi-papered hallway and looked into his son’s room.

Empty.

Then he went out through the sliding doors to the front of the house with its view from the hill, down the slope of old bloodwoods. ‘Harry!’ he called, but there was no response.

He stood on the wide porch which, although at the front of the house, was really the back, away from the chaos of the compound. Broken tiles. A bull-nosed verandah that leaked, although they knew where to sit to stay dry. There were several old chairs – wicker, tube-steel, a fluffy stool from Carelyn’s ABBA days – and an old tranny, although there was no signal for it to pick up.

This is where they’d come on hot evenings to escape the house, to watch distant freight trains or the Indian Pacific, scurrying between oceans. They’d watch them come into view and, an hour later, disappear. They’d follow their every painful inch, as if it was the first time they’d ever seen a train.

‘Harry!’

Nothing.

He’d warned him so many times: *stay within calling distance of the house*. He could remember a night when Harry was three or four, when it was pelting down (the first time in years), the fork-lightning picking up the glint of the railway tracks, strobing the cattle-eye desert. And there he was, standing in this same spot, calling out, ‘Harry, where are yer?’

Searching the sheds, the roads, the tracks, down among the

bloodwoods, out onto the flats, their rain-soaked outdoor lounge room; Chris cowering under a rug; Fay, still in her nightie, poking about in long grass with a broom.

Until Harry emerged from Murray's sleep-out, from under the canvas stretcher the old man slept on, saying (words like), 'I knew you wouldn't find me.' Smiling, laughing, wondering why his dad was covered in curry-coloured mud.

'Dad.' Harry was at the door.

'Christ,' Trevor said, turning. 'Where were you?'

'I left my iPod in the ute.' He was gone, back to the table, the thick slabs of cold ham and beef and pickled onions.

Trevor followed him in. 'Didn't you hear me calling?'

'Sorry.'

'It's probably those headphones, makin' you deaf.'

'Dad, it's not.'

They both sat down.

Fay's chin was nearly on her chest. '*Give us this day our daily bread.*'

They all looked at her, then at each other.

'What, you wanna say grace?' Murray asked his sister.

Fay took a deep breath and looked up. 'No, of course not.'

'You wanna say the Lord's Prayer?'

'No, I don't.'

'You were sayin' it.'

She shook her head. 'No, go on, get on with yer lunch. You want more tea? Anyone want more tea?'

They ate silently: nothing but the roar of Spitfires and Messerschmitts.

Half an hour later, Harry stood in the machinery shed wearing gloves, gumboots and overalls. Trevor looked him over and said, 'Fifty mils.' The hazel-eyed boy carefully measured fifty

millilitres of herbicide into a cylinder and tipped it into a spray-pack. Then used a bigger cylinder to fill this with water. Took a stick, stirred the mixture and screwed the lid on tight. Primed the tank and started spraying around the sheds – coating every weed, every blade of grass with herbicide. He'd stop, prime the pump, and start again, following fence lines, in and around Fay's garden.

At one point, Carelyn stuck her head out of the door and called, 'Watch the washing.'

Trevor, following behind, just mumbled, 'There's not a breath of wind.'

Chris appeared from the house wearing his spaghetti singlet and boxer shorts and started singing *The Battle of Britain* theme. He conducted with his right hand as his head flew about in incomplete orbits. Finding the exact centre of the compound, he came to attention, saluted and started marching around the perimeter. Each step was in time with the music. He stopped, turned and was off again. Stopped, turned, marched.

Harry smiled at his father. Trevor just raised his eyebrows. 'Go on, get on with it.'

'Shouldn't we tell Aunty Fay?'

'No.'

He continued along the fence line, saying, 'Dad, what's gonna happen to Uncle Chris?'

'He'll get tired ...'

'No ... later? Will we have to look after him?'

'We already do.'

'No ... by ourselves?'

Trevor saw he'd missed a spot, but he didn't say anything. It wasn't like you could get it all. Or, for that matter, stop it re-growing. No matter how careful you were the weeds would win. 'Maybe there will be somewhere he can go,' he said.

‘Where?’ Harry asked, pumping with the palm of his hand.

‘A home.’

‘A nursing home?’

‘No, some sort of ... well, perhaps a nursing home.’

Harry wasn’t happy. ‘But they’re for old people.’

‘Not always. Just people who need ... nursing. Hence the name, numbat.’ He knocked on his son’s head. ‘*Nursing* home.’

Chris stopped and waited.

‘What’s wrong?’ Trevor called.

And then thrust his arm out. ‘*Sieg Heil!*’

They had to stop themselves from laughing.

Chris was hot; he took off his singlet and stood at ease. Then, having received some sort of order, was off again, this time launching into a vocalise of the *Colonel Bogey March*.

Harry continued. The herbicide was running out; it was frothing, drifting in the chemical breeze. ‘If he needs a home, we should start looking,’ he said.

‘Why?’

‘Aunty Fay ...’ He didn’t really know how to say it.

Trevor took a moment and said, ‘I suppose you’re right.’

‘Are you gonna look?’

‘Soon.’

This didn’t seem the least bit sensible to Harry. ‘Don’t they have waiting lists?’ he asked, finishing the poison.

As they marched back to the shed, Chris stopped and waited silently. Then he said, ‘Fall out.’ He walked towards the house, wiping his red flesh with his singlet, drying his armpits and the skin that formed a pouch between his belly and pubic triangle.

‘We could always look after him,’ Harry said.

‘We could.’

‘Will we?’

‘That’s up to Pop, and Mum.’

They arrived back in the shed and Harry unscrewed the top of the spray-pack. Trevor handed him the measuring cylinder. 'This time we'll do twice as much.'

Harry was opening the poison. 'I could do more, to help him.'

'We'll see. A lot could happen. He might need more help than we can give him.' He looked up and saw the yellow sheets hanging on the line.

Harry was just about to measure the herbicide when he heard the back door open. 'Harry, time for your lesson,' Carelyn called.

'Mum!' he complained, loudly.

'Now.'