

Thomas Shapcott, *Gatherers and Hunters: Stories* (Wakefield Press, 2010)

Thomas Shapcott's long last story has the innocent title 'Sunshine Beach'. There's nothing innocent about it. All of his stories, in fact, have innocuous titles, but inside them are great currents of emotion and difficult truths. But the novella made me realise just how fine his storytelling is, and how much wisdom is contained within.

Charlie Branson is the main character, and I kept reading his name as Charles Bronson, the tough guy actor with the sculptured rock face, as if he keeps trying to 'tough' out the change in his life. Charlie is a widower, his wife Miriam having died suddenly while overseas at a conference. Shapcott shows him clearing every physical object out of his life after her death: the house is sold, the furniture disposed of, even the photograph albums thrown away. He clears out a lot of his own clothing and bins paperwork, until there is nothing left.

Ghosts. No, out with them all. Everywhere he looked, even with so much of the household furniture already sent off to children, in line with Miriam's will, and with all those 'might come in handy' bits and pieces (from long pieces of timber to what seemed like every piece of electric gadgetry ever invented) at last bequeathed to the Salvos, in each room of the house Charlie still found himself looking into a mirror, not a tunnel, of remembering. And what made it worse, each memory associated with each stick of furniture or property was as if each moment of the past were still now. Everything lived still in a perpetual present tense. He had not realised that furniture had this power. (124)

And then he goes back to the holiday town of his early adolescence, Caloundra, where he had experienced 'glorious times' (125). He buys a unit, furnishes it with any old pieces he can pick up, and reminisces about Beatrice. She was his brother's friend, a special girl he got to know when he was fifteen, who now seems to glow with the light of nostalgia, lost youth, longing. He has thrown away the memories that pain him, and grasped with both hands the ones he thinks will comfort.

But after the frantic activity following Miriam's death, something happens to Charlie. It is such a beautifully described moment, one that the reader knew was coming, but this does not lessen its impact. What happens is that he now has time for grieving, that thing he was trying to put off by wildly throwing away all that contained memory.

Grief overtook him. Sitting before the television with its reports of distant calamities, his own almost impossibly distant bereavement caught up with him. There was nothing in the place to comfort him. The used furniture reeked of other lives and other holidays and alternative relationships, now surely ended as well. (141)

Mixed in with his reminiscence of teenage holidays are his memories of Miriam, but then he spots a young woman in Caloundra who looks remarkably like Beatrice from fifty years ago. He starts to obsess about her, and wonder if she's a granddaughter. The story continues down this pathway, and the reader knows that all will not be well.

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I can see a thread through the narrative that dwells on stereotyping and assumptions. There's an old garrulous man called Bernie who harangues people with racist rants; youth expects age to behave a certain way; the grieving are meant to get on with it. And to a certain extent, Shapcott's collection as a whole has this as one of its themes.

'Pristina', for example, is written as a one-sided argument between a resident of the town by that name and another person, and begins with 'Because my grandfather said the water here was still in a pristine state, that's why' (51), plunging the reader straight in. The town has changed, largely it seems because of its migrant population, and the narrator refuses to accept the other's racist remarks about the Albanians ('they're neighbours, not enemies' [64]). Instead, he reminds his companion, and the reader, that ideas of white 'ownership' of land mean nothing against the realisation that Aboriginal people have lived here for thousands of years. Other stories feature Eastern Europeans playing tricks on visitors ('Ljubljana') and seemingly staid financial workers surprising the reader ('Bank Closure' and 'Furry Animals'). And who would know that the refugee on his bicycle was 'Dr Emre Halasz LL.D Translator and Linguist' (1)? His fellow workers at the vulcanising works mock him for drinking wine at the pub.

'The Red Hat' shows Mark and his developing sexual self colliding up against his Aunt Olga, whom he loves 'more than anyone else in his family' (13). She and his uncle tease him and play strange tricks. She is a painter and the title refers to a painting she executes and gives to him, 'Woman in a red hat'. It seems to him to be a dual painting, and it adds to the mystery and confusion of growing up.

The only jarring note I felt in this collection was some of the dialogue, particularly in the long story at the end. The speech of the teenagers in 'Sunshine Beach' seems oddly old-fashioned and stilted, for example.

But overall these stories are deeply thoughtful, interesting, varied. They are a fine addition to the body of work of Thomas Shapcott, which consists of several novels, books of poetry and other collections of short stories, as well as sought after books on the artist Charles Blackman.

Sue Bond