Spirit Wrestlers is Thomas Shapcott’s tenth novel. The setting is a Lutheran farming community in south-east Queensland, not far from Brisbane. The novel begins in 1964, and the conservative Schumacher family – proud of their self-sufficient pioneer traditions and shunning television’s ‘corrupting influence’ – witnesses the arrival in the district of a small community of Doukhobors, a Russian Christian sect, seeking a new Eden, having been in Canada for 60 years.

Ivan Verigin and his sister Olga have to attend school, of course, despite the extreme isolationism of their community’s beliefs. Here Ivan meets Johann Schumacher, only child and heir to the Schumacher farm, and a friendship, spiced with rivalry, begins between the two 15-year-olds. Ivan’s stories intrigue Johann. He explains that his family belongs to the Sons of Freedom, a small group within the Doukhobors. They insist on the old ways – vegetarianism, communal farming; no leather, metal or personal wealth. Johann is all ears as Ivan goes on, ‘They would burn the schools then march into the towns and around the school and throw their clothing onto the fires to show that the way of Adam, the simple way, was the way to salvation and that public schools were turning Doukhobor children into the children of Satan. They would then march, nude, to show their contempt for sinning and evil thoughts.’

This combination of contempt for the world and belief in purification by fire is dangerously concentrated in one member of the community, known as Andreas the Psalmist, who happens to be the father of Ivan and Olga. Andreas’ desire for purity is pathological and has severe consequences for his family and community.

The book is in two parts. The second takes place 14 years after the first, the three main characters having scattered after a climax of madness, violence and conflagration at the end of the first part. They reunite at the Doukhobor farm. Each has suffered and has some unfinished business to resolve. But some sort of redemption is possible for each of them. The staid Johann and Olga are clearly ready to settle down, but Ivan seems to have
inherited some of his father’s craziness, and it’s hard to believe that his future will be peaceful. The completeness of the resolution is a little surprising after the violence and confrontation they endure.

*Spirit Wrestlers* – the title is taken, it is implied, from the English translation of the Russian word Doukhobor – has the strengths and weaknesses which seem to run through most of Shapcott’s fiction. He brings his customary poetic intensity to many scenes. To match the old-fashioned, biblical atmosphere of both these communities, the language is simple, but sometimes strangely stilted. The characters are complete enough in themselves. It is their relations with each other that are often less than convincing. Their conversations are as unlike natural speech as the rest of the prose. The point of view, shifting between various characters, is slightly disjointed. Although the novel is written in the third person, events are usually seen through the eyes of one of the main characters. But at the beginning of part two there is a puzzling attempt at mystification. A cyclist travels towards the farm: ‘His helmet, his goggles, his black leather gear: it is impossible to tell what sort of person this is.’ However, the reader has no trouble realising that it’s Ivan. This attempt to heighten the drama, straight from Dickens, falls a bit flat. So, though there is undoubtedly considerable power in many of the images, especially fire as both a purifying and destructive force, somehow the whole book fails to gel as a work of art.