This is the author's radio script of this article.
Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, recorded 5 June 2010.

There are ten stories in Thomas Shapcott’s new collection, Gatherers and Hunters. Shapcott seems to have set himself the task of seeing the world (usually the Australian world) in a state of change, and from a variety of perspectives. The characters range from young to old, urban sophisticates to country-town dwellers. There’s even one female protagonist, though they are mostly men. Points of view vary – first and third person, even second person in a couple of stories.

The first story, ‘Refuge’, is probably the strongest of the collection, and not just because of its powerfully resonant themes of migration and hardship. In just few pages Shapcott takes us into the life of a young Hungarian migrant in the late 1940s: ‘Emre always rises at five. His palliasse has to be slid beneath the couch so that Frau Losberg might use the tiny room through the day for her piecework sewing. Emre is sincerely grateful for this space.’ As we come to know this valiant young man – determined to rescue his wife and baby daughter from the intolerable migrant hostel while resisting the advances of his landlady, forced to work in a factory despite his advanced qualifications and highly-developed linguistic skills, casually bullied by his rough-and-tumble workmates – we seem to be immersed in an unforgiving present. However, the story ends on an optimistic note as Emre begins to sense that he and his family finally have a future: ‘In six months time we will look back and see how far we have come.’

There are a couple of growing-up stories, the more interesting of which is ‘The Red Hat’, which concerns the changing relationship between a boy and his unconventional aunt. In ‘Turkish Coffee’, a woman catching up with a colleague from Eastern Europe, is reminded of her son, the result of a brief affair in Istanbul, by an Italian at another table in their restaurant. The story doesn’t quite hang together: in its short span there are too many elements fighting for the reader’s attention. ‘Pristina’ is better: this is the one cast in the second person, as a third-generation farmer recounts the history of the town to an unspecified younger relative. It gradually becomes apparent that the young man is up in arms about the ‘takeover’ of the town by gangs of Albanian
Muslims, while the older narrator is more temperate in his attitude. ‘The Singer’, though quite short, contains three points of view, as a young man interviews a divorced couple about a famous blind singer who was instrumental in breaking up their marriage, and only at the end reveals the reason for his interest. ‘Ljubljana’ is a quirky horror story about an Australian tourist in Slovenia while it was still behind the Iron Curtain.

‘Bank Closure’ takes us back to rural Australia, where a country bank manager finds an unusual use for his bank’s archives when he’s forced to retire. In ‘Furry Animals’ an auditor is apparently overreacting to fundraisers at Flinders Street Station dressed in koala outfits, until he remembers a telling incident in his childhood.

‘Sunshine Beach’ is the last story, really a novella, at 85 pages. A recently widowed man moves from Melbourne to Caloundra on the Sunshine Coast, reliving his unconventional marriage and, more hazardously, a youthful holiday flirtation with a young woman who seems to be uncannily reincarnated in a local teenage girl. It balances the first story, ‘Refuge’, in a way: the first story is about someone who has nothing but a future, while in ‘Sunshine Beach’ Charlie has everything he needs except a future: the first story is about a beginning, the last about an ending.

Occasionally there is slightly too much crammed into a story – an unexplained name, or a fact of puzzling significance – which lessens its impact. However, the best of the stories are deft and economical: the humour is often wry and the characters are believable, and they are all engaging and readable.