

# LIFE AS A LITERARY DEVICE: A Writer's Manual of Survival

by Vitali Vitaliev

## SAMPLE CHAPTER:

### Autumn in London

A bright-yellow autumn leaf was stuck to the windscreen of my neighbour's old Volvo. It was like a parking ticket, issued by the meticulous and transparent traffic warden of late autumn, whose long droopy trousers make a soft rustling noise as he saunters around London in the middle of the night.

I read somewhere that the exact mechanism of the riot of colours displayed by nature every autumn is still unknown to the scientists. Just like the exact mechanism of human smile.

A London autumn is a wry smile in itself, a farewell grin of nature soon to be replaced with the cold impassiveness of winter. It is the time of early darkness, when lonely pedestrians hurriedly make their way home. The pale evasive moon is mooching about in the whisky-coloured sky, like a pot-bellied drunk trudging unsteadily home after a long evening in the pub. It is the season of crisp foggy mornings, when moving around London is like traveling inside a huge chilled wine-glass, and of fragile mica-like sunlight, which shrinks, crumbles and crunches under your boots . . .

Emily Dickinson once beautifully called November 'the Norway of the Year'. By the same token, seasons can be compared to great cities, Paris is spring. Moscow is winter. Rome is summer. And London? Autumn, of course!

Londoners are known to take perverse pride in the all-permeating drabness of their winters. Every year newspapers report with triumph that London is experiencing its dullest (darkest, coldest, lousiest) winter on record.

How do they measure dullness? In 'glums'? Or maybe in 'spleens'?

Autumn, however, is different. It cleanses thoughts and emotions. It helps trees and humans to shed the leafy baggage of their past.

By mid-November, London starts looking light and slightly barren, like the interior of a familiar house from which the excessive furniture has been removed.

Trying to uncover the secrets of London's autumn, I go for long walks in Highgate Wood, touched with a brownish seasonal rash, as if the trees are all suffering from some botanical form of measles. I trudge through piles of fallen leaves, these fading flashes of summer sunshine. I stare at well-behaved Highgate squirrels (I wouldn't be surprised to

learn that they regularly pay taxes to forest authorities). I pick up round—polished and gleaming (like the handlebars of an electric chair)—chestnuts and mumble to myself some half-forgotten autumn rhymes:

‘O dear and cheerless time, you charm the eye and tender contentment to the heart.  
How wondrous to behold your dying beauty is, the lush and sumptuous splendour of  
nature’s farewell bloom; the forests clad in gold . . .’<sup>6</sup>

Yes, on top of everything else, a London autumn is breathtakingly poetic. Its poetry affects everyone, even those who think that a trochee is a moss-like plant that grows in the desert, and a hexameter is an instrument used by joiners to measure crooked wooden surfaces.

That is why I wrote this autumn elegy—in the hope that Autumn will issue me, too, with its bright-yellow parking ticket, of which there is only handful left on a branchy maple tree behind my window.

After the ‘elegy’ was published in the *Guardian*, he was inundated with letters from readers, who, contrary to the old stereotype of the English as cold and emotionless pragmatists, were genuinely touched by the poetry of autumn.

One reader gave him a highly confidential ('don't tell anyone, please!') piece of advice as to where in Highgate Wood one could find some ‘proper’ mushrooms ('near that ramshackle fence off Archway Road . . .').

As always, autumn—his favourite season—had a therapeutic effect on his health and soon he was ready to go on his first trip outside the UK since arriving from Australia. He travelled to Paris to meet a fellow Russian émigré who also viewed his life very much as a literary device.

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