

Kibble Scribblers 14th & 21st October: *Theme – My Life Flashed Before My Eyes*

This session was developed for delivery in autumn, so the poems studied and some of the activities reflect that.

Icebreaker – exploring literary ‘guilty pleasures’

- **Do your group members have a ‘guilty pleasure’?**
 - A poem, a poet or a poetic form that they like but which they feel they ‘shouldn’t’ like, e.g. Pam Ayres, the Limerick?
 - Something other than poetry, e.g. the novels of Jilly Cooper or Dan Brown, the music of Sydney Devine, the comedy of Benny Hill?
 - Why do they think this is a ‘guilty’ pleasure, i.e. why it might be frowned upon by others? What do they like about it?

Words of Autumn

- **Read [‘Autumn’ by John Keats](#)**
 - This is an outward-looking poem with themes of nature, beauty and the passage of the seasons. Lines such as ‘Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness’ have become poetic clichés regarding autumn
- **Read [‘Japanese Maple’ by Clive James](#)**
 - This is a more inward-looking poem focusing on the autumn of life, mortality and defiance of death. The poem resists clichés to find new expressions of its themes.
- **Discussion**
 - Which lines, in either poem, stand out for your group members? Why?

Activity

- Film producer Sam Goldwyn is reputed to have said ‘*Let’s have some new clichés*’. Set your group the task of devising some new observations or images to describe autumn.
- **AVOID** using the usual autumn clichés, e.g. ‘Falling leaves’, ‘Nights drawing in’, ‘Crops safely gathered’, ‘Earth going into hibernation’.
- **INSTEAD** encourage them to find new expressions from their own imagination or experience, e.g. changing the duvet to winter tog rating, coiling the garden hose
- They can still focus on often-observed autumn phenomena, but they should do it *obliquely* or as Emily Dickinson said, ‘tell it slant’.

Life in flashback (20 mins)

- Read [‘At Grass’ by Philip Larkin](#)
 - This poem describes a racehorse in the autumn of its life through flashback and broken timeline. The horse’s life is not a distinct linear narrative but is shown through the archetypal ‘my life flashed before my eyes’ experience - a series of images capturing a life, bookended by opening/closing sections.

Activity – Journeys to autumn

- People sometimes refer to themselves as ‘being in the autumn of their life’. What does this mean to your group?
- How would they know they were in the autumn of their lives - are there signs and signifiers? If so, what are they – retirement parties, will-writing, bucket lists?
- **Develop a timeline of life events along the long side of a piece of A4 (see example below)**
- This may not necessarily be just the major events such as births/school/marriages/deaths/new job/new house, but events or periods of time that are more unusual or personal to your members, relating to health, success or failure, happiness or sadness, seeing sights or having experiences.
- Ask them to plot their own happiness or state of mind against the timeline as a curve – highs and lows. This may be quite difficult as it will encourage them to revisit times when they may not have been in a good place.
- **Translating the timeline into something creative**
- Creating the timeline will throw up images or fragments of memory, like a string of snapshots giving a sense of an event or a time rather than a perfect and complete description.
 - Taking their timeline as the prompt, members should assemble 10-12 snapshots from their lives. As with the ‘new clichés’ exercise above, they should try and write them unconventionally rather than simply describing them in familiar phrases, e.g.
 - My first day at school – *the sting of wind against my quavering knees*
 - My graduation – *I step from weightless youth into the gravity of a real world*
 - My first house – *armed with scrolls of wallpaper, cauldrons of gloss paint*
 - My wedding – *the groom’s family sheathe their daggers to pose for photographs*
 - My retirement – *I close the laptop lid and surrender my keys*
 - The temptation will be to expand each snapshot and write more on each one – ask them to aim for shorter snapshots, and more of them to achieve the fragmented effect that Larkin achieves in ‘At Grass’.
- What they have written will provide the raw material for a poem or prose passage. The process will equip them with an arsenal of personal images and recollections in fragmentary form, which may help them to reflect on their lives and their emotional variations. This act of reflection might help them make sense of their lives as a whole, seeing them as more of a journey than a sequence of loosely connected incidents or experiences. A glimpse of the bigger picture, possibly?

