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*Journal of Artistic  
Creation & Literary  
Research*

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**Volume 5 Issue 2 (December 2017) Review**

**María Luisa Hernández García**

**"Review of Ali Smith's novel *Autumn*"**

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#### **Recommended Citation**

Hernández García, María Luisa. "Review of Ali Smith's novel *Autumn*." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 5.2 (2017): Book Review  
<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>  
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#### **María Luisa HERNÁNDEZ GARCÍA Review of Ali Smith's novel *Autumn***

The author, Ali Smith, was born in 1962 in Inverness and lives in Cambridge, with her partner, the filmmaker Sarah Wood. She has written seven plays, five short story collections and nine novels; had worked as a lecturer of Scottish, English and American Literature, and writes articles for *The Guardian*, *The Scotsman* and other newspapers.

*Autumn* begins describing a more than hundred year old man dream, follows with the daily life of Elisabeth, a thirty two year old woman, junior lecturer of Art at a university in London, who has to fight against bureaucracy and short income. She has returned to live with her mother and is going every day to read books to the man, although he couldn't probably hear her.

The beginning, enjoying and finally emerging from a dream, reminds me of that of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*, where the protagonist is swimming as a jellyfish until he arouses and must face his physical reality: "What will the creature made all of seadrift do on the dry sand of daylight; what will the mind do, each morning, waking?" (Le Guin, 2008: 2).

The novel, narrated in third person with alternated indirect and free indirect speech, interpolates the dreams and thoughts of the old man, Daniel, and the present and past life of Elisabeth and her mother, and also thoughts and dreams of Elisabeth. They have been

neighbours during the childhood of her, and she has a great admiration and platonic love about him.

The relation with her mother changes across time, passing from a total confrontation to friendship. The mother also changes from being a traditional woman fond of social conventions to taking a girl partner that lives with them, and throwing things to a fence in order to protest against borders, in solidarity with the immigrants who can't arrive into the country because of recent rough political rules.

The present time of the action is the same as that of its writing. Thus, the protagonists live the tensions of the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum and the current social integration problems that are increasing as a consequence of the crisis.

In the last chapters it is related the life of Pauline Boty, a Londoner forgotten actress and pop-art painter, who lived between 1938 and 1966. Besides, along the novel some of the paintings of her are accurately described by the protagonists, who love them awfully: "It is possible, he said, to be in love not with someone but with their eyes. I mean, with how eyes that aren't yours let you see where you are, who you are." (Smith, 2016: 159-160).

Daniel, that has been a splendid music composer, has during all his life missed his dead in her youth little sister –whom I suspect could have been Pauline herself–, who had the ability to look to the world freshly and originally. He has transmitted this form of regard and the pleasure of reading to Elisabeth in the innumerable days that they have shared during the childhood of her. A game that they sometimes played in this enriching period was to create a story for an image or an image for a story.

Along the text, there are a lot of quotations and allusions to great literature works, like that of Shakespeare in *Macbeth* when Daniel opposes a man fancied like a tree to the man armed with a gun that Elisabeth has imagined. Not for nothing *Autumn* begins with these words from Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the worst of times" (Smith, 2016: 3), taken up later when she reads that novel at the hospital and the personage infiltrated in the narrator highlights the importance of literature in order to enjoy a fulfilling life:

She'd started to read, from the beginning, quite quietly, out loud. *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.* The words had acted like a charm. They'd released it all, in seconds. They'd made everything happening stand just far enough away.

It was nothing less than magic.  
Who needs a passport?  
Who am I? Where am I? What am I?  
I'm reading. (Smith, 2016: 201-202).

*Autumn* is a very poetical book, not only by its argument and characters but also by the rhythm of some passages and above all for the images that reveals; like that of Elisabeth at the fence, which evokes our divided world; and it is also a very visual novel plenty of colour, in which the ekphrasis of pictures is a crucial point.

So its final words are an exhortation to pull oneself together looking the colour of life amidst the winter desolation:

But there are roses, there are still roses. In the damp and the cold, on a bush that looks done, there's a wide-open rose, still.  
Look at the colour of it. (Smith, 2016: 259-260).

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**Bioprofile of the author:** María Luisa Hernández García holds a Hispanic Literature Degree from the University Complutense of Madrid. She did a Master's programme in Literary Studies at the same University, where she is currently working on her PhD, in which she research about the conceptions of time in narrative, focusing on some authors like Ursula K. Le Guin, Kurt Vonnegut and Juan Gómez Bárcena. Her areas of interest are literary theory and comparative literature.

**Contact:** [mluisa.hernandezg@gmail.com](mailto:mluisa.hernandezg@gmail.com)